

Chametz

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[What is chametz? 2](#_Toc19721402)

[Chametz Parallels Idolatry 3](idolatry.html)

[Chametz = Ego 3](#_Toc19721404)

[Chametz = Yetzer HaRa 4](#_Toc19721405)

[In The Temple 5](temple.html)

[Spring Cleaning 5](#_Toc19721407)

[Selling Leaven 5](#_Toc19721408)

[Search for Leaven 5](#_Toc19721409)

[Burning Leaven 5](#_Toc19721410)

[Pesach to Shavuot 5](shavuot.html)

[Halacha 6](walking.html)

[Conclusion 6](#_Toc19721413)



In this [study](study.html) I would like to look at chametz, leaven, and it’s details, symbolism, and implications. [Jews](gen-jew.html) approach the [spiritual](physical.html) through our involvement in the [physical](physical.html). chametz (leaven) is the [physical](physical.html) component that includes a [spiritual](physical.html) component. In fact, real spirituality comes from being able to see through mundane [physical](physical.html) objects, to their [spiritual](physical.html) core. Further, we see the [physical](physical.html) as bridge to the [spiritual](physical.html) because Judaism recognizes that the [physical](physical.html) has been created as a visceral mirror for abstract [spiritual](physical.html) concepts. [One](one.html) of the goals of this [study](study.html) is to understand the [spiritual](physical.html) component of chametz.

Let’s start by examining the Torah prohibition against chametz on [Pesach](passover.html) ([Passover](passover.html)):

***Shemot (***[***Exodus***](exodus.html)***) 12:15-20*** *For* [*seven*](seven.html) *days you are to* [*eat*](eating.html) *bread made without yeast (chametz). On the* [*first*](one.html) *day remove the yeast(chametz) from your houses, for whoever* [*eats*](eating.html) *anything with yeast (chametz) in it from the* [*first*](one.html) *day through the* [*seventh*](seven.html) *must be cut off from Israel. On the* [*first*](one.html) *day hold a* [*sacred assembly*](rehearse.html)*, and another* [*one*](one.html) *on the* [*seventh*](seven.html) *day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare* [*food*](food.html) *for everyone to* [*eat*](eating.html)*--that is all you may do. "Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions* [*out of Egypt*](thebirth.html)*. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the* [*generations*](toldot.html) *to come. In the* [*first*](one.html) *month you are to* [*eat*](eating.html) *bread made without yeast (chametz), from the evening of the* [*fourteenth*](fourteen.html) *day until the evening of the* [*twenty*](twenty.html)*-*[*first*](one.html) *day. For* [*seven*](seven.html) *days no yeast (chametz) is to be found in your houses. And whoever* [*eats*](eating.html) *anything with yeast (chametz) in it must be cut off from the* [*community*](community.html) *of Israel, whether he is an* [*alien*](aliens.html) *or native-born.* [*Eat*](eating.html) *nothing made with yeast (chametz). Wherever you live, you must* [*eat*](eating.html) *unleavened bread."*

***Shemot (***[***Exodus***](exodus.html)***) 13:6-7*** *For* [*seven*](seven.html) *days* [*eat*](eating.html) *bread made without yeast (chametz) and on the* [*seventh*](seven.html) *day hold a* [*festival*](festival.html) *to* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*.* [*Eat*](eating.html) *unleavened bread during those* [*seven*](seven.html) *days; nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you, nor shall any yeast (chametz) be seen anywhere within your borders.*

Although chametz is often translated as “leaven,” the term has a much more precise definition. Chametz means wheat, barley, oats, spelt, or rye that has become wet and allowed to remain for a short period of [time](time.html) (18 minutes) so that it begins the leavening process.

On [Pesach](passover.html) we are forbidden to own chametz (leavened bread, i.e., virtually any flour product not especially produced for [Pesach](passover.html)) or have it in our possession. On the evening preceding [Pesach](passover.html) there is a serious search of the home for chametz.

The prohibition on [eating](eating.html) chametz (leavened bread) on [Pesach](passover.html) is different from all other prohibitions in the Torah. This begins from the fact that the prohibition is only for [seven](seven.html) days. The simple question is: If chametz is *bad*, for some reason, it should be prohibited all year; and if not, why is forbidden on [Pesach](passover.html)?

