



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## VAYIKRA > Tzav

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March 23, 2013

Tzav - Shabbat HaGadol

**Every Last Crumb**



# Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”

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## ABSTRACT

How would you answer if someone asked you: “Why the obsession with finding every last crumb of *chametz*?”

Certainly, non-religious Jews are puzzled, but even those from traditional homes often wonder why the age-old custom to scrub endlessly with harsh chemicals and turn the house upside down. Why the literal “witch hunt” and obsessive search to ensure that not one shred of *chametz* remain?! Does God really care about a mere crumb?! And if it does matter that much, why can we eat bread a moment before and a moment after Passover?

On this *Shabbat HaGadol* when we historically review the laws of Passover, we shall look at a key law behind the laws – the very meaning of *chametz* and its antithesis matzah.

The first man, Adam, is described as “a bread formed from a dough” in the words of the Midrash. And we are all descendants of Adam. As such, we are all considered a product of dough. The question is how – through the exercise of eradicating all *chametz* on Passover – we can we make sure, as individuals, that our “dough” will not rise and become bloated?

The answer teaches us a tremendous lesson in the nature of the self and the ego, by addressing the big question: Is the self-contained ego the root of all evil? Do we have to annihilate it or can we channel it?

This also explains the secret how the Rebbe, whose 111th birthday we honored yesterday, was able to ignite and motivate so many hearts and souls to be leaders and initiators: One of the Rebbe’s major contributions was teaching us how we can harness our individuality and egos toward the greatest achievements.

## EVERY LAST CRUMB: WHY THE OBSESSION WITH CHAMETZ?

### 1. Unpopular Rabbi (Humor)

A mother goes into her son's room. "You've got to get up for synagogue Bernie." Bernie pulls the blankets over his head. "I don't want to go to synagogue." "But you have to," his mother said. "I don't want to. The congregants don't like me, the staff makes fun of me." Mother pulls the blanket back a little, "Bernie, you don't have any choice. You've got to get up for synagogue." "Yeah," say Bernie, "Give me one good reason!" "You're 52 years old and you're the rabbi."

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The same man served for many years as the wagon driver for the 18th century Rabbi Landau of Prague. He accompanied him everywhere on his lecture tours. Many of his talks were repeated and these the driver soon learned by heart. One day shortly before they entered a city that they had never been to before, the driver said to the rabbi, "In every town we go, I see the great respect that people show you. I'd love to know what it feels like to be given such honor." "Then today you shall. We will exchange clothes and you will give the talk." Everything proceeded well and the driver gave the talk he had learned perfectly, while the rabbi listened at the back of the synagogue. The driver even managed to answer all the questions. Then came a question that he had never heard before so he was stymied. Standing quietly beside the lectern he said, "That question is not so difficult as it may sound; even my driver can answer it." So he asked him to come forward.

## 2. Awesome Responsibility

This Shabbat is known as the favorite of many rabbis – and possibly as the least favorite of many congregations – because of an ancient custom attached to it. For hundreds of years, rabbis have been known to deliver a special sermon ... or an especially long sermon ... on this last Shabbat before Passover.

The object of the sermon – called *Shabbat HaGadol drasha* – was to make the community aware of the laws pertaining to Passover, and there are many of those, as we know.

So, historically, these sermons have ... how shall I put it ... dragged on. Indeed, the great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, explains that this is the very reason that this Shabbat is called *HaGadol*, meaning great/big/long, because it felt that way due to the great/big/long sermon.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Mixed Feelings

So you may wonder: How do I feel about this Shabbat, being that I am mandated to speak to you at length?

Frankly, I have mixed feelings on the topic. On one hand, I obviously take my responsibility seriously and I follow orders. Hence, I am my standing here before you. But on the other hand, I feel apprehensive and humbled, recognizing the awesome and daunting challenge to find relevant words that will be meaningful to you and to me.

It's no small task to stand here. No one wants to speak hollow words that do not touch the hearts and souls of his listeners. Personally I see my role as one that must above all respect your time and attention. I must earn the right to have you listen to me. This is why my preparations for a sermon always include one question that I ask myself:

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi, Sefer ha'Pardes, p. 343, citing Rabbi Yitzchak Yuskuntu: "When people do not move around, but stay in one place for an extended time and don't have what to do, they customarily will say: 'what a long day'" A similar sentiment is expressed by the 13th century scholar, Rabbi Tzidkiyahu ben Avraham in his *Shibolei Haleket*, R' Yechiel in *Tanya Rabsi* and others.

Will listening to me for a half hour (or whatever time it takes) be the best thing that everyone in the audience could be doing at this moment?

My challenge and objective is to ensure that my words are not meaningless and empty, but relevant and empowering. My wish is that you, my listeners, walk away with a message that you will integrate and share, rather than one that you will forget the moment you leave the room.

I don't know if I always succeed. But I always try. And I always pray to God to put the right words in my mouth.

No less so today.

