

Pesah Sanity

For Sephardim & Ashkenazim

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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Pesah time is upon us. It might be time to get busy but this does not mean that it is time to get crazy. Pesah preparations have been transformed from a ritual removal of hametz to an all out, thorough spring cleaning of everything and everywhere, most of which has nothing to do with Pesah obligations. While there is nothing wrong with doing a thorough spring cleaning, one should still realize that clearing one's domain of hametz (leaven) does not have to be such a long, drawn-out stressful experience. There are certain basic laws for Pesah that if one follows will clearly reduce the amount of work and stress one faces by 90+%.



Please remember this great rule; our Torah path is governed by law (Halakha), not by custom (Minhag). Individuals and communities can embellish the law all they wish with whatever customs they wish; nonetheless, those customs are still not to be misunderstood as absolutes as are the laws themselves. In other words, when the letter of the law is met, whether or not one fulfills every imaginable expression of custom does not really matter. One can never be lenient with regards to fulfilling the law, whereas one does not have to be so meticulous with regards to observing a custom. Customs (minhagim) are culturally based. One is obligated to follow the customs of one's own community; however, one is not obligated and in some instances one is actually forbidden to observe the customs of another community.

One may indeed chose to observe customs with the same meticulousness as one does a law. However if a circumstance arises where following a custom may lead to loss or a situation arises where following the custom simply cannot be performed as one would like; there are avenues and expressions wherein which one can be lenient, unlike how one must act with regards to the law itself. When our Sages coined the age-old term, "minhag b'yisrael, Torah hee" (a custom is akin to a law), they said this within a very specific context that needs to be understood properly. Let us address some of these issues with regards to Pesah laws.

As we know from the Torah, hametz (leavened grain) is forbidden on Pesah. Now the question arises is in what measure is hametz forbidden? In other words, is even a microscopic amount prohibited or does the prohibition of hametz fall under the same category of other

forbidden food items. According to Torah law a prohibited food item is nullified if it were accidentally (and only sincerely accidentally) mixed with permissible food items of the same variety and taste, therefore preventing its identification and removal. Rather than lose the majority of good food the unidentifiable minority prohibited food is nullified by the majority. With regards to hametz, if it were mixed with non-hametz items it too became nullified all the while that it did not add taste to the mixture. This was how the rule was observed in Biblical times. Since Temple times, we can no longer follow this rule.

Over the centuries, our Sages in their prophetic wisdom saw the low level of Torah knowledge and observance amongst the people. In order to safeguard them from mistakes, accidents and cheating, the Sages devised the rule that when a forbidden item is mixed in with what is permitted in such a way that it cannot be identified and removed, then it can be considered nullified as long as it does not add any noticeable taste and that the ratio is 60 to 1 or more of the permitted against the prohibited. This law of a 60 to 1 nullification is still in effect today with almost all forbidden mixtures. Mixtures of meat and dairy differ and according to the Ashkenazi community so too does hametz differ. In spite of all the rational reasons proposed for this 60 to 1 ratio of nullification, the Kabbalah reveals to us that there is a great secret with regards to it. But now is not the time to discuss the Kabbalah.

Sephardim hold that if an all year round kosher item had hametz added to it, be it accidentally or intentionally, and that the ratio of hametz to the rest of the product is 60 to 1, then the hametz is considered nullified and the entire mixture will be permissible for Pesah. Mind you, this allowance only applies prior to Pesah itself and not on or during the holiday. If such a mixture were to occur during Pesah then there is no amount of nullification possible. Even the smallest amount of hametz during Pesah is strictly forbidden by Biblical Torah law.

Ashkenazim are so strict with this concern of violating the Biblical law that they have adopted the minhag to even disqualify 60 to 1 nullifications that happened before Pesah. For the Ashkenazim, if there was a permissible mixture of hametz and Pesah products properly nullified before Pesah, during Pesah this nullified mixture is reactivated and becomes forbidden as if the mixture were itself made during Pesah. Therefore, what the Sephardim will allow, the Ashkenazim forbid. This is where minhag and Halakha differ. Practically speaking each community is obligated to follow their own customs. One cannot choose a leniency simply because one wants to or finds it easier.

With regards to koshering one's kitchen and preparing one's food for Pesah, this difference of minhag makes a significant difference. Sephardim have a much less stressful approach. That which is nullified before the Pesah is finished and done with. It does not come back and reactivate, it does not come back to haunt us. Therefore, Sephardim only concern themselves with the removal of actual hametz that itself is forbidden and which can cause other items to become equally forbidden. Being that we are not concerned about previously nullified hametz, we have no concern about hametz reactivating on countertops or in sinks, or in a number of kitchen appliances. The Sephardic tradition is to simply boil up water in a

kettle and pour it over all open surfaces and sinks where hot hametz might have been. Clean up the water and the Sephardic kitchen is kosher for Pesah.