All other [food](food.html) prohibitions fall into [two](two.html) possible categories; either [eating](eating.html), or all benefit, is forbidden. Indeed, chametz falls into the latter category. However, in addition, there is a prohibition called "lo yeira'eh lekha". chametz may not be in your possession all the days of [Pesach](passover.html). There is no prohibition on having ham in [one](one.html)'s home, but chametz must be gotten rid of before [Pesach](passover.html). That is why [Pesach](passover.html) is the cause of massive spring cleaning in [Jewish](gen-jew.html) homes, as we conduct an obsessive search to root out any crumbs that might be lurking somewhere. There is no other prohibition like this.

On [Pesach](passover.html), we are enjoined to strike out the very existence of chametz from our lives. chametz is not to be found anywhere "in your borders." According to the Ramban, the aim is that chametz not be found "in your mind," it should be like [dust](rock.html) in your [eyes](body.html).

What is so bad with chametz that we are set to destroy it, and why does our attitude change so completely [seven](seven.html) days later?

# What is chametz?

Our Hakhamim specified [five](five.html) grains which can become chametz: wheat, barley, spelt, rye, and oats. Ashkenazi authorities added to this list rice and kitniot, or legumes (including beans, peas, lentils, corn and maize, millet, and mustard). Sephardic authorities, prohibit only the [five](five.html) specified grains, thus Sephardic [Jews](gen-jew.html) are allowed to [eat](eating.html) legumes and rice during [Pesach](passover.html).

During the [eight](eight.html) days of [Pesach](passover.html) (in the diaspora), chametz cannot lose its identity in an admixture (the ratio needed is usually 1/60). Therefore, the minutest amount of chametz renders the whole admixture chametz and its use on [Pesach](passover.html) is prohibited. However, during the rest of the year, chametz follows the normal rules of admixture, i.e. it loses its identity in an admixture of non-chametz. This affords us the opportunity to differentiate between [foods](food.html) purchased before and during [Pesach](passover.html).

The Sages [teach](teacher.html) us that there is no punishment for [eating](eating.html) less that kazait, the bulk of an olive, of forbidden [food](food.html), if done accidentally. So, if a drop of milk accidentally falls in the beef stew, we are allowed to [eat](eating.html) it. But [one](one.html) Torah prohibition does not follow this standard, chametz. If we even so much as possess, much less [eat](eating.html), the tiniest speck of chametz during [Pesach](passover.html), the punishment is keret, [spiritual](physical.html) excision. We have no other [mitzva](cmds613.html) like it. This [mitzva](cmds613.html) declares that we are to live in the moment which is beyond the reach of the yetzer hara, a moment beyond [time](time.html).

***Shemot (***[***Exodus***](exodus.html)***) 12:15*** *Anyone who* [*eats*](eating.html) *chametz, that individual will be cut off from the* [*Jewish*](gen-jew.html) *people.*

Chametz which remains in the possession of a [Jew](gen-jew.html) over [Pesach](passover.html) may not be used, [eaten](eating.html), bought or sold even after [Pesach](passover.html).

Given the nature of modern [food](food.html) technology, that results in the necessity that any processed [food](food.html) have special [Pesach](passover.html) supervision.

חמץ **- chametz**

מצה **- Matza**

chametz (leaven) shares nearly the identical [letters](letters.html) with matza (unleavened bread). The only difference is that [one](one.html) has a chet (ח) and the other has a hay (ה). A careful examination of these [two](two.html) [letters](letters.html) will reveal that the only difference is [one](one.html) very tiny line. A line so short it is just a point.

What is the difference between matza and chametz? To bake matza, we must have the matza cooked within [eighteen](eighteen.html) minutes of the [time](time.html) we [first](one.html) add water to the flour. If we go [eighteen](eighteen.html) minutes and [one](one.html) seconds, the matza becomes chametz.

The difference is [one](one.html) second! The same ingredients that make matza, if left an extra second will become chametz. Again, the difference is very tiny.