#### 4. The Law Behind the Laws

And this is why today, I will not just speak about the laws of Passover, but about the law behind the laws – about the inside story of this powerful holiday.

I would like to begin with a provocative question which I was recently asked by a young man struggling with his traditional upbringing: “Why the obsession with finding every last crumb of *chametz*?”

He explained that he grew up in a home where the day after Purim, his mother and grandmother began this determined and painstaking search for every shred of bread in the house. They would turn over every couch pillow, burrow into every crevice and nook and cranny. They would climb on top of the cabinets and even above the ceiling rafters to cleanse and scrub. Harsh chemicals permeated the air. It was a sight to behold.

He summed it up: “Come Pesach our house definitely felt like new, but what I never understood is why the literal ‘witch hunt’ and obsessive search to ensure that not one shred of *chametz* remain?! Does God really care about a mere crumb?! And if it does matter that much, why can we eat bread a moment before Erev Pesach and a moment after Pesach?”

## 5. A Good Question

A good question.

Indeed, the Torah commands us to search for *chametz*, to eradicate it and to burn it. After a thorough cleaning process, the night before Passover, we go on one last search for *chametz* and then declare: “All leaven and anything leavened that is in my possession, which I have neither seen nor removed, and about which I am unaware, shall be considered nullified and ownerless as the dust of the earth.”

So, an easy answer would be that this is God’s commandment whether we understand it or not. But that would be a coward’s way out. For God does want us to understand His commandments. Moreover, when we understand and appreciate them, we go about fulfilling them with vitality and passion, rather than mechanically and mindlessly.

## 6. A Better Answer

And indeed there is a much better answer, and it can be found in the Hebrew words used for bread on Passover – *chametz* (spelled *chet*, *mem*, *tzadik*), and its antithesis, *matzah* (spelled *mem*, *tzadik*, *hei*). Both words are comprised of three letters, two of which are exactly the same, and the third very similar. Both contain the letters *mem* and *tzaddik*. However, the third letter in *matzah* is a *hei*, whereas in *chametz* it is a *chet*. Although these two letters are different, they sound almost the same, and they are written in an almost identical fashion – they both consist of three lines forming a house of sorts, the only difference being that the *chet* has a complete left side attached to the roof, while the *hei* has a little gap, with the left side not quite arriving to the roof line.

This is a tiny difference, but it is as huge as the difference between life and death.

## 7. Sign of Life

A key sign of life is the ability to breathe. And breathing means that there is space and room for release.

Think of a kettle that has no spout. Without the release spout, a boiling kettle will explode, having nowhere to put its pressure. The *chet* of *chametz* is closed and has no spout, no release point. The *hei* of matzah has that space to allow the air out.

The psychological significance is critical:

Both matzah and *chametz* are made of the same ingredients: flour and water. Hence the same letters. But there is a big difference between them. The matzah dough is carefully watched<sup>2</sup> and not allowed to rise, while the *chametz* dough is allowed to rise and become inflated. Same ingredients but one emerges bare and raw, the other puffed up full of air.

## 8. Bittul

The bare quality of matzah symbolizes *bittul*, suspension of self (or ego) for higher purpose.

Matzah is made of water and flour – water representing the soul and the Torah, and flour representing the body. Its antithesis *chametz* is made of the same ingredients plus yeast which causes it to rise as the dough becomes puffed up with air, and this represents the inflated ego.

Hence *chametz* is written with a *chet*, a closed letter, self-contained, bloated. Matzah, on the other hand, is written with a *hei* – the spout of *bittul*, the opening that lets the air out.

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.

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<sup>2</sup> “And you shall watch the matzahs,” Exodus 12:17.

## 9. Man as Dough

The first man, Adam, is described as “a bread formed from a dough” in the words of the Midrash.<sup>3</sup> And we are all descendants of Adam. As such, we are all considered a product of dough. It is therefore not surprising that the Talmud describes our evil inclination as a little volume of sour dough that is mixed into the dough in order to make it rise.<sup>4</sup>

The question is how can we make sure, as individuals, that our “dough” will not be influenced by our evil inclination and rise and become bloated?

The answer is that we must train ourselves to be like matzah.

In regular *chametz* dough, one adds a little sour dough or yeast to make it rise. This complete recipe is symbolized by the complete left side of the *chet* in the word *chametz*. The matzah lacks this ingredient and therefore stays unleavened, as symbolized by the incomplete left side of the *hei* in the word matzah.

This is the secret. If we manage to keep the rising agent out of our dough, we will stay humble like matzah and not inflate ourselves like *chametz*.

This is what we pray for three times daily, at the end of the *Shemonah Esrei*, when we ask God for assistance so that “our soul should be like dust to all.”

There is no more volume in the leavened *chametz* bread than in the unleavened matzah. It is just that the rising ingredient makes the *chametz* appear larger. If we manage to control our evil inclination we will be like the unleavened matzah.

