

It's Time for Pesah! Lighten Up!

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This is one of those times during the year when people lose their minds. I think the driving factor is fear. We want to keep Passover and it is truly such a large and intimidating endeavor that we revert to the strictest, Orthodox observance so as not to do anything wrong.

The intention is well-placed...to observe the holidays, follow God's laws, so that we successfully remember our slavery in Egypt and our redemption and freedom. But often this urge makes observance of the holiday so difficult that people throw up their hands and neglect the laws of Pesah because they seem too difficult. While on the one hand, I tend to believe that part of the extreme limitations of Passover is to give us a sense of restriction as a taste of slavery...another part of me feels that we need to remove the enslavement to unnecessary strictures of the laws of Pesah.

I want all Jews to observe Pesah. I want all Jews to keep kosher and, in particular, even if it's the only time of the year, to keep kosher for Passover. It shouldn't be an impossible task and it shouldn't be something that breaks the bank. In fact, it is my hope that when people take on the task of keeping kosher for Passover that it leads to keeping kosher year-round. This is a perfect time of year to start keeping kosher and continue through Passover and beyond...through to the next Passover.

There are a few things that I think people have to keep in mind.

First, Hametz is not dirt and dirt is not hametz. If you like to use Passover as a time to do a good spring-cleaning, then kol hakavod, good for you. If you find the task of cleaning for Passover daunting and impossible, it does not have to be. There is a reason that we have the halakhic institutions of Searching for hametz, Burning and Selling Hametz. We are supposed to remove from our homes the hametz—leavened products from the five grains of wheat, barley, spelt, oats and rye. We should clean away crumbs, get rid of bread, cakes, cookies, crackers and pasta. But, we are also able to sell our hametz. And when we burn the hametz the morning before Pesah begins, we recite a formula that turns any hametz that we didn't find into hefker...it is nullified and it is as if it is not hametz. That's not to say that we should eat it if we find it—don't, cover it or throw it out...but what I am trying to say is that you don't have to break your back and all your fingernails scouring every last corner of your home where food may have been. You should do your best to clean the places where you know food has been and then you should save your energy to prepare for the seder, to enjoy the seder and to worship in synagogue singing the praises of Hallel and reciting the special prayers that accompany the holiday.

Second principle: Hametz is not kitniyot and kitniyot are not hametz. Kitniyot are referred to as legumes and traditionally are defined as beans, corn and rice. Traditionally, Ashkenazim—Jews of Eastern European descent—have not eaten kitniyot as a fence around the law, an additional stricture added to the observance of Passover so that laws are not easily broken. Ashkenazim ruled out the eating of kitniyot such as rice, beans and

corn (1) because they were stored in a shelled or husked state like grains; (2) because they can be prepared as a cooked cereal like the five grains and (3) because bread can be made from them. These three states could lead to them being confused with the five grains so they were cut out of the Ashkenazic diet. They weren't essential to the Ashkenazic diet as they were to the Sephardim and this could be one reason why the Sephardim didn't accept this stricture.

Now, there has been a lot of discussion of kitniyot recently. It actually began before this past week's NY Times article in the Food section by Joan Nathan. There was a rabbinic position, a teshuvah of Rabbi David Golinkin, approved seventeen years ago by the Conservative Law Committee of Israel allowing for the removal of the stricture against eating kitniyot in the Land of Israel because we have lived to see the ingathering of the exiles and it is understood to be a foolish custom by many halakhic scholars.

While I think permission to eat kitniyot should be extended to vegetarians whose only source of protein is kitniyot such as soy, I don't see any need to get rid of a strong custom of our ancestors. Ashkenazim don't eat kitniyot. I personally don't eat kitniyot. However, because of the strong position of the Talmud and later legal commentators that this strict practice is a mistaken or foolish custom, I certainly think it is permissible for someone to eat kitniyot...in particular, if that will make the difference between someone keeping kosher for Passover and observing the laws of Pesah or NOT, that person should keep kosher for Passover and eat kitniyot—eat rice, beans and corn.

I have two side notes on peanuts and baking soda. They both have been ruled to be permissible for consumption during Passover by the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Laws and Standards. Peanuts are permissible because although they are considered legumes they do not meet any of the criteria for kitniyot for which kitniyot were forbidden by Askenazim: they are stored in their shells, they are not made into a grainy cereal or daisa and they are not made into bread or crackers.

Baking soda or sodium bicarbonate is permitted because the means by which baking soda causes food to rise is considered masrihin or "putrefecation/spoiling" and not mahmitzin or leavening. Baking powder is baking soda combined with cream of tartar or chemical substitutes such as aluminum sulfate. It also contains cornstarch and so, if you eat kitniyot, you can use baking powder. If you don't eat kitniyot, you should not use baking powder.

The last principle of Pesah I want to share is that keeping Pesah has a few basic requirements. We are supposed to remove hametz from our homes and our possession. We are supposed to eat a significant portion of matzah at the seder, drink four cups of wine, mention the significance of matzah, maror and the pesah sacrifice, and we are supposed to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. We do not have to say every word of the haggadah. We have to tell the story. We do not have to sit still through the whole seder or even sit on chairs for that matter. We can walk around, act out the story, recline on pillows...We can do whatever it takes to engage the children and the adults so that

they experience Egypt and they experience God's redemption of Israel and gift of freedom.

I encourage you to maintain the traditions of Pesah. I encourage you this year to take on more observance of the laws than you did last year. I encourage you to create family traditions that help your family to observe and enjoy the holiday so that Pesah and the s'darim come alive and speak to the hearts and minds of all those sitting around the seder table.

I caution you not to lose your minds. Not to obsess about dirt but rather focus on how you can make the holiday special and meaningful for your family and friends. I caution you not to buy products that are unnecessarily marked up in price because manufacturers like to play off our fears. Read the Passover guide and note the food products that don't need a kosher for Passover label if purchased before Pesah. Before you buy one of those attractively packaged special kosher for Passover products, ask yourself if you would eat it any other time of the year or if you need it to exist for the eight days of Pesah. Also, think about what you eat during the year as you plan your menus. Most of us eat some form of meat or fish, vegetables and starch like potatoes. All of that is kosher for Passover...no reason to go crazy!

I hope we all have kosher, joyful, inspiring s'darim. I hope we all welcome guests into our homes; enjoy the children and encourage their questions at the table; and enjoy the gifts of freedom that we celebrate as we observe Passover here in America, the land of freedom. And when you open the door to welcome in Elijah, please don't forget to look outside and ask yourself what work needs to be done out in the world so that Elijah will be able to come and bring us the message of perfection and universal peace.

This year in New Jersey. Next year in Jerusalem. Ken y'hi ratzon. Shabbat Shalom.