



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Finding the Last Crumb”

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Centering Thoughts

For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien or a native of the land. Exodus 12:19

The point of cleaning for Pesach is to remember that we are leaving Egypt, leaving the things that constrict us spiritually. Shimon Raichik

Today, Passover is used as an opportunity to reflect on the things that plague our world, to seek justice for the still-oppressed and even to bring together multi-faiths family and friends under the common banner of universal freedom. Huffington Post, “Passover 2011”

Sermon

Some of you may know I consider myself a lazy housekeeper. I keep up the bathrooms and kitchen pretty well, but if you came to my house right now, you’d probably need more than ten fingers and toes to count the number of cobwebs. And if you came I would not advise wearing white gloves, unless you want to dust.

Cleaning falls far short of my top priorities in life. If I have guests coming to visit, then I’ll clean and dust and vacuum. Otherwise, there’s always something more interesting to do than clean. However, if I were a practicing Jew, I would be cleaning my house this week from top to bottom in preparation for Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Some scholars suggest spring cleaning traditions may be rooted in this ancient custom. But this custom doesn’t exist just so you can welcome guests for your Seder with a sparkling, dust-free house.

The cleaning allows one to remove all the leavened bread and other food or beverages that might include grain-based yeast. Grains of wheat, barley, spelt, oat, and rye are prohibited from fermenting during Passover. Furthermore, in Exodus, Chapter 13:3–7, it says: “No leaven shall be eaten... For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread... and no leaven shall be seen [in your possession].”

Simply not eating leavened bread isn't good enough. You can't even possess it. You can't put it away in a drawer or cupboard until after Passover. You have to search and destroy it. Every last crumb must be removed from your home. Customarily, this search is done the night before Passover starts, that's Thursday, this year. The traditional tools are a lighted beeswax candle to see by, a feather to sweep with, a wooden spoon to pick up the crumbs, and a paper bag for collecting them. No Cheerio, Oreo, or Wonder bread crumbs may remain. When the search is complete, the tools are burned along with the crumbs. And for added insurance, this declaration is made: All leaven or anything leavened which 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. [www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/117217/jewish/Search-for-Chametz.htm]

Sounds like lawyers must have written that nullification.

What purpose does ridding the home of leavened foods serve? Like most religious traditions, the act represents something more than the obvious cleaning. The two primary reasons for the Feast of Unleavened Bread are commemoration and spiritual cleansing.

The events described in the Exodus may not be historical; there are no fully adequate archaeological records to support it besides what's in biblical scripture. On some very small scale some Hebrew slaves may have left Egypt. Regardless, the flight from Egypt is the mythological founding of the Jewish nation. According to that story, once Pharaoh said they could leave, the Hebrews wasted no time getting ready. They left in a hurry to get themselves out of Egypt, and they left in a hurry to get Egypt out of themselves. The dough they had made was cooked immediately, without letting it rise, and this they carried with them [Exodus 12:34; Deuteronomy 16:3-4]. By eating unleavened bread for Passover, Jewish people experience today some of the hardships their ancestors had. The Passover week is all about putting yourself in the shoes, or sandals, of the ancient Hebrews. It's even part of the Seder when a person recites: "When we were in Egypt." This is a way of identifying with the ancients. It also gives people today a chance to identify with those in the world who are still enslaved to someone or something.

Eating matzah feels like a hardship today because we're spoiled by so many delicious food choices. Matzah doesn't taste very good. It usually contains no herbs, no spices, no salt, no leavening, and no flavorings of any kind. It's just flour and water. It's perfectly bland. Imagine eating matzoh for a week—no pasta, no bread, no beer, only matzah sandwiches, matzah soup, matzah snacks, just matzah and more matzah.

An observant Jew willingly makes this sacrifice because it shows they can sublimate their own ego, their own sensory delights in order to be more holy—and there's no w in that word. Unleavened bread is considered more holy than yeast bread or fermented products because the chemical reactions of fermentation is a product of decay and death. When cells die they give off the gases which create bubbles that make bread and cakes rise, becoming light and fluffy. If you like wine, fortunately, it is not prohibited during Passover. The juice of the fruit of the vine becomes fermented by the natural yeasts found on grape skins in combination with the fruit's own sugars. Wine or grape juice is an integral part of a Seder.

When Jewish people clean out their bread crumbs, they are also cleaning out the things that promote their own spiritual death, the things that hold them back from fully following God's commandments. Gathering up and burning the breadcrumbs represents identifying and ridding one's self of the things that turn that person away from God. For Jews, the biggest sin is pride. It is no accident that puffed up yeast bread, like a puffed up, arrogant personality, is forbidden in favor of the flat, ego-less, humble, unleavened matzah.

Passover revolves around the actions involved in retelling the Exodus story with the spiritual cleansing needed for a new beginning. The Exodus events gave the Hebrew's a new beginning as both a nation and as a people of God. They gained this new beginning, according to the scriptures, by God (or possibly the Spirit of Freedom) helping Moses to lead his people out. But in throwing off the unwanted shackles of Pharaoh, they willingly took on a bond or covenant with God.

Freedom meant they could make a choice to follow God or not. The Hebrews chose to covenant with God. The purpose of this new spiritual bond was to liberate them from what limits them, and us, too, from being less holy and whole (this time with a w). Whether we are Jewish or not, we want this same choice. As Unitarian Universalists we make a choice whether to bind ourselves to our Unitarian Universalist covenant and principles. Leaven can represent for us what is undesirable in our lives, the evils, impurities, temptations, and bad luck, too. Our own spiritual cleansing can allow us to make a fresh start. We can begin again, too.

When you or I look inside ourselves, into our souls, what do you see that needs to be cleaned out? Where does your and my ego, our self-satisfying desires, get in the way of inviting the good into our lives? Or others into our lives? Are we slaves to some power we need to throw off—a boss, a partner, a culture? A habit, possessions, envy or some other desire? Along with our Jewish friends, this can be a time for us to ask these same questions.

I would guess that most people think of Passover simply as a celebration of freedom, especially religious freedom. But the spiritual side of the time begs us to ask if we are in fact free. And even if we are free from some enslavements, does our freedom demand we help free so many others in the world who remain in bondage – to poverty, manipulation, marginalization, war, unjust prison sentencing, and more.

Moses battled Pharaoh. Are we fighting the powers of evil and oppression as he did? Are we following our values closely enough, or are we less than holy? You and I each must ask ourselves these questions and decide if what we are doing is enough. It may be, but we must regularly check in with ourselves to be sure. Passover is such a time.

Christians have Lent, Jews have Passover, and Muslims have Ramadan when they are asked to sacrifice in some way. Making a sacrifice means suffering for a higher purpose. We UUs have it easier than many religions because making sacrifices isn't explicitly required of us. Maybe we should. Maybe you and I can devise our own spiritual discipline, and I urge you to consider

doing that in the coming week. What might you cut out, what might you cleanse yourself of so as to be more whole and more holy? I for one, will clean my house this week, rather than indulge my laziness. I won't clean out my house of all leavened products, but I will try to limit my bread consumption to this box of matzah this week.

Whatever you may or may not do in the physical realm, I encourage you to reflect on the status of our own interior, spiritual life in the coming week.

May we welcome the season of new life with a spring cleaning of our souls. May we enjoy the new creation of life and beauty evident in the greening and blossoming world around us. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What cleansing of your soul or spirit might the Spring season's new beginnings offer you?
2. Share a family story that connects you to your heritage or ancestors and influences you today.
3. Are you tied to unwise or unhealthy behavior or are you unduly influenced by an aspect of popular culture that undermines your values? What might you do to break free of these?