

*Preparing for  
Passover: Good  
Clean Fun*

**Study Session**

March 2006

**KOACH**  
on campus



The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains: background materials and a facilitator guide. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

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# Preparing for Passover

## Facilitator Guide

### Overview and Objective

The night before the Passover *seder*, on the fourteenth of the Hebrew month of Nissan, Jews are required to search their homes with candles for any remaining leavened products, or *hametz*, that might be on their property. The next day, late in the morning, Jews burn the *hametz* and affirm with words that they have nullified all the remaining *hametz* in their homes and in their hearts.

These processes, called *bedikat hametz* (checking for *hametz*) and *biur hametz* (destroying *hametz*) can be the culmination of days or weeks of pre-Passover cleaning. More than any other Jewish holiday, Passover is famous for the physical labor that goes into preparing for its celebration. Floors, office spaces, closets, and cars are swept, washed and vacuumed in order to make sure that by the time Passover arrives, no *hametz* will be present in a Jewish home.

What makes Jews engage in such thorough preparation for the Passover holiday? Is such behavior commanded in religious law or is it part of custom (*minhag*) and tradition? This study packet examines some of the specific rules for the often tiring, yet rewarding, process of cleaning for Passover. In exploring reasons and benefits for this cleaning, this study packet delves into the traditional Jewish view that *hametz* is not just a physical leavening, but also an inner, emotional state of being.

This study packet is comprised of two separate sections of texts and questions based on those texts. The texts and the questions provide a structure for exploring, evaluating, and reacting to these different topics and views presented.

Although this material is presented as a progression, you need not follow the format from beginning to end. Each section can stand on its own or be combined with other sections or additional texts. Perhaps you will want to use one of the texts as a basis for a *d'var torah*. Alternatively, you can place one of the texts on the center of your *seder* table and use it to spark an informal discussion. Be creative with the material and have fun!

## Definitions and Biographies

***Raya Mehemna***- Means "faithful shepherd." A Kabbalistic work consisting of conversations between Moses, Elijah, and Shimon bar Yohai about Jewish law. This document is distributed throughout the second and third sections of the *Zohar*.

***Shulhan Arukh***- Name means "prepared table." A legal code composed in the mid-16th century by Sephardic rabbi Joseph Caro which serves as one of the main standards of Jewish law. The *Shulhan Arukh* contains four sections: *Orah Hayyim*, the laws of prayer, synagogue, and holidays; *Yoreh Deah*, laws on such things as *kashrut* and charity; *Ezen HaEzer*, laws about marriage and divorce; and *Hoshen Mishpat*, Jewish civil law. The *Shulhan Arukh* also contains commentary by Polish Rabbi Moshe Isserles (The Rema) describing how Ashkenazi law differs from Sephardic law.

***Zohar***- The primary book of Jewish mysticism. The *Zohar* chronicles the life and death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, who lived in Palestine in the second century. The *Zohar* was introduced to the public in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain by Moshe de Leon. Over time, there has been much speculation and controversy as to the identity of the *Zohar's* author. Some people think that it is Shimon Bar Yohai himself, while others hold that Moshe de Leon wrote the *Zohar*. Many academics believe that the *Zohar* is a composite document, emerging from the works of a number of different mystical thinkers and study groups.

## Section One– Cleaning Your Home for Passover

### Texts:

שו"ע או"ח סימן תלג סעיף א, ג

א. הבדיקה צריך שתהיה לאור הנר ולא לאור הלבנה...  
ג. בודק כל המקומות שיש לחוש שמא הכניסו בהם חמץ. ולכן כל חדרי הבית והעליות צריכים בדיקה; שפעמים אדם נכנס בהם ופתו בידו. אבל אוצרות יין שאין מסתפק מהם, וכן מתבן וכיוצא בו, אינם צריכים בדיקה.

1. Checking [for *hametz*] needs to be done by the light of the candle and not the light of the moon...
3. One needs to check all the places in which there is concern lest he has brought into them *hametz*. And therefore, all the rooms of the house and the lofts need checking; because sometimes a person enters them with his bread in his hand. But, wine cellars from which one would not go get wine in the middle of a meal, and likewise a shed or similar places, they do not need checking.