On [Pesach](passover.html), [eating](eating.html) matza is a [mitzva](cmds613.html) and [eating](eating.html) chametz is a grave [sin](sin.html) which cause a soul to be cut off from Israel. The very same material can either be [spiritual](physical.html) rocket fuel or [spiritual](physical.html) excision; all for the sake of [one](one.html) second!

Keep in mind that the [number](nchart.html) [eighteen](eighteen.html) is written in [Hebrew](hebrew.html) as: **יח** These [two](two.html) [letters](letters.html) can be reversed to spell: **חי** Which is the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word for life!

Now if we [eat](eating.html) chametz at [Pesach](passover.html), the penalty is [spiritual](physical.html) excision:

***Shemot (***[***Exodus***](exodus.html)***)12:15***[*Seven*](seven.html) *days shall ye* [*eat*](eating.html) *unleavened bread; even the* [*first*](one.html) *day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the* [*first*](one.html) *day until the* [*seventh*](seven.html) *day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel.*

***Shemot (***[***Exodus***](exodus.html)***) 12:19***[*Seven*](seven.html) *days shall there be no leaven found in your houses: for whosoever eateth that which is leavened, even that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a stranger, or born in the land.*

WOW! If we [eat](eating.html) matza at [Pesach](passover.html), it is a [mitzva](cmds613.html) derisa and we enter the sublime [spiritual](physical.html) realms because of the [mitzva](cmds613.html). But, if we [eat](eating.html) the same stuff that took a second longer to cook, we are completely cut off from Israel! Such is the transcendent level that [Jews](gen-jew.html) are to live. [Time](time.html) is important!

# Chametz Parallels [Idolatry](idolatry.html)

The [Zohar](orallaw.html) equates chametz and [idolatry](idolatry.html):

[***Zohar***](orallaw.html) ***2:182*** *Whoever* [*eats*](eating.html) *chametz on* [*Pesach*](passover.html) *is as if he* [*prayed*](prayer.html) *to an* [*idol*](idolatry.html)*.*

R. Menachem Kasher[[1]](#footnote-1) draws a series of halakhic parallels between the [laws](law.html) of [idolatry](idolatry.html) and the [laws](law.html) of chametz:

1. The prohibition of even seeing it.
2. The requirement to burn it, to eradicate its existence.
3. The prohibition not only of [eating](eating.html) but of any manner of benefit from it.
4. The prohibition of even the most minuscule particle. This is true for [idolatry](idolatry.html) and chametz, but is not true for any other prohibitions in [Jewish](gen-jew.html) [law](law.html).]

# Chametz = Ego

Some have observed that chametz, the air that puffs up dough into bread, is the ego. Just as chametz makes bread look bigger than it is without adding any substance, so too an ego filled with self-importance is ultimately nothing but hot air.

Ego, though, has a purpose that is good. Any psychologist will tell you that a healthy ego is a powerful motivator, giving people the courage to pursue their [dreams](dreams.html) and stand up for what is right. The ego drives us to build the [world](worlds.html), to accomplish the tasks that [HaShem](hashem.html) has set before us. Though we think that we are building up ourselves, in reality we are usually building the [world](worlds.html) in a very real way. Because we wish to be seen and appreciated by others, we perform tasks and [mitzvot](cmds613.html) which ultimately build the [world](worlds.html) and accomplish the purposes of [HaShem](hashem.html). Thus we see that the ego is a good thing and that our goal should be the mastering of the ego for [HaShem](hashem.html)’s work.

chametz is nothing but puffed up matza. But what chametz is actually made out of is nothing less than matza itself! So too there is an idea that the ego is nothing but a corrupt twisted [desire](needs.html) that actually has its basis in a drive [coming](coming.html) from the soul. For example:

The soul [wants](needs.html) only to give, to help humanity and fix the [world](worlds.html). The ego's perverted version of this noble drive is the [desire](needs.html) for power and control, the urge to conquer the [world](worlds.html).

The soul [wants](needs.html) to connect with the Divine. The ego [wants](needs.html) to use spirituality to serve its [needs](needs.html) (this is the basis for [idol](idolatry.html) worship).

