

## CHUMROS ON PESACH

# Q&AS PART I

**MARA D'ASRA AND CHAVER HABADATZ OF CROWN  
HEIGHTS HORAV YOSEF Y. BRAUN SHLITA**

**Interview by Mrs. Chana Shloush of the N'shei Chabad  
Newsletter**

### WHAT IS CHABAD'S GENERAL APPROACH TO PESACH *CHUMROS* AND *HIDDURIM*?

Let's distinguish between the two words themselves: *chumra* and *hiddur*. While the terms are used interchangeably, nonetheless for the purpose of our discussion it would be worthwhile to establish a distinction. *Chumra* means stringency, with connotations that it is challenging, difficult, strict, and narrow. *Hiddur*, in contrast, means the beautification of a mitzvah. There is an old vort about the three different approaches to mitzvos. One can view them as 613 different *segulos*, i.e. "what's in it for me," or, worse, as 613 problems to contend with. The third - and ideal - way is to think of the mitzvos as 613 opportunities to connect with Hashem. Of course, this is the authentic Torah approach and is particularly highlighted in Chassidus. The added stringency or beautification then enhances our connection. Still, when taking on a *chumra* or *hiddur*, it is important to understand the historical background and halachic discussions involved. A sefer entitled *Sh'ailos Uteshuvos Min Hashamayim*, written in the early 13th century, by Rabbi Jacob of Marvège (which incorporates responses he received from Shamayim to various halachic questions), discusses this subject. The author (actually, the Author with a capital A) writes that since avoiding *chometz* on Pesach was one of the very first mitzvos the Jews accepted from Hashem, therefore, our ancestors embraced it with *ahavah*, *chibah* *v're'us*: love, affection, and warmth. Because of that tremendous initial enthusiasm, they were quite *machmir*, and the special care and attention paid to Pesach has only grown over the generations. In fact, some *tzadikim* have said that when the mitzvah of Pesach was given, there was uncertainty as to the parameters, since it was before *mattan Torah*, but due to

their love for the mitzvah, the Yidden formulated their own chumros. There are several practical reasons for stringency as well. Chazal have taken a different attitude toward chometz on Pesach than toward any other mitzvah, since the Torah itself is extremely stringent regarding chometz. The Torah tells us that not only may we not eat chometz; we must go so far as to declare it ownerless or, alternatively, search for it and destroy it. Chazal went a step further and added that we must always perform the mitzvah of bedikah. Strictly speaking, from the Torah perspective, one may declare the chometz ownerless in a process called bittul – and that would have been sufficient. Chazal have insisted that we search for the physical chometz on the night before Erev Pesach in order to burn it on Erev Pesach. After the bedikah, we destroy it in our thought (bittul), and we verbalize that it has been destroyed and declared ownerless. Furthermore, Chazal say we are not permitted even a mashehu of chometz in a mixture, unlike other mitzvos where a tiny amount of the forbidden might be allowed in a mixture, in some cases, as determined by a Rav. One of the reasons for all these extra safeguards regarding chometz is due to the fact that chometz is permitted year-round, unlike traife, which is always forbidden. The extra care we take regarding Pesach serves as a margin of safety as we separate ourselves from what is otherwise allowed. In later times, more Rabbinic prohibitions were added. Kitniyos (beans, legumes, rice, etc.) is an example of food which is not chometz but which Ashkenazi poskim have forbidden on Pesach. Of course, all of Ashkenaz Jewry has accepted the prohibition of kitniyos on Pesach, and even some Sefardim have taken upon themselves this issur. Even in times of severe famine, the Tzemach Tzedek (among other Poskim) treated kitniyos almost as serious a prohibition as actual chometz (except for the infirm or for children). It's important to always keep our focus on the fact that the Jewish people's becoming increasingly machmir through the ages stemmed from our love for this mitzvah. In addition to all the above, we have the spiritual dimension. It is quoted in the name of the Arizal that one who is careful about a speck of chometz on Pesach is protected from sin year-round. Because chometz represents the yetzer hara and the ego, we need to work full force against it (as per Responsa from the Radbaz). There are only three other things which the Torah forbids b'mashehu,

