

But on the previous day you shall nullify the leaven from your homes; for anyone who eats leavened food, that soul shall be cut off from Yisrael. (12:15)

Among all of the *mitzvos* connected to the festival of *Pesach*, none is so stringent as the prohibition of *chametz*. One who does not recount the story of the Exodus, one who does not eat *matzoh* or *marror* has “only” neglected performing a *mitzvah*. One who eats *chametz*, however, is liable to the Heavenly punishment of *kares*, premature death. This harsh punishment seems to underline the significance of the *mitzvah* of *matzoh*. The prohibition against eating or keeping *chametz* in one’s possession indicates the crucial importance of the haste in which the Jews left Egypt. They departed in such a hurry that the dough which they were making did not have the opportunity to rise. Imagine, in the space of eighteen minutes, the amount of time it takes for dough to become *chametz*, all of *Klal Yisrael* left Egypt! Does this speed minimize the miracle of the exodus from Egypt? Would the significance of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* have been diminished if the Jews had left Egypt in an hour or even two? Did eighteen minutes really make such a difference?

Horav Avigdor Ha’Levi Nebenzahl, Shlita, suggests that the concept of *chametz* is spiritual in nature. *Bnei Yisrael* were totally absorbed in the degenerate Egyptian lifestyle. They were so mired in the contamination of Egypt that had they remained just a bit longer, they would never have been able to leave. *Bnei Yisrael* had descended to the forty ninth level of spiritual impurity. They were at the brink of ultimate disaster. They were about to become Egyptian citizens--forever!

This is the critical concept that the *Torah* seeks to impress upon us. The underlying motif behind the prohibition against eating *chametz* is that the Jews were almost at the brink of spiritual annihilation. We were “raised up” from this nadir of degeneracy, to *cheirus pnimis*, internal liberation, and spiritual freedom. Never would *Bnei Yisrael* return to that lowly position of near-spiritual extinction. As they viewed Egypt then, they would no longer see it again. True, they would err and sin, but they would never sink to the point of utter depravity that they displayed in Egypt.

Klal Yisrael’s deficient level of spirituality became apparent during the *makas bechoros*, when the firstborns of the Egyptians were killed. The *Baal Haggadah* tells us that it was Hashem Who passed through Egypt on that fateful night. Only Hashem--not an angel--could have discerned between Egyptian and Jew. The realm of distinction between Egyptian and Jew had narrowed so much, as a result of the Jew’s spiritual degeneration that an angel would not have been able to distinguish between the two.

We find that at the *Yam Suf*, the angels complained to Hashem. “Why do You spare the Jews while the Egyptians are drowning? These are idol worshippers, and those are idol worshippers! What advantage do the Jews have over the Egyptians? They are both sinners.”

This idea, claims *Horav Nebenzahl*, is the *Torah's* message for us. The *halachah* is stringent regarding *chametz*, prohibiting leaven which distinguishes itself from *matzoh* in a matter of minutes. Between leaven and non-leaven--between the *matzas mitzvah* and the prohibited *chametz*--is a mere minute! The Torah seeks to impact upon us a profound message. Between *nitzchiyus*, eternity, and spiritual oblivion; between kedushah, holiness, and *taharah*, purity, there is a distance of only one minute. One *ma'shehu*, minuscule drop, determines the essence of an individual. Had *Klal Yisrael* remained in Egypt for one more minute they would have been relegated to spiritual oblivion. A *geulah*, redemption, could not have occurred. One more minute! That is the difference between *chametz* and *matzoh*. Eighteen minutes constitutes the creation of *matzas mitzvah*. One more minute, and the individual becomes liable for *kares*!

This is consistent with *Chazal's* famous dictum: The letters of *chametz* and *matzoh* are the same except for the "ches" of *chametz* and the "hay" of *matzoh*. What difference is there between a "ches" and a "hay"? One little line. One more minute! That minute marks the distinction between *chametz* and *matzoh*. That minute determines spiritual success or its unfortunate counterpart.

The *Midrash, Toras Kohanim*, expresses a similar idea. The *pasuk* in *Vayikra* 20:25, 26, reads: "You shall therefore separate between the clean beast and the unclean and between the unclean fowl and the clean...And I have set you apart from the nations that you should be Mine." *Chazal* attribute the juxtaposition of the *pesukim* to the relationship between the two "separations." If we distinguish between the clean and unclean animal, between the kosher and non-kosher, between the animal whose two *simanim*, vital organs, foodpipe and windpipe have had the majority of their width ritually slaughtered, Hashem will take us to Him. For the *shechitah* of an animal to be considered kosher, it is necessary that the majority of both the foodpipe and the windpipe are properly slaughtered. Imagine the amount necessary to make the *shechitah* kosher is nothing more than a *ma'shehu*, a tiny drop, insignificant in size, but greatly significant in impact. That tiny hairbreadth distinguished *Bnei Yisrael* from the Egyptians. That minuscule amount delineates between *matzoh* and *chametz*.

On the night of Pesach thousands of years ago, Hashem chose us over the Egyptians, as He has chosen us above all the nations of the world to be His *am segulah*, treasured nation. This selection separates us from all of the rest. We must continue to strive to earn this distinction.