The soul [wants](needs.html) to connect with other people meaningfully. The ego corrupts this [desire](needs.html) into a drive to manipulate and take from people.

By seeing that often the ego is nothing but a corruption of a noble [desire](needs.html) we can easily move past it and bring even the ego to serve [HaShem](hashem.html).

# Chametz = Yetzer HaRa

The *Ramchal zt”l* [teaches](teacher.html) us that chametz is a symbol of yetzer hara, the evil inclination. This urge to [sin](sin.html) is a force given to us by [HaShem](hashem.html) to balance the yetzer tov, the good inclination. With these [two](two.html) in balance, we have the free will to choose the good or the evil. Without the yetzer hara and the yetzer tov we would not have free will.

The yetzer hara is also the [desire](needs.html) which pushes us to marry in order to fulfill lust. It is the [desire](needs.html) which pushes us to build a house in order to marry. It is the [desire](needs.html) which pushes us to work hard in order to gain the money or power that we covet. But, in the end, each of these selfish acts is used by [HaShem](hashem.html) to build His [world](worlds.html) and to cause us to do His will. Our goal is to bring the yetzer hara under our control to eliminate the lust, love for money, love for power, and every other selfish [desire](needs.html). Our goal is to use the yetzer hara to bring about the [world](worlds.html) desired by [HaShem](hashem.html).

Sometime, on a [future](future.html) [Pesach](passover.html), the yetzer hara will finally be destroyed and we will enjoy the reward that came from over-[coming](coming.html) the yetzer hara. Then we will no longer have to battle the yetzer hara, and we can enjoy the reward that we earned by controlling the yetzer hara.

***Berachot 17a*** *R. Alexandri on concluding his* [*prayer*](prayer.html) *used to add the following: Sovereign of the Universe, it is* [*known*](daat.html) *full well to Thee that our will is to perform Thy will, and what prevents us? The yeast in the dough and the subjection to the foreign Powers. May it be Thy will to deliver us from their* [*hand*](fourteen.html)*, so that we may return to perform the statutes of Thy will with a perfect* [*heart*](body.html)*!*

When the chametz enters the dough mixture through the air or water, it is acting independently, intruding on its own. Fermentation, chametz, is a function of nature which symbolizes the negative forces of civilization which sway man from his responsibilities, which entice man to [sin](sin.html). This is how evil works, it sneaks up quietly and unobtrusively. Fermentation represents the evil urge, the urge to [sin](sin.html), the influence of [alien](aliens.html) ideas and forces. It is the [voice](voice.html) that encourages us to ignore the pushy power of evil until it is too late. Flour and water which stand for more than [eighteen](eighteen.html) minutes become by definition chametz, leaven. Because matza is bread which is not leavened, it represents man in control of his passions, exercising his independent disciplined will unflayed by external forces. Matza is the very opposite of chametz. It is a man who is alert, on the defensive, disciplined and in control, rising above the forces of nature.

[Pesach](passover.html) is the [time](time.html) of [freedom](freedom.html), [spiritual](physical.html) [freedom](freedom.html) (which is the essence of why [HaShem](hashem.html) brought us [out of Egypt](thebirth.html)). The only thing that stands between you and [HaShem](hashem.html), is you. To come close to [HaShem](hashem.html) (which is the essence of life and the opportunity of every [mitzva](cmds613.html) and [holiday](festival.html)), [one](one.html) must remove his yetzer hara. [One](one.html) must choose the good! This is the lesson of removing the chametz from our possession.

The Sages [teach](teacher.html) that the yetzer hara, evil inclination, cannot touch [one](one.html) who acts immediately at the flash of inspiration from [HaShem](hashem.html). If we live at that transcendental moment, we will live beyond the reach of Paro’s magicians, beyond the reach of evil. Then [HaShem](hashem.html) will reward us midda kneged midda, measure for measure.