even a minute amount: anger, arrogance and avodah zarah. Chometz is symbolic of all of the above. However, here is a crucial caveat: If being machmir on Pesach enhances our ego (engendering a “holier than thou” attitude toward others who are less machmir) or leads to anger in the household, we are defeating the purpose and allowing our chumros to become a stumbling block. In being machmir on Pesach, people sometimes violate an explicit din in Shulchan Aruch (Alter Rebbe 469:5) because they say, “How difficult this Pesach is for me!” Such an expression sounds like the words of the rasha in the Haggadah, “What is this work to you?” The reality, however, is that people do feel this way and therefore they express it. The Alter Rebbe was melamed zechus on such people by pointing out that the rasha in the Haggadah was referring to the avodah of the korban Pesach exclusively, whereas today’s Jews are complaining about all the extra chumros. Nevertheless, if we fall into the trap of complaining, we are defeating the purpose.

## DOES THAT MEAN WE SHOULD BE LESS EXACTING ON OURSELVES?

Not necessarily. Another perspective on Pesach chumros, from the Shulchan Aruch (Alter Rebbe 442:30), is that Yisroel kedoshim heim – the Jews are holy: they scrape their chairs and walls. Even though the tasks are not necessary according to the letter of the law, the Rishonim tell us – and Shulchan Aruch quotes this – that the Jews are considered a holy nation for performing them. The Shulchan Aruch adds (O.C. 442:6): Yesh lahem al mah she’yismochu – they have a basis to rely upon. This turn of phrase is generally reserved for discussing a leniency, since normally we would not be halachically lenient, unless there was a real halachic basis. Why is this expression used here when discussing a chumra? The Maadanei Shmuel brings the following explanation from Reb Yaakov Yosef of Ostra (and a similar thought is also found in Mishna Berurah on this halachah): Here we learn an important perspective that our chumros must also have a basis, a real source backing it up. The chumros should not be a chassidus shel shtus – a foolish piety... An individual cannot simply add his own made-up stringencies to the list. All chumros must stem from an actual halachic source, or at least from a specific community minhag or family mesorah.

## HOW IMPORTANT IS THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN HALACHAH AND CHUMRA?

It is important to distinguish, because there are clear differences. This is one of the many reasons offered (see *Derech Pikudecha Mitzvah 12*) as to why we all eat matzah shruyah on Acharon Shel Pesach: if other Torah-true Jews are eating it throughout the Yom Tov, it surely is halachically permissible after all. In order that we don't create any notion that others are eating something which might be chometz, chas v'sholom, we go out of our way on the last day of Pesach to drop this particular chumra. (Of course, other reasons are offered why we eat shruyah specifically on Acharon Shel Pesach and why we don't take this approach with other chumros.) Reb Michel Zlotchover's son, Reb Binyomin Zev, was exceedingly machmir on Pesach and of course always ate matzah shmurah. At one occasion, he noticed his followers humiliating a Yid for eating matzah that was only guarded from the time of grinding. He stood up and said: "You think that so many Yidden who aren't machmir on shmurah are eating chometz on Pesach? Chas v'sholom. Certainly, these matzos are very kosher." He then asked for some only-from-time-of-grinding matzah and ate it in the presence of all the chassidim. Relying on Hashem and maintaining proper humility and respect for others on Pesach are the themes of this eye-opening story which the Rebbe told at a farbrengen on Shabbos Parshas Ha'azinu 5722. (While the story is not printed in the transcript of the sichos, and some have doubted the veracity of the story as it appears in other sources differently, my father-in-law, Rabbi Berel Lipskier, zol gezunt zein, testifies that he heard it personally from the Rebbe): A certain chossid of the Tzemach Tzedek was extremely careful in his Pesach preparations, doing everything himself including baking his own matzos. He wouldn't use the regular water in his house obtained by the water carrier, preferring to draw water from a covered well behind his home. He didn't want to eat in the Tzemech Tzedek's house, so he only visited the Tzemach Tzedek on the last day of Pesach. At that time the Tzemach Tzedek told the chossid, "I want you to know that you had chometz the entire Yom Tov. Check the well behind your house." The man ran to the well and discovered a loaf of bread floating on the surface. Distraught, he ran back to the Tzemach Tzedek and said, "I have three questions:

Why did I receive such a serious punishment when I was so careful to avoid chometz? Why did the Rebbe not warn me? What is my tikkun?" The Rebbe replied, "I didn't see you all Pesach so I couldn't warn you. What occurred is not a punishment, but a direct result of your own actions - you relied only upon yourself and forgot about siyata d'Shmaya." The Rebbe then gave the man a tikkun.

