

Pesah - a time of cleaning, sweeping, washing, scouring, scrubbing  
So much cleaning  
Cleaning the debris that has collected over the past year  
The oven, the counters, under the beds, the corners  
The corners! What schmutz has taken up residence in the corners?  
And so it goes each year  
Making everything shine anew

And what about our bodies and our neshamot?  
What about the schmutz that has accumulated inside of us?  
The aches, the pains, the emotional roller coasters  
The hidden corners in the crevices of our bodies  
That hold so much

How do we find  
the hametz hiding in our corners?

We sit  
We pause  
We breathe  
We notice

We look inside and with a feather of tenderness  
We sweep the hidden corners into the light  
We sweep the hidden corners into a dustpan of compassion  
Holding our pile of crumbs, surrounding them with lovingkindness  
And finding a place, a spot  
To gently put the bits and pieces

As we breathe in, we notice the corners  
The bits and pieces that have resided there perhaps all year  
As we breathe out, we gently notice the bits and pieces  
As we surround them with compassion.

## Commentary

As we approach Pesah each year, it can be overwhelming. Where to celebrate the sedarim? Where to purchase all the food items? Whom do we include to share the holiday? Will there be enough time for all the cleaning?

Our meditation invites us to approach this labor-intensive festival with a different mindset. Can we inhabit a pause? Can we find meaning in all these preparations, especially the cleaning?

Jewish tradition offers us a teaching which can be helpful. What is hametz? On a simple level, it is leaven, the wheat and water that have been combined for more than 18 minutes on their way to becoming bread. The Torah states over and over how serious it is to eat hametz or even to possess any of it on Pesah. There are two terms for this forbidden food – the more well-known hametz (leavened food) and the less well-known word: *se'or*, which is the leavening agent known today as sourdough (Etz Hayyim Humash, p.384).

This is so serious that a *nefesh* (the word for “a person” in the Torah) who eats leavened bread will be cut off from the people of Israel (Ex 12:15). The rabbis expand the meaning of *nefesh* to include the notion of a soul. The Kabbalists further define the *nefesh* as one of the five words for soul; it is the most physical aspect, the most “animalistic.”

This interpretation opens up new ideas - perhaps we are being asked to remove some of our more animalistic aspects, cleansing our souls as it were. Thus, Pesah cleaning can be understood as a more spiritual, more inward process or ridding the *klippot*, (the shells or shmutz) that block us from our most calm, compassionate selves.

The word *se'or* can also be understood in a similar vein. In a section of the Talmud where various personal prayers for the end of the Amidah (a pinnacle moment in the service) are shared, one of the prayers begins: “Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that our will is to perform Your will, and what prevents us? The yeast in the dough (*se'or sheba'isah*).”

What is this *se'or*?

Rashi comments that this *se'or* that can block us from the Divine is “the evil inclination (*yeitzer hara*) in our hearts which leavens us (*hamahmitzeinu*).” Rabbi Ira Stone translates the *yeitzer hara* differently, seeing it as the inclination to care for ourselves, as

opposed to the *yeitzer hatov* - the good inclination which is the inclination to care for others. While we need both of these, sometimes they can get out of balance.

The focus on ourselves can grow and increase like leaven, the arrogance growing in our hearts. Thus, Pesah reminds us not to get too full of ourselves and care only for ourselves.

Pause. Look around. Remember there is a world beyond ourselves. Bring it love and compassion and from there, we can bring more love to ourselves. As we clear out the crumbs out of our soul, the *se'or*, our actions become more aligned with God's Presence.

Practice:

When you light the candle for *bedikat hametz* (the search for the leaven), think about moving from arrogance to humility, cleaning some of the clutter in your soul. As the book of Proverbs states: "The lifebreath of a person is the lamp of the Adonai, revealing all of a person's inmost parts." As we search for hametz, let us also symbolically cast light on the deepest aspects of our souls.

What are your parts that you hope to find?

Another text:

After we check for hametz, we recite an ancient Aramaic formula (you can find it in the very beginning of the Hagaddah) that nullifies all the hametz we have found and that which we have not found. Similarly, we are reminded to search out the hametz in ourselves, gently working to remove it over time.