Our Sages have told us that chametz and the preparations associated with it are extremely symbolic. Chametz represents the evil within us, our yetzer hara, our evil inclination. It represents all of our character flaws such as haughtiness, jealousy, unbridled passion and lust. Just as we need to remove every speck of chametz from our [household](househld.html), so too we need to remove every speck of [spiritual](physical.html) chametz from our beings. Just as much [time](time.html) and effort is expended on preparing ourselves [physically](physical.html) for [Pesach](passover.html), by removing any hint of chametz, we must also exert much [time](time.html) and effort on preparing ourselves [spiritually](physical.html) for [Pesach](passover.html), by working on improving our character, which is accomplished by removing all the evil traits we unfortunately carry with us. Then, and only then, can we stand before [HaShem](hashem.html).

# In The [Temple](temple.html)

Among the many [laws](law.html) of offerings to be brought in the [Beit HaMikdash](mikdash.html), there is a curious restriction: no chametz may be brought on the altar as part of the various meal-offerings. We can’t bring chametz on [Pesach](passover.html):

***Shemot (***[***Exodus***](exodus.html)***) 34:25*** *Thou shalt not offer the* [*blood*](body.html) *of my* [*sacrifice*](korbanot.html) *with chametz; neither shall the* [*sacrifice*](korbanot.html) *of the feast of the* [*Passover*](passover.html) *be left unto the morning.*

Nor can we bring chametz to the altar at any other [time](time.html):

***Vayikra (Leviticus) 2:11*** *No meat* [*offering*](korbanot)*, which ye shall bring unto* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, shall be made with chametz: for ye shall burn no chametz, nor any honey, in any* [*offering*](korbanot) *of* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *made by* [*fire*](fire.html)*.*

So when do we bring leaven to the [Temple](temple.html)?

[Shavuot](shavuot.html) is the [Festival](festival.html) of Weeks. It is also the [festival](festival.html) designated as the [time](time.html) to bring [first](one.html) fruits from the [new](new.html) crop in the [Land of Israel](city.html) to the [Temple](temple.html). [Shavuot](shavuot.html) is linked to [Pesach](passover.html) by the [Omer](omer.html). We count [seven](seven.html) [cycles](cycles.html) of [seven](seven.html) days from [Pesach](passover.html) and then we celebrate [Shavuot](shavuot.html). [Pesach](passover.html) is the start of a process; [Shavuot](shavuot.html) is the end. On [Pesach](passover.html), we remove all leaven and [eat](eating.html) only unleavened bread. On [Shavuot](shavuot.html), we bring loaves of leaven.

# Spring Cleaning

The [Passover](passover.html) home atmosphere is created by the practice of cleansing the home of all traces of chametz, or leaven, and by the careful avoidance of its use throughout the [holiday](festival.html), both at home and away.

The term *chametz* is applied not only to [foods](food.html), but also to the dishes and utensils in which [foods](food.html) are prepared or served during the year. 'These may not be used during [Pesach](passover.html), except as indicated.

# Selling Leaven

MECHIRAT CHAMETZ - The Selling of Leaven: According to the Biblical injunction that "no leaven shall be seen or found in your possession, “during [Pesach](passover.html), [one](one.html) must dispose of all non-[Pesach](passover.html) [foods](food.html) for the full week of [Pesach](passover.html).

Torah [law](law.html) prohibits the use or legal possession of any chametz, leaven of any kind, on [Pesach](passover.html). In order to be certain that all chametz has been removed from our possession, [Jewish](gen-jew.html) tradition requires us to sell our remaining chametz to a non-[Jew](gen-jew.html). This chametz, then, becomes the property of the non-[Jew](gen-jew.html) for the duration of [Pesach](passover.html) and should be set aside in a place in [one](one.html)'s home that will be unused during [Pesach](passover.html).

The authorization of the right to sell chametz can be granted to another. In order to symbolize that [one](one.html) is transferring the [authority](authority.html) to sell, it is customary to make a token monetary transfer. The money contributed will be used to provide needy families with [Pesach](passover.html) necessities.

# Search for Leaven

BEDIKAT CHAMETZ - The Search for Leaven: Taking place the evening before the [first](one.html) [Seder](haggada.html), (except when [Pesach](passover.html) begins on a Saturday night), this ceremony is the climax of the [Pesach](passover.html) preparation. [Ten](ten.html) pieces of chametz are hidden around the house. The family gathers together with a candle for lighting the way, a feather for brushing-up the chametz, and a wooden spoon onto which the chametz is brushed.

