

The Search for Leaven

“In every generation one should see himself as if he personally went forth from Egypt...”
- Passover Haggadah

The historical episodes in Israel's history always reflected inner spiritual truth.

The plagues of the Exodus actually fell on Pharaoh's "heart." Jesus defined the search for leaven as really an inner "spring cleaning" from the self-focused ways of thinking that puff us up. The blood on the doorpost finds its fulfillment in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. And the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea signifies that we've been buried in baptism, and a new creation comes out on the other side.

On the evening before Passover, Jews search their houses to get rid of any food that contains leaven - the yeast that causes bread to puff up when it's baked.

The reason for this is that when they left Egypt, it was in such haste that they didn't have time to let the dough rise. They ate it unleavened and they called it matzoh.

Passover falls at the beginning of the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (**Exodus 12:19-20**) during which nothing leavened can be eaten.

Later the rabbis found spiritual meaning to the matzoh as a metaphor for pride and self-importance, and then Jesus focused the meaning on three distinct examples of what this "puffed up," leaven-filled person would look like.

Matthew 16:6 - "Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees."

In another version, Jesus adds in the leaven of Herod:

Mark 8:15 - "And he charged them, saying, Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod."

Luke adds another important detail:

Luke 12:1 - "Beware the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."

The disciples were literalists, so they wondered if He was mad because they forgot to bring any bread. But he was really talking about ways we enhance ourselves and in turn belittle others.

All of these involve our responses to different instances of seeing "lack" in our own lives and trying to provide an artificial, human solution that never works..

The Pharisees, aware of their lack within themselves of personal character and spiritual obedience to God, portrayed themselves as if they WERE pious and law-abiding, even

adding certain "hedges" around the Law to make sure they would not have to repent for any sins. The result was hypocrisy - hiding who they really were while projecting a facade of what they wanted people to believe about them.

The Sadducees were the well-connected upper class with authority over the Temple. But they were agnostics in many ways - they discarded the Prophets and Writings and followed only the five books of the Torah. But they also doubted the resurrection of the dead, the supernatural, or that God intervened miraculously in the world at all.

Herod, of course, was a ruthless monarch, who cruelly massacred hundreds of priests and later members of his own family when they crossed him. He would get his way, no matter who got hurt in the process of filling what he felt he lacked.

Before Passover, we look within ourselves for evidence of any of these perceptions of "lack" and the leaven that puffs us up, and we sweep it from our lives.

Rabbinical Interpretation

Jesus' version of the meaning of leaven was built upon earlier rabbinical understanding that leaven was a metaphor.

The Talmud says, "One who is full of himself fills all the space around him. There is no room left for anyone else, including the Divine in his life. Therefore, he despises another person by virtue of the space that other person consumes. He may give reasons for his disdain, but the reasons are secondary."

Talmud Bavli Tractate Sotah 5a tells those who want to grow spiritually: "You lack nothing. You do need, however, to rid yourself of the *Chometz*, the leavening, the puffed-up-ness, which is awareness of self, and arrogance, and to bring in Matzah - humble, flat bread, which is *Bitul*, renunciation of self." Such pride and ego repels the Shechinah (God's presence), for "an egotistical man and God cannot dwell together."

Self-centeredness and self-seeking, as well as the fears leading to and stemming from these, are the leavening agents.

The Zohar goes further and says the sweeping out of the leaven can lead us to a state of *Bitul hayesh* ("nullification of one's somethingness"). In Kabbalistic terms *Bitul* is the experience of *ayin*, nothingness.

The puffing up process of leaven is unstoppable. That's why it's so dangerous. It will eventually have us attempt to reach heaven like the Tower of Babel or rise above the cloud like Lucifer in defiance of God Himself.

"Rabbi Alexandri would end his daily prayers with the following supplication: 'Master of the Universe, You know full well that it is our desire to act according to Your will; but what prevents us from doing so? - the yeast in the dough...'" (Berakhot 17a)

Matzoh - unaided by leaven - is seen as a symbol of survival of the Children of Israel in the world, surviving only by the Spirit of God, lacking nothing.

1 Corinthians 12:9 - "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

The Afikomen

At the Lord's Supper, Jesus took a portion of the matzoh used in the Passover meal to demonstrate something else about Himself.

Earlier in the meal, three pieces of matzoh are uncovered on a plate, the middle one is removed and broken, then wrapped in linen and hidden away (buried) for later.

After the seder meal is eaten, the hidden matzoh was brought out by Jesus, and this is the matzoh he said was His body. An olive-sized portion of the afikkomen is eaten, and then the third cup of wine - representing His blood - is drunk.

This hidden matzoh is called the *afikomen*, which generally is translated as "dessert."

After the destruction of the Temple, the Passover lamb was no longer sacrificed or eaten, and the seder order changed. But scholars say the *afikoman* was originally part of an established messianic ritual observed during the Passover.

The Mishnah (Halakha, that is Jewish Law, Rabbinical Judaism) for Pesachim 119a dictates that the Afikomen represents the *Korban Pesach*, the Passover offering. When the hidden *afikoman* emerged from concealment at the end of the Seder, it symbolized the coming of the Messiah in the midst of his people.

The word *afikoman* actually had nothing to do with "dessert," but came from the Greek verb *afikomenos* which means "the Coming One" or "He who has come."

There is a dense argument in the Talmud about the coming of Messiah -Talmud Sanhedrin 98b–99a:

“Rav Giddel says that Rav says: The Jewish people are destined to eat from the bounty of, i.e. enjoy, the years of the Messiah... The Gemara explains that Rav Giddel's statement serves to exclude the statement of Rabbi Hillil, who says : There is no Messiah coming for the Jewish people, as they already ate from him, as all the prophecies relating to the Messiah were already fulfilled during the days of Hezekiah....Rav Yosef says: May the Master forgive Rabbi Hillel for stating matters with no basis. With regard to Hezekiah, when was his reign? It was during the First Temple period. Whereas Zechariah ben Berechiah, the prophet, prophesied during the Second Temple period and said: “Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion; shout, daughter of Jerusalem; behold, your king will come to you; he is just and victorious; lowly and riding upon a donkey and upon a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). In the generations after Hezekiah, there are prophecies about both redemption and the coming of the

Messiah.”

(Hezekiah was king during the time of Isaiah in the 8th cent. B.C. and was considered a Messianic figure).

But what does it possibly mean to “eat” from, or of, the Messiah? It stems from the already existing Passover ritual concerning the *afikomen*, that was deleted in later times

When Jesus lifted the unleavened bread and said, "Take, eat; this is my body," he was in effect saying: "This broken and hidden matzah, which has for our people symbolized the Messiah, is fulfilled in me. I myself am the *Afikoman* — the Coming One — whom you expect."

Melito of Sardis in his Passover Sermon calls the Christ, "this one who is coming out of heaven [*houtos afikomenos ex ouranon*] to the earth" (*Melitonos Peri Pascha*, On the Passover §66).

"When the people saw the sign he did, they said, 'Truly, this is the Prophet, the One Coming into the world.' " (**John 6:14**)

The Seder contains 15 separate steps or stages, and the *afikomen* comes during the twelfth step (or 11th in some traditions), which is called *tzafun*. The Hebrew word *tzafun* is usually translated “hidden” or “concealed,” which describes the *afikomen* and accurately conveys the uncertain and peculiar origin of the ritual.

The Rebbe Maharash said that *tzafun* means “hidden” because eating the *afikoman* endows us with the potential to destroy the evil hidden in our hearts.

The way to truly rid ourselves of leaven is to eat the unleavened *afikomen* of His body - then our self is transformed and cleansed by His life within us.