*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, 433:1, 3*

שו"ע או"ח סימן תלג סעיף יא

המכבד חדרו ב"ג בניסן ומכוין לבדוק החמץ ולבערו ונזהר שלא להכניס שם עוד חמץ, אף על פי כן צריך לבדוק בליל י"ד. הגה: וכל אדם צריך לכבד חדריו קודם הבדיקה. (מרדכי ריש פסחים) והכיסים או בתי יד של בגדים שנותנים בהם לפעמים חמץ, צריכין בדיקה (מהרי"ו).

The one who sweeps up his room on the thirteenth of *Nissan* and intends (at that time) to check for *hametz* and to get rid of it, and he is careful [afterwards] not to bring any more *hametz* into that space, nonetheless, he needs to check on the night of the fourteenth. Rema: Every man needs to sweep his room before checking. And the pockets or sleeves of clothing in which we sometimes place *hametz* need checking.

*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, 433:11*

Cleaning for Pesach is the most thorough spring cleaning imaginable. Every corner is vacuumed, every shelf is scrubbed, every drawer cleaned out. Furniture is moved, mattresses are overturned, pockets of garments are turned inside out and shaken clean. What we are looking for are any possible hiding places of chametz. While it seems a bit excessive to some, I am always surprised at how much chametz a good cleaning uncovers. My husband empties out his travel bag—full of tiny pretzel crumbs. J. J. finds his old book bag in a bottom drawer and in it, horror of horrors, is a peanut butter sandwich, hardened like a piece of petrified rock. And once we have started to clean for Pesach, some of us go overboard. Every curtain gets washed and ironed, the rugs are shampooed. At Pesach time, I recall the scene of my father, who like most men of his generation was not big on housecleaning, taking each and every book off the shelves of his extensive library, dusting each book individually, shaking out its leaves, washing the bookshelves...Pesach cleaning becomes a combination of classical New England spring cleaning and the relentless ritual search for chametz. That is why, in many well-organized households, Pesach cleaning begins right after Purim.

*How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household by Blu Greenberg*

## Discussion Questions:

1. What motivates you to clean your dorm room, apartment or house? For example, are you the type of person who cleans on a regular basis, or, are you more likely to clean if you are planning on having your parents or another important guest visit? Does having a clean home affect or influence your feelings or emotions? Do you judge people based on how clean or neat they keep their personal space?
2. In what places in the house do you eat and do you engage in other activities while eating (for example, are you likely to be munching on a bag of potato chips while roaming around your house on the cell phone or do you always eat at the kitchen table)? What does where we eat and how we eat suggest about our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about food (for example, is food something we take for granted, it is something we see as holy, or is it something that brings us together with family and friends)? How does cleaning for Passover change our thoughts and feelings about food?
3. Read the first passage from the *Shulhan Arukh* which talks about the requirements for the process of *bedikat hametz* (searching for *hametz* with a candle) on the night before Passover. In which spaces is one required to check for *hametz* and in which spaces is one exempt? Read the second passage from the *Shulhan Arukh*. How does this text distinguish between *bedikat hametz* and Passover cleaning? How do you think the process of *bedikat hametz* and cleaning for Passover differ? What does the *Rema's* commentary add to the discussion?
4. Read the excerpt from Blu Greenberg's book [How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household](#). How does her description of Passover cleaning compare to the requirements in the *Shulhan Arukh*? Do you have any meaningful memories of your family cleaning and preparing for Passover as a child? If so, feel free to share them with the group.
5. Does the extensive cleaning involved in preparing for Passover affect how you experience the holiday? For example, does the preparation involved make the holiday seem more special or more holy? Does it diminish your experience in any way?

