

Nourishment for the Neshama

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Pesach 5771 - Chometz or Matzah?

During Passover we eat Matza or unleavened bread. We give up our leavened bread or chometz and nullify it (through cleaning, selling, searching, burning it and declaring it null and void – representing the measure of the challenge in ridding ourselves of chometz). What is the challenge?

On a deeper level what are we doing to chometz? What do leavening and bread represent, and why is it such an intensive and many-stepped process of hard work? On a physical level, more than 18 minutes for a flour and water mixture begins a leavening which “puffs up” bread, expanding the flour and water so that it takes up more space (it takes both more time and space). Matza is flour and water that is baked within 18 minutes, so that it has physical existence but does not take more time or space than necessary; it is baked before it has a chance to expand beyond what is necessary to exist. On a spiritual level, flour and water mixtures that stand for more than 18 minutes – chometz - represent how our ego can expand a feeling or thought more than necessary which in turn can take us into falsehood, sheker, that may feel and seem very real to us. Whether our feelings are hurt or whether we are attempting to achieve something, there is a natural part of us that sees respect, attention, gratitude, accolades, and wanting to be right as normal and even healthy pursuits. Matza represents G-dliness or just enough physicality to exist, unexpanded ego and simplicity. When we minimize our ego, we acknowledge that we are here to reflect the Divine reality and not to reflect a reality based on our own feelings and goals. At first it may feel as though we are giving up something crucial to existence but when we realize that by doing so we make a space within us that unifies us with G-d, we fulfill the spiritual equivalent of Matza. Our subsequent actions, reflective of Divine reality, enable us to comprehend Jewishly a very popular 12 step programs they use the term “let go and let G-d”.

So how do we nullify or at least reduce our egos to within the 18 minute model? We do this through self introspection. As we clean our homes from chometz, we look at our internal processes – am I allowing a feeling to expand and dominate that really may not be reflective of Divine reality and truth but only reflective of my own feelings? Where have we lost perspective in our lives? Where do we lose control of ourselves? Where have we judged ourselves and others? Where have we made others wrong and ourselves right? It is natural for human beings to have these imperfections – in fact we are each designed with a set of natural distortions specifically for the purpose of helping us minimize them and trade them out for clarity based on the Divine reality. That is how we grow. We are made in the Divine Image and have the ability to correct those natural imperfections, improving ourselves and building our

eternity. While we have to make judgments all day long about what is and is not the will of Hashem, it is the internal process that helps us succeed with our spiritual goals, not the external results. Thus, when we choose to reflect the Divine reality and offer love to each other and not judge each other, it represents a success at minimizing our natural human nature in exchange for declaring that Hashem is One.

What helps is remembering that the external triggers or things that get us upset and challenge us are opportunities for us to tell Hashem that it is He we wish to emulate and to Whom we wish to be connected. When we feel low and upset, it is often because we have allowed the words or actions of another person to resonate and expand beyond the "18 minutes" needed to devise a response that is reflective of Divine reality and instead seek some hurtful external action that we think mistakenly will heal what has hurt us but which will rather take us further into falsehood, coldness, emptiness and ultimately self-destruction. We must learn to break this cycle.

How do we break the cycle? Our pain from external triggers comes from a disconnection with G-d – subconsciously we relate to the pain of the external triggers and its impact on us, which can draw us further into emptiness and despair if we relate to the pain because we are likely to expand into it. First aid here is to remain connected by calming the mind, remembering that there is hashgacha pratis, everything Hashem does is good, even if we do not feel that it is. We beseech G-d to answer our cries to Him, trying at every moment to take our next step in avodas Hashem (doing the will of G-d) by emulating Him. For example, just as Hashem tolerates our insults to Him (e.g. our halachic mistakes and omissions) so must we tolerate others' insults to us. An example of this is when Bonnie insults Sarah. Sarah has a choice, either to react negatively i.e. insulting Bonnie back, carrying a grudge, etc. or to connect to Hashem (davening, putting money in the pushka, and asking G-d to help her overlook it just as He overlooks our insults, thus substituting any human nature tendency to take the insult personally with a sense of gratitude of how Hashem treats us!). Sarah has the ability to take this incident and to use it to feel gratitude and love for Hashem, strengthening her relationship with G-d. She can ask G-d to help her pass this test by making the correct choice in behavior, one that emulates His attributes.

When we take a moment to choose a G-dly reaction to a negative occurrence, we shine Divine attributes (light) into the darkness. The more we experience the joy in connecting to our Creator by emulating Him, the less upset we will be when things go "wrong" or when we are given "challenging" situations because we will see these adversities instead as opportunities to perfect ourselves and grow closer to the aspect of Hashem within us. So next time a challenge comes along, think to yourself, "am I being like chometz or like matza?" We will thereby find great breakthroughs in ahavas yisrael and in humility that will sustain us all year! The choice is up to you.