

WHY WAS HAMETZ SO STRICTLY FORBIDDEN ON PASSOVER?

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The prohibition against leavened bread on Passover is one of the most unique in the Bible. The Bible in three separate places commands the Israelites to destroy *se'or* (leaven) from their homes and to not find *se'or* and hametz (leavened bread) in their possessions or in their territory (Ex. 12:15-20, Ex. 13:7, Deut. 16:3-4). This includes a prohibition against getting benefit from hametz and even the smallest amount of hametz, a *mashehu* in halakhic parlance, is forbidden. Why is the Bible so much stricter regarding hametz as compared to other prohibitions?

In Leviticus, we find another prohibition concerning hametz which applies throughout the entire year. The Bible tells us that it is forbidden to offer *se'or* as well as *devash* (honey) on the altar as a sacrifice (Lev. 2:11). What is the connection between the year-round prohibition against hametz on the altar and its proscription everywhere during the Passover holiday?

Maimonides in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3:46 gives a socio-historical explanation for the prohibition against offering hametz and *devash* on the altar all year round. He explains that idol worshippers would go out of their way to sacrifice sweet and decadent foods on their altars to their gods. Foods like hametz and *devash*. Therefore, as a rejection of idolatrous practices, Israelites refrain from utilizing these items in their sacrifices to God. Furthermore, since idolaters prohibited salt on any of their sacrifices, Israelites always add salt to their sacrifices. Maimonides attributes his knowledge of this to his reading books of idolatrous practices.

Maimonides based himself on TJ *Avoda Zara* 1:1 which describes King Jeroboam's plan to seduce the Israelites to worship idols. Jeroboam utilized a simple slogan, "Come worship idols. Idol worship is easy!" He provided many contrasts where polytheism is easier than monotheism. One example is the case of the prohibition of burning of hametz on the altar throughout the

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year, forcing the priests to always act with haste while performing the Temple service, while idolatry allows the burning of leaven on the altar. The Jerusalem Talmud bases this account on Amos 4:5, which states that in the Israelite temple in Bet El, in the kingdom of Jeroboam, hametz was burned on the altar.

It may be suggested that the prohibition against hametz on Passover is similarly linked to the prohibition against idolatry.¹ There is one item that the Bible commands must be burned and prohibits one from seeing. This item is not hametz despite popular opinion,² it is idols. One is not only commanded to burn idols and not have them in one's possession but prohibits even the most minute amount of idols, a *mashehu*, just like hametz. One must search for idols to destroy them and one cannot derive benefit from idols. In fact, the prohibitions against idols and hametz on Passover are almost identical (Deut. 7:25-26). Why?

We know that one of the main themes of Passover is rejecting the gods of Egypt in favor of the one and only God. This is one reason the Israelites slaughtered the paschal lamb, an Egyptian god. By slaughtering it and offering it to the one and only God, Israelites actively repudiated the gods of Egypt.³

We can say that in Egypt hametz was also treated like a god and by refraining from hametz one is rejecting Egyptian idolatry. The Zohar (2:182a) seems to suggest this idea by saying that anyone who eats hametz on Passover it is as if he worships idols. Conversely, by refraining from hametz, one is rejecting idolatry. The Zohar continues that when the Israelites left Egypt, they left the land of the forces of evil, the land that is called hametz. The Zohar seems to be identifying the idolatry of Egypt with hametz, personifying the very land of Egypt with leavened bread. Is this only a mystical concept or does it have some basis in the biblical text?

A basis for this Egyptian identification with hametz can be found earlier in the Bible in the Joseph story.⁴ The Bible says that when Joseph was a slave in Egypt in Potiphar's house, Potiphar gave Joseph all that was his except for the bread that he ate. *And he left all that he had in Joseph's hand; and, having him, he knew not aught save the bread which he did eat. And Joseph was of beautiful form, and fair to look upon* (Gen. 39:6). Rashi interprets this bread as a euphemistic statement meaning that Potiphar gave Joseph access to eve-

rything except for his wife. However, the Bible text says that Joseph was not allowed to partake of Potiphar's bread, not his wife. Why would Potiphar deprive Joseph of his bread? Perhaps this is due to the fact that Joseph as a slave and a foreigner was forbidden from eating Egyptian bread.

This is supported by the biblical account of the feast attended by Joseph, his brothers, and the Egyptians. Joseph, his brothers, and the Egyptians partake of a feast, yet each group eats separately. *And they set on for him (Joseph) by himself, and for them (the brothers) by themselves, and for the Egyptians, that did eat with him, by themselves; because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians* (Gen. 43:32). Why don't the Egyptians eat bread with the Hebrews? The Bible states that it is an abomination, in Hebrew a *toevah*, for the Egyptians to eat bread with the Hebrews. The word *toevah* is used in the Bible to indicate a blasphemy against God or in the case of idolaters against their gods, as in Exodus 8:22 and Deuteronomy 7:25-26. Genesis 43:32 would then indicate that for the Egyptians to break bread with the Hebrews would be an act of blasphemy, a sacrilege to the Egyptian gods, for a foreigner may not eat Egyptian bread.

What was so special about Egyptian bread? Encyclopedia Britannica notes the following: "Bread, baked food product made of flour or meal that is moistened, kneaded, and sometimes fermented. A major food since prehistoric times, it has been made in various forms using a variety of ingredients and methods throughout the world. The first bread was made in Neolithic times, nearly 12,000 years ago, probably of coarsely crushed grain mixed with water, with the resulting dough probably laid on heated stones and baked by covering with hot ashes. The Egyptians apparently discovered that allowing wheat doughs to ferment, thus forming gases, produced a light, expanded loaf, and they also developed baking ovens."⁵

The Egyptians invented leaven (*se'or* in Hebrew) the fermenting process that allows bread to rise. The Joseph story can hint that this may have been a closely guarded secret by the Egyptians who considered it an act of blasphemy to allow foreigners to eat this special Egyptian bread. They likely considered yeast-risen bread to be a gift from their gods, perhaps even an object of worship. This could explain why the Israelites are enjoined from eating *se'or* and hametz during the Passover holiday. The destruction of all hametz repre-

sents a rejection of the idolatrous practices of the Egyptians. Conversely, the commandment to eat Matza throughout the seven-day holiday, the same poor man's bread the Hebrew slaves who were deprived of Egyptian bread were forced to eat in Egypt, serves as a reminder of the bondage the Hebrews suffered as foreigners enslaved in Egypt.

NOTES

1. The analogy between the prohibition of *hametz* on Passover and the prohibition against idolatry is discussed by M. Kasher, *Torah Sheleimah*, Vol. 19, (New York, American Biblical Archeological Society, 1959) pp. 300-302.
2. The commandment to burn *hametz* prior to Passover is rabbinic in nature since the Bible does not use the word *tivaaru*/to destroy regarding *hametz*, but uses the word *tashbitu*, usually translated as to remove or put away, not to burn or destroy. See JPS translation on Exodus 12:15 and TB *Pesahim* 4b.
3. See Rashi on Exodus 8:22 and Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:46.
4. I first heard this idea connecting the Joseph story with the Egyptian fixation on *hametz* from Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Goodman, a long time teacher and former colleague of mine at The Frisch School.
5. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. "Bread." (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2015). Web.