## Section Two – Cleaning Your Heart

### Texts:

זוהר - רעיא מהימנא דף מ:ב

וישא העם את בצקו טרם יחמץ וגו', כ"ה פקודא דא לבער חמץ דהא פקודא דא אתמסר להו לישראל, וישא העם את בצקו טרם יחמץ, וכתוב שאור לא ימצא בבתיכם והא אוקמוה חבריא ורזא אוקמינא בין חמץ ומצה בכמה דוכתי דא יצר רע ודא יצר טוב.

AND THE PEOPLE TOOK THEIR DOUGH BEFORE IT WAS LEAVENED (Exodus 12:34). On the strength of this is founded the precept that the leaven should be burned on the Passover Eve.

“Leaven,’ and “unleaven” symbolize the evil and the good inclinations in man.

*Zohar, Raya Mehemna 40b (Soncino translation)*

זוהר שמות דף קפב:א

מאן דאכיל חמץ בפסח (כאלו עביד כו"ם למפלח לגרמיה דהא רזא הכי הוא דחמץ בפסח) כמאן דפלח לכו"ם איהו... דיצר הרע פולחנא נוכראה, דאקרי אוף הכי שאור ודא איהו יצר הרע דהכי איהו יצר הרע בבר נש כחמיר בעיסה, עאל במעווי דבר נש זעיר זעיר ולבתר אסגי ביה עד דכל גופא אתערב בהדיה, ודא איהו כו"ם.

If one eats leaven during the Passover, it is as though he worshipped idols...for the “evil inclination” operates in man and grows in him like leaven in the dough: it enters into him, and, little by little, extends its influence until his whole self is permeated by it. This is idolatry.

*Zohar, Shemot 182a (Soncino translation)*

The obsessive search and destruction of chametz from our homes has spiritual as well as ritual overtones. Yeast came to symbolize **arrogance** because the bread raised itself above the level of matza though it was only filled with pockets of hot air. Yeast is also a catalyst that symbolizes the restless force of the evil inclination (*yetzer ha-ra*). Just as yeast causes fermentation in bread and wine, it also turns them sour when not controlled. Similarly, the instinctual forces, desire and ambition, can contribute to progress but also to discontent and corruption. On Pesach, which celebrates the rejection of Egyptian civilization and a new pristine beginning of Jewish freedom, the matza is more appropriate fare than bread. Don Isaac Abarbanel (15<sup>th</sup> C. *Spain and Italy*) explains that matza represents simplicity which is a desirable spiritual quality. Freedom involves the rejection of the “fleshpots of Egypt” (Ex. 16:13) and the removal of the restless yeast of the evil inclination.

*A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah, by Noam Zion and David Dishon*

### Discussion Questions:

1. Read the two passages from the *Zohar*. Why do you think the *Zohar* associates yeast and leaven with negative characteristics? In thinking about this question, it may be helpful to consider the following: Water and yeast cause flour to ferment, rise, and puff-up. How could the verbs “to rise,” “to ferment,” and “to puff-up” be associated with negative emotions or negative personal characteristics? Do you agree with this analogy between yeast and negative emotions? The word “idolatry” is usually defined as “the worship of foreign gods.” How does the second selection from the *Zohar* modify this definition?
2. Check out the quote from A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah. How do the authors of this book explain the negative characteristics associated with hametz?
3. As explained in the last section, many Jews put in a lot of effort to clear their houses of physical hametz before Passover. In light of the *Zohar*, do you think that Jews should also clean their inner-spiritual hametz before Passover? If so, how would you recommend that people accomplish a spiritual cleaning? How would you compare the process of cleansing one’s heart and spirit of hametz before Passover with the process of preparing emotionally for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur?
4. Have you learned anything in this study packet that you want to incorporate into your preparations for Passover this year? If you feel comfortable doing so, please share your reflections and ideas with your peers.

# Additional Resources

- Creating Lively Passover Seders: A Sourcebook of Engaging Tales, Texts, and Activities. David Arnow. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004.
- <http://learn.jtsa.edu/passover>
- <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Passover.htm>
- Preparing Your Heart for Passover by Kerry M. Olitzky. JPS, 2002.
- Leading the Passover Journey: The Seder's Meaning Revealed, the Haggadah's Story Retold by Nathan Laufer. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005.