Ashkenazim are very concerned about reactivated hametz, so much so that in order to avoid any possibility of this occurrence they have adopted the practice to cover large areas of their kitchens with aluminum foil. In this way, even hot foods put on to countertops and the like will never come directly into contact with the surface that might possibly have absorbed hametz in it. While many Halakhic authorities can argue that there is no necessity for this stringency, still the practice is common and custom in many Ashkenazi homes. Needless to say for Sephardim this practice is as strange and foreign to us as it is accepted and common to Ashkenazim. Again, when it comes to what an individual should perform in one's own home, one must consult one's local Rabbi and follow the directives of one's own community.

Another famous stringency (humra) of the Ashkenazim is the prohibiting against eating any kind of beans or legumes during Pesah. These are called kitniyot. Their prohibition is actually steeped in history as opposed to Halakha. In centuries gone by when wheat, legumes and beans were carried to the public markets in large sacks, it was almost always the case that grains from one type would get mixed in with grains of another. It seems the carry sacks were never completely cleaned out from one haul to the next, so grains became intermingled. During the year, this is no concern, however on Pesah; this could become a serious issue. Therefore the Rabbis of those domains made a blanket prohibition against any grains that were carried in these sacks because no one could check them literally grain by grain to make certain no forbidden mixtures had occurred. Thus all suspected grains, the kitniyot, were shunned. Although we live centuries later and this concern is no more, still, once a tradition, always a tradition. Although many Ashkenazi Rabbis acknowledge that there really is no reason to prohibit kitniyot anymore, still, they are Halakhically obligated to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors and uphold this tradition, however antiquated it may be.

Today the Pesah market has become big business. With regards to food products numerous Rabbinic organizations issue their certifications on a wide variety of products. It is of interest to note that not all of these organizations follow the same Halakhic guidelines. While the majority of them are Ashkenazi and therefore share certain common denominators, still there are others that are Sephardic, who tend to be more lenient than the standard Ashkenazim, and other Hasidic groups, who tend to be stricter than their non-Hasidic Ashkenazi peers. It must be pointed out that regardless of which certification and level of observance one accepts, as long as the others are standing upon the bedrock of Halakha they are all permissible and acceptable. It is only minhag that separates one level of legitimate observance from another. While we personally may not accept the stringencies or leniencies of another, this does not make them to be less or wrong when accepted by those of another group.

Unfortunately, outright prejudice and arrogant religious chauvinism does exist. I have personally witnessed Rabbis from one group speak disparagingly about the observances of another group, not only with Pesah but also with regards to other matters. Last year, I

personally confronted one Rabbi who spoke disparagingly about another Rabbi's list of certified kosher products for Pesah. His attack was racist and not founded upon any legitimate Halakhic concerns. This Rabbi did not respond to my carefully worded respectful address to him. He ignored me and continued to make his disparaging comments. All I could do was to warn my students not to pay heed to this Rabbi. His behavior was deplorable. Unfortunately, he is not the only one to behave in such a non Torah-like fashion.

I could go on the vent my feelings about such hypocrisy, but let it suffice as a warning to us all. If a Rabbi comes out with suspiciously negative things to say against another Rabbi's organization or Halakhic decisions, those objections have to be firmly grounded in Halakha. Not only must the objection be firmly grounded in Halakha, the Rabbi must document both his objection and sources in detail. Anything less than this should be recognized as suspect and discounted immediately.

Mind you, you will always find members of other communities who follow different minhagim (customs). They may even be your neighbors. They are acting in accordance to their Rabbis, just as you are acting in accordance to yours. Their home is as kosher for Pesah as is yours, even if they are more lenient than you in some regards. However, just because one family is lenient in some regards does not allow a visiting family from another community to accept the leniencies of their hosts all the while that they are in their homes. Each family must stay faithful to their own communal laws, regardless of whose home they are in.

This is why Sephardim can have a Pesah table full of rice and beans (kitniyot) that they can enjoy, whereas their Ashkenazi guests may not partake of those foods. While Ashkenazim can still eat in the home of their Sephardic neighbors, there are those foods that they cannot partake of. This (and other minhagim) should never be a source of prejudice for an Ashkenazi to mistakenly believe that he cannot eat in a Sephardic home during Pesah. Our Sages have addressed this point in their literature in no unclear terms.

When we understand the roots of the laws of Pesah and can recognize how they are separate from the minhagim, we are in a much better position to properly prepare for the holiday, and to do so, with the minimum degree of stress. After all, Pesah is supposed to be a time of joy, not one of paranoiac fear and stress. Therefore, please, go study the Halakhot and learn the practices. Learn what you are obligated to do under law, and what others in your community follow as a matter of tradition. Do what you have to do and enjoy it.

Have a happy, healthy and sane Pesah.