# Burning Leaven

BIUR CHAMETZ - The Burning of Leaven: The crumbs of bread that have been [gathered](gather.html) the night before are put together in a bundle and burned the morning before [Pesach](passover.html). The appropriate [prayers](prayer.html) can be found in any [Haggada](haggada.html).

# [Pesach](passover.html) to [Shavuot](shavuot.html)

The [seven](seven.html) weeks between [Pesach](passover.html) and [Shavuot](shavuot.html) is a [time](time.html) when we move from matza to chametz.

# [Halacha](walking.html)

1. Chametz may not be [eaten](eating.html) in any form on [Pesach](passover.html), for [seven](seven.html) days ([eight](eight.html) outside of Israel).

2. It is prohibited to have chametz in your possession during [Pesach](passover.html) (beginning [one](one.html) hour before noon on the day before.). Either [one](one.html) simply gets rid of it all, or it can be sold to a non-[Jew](gen-jew.html) through the offices of your local Hakham.

3. The night BEFORE [Pesach](passover.html), [one](one.html) searches through the entire house to insure that there is no chametz around. The found chametz, and any left over, is burnt the next morning. [One](one.html) mentally removes any remaining chametz from [one](one.html)'s mind and makes it "hefker" (free, un-owned).

# Conclusion

In the ultimate sense, fermentation is not merely a process which does not take place in matza. That is its lesson. In reality it was Israel who had become fermented, up to the point where they almost became chametz. It was [HaShem](hashem.html) who saved Israel from becoming chametz, which would have spelled Israel's destruction. It was the redeeming [hand](fourteen.html) of [HaShem](hashem.html) which guaranteed that Israel would "remain matza" for all [time](time.html) to come.

Hmmm…

***Soncino*** [***Zohar***](orallaw.html)***, Bereshit, Section 1, Page 157a*** *As R. Hiya and R. Jose were once* [*walking*](walking.html) *on the road, the latter said: ‘Every* [*time*](time.html) *we* [*walk*](walking.html) *together and discuss matters pertaining to the Torah, God performs for us miracles, and now that we have a long road before us let us occupy ourselves in the Torah and so God will join us.’ R. Hiya then opened with the verse: In the* [*first*](one.html) *month, on the* [*fourteenth*](fourteen.html) *day of the month at even, ye shall* [*eat*](eating.html) *unleavened bread (Ex. XII, 18). ‘This unleavened bread’, he said, ‘is called in another place “bread of affliction” (Deut. XVI, 3), an expression on which the companions have commented as follows. When Israel were in Egypt they were under an* [*alien*](aliens.html) *power; and when God desired to bring them near unto Himself, He assigned them the region of the bread of ’oni (affliction), the term ’oni admitting also of the reading ’ani (poor), and thus pointing to King David, who said of himself: “for I am poor (’ani) and needy” (Ps. LXXXVI, 1). Now this bread of affliction is called matza (unleavened bread), symbolic of the* [*female*](male%2Bfemale.html) *principle, which without the* [*male*](male%2Bfemale.html) *principle is, so to* [*speak*](mashal.html)*, in poverty. Thus Israel were* [*first*](one.html) *brought near the grade symbolized by matza. But afterwards God caused them to enter other grades, until the* [*male*](male%2Bfemale.html) *principle joined the* [*female*](male%2Bfemale.html) *principle, and so matza received the addition of the* [*letter*](letters.html) *vav, symbolic of the* [*male*](male%2Bfemale.html) *principle, and became converted into* [*mitzva*](cmds613.html) *(*[*command*](cmds613.html)*, precept). So Scripture says: “For this* [*commandment*](cmds613.html)*” (Deut. XXX, 7):* [*first*](one.html) *matza (unleavened bread), then* [*mitzva*](cmds613.html) *(*[*commandment*](cmds613.html)*).’*

**\* \* \***

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1. *Haggada Shelema* by R. Menachem Kasher, Appendix #7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)