

## IKAR עיקר

### What's So Bad About Hametz?

The Torah tells us many times and in many ways to get rid of all traces of hametz for the duration of Pesah. "No hametz should even be seen with you!" we are told (Ex. 13:7) -- pretty serious stuff for bread crumbs and crackers.

It was in great haste that we evacuated Egypt -- taking only our most essential belongings, leaving behind hundreds of years of memories, collectibles, family heirlooms. The *matzah* became the symbol of that rushed departure -- "They baked the dough they took out of Egypt into cakes of *matzah*, for they could not be leavened, for they were driven from Egypt and could not delay, nor had they made provisions for themselves" (Exodus 12: 39). Each year we bring that *matzah* back to our tables -- reminding ourselves of the imperative to make radical adjustments, to be willing to leave everything behind for a shot at real freedom.

Hametz is the anti-*matzah*. The two are made of exactly the same ingredients, but *matzah* has been soaked in water for fewer than 18 minutes, whereas *hametz* can luxuriate in the bath all night long. *Matzah* doesn't waste any time -- it is the sense of urgency that drives us to do uncomfortable, inconvenient things -- like leave behind the shackles of our own slavery, like leave our safe careers to do something we really believe in, like leave relationships that we know are destroying our spirits, like leave the complacency that excuses us from engaging seriously in the pursuit of justice. Hametz, on the other hand, is what keeps us complacent. It makes excuses for us, it tells to wait another year before leaving Egypt. *Matzah* celebrates the human capacity to take control of our own lives and change our destiny, shape our history. Hametz celebrates our resistance to change and feeds our desire for the status quo.

We live all year in the place of hametz -- indulging, delighting, ignoring. Then comes Pesah -- the holiday devoted to telling and retelling the greatest story ever written -- the story of a people who emerged from generations of slavery, abuse and degradation, and became an eternal symbol of the possibility of redemption and the power of hope. During Pesah, there would be nothing more incongruous than the ingestion of hametz. So we instead eat the *bread of affliction*, the *matzah* that reminds us of not only our pain, our humiliation and degradation, but also of our willingness to fight for our dignity, to leave the comfort and certainty of Egypt, and begin to make our way across the desert to the Promised Land. With each bite, as the *matzah* sits heavy in our bellies, we remind ourselves of the necessity of real moral courage if anything is ever to change in our lives or in our world.

But we don't only avoid ingesting hametz. Traditional Jews don't own it, don't derive benefit from it, don't go near it. Why not? Because in the world of Pesah -- the world of hope, possibility, and spiritual mobility, there is no room for bloated stagnancy, for excuses, for sleeping through life. There is work to be done, and for this one week, we can't afford to be set off course by the delightfully distracting.

This is all a long way of saying -- this year, *get rid of your hametz!* Take a break from the comfort of stagnation and truly engage in the deepest truth of the holiday of Pesah -- that suffering and degradation are not interminable, that change is possible, that justice can prevail, if only we are willing to fight for it.

Go through your cabinets and give your pasta to the hungry. Clean out your refrigerator and clean out your soul. Then do *mekhirat hametz* -- sell whatever remains -- tape shut the liquor cabinet and release yourself of ownership for just eight days. Together we can eradicate the apathy and stagnancy that prevails in our hearts, and begin to make manifest the world of freedom, human agency and human dignity that we left Egypt to create.

**Bring your hametz to IKAR** -- we'll donate it to hungry folks in Los Angeles through SOVA.

**Sell your hametz through IKAR** -- we'll do our best to make sure you get it back when the sun sets after Pesah. Come to our offices (between 9am and 5pm from now until March 26) or visit our website to sign over possession of your hametz.

**This Pesah, perform a small physical act with the potential for great spiritual fulfillment.**