

# Getting Rid of the Chametz

*Sefaria Source Sheet* by Rachel Buckman

## Introduction

In preparation for *Pesach* (Passover), families clean their homes in order to remove all of the *chametz* (leavened bread).

- Where does this tradition come from?
- What does it entail?
- How do you know that you have removed all of the *chametz* from your home?

In order to better understand this *mitzvah*, in this lesson we will look at sources from the Torah, Mishnah, and Mishneh Torah, examine drawings of families in Amsterdam and Frankfurt, and read an excerpt from the oral history of a woman who grew up in Mukachevo, Czechoslovakia.

## Biblical Source

Read the verse from Shemot (Exodus) below and answer the following questions:

### Exodus 12:19

No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a citizen of the country.

שמות י"ב:י"ט

שְׁבַעַת יָמִים שְׂאֹר לֹא יִמָּצָא בְּבֵתְכֶם כִּי אִלְּאֵלֶּי  
 מִחֲמַצֵּת וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַדְתּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגֵר  
 וּבְאֶזְרַח הָאָרֶץ:

- According to the verse, what food is barred from one's home for seven days?
- Which festival do you think the verse is describing?  
 (Hint: The verse appears after the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.)
- According to the verse, how important do you think this commandment is?

## **Bedikat Chametz (Searching for Chametz) in Art**

Below are two postcards from the collection of the National Library of Israel. The illustration on the first postcard is from Amsterdam, Netherlands. The second postcard is from Frankfurt, Germany and is illustrated with a painting by the German Jewish artist Hermann Junker. Examine both illustrations carefully and answer the questions below.

## Amsterdam



## Frankfurt



- Describe the homes and the people in the illustrations.
- What are the people doing?
- What objects are they using?
- What is similar in the two illustrations?
- What is different in the two illustrations?
- What are the titles of each illustrations? (Translate the texts from German or French)
- Are the titles accurate?
- Do both illustrations show the actual ceremony of *bedikat chametz*?
- Which scene, do you think, would have taken place first?

## Mishnah Source #1

The Mishnah gives the practical instructions for *bedikat chametz*.  
 Read the source below and answer the following questions.

### Mishnah Pesachim 1:1

משנה פסחים א'א'

On the evening of the fourteenth [of Nissan] we check for leavened bread by candlelight. Any place which we do not bring leavened bread into does not require checking...

אור לארבעה עשר, בודקין את החמץ לאור הנר.  
 כל מקום שאין מכניסין בו חמץ אין צריך בדיקה...

- In the previous source from the Book of Shemot, we learned that one should not have *chametz* in the home.  
 According to the Mishnah, how should we check whether there is any *chametz* in our home?
- Which elements described in the Mishnah are illustrated in the drawings on the postcards?

## Mishnah Source #2

The next Mishnah adds one more piece of information which refers to an animal!  
 Read the source below and explain what a rat has to do with cleaning the house for Pesach. For an added hint, look at the poster below.

### Mishnah Pesachim 1:2

משנה פסחים א'ב'

We do not need to be concerned [that] perhaps a rat dragged [*chametz*] from [one] house to [another] house, or from [one] place to [another] place. Since if [we were to be concerned, we would also need to be concerned that *chametz* was dragged] from [one] courtyard to [another] courtyard, and from [one] city to [another] city — there [would be] no end to the matter.

אין חוששין שמא גררה חלדה מבית לבית וממקום למקום, דאם כן, מסצר לסצר ומעיר לעיר, אין לדבר סוף:

## Rats Spread Diseases

Translation:

*Rats Spread Diseases*  
*Keep Food Away From Rats*  
*Cover Dustbins*  
*Protect the Health of your Household*

Municipality of Tel Aviv-Jaffa – Department of Sanitation



- While the poster is concerned with diseases that animals might spread, the Rabbis of the Mishnah were concerned about animals spreading something else. What was it?
- According to the Rabbis, can a family ever declare their house completely free of *chametz*, or must they keep on cleaning in case new *chametz* has been brought into the house?
- Why do the Rabbis make this decision?

## Mishneh Torah Source

The Mishneh Torah was written by Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (also known as the Rambam or Maimonides) between the years 1170 and 1180 CE.

The Mishneh Torah details all of the laws mentioned in the Oral Law (Mishnah and Talmud). The Rambam's intention was to provide an organised and practical way for people to learn about Jewish laws.

### Mishneh Torah, Leavened and

#### Unleavened Bread 2:3

By rabbinic enactment, one must search for *chametz* in hiding-places and holes and remove it from his entire domain. Also, by rabbinic enactment, one should search and remove the *chametz* by lamplight at night, at the beginning of the night preceding the fourteenth day of *Nisan*, because all the people are then at home and lamplight is best for searching.

- What two pieces of information does the Rambam add to what we already know about performing *bedikat chametz*?
- What reasons does he give for performing the *mitzvah* in this way?

משנה תורה, הלכות חמץ ומצה ב'ג'

ומדברי סופרים לחפש אחר החמץ במחבואות  
 ובחורים ולבדוק ולהוציאן מכל גבולו. וכן מדברי  
 סופרים שבדקין ומשביטין החמץ בלילה מתחלת  
 ליל ארבעה עשר לאור הנר. מפני שבליילה כל  
 העם מצויין בבתים ואור הנר יפה לבדיקה.

## Performing Bedikat Chametz in the 20th Century

Read an excerpt from the oral history of Tilda Galpert, who describes Pesach preparations as a child in Mukachevo, Czechoslovakia (currently Ukraine). The full text can be found on the [Centropa](#) website.

After reading the excerpt below, answer the following questions:

I remember a general cleanup of the house before Pesach. There wasn't a single breadcrumb to be ignored. A day before the seder our father checked the whole apartment. My mother gave him a goose feather and a little shovel and he walked all corners [of the house] pretending that he was sweeping them. Pretending, since all corners were shining [from being] so clean. My father did this symbolic sweeping. There was some chametz hidden for him to find.

My parents put this chametz into an old wooden spoon, tied it with a piece of cloth, and burned it in the oven. This was the ritual in all Jewish families in Mukachevo. My brother did it after my father died.

There was a Jewish bakery in Mukachevo. They started making matzah about a month before Pesach. The bakery was cleaned from chametz, then a rabbi inspected it and issued a certificate confirming that the bakery was clean. The bakery delivered matzah to Jewish homes. The Jewish community provided poor Jews with a bit of free matzah. My mother made traditional Jewish food on Pesach: chicken broth with matzah, gefilte fish, tsimes, strudels, and cookies. On the first evening of Pesach my father conducted the seder. He sat at the head of the table and one of his youngest sons asked him the traditional questions [the *Mah Nishtanah*]. We prayed and sang songs. I don't remember the lyrics, but I remember the tunes. We had no guests for the seder, but on the next day our parents' relatives visited us.

- Which details of Tilda Galpert's story match the texts that you studied?
- Which details of her story are illustrated on the postcards?
- What else did you learn about Tilda Galpert's family and their Pesach customs from the excerpt?

### Preparing for Pesach in Your Home

- How do you prepare for Pesach in your home?
- When do the preparations begin?
- What must be done to get ready for Pesach?
- Who does the work?
- How do you help your family get ready?
- What do you enjoy about the work and what do you find trying?

### Putting It All Together

Choose one of the following options:

- Draw an illustration of your family doing *bedikat chametz*.
- Draw a picture of Tilda Galpert's family doing *bedikat chametz*.
- Create a poster with instructions on how to do *bedikat chametz*.