



Chametz – How and Why We Get Rid Of It

Matzah – unleavened bread – symbolizes the Exodus from Egypt, which happened so quickly that the bread baked by the Jews had no time to rise.¹ **The opposite of Matzah is Chametz** – dough which has been left out long enough to ferment and rise – symbolizing negative influences that creep in and corrupt our spirit. It is a Mitzvah to rid our homes of Chametz and consume only Matzah for the duration of the eight days of Passover.

There are two basic ways to remove Chametz: “*Bi’ur*” – physical destruction or removal; and “*Bittul*” – declaring our Chametz worthless and ownerless.

Rabbinic law requires us to use both methods. Simply declaring the Chametz ownerless leaves the risk that we may not really mean what we say, especially if we own valuable or tempting morsels of Chametz. In addition, if Chametz is physically present we are likely to accidentally eat some. Physically cleaning our homes, on the other hand, does not guarantee that we will actually find all the Chametz we own, and the stray pieces we overlook may resurface during the Holiday.

Therefore, we spend the weeks leading up to the holiday cleaning out any areas of the house where food may have traveled. The night before Passover begins is Bedikas Chametz – the official search for Chametz by candle light (or flashlight) – a final last-minute check into the nooks and crannies of our homes. We also issue recite “Kol Chamira” – a declaration found at the beginning of every Haggadah, declaring the Chametz we own “void and ownerless like the dust of the earth.”

It has become a universally accepted practice to use an additional, third method of removing Chametz: selling it to a non-Jew. Synagogue rabbis perform this service for their congregants, who empower the rabbi to act as their agent in the sale. A trustworthy gentile buys all the Chametz before Passover and sells it back after the holiday. The sale of Chametz reduces the need for Passover cleaning: cabinets, drawers and even entire rooms that will not be used during Passover can simply be closed off and marked as such – since any Chametz within them does not belong to us anyways. However, rooms that will be used during Passover should still be cleaned, to prevent the accidental consumption of Chametz during the holiday. As in all areas of Jewish law, there is a degree of complexity in the application of these laws, and a rabbi should be consulted for practical decisions.

¹ Matzah actually has a dual symbolism, as it also represents the “Bread of Affliction” eaten by the Jewish slaves.