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Noah 7 and Rashi on Shabbos 32a.

<sup>4</sup> Berachos 17a.



## 10. Harnessing the Ego

But note something important – the prohibition to eat *chametz* is only for the seven/eight days of Pesach, not before, not after.

This teaches us that the objective is not to annihilate the ego, but to harness it. Thus, all year round we eat bread, which is *chametz*.

Ego 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 and stand up for what is right. The ego drives us to build the world, to accomplish the tasks that we were charged with. Though we think that we are building up ourselves, in reality we are usually building the world in a very real way. Because we wish to be appreciated by others, we perform tasks and deeds which ultimately build the world and accomplish the divine purpose.

Thus we see that the ego is a good thing and that our goal should be not annihilating it, but harnessing it toward divine objectives. *Chametz* is nothing but puffed up matzah. But what *chametz* is actually made of is nothing less than matzah itself!

However, recognizing the power of the inflated ego to lead us astray, we seek to put limits on it. We ponder the destruction self-interest can wreak, and we take care.

One week a year – on Passover – we do not allow even one shred of ego into our lives.

## 11. Not One Crumb

Why not even one shred? Why not even one crumb?

Because when it comes to ego, the issue is qualitative not quantitative. One drop contaminates the entire thing. Thus *bittul* requires total immersion.

*Tevilah* (“immersion”) in a *mikveh* contains the same letters as *ha'bittul* – because if you don't immerse totally, then it's as if you have not immersed at all.

*Chametz* on Passover is compared to idolatry.<sup>5</sup> Idolatry too is prohibited completely.

Give one inch to your evil inclination, and you are sunk. All mistakes begin with small errors. So on Passover the line is drawn in the sand – a line that cannot be crossed.

This explains the powerful words of the great 16th century Kabbalist known as the Ari: “Anyone who is careful from even a shred of *chametz* on Passover is assured that he will not sin all year round.”<sup>6</sup>

If we learn to totally subdue the inflated ego on Passover, then, when we reenter the world of the ego afterwards, we will know how to harness it, instead of the other way around.

## 12. Harnessing the Ego

This idea – of subjugating the ego (*chametz*) in order to harness it – captures one of the major contributions and foundational teachings of the Rebbe, whose 111th birthday we honored yesterday on Yud Alef Nissan:

People wonder what was the Rebbe’s secret in igniting so many people’s hearts and souls and motivating them to become leaders and initiators? Take the thousands of the Rebbe’s shluchim (emissaries) across the globe – who I and my wife are honored to be one of: Despite their lack of resources and experience, they have each built communities and institutions that have changed the face of their cities. What motivated them and what continues to motivate them (though the Rebbe’s physical presence is not here now 18 years)?! Were they all born leaders?

Hardly.

The Rebbe’s secret was teaching us how to balance the eradication of *chametz-ego* in order to harness its power throughout the year.

<sup>5</sup> Zohar II 182a.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Ba’er Heitev (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 447:1).

On one hand, the Rebbe did not demand annihilation of the self. Quite the contrary: a shliach, the Rebbe often emphasized, was a person with his or her own independent mind and heart, with his own interests, who at his own volition commits to being a shliach – an ambassador of the *meshalayach*, the one who sent him.

And it is actually the self and the ego that drives and motivates a person to succeed. Without our individual drive and personal interest, we will not invest in fighting for the cause, overcoming obstacles, innovating programs and truly succeeding. No, the objective is not destroying the ego. It is to harness the ego.

But at the same time, one has to commit with *bittul* (suspension of self) to the cause, or else he cannot be considered a shliach. He has to focus and direct his individual energy not toward his own personal interests, but to the greater cause.

The key to success, the Rebbe emphasizes, is to fuse your interest and self with the cause that is greater than the self.

First, you must have *bittul* of your ego (*chametz*) to the cause. Then, you self will be infused and harnessed toward fulfilling your mission with total dedication. When you dedicate your self (your *chametz*) to a cause that is greater than you, then you become an extension of that greatness.

### 13. In Conclusion

So, in conclusion, as we prepare for Passover and we finish cleaning up every shred of *chametz*, let us remember the reason that we take such great care – that our ultimate goal in this obsessive cleaning up of every crumb of ego is to begin a new life committed to its divine purpose.

May we all do this with great joy and success.

Perhaps the best blessing to conclude with is the blessing that we all will be making after we burn our *chametz* this Monday morning:

May it be Your will, Lord, our God and God of our fathers, that just as I remove the *chametz* from my house and from my possession, so shall You remove all the extraneous forces.

Remove the spirit of impurity from the earth, remove our evil inclination from us, and grant us a heart of flesh to serve You in truth.

Make all the *sitra achara*, all the *kelipot*, and all evil be consumed in smoke, and remove the dominion of evil from the earth. Remove with a spirit of destruction and a spirit of judgment all that distress the *Shechinah*, just as You destroyed Egypt and its idols in those days, at this time. Amen, Selah.