

The Real Difference Between Chametz and Matzah

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Chametz and Matzah: two food types that are inexorably linked to Pesach. One is the unleavened icon of our liberation, while the other is the leavened opposite of Matzah. As opposite as they are physically and - are almost identical. They share two letters, the mem and the tzadi, but “Matzah” has a heh at the end, whereas “Chametz” has a “ches” at the beginning. But even these differences are slight. The “ches” and “heh” actually look very similar. The only difference between them is the small aperture in the left side of the letter “heh,” while the “ches” is closed on both sides. Even the pronunciations of the “ches” and “heh” are similar, so much so that the halakhic authorities are careful to admonish someone leading services to carefully distinguish between the two pronunciations.¹

The minor difference between the letters “heh” and “ches” is taken up by the Gemara (Menachos 29b). Hashem created this world with a blueprint in the shape of the letter “heh.” The only side of the letter “heh” that is completely open is the bottom, which teaches that if one is not careful, he may fall “out” of the “bottom” of this world through his sins. So why is there a little aperture on the side of the letter? To make it very easy to come back into this world through teshuvah (repentance). Without the aperture, it would be too difficult to come back in the same way one left, through the bottom. That is why this world needed to be a “heh” instead of a “ches.”

Many times this world appears to be like a “ches;” it’s static and there doesn’t seem to be any way to make up for the past. The challenges seem insurmountable, and change doesn’t seem possible. Indeed, Bnei Yisrael were slaves in Egypt and had become so demoralized that they couldn’t even envision themselves as free people. According to the Zohar, this is when Pharaoh believed that he had permanently subjugated and conquered the Jews.

His mistake, however, was that he didn’t account for one element that still remained within the Jewish people, and that was their Emunah, their faith in Hashem. In Chassidic thought, the belief alone that Hashem can help us is enough to change our mental and physical realities. Because of Emunah, the static “ches” was transformed into the dynamic “heh” – a door was opened for the Jewish people, enabling them to come back and be part of Hashem’s world and be liberated.

Sometimes it’s hard to see the door, because the world appears opaque and impenetrable. The world looks like one big “ches” without the aperture to let us back in. The redemption process was therefore Hashem enabling Bnei Yisrael to find the door, to realize that the “ches” was really a “heh.” Bnei Yisrael had the ability to leave Egypt at any time, and the doorway to their freedom was always open. But until they mustered Emunah, they were unable to find the door.

Sometimes realities exist all around us, but we just can’t see them. We are taught of two tragic figures in the Torah. When Hagar was wandering in the desert, the verse says (Gen. 21:19), “Hashem opened her eyes and she saw a water well.” Our sages observe that the well was always there; it was only Hagar’s ability to see which changed. Our ability to see things as they truly are is predicated on Hashem allowing us to see them.

The second figure was Balaam, in that his donkey saw the “angel of Hashem” standing in front of them on the road, but it was only after Hashem opened up Balaam’s eyes that he, too, could see the angel (Num. 22:31): Here, too, the Midrash echoes the same message as with Hagar: Balaam wasn’t blind, yet his true sight came only after Hashem opened his eyes.

¹ See Magen Avraham and Mishneh Berurah to S.A. Orach Chaim 53:12.

We may now understand why “Matzah” and “Chametz” are so connected etymologically. They both emanate from the same “mem” “tzadi”, two letters which form the root word for reality (“metzius”). When the world appears to be a “ches,” it seems so real that it’s the main part of what a person experiences in his frame of reality. That is why the “ches” in “Chametz” is the first letter of the word, in that it completely overwhelms and overshadows one’s reality. But the goal is to hone our vision to the true reality, stripped of the “ches.” We are meant to transform the “ches” into a “heh,” and put it at the “back” of our reality, acknowledging that our true purpose is not realized in this world but in the Next. Our goal, therefore, is to transform the “Chametz” into “Matzah”.

Pesach is a time when the individual has greater ability to experience redemption, the redemption of being able to see the aperture that Hashem leaves open for the individual, allowing him to come back “in” to this world of goodness.

The difference between the “ches” and the “heh” is so tiny but it makes all the difference in the world. The difference between “chametz” and “matzah” is just air, but it is that airy façade that prevents a person from seeing the world for what it is. In order to experience redemption, all we need to do is have a little faith and open our eyes. We can then break free of whatever vices are holding us back from realizing our goals and dreams. The key to breaking free is Emunah that the door of the “heh” is there if we seek it, and then Hashem will enable us to see the door. He’ll open our eyes and give us the faculties to come back into this world and experience our own redemption.

May we merit to see the doorway to the ultimate redemption this Pesach. Chag sameach!

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