## SO, IF ONE WISHES TO OBSERVE EXTRA CHUMROS FOR PESACH, WHAT IS THE PROPER APPROACH?

Simchas Yom Tov, celebrating Pesach with joy, is a mitzvah from the Torah for men, women and children. Hiddurim, on the other hand, are just that - hiddurim, not obligations. If Pesach puts someone in a Tishah B'Av mood, hiddurim are out of place (see Chassidim Mesaprim I:637). People need to approach a Rav or mashpia with any questions. They may learn that some of their so-called "hiddurim" have no basis whatsoever in halachah or minhag. The Rebbe quotes (in his account of Pesach 5692 with the Frierdiker Rebbe) in the name of the Rebbe Rashab that one should not take on extra chumros on Pesach, so that one will not be making a neder. On a different occasion, the Rebbe Rashab said after selling his chometz, "I'm very scared of chumros." This is difficult to understand; the Alter Rebbe brings from the Arizal that one should "follow all chumros regarding chometz." Indeed, the Rebbe Rashab himself observed many extra chumros beyond the norm on Pesach. One lesson we can learn from the Rebbe Rashab's strong language is the importance of taking on our Pesach hiddurim "bli neder." Not all hiddurim are suitable for all people. A person has to be makir es mekomo: to know whether a practice is suitable to take on or whether it is beyond their level. Discuss this with a mashpia or Rav. And when one decides to keep a particular hiddur, one should do so with both simchah and humility, recalling that many people of the highest spiritual caliber did not keep such hiddurim. The great chossid Reb Noteh of Malastirchina never ate shmurah matzah in his life. (Keep in mind, in earlier times all matzah was hand-made, but most was guarded from contact with water only from the wheat-grinding stage, not from the time of harvest. Today all hand-made matzah is shmurah matzah, guarded from

harvest.) Reb Noteh would say, “I don’t know when I should begin [observing this hiddur].” Of course, nowadays we all insist on eating only shmurah. (This stringency became the norm in the time of the Rebbe Maharash.) Whether or not we keep a particular minhag or hiddur, it’s vital to emphasize the importance of not undermining, chas v’sholom, any minhag Yisroel practiced by others.

### WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IF A PERSON REALIZES THEIR PESACH *HIDDUR* IS BEYOND WHAT THEY ARE CAPABLE OF DOING?

There is always the option of doing hataras nedarim when one realizes a certain practice cannot be kept any longer. Consult a Rav who is a moreh hora’ah b’poel (an experienced Rav) if necessary.

### CAN THE RAV DISCUSS *HALACHAH* AND *HIDDUR* IN CLEANING FOR PESACH?

When cleaning, some people overdo Pesach hiddurim in an inappropriate way. People often confuse Pesach cleaning with spring cleaning, saying, “I might as well...” However, if one runs into a time management problem, one can develop a negative attitude toward Pesach altogether. It is important to separate Pesach cleaning from spring cleaning, as was famously said, “Dirt is not chometz, and children are not the korban Pesach.” If one wants to do spring cleaning, one may do so as long as one realizes it is extra work and has nothing to do with Pesach. As mentioned, if one wants to perform extra hiddurim, one should appreciate that this is a hiddur, done out of a love for the mitzvah and not complain about the difficulty. And really, why not wash curtains and windows before Shavuot? Or in honor of Rosh Hashanah? Pesach cleaning today is often much harder than it was centuries ago. We have larger houses and far more possessions. In addition, we do not have many maids and servants – plus a grandmother and extended family living with us – as did our ancestors with small homes. It is critical to keep in mind the halachah, “A place into which one doesn’t bring chometz does not require bedikah.” We have a halachic definition of such a spot: In the middle of a meal, you would not get up from the table and take things from that place. Of course, in a house with young children,

many additional areas must be checked because children don't necessarily follow such rules. But one need only check places where children can reach, not the high shelves they cannot access or places like the boiler room or meter room, where they will not go. In addition, according to the Tzemach Tzedek, a place that is being sold does not require bedikah or cleaning beforehand. Remember: One need not dispose of a piece of chometz smaller than a k'zayis which is slightly soiled. If the chometz is larger than a k'zayis, then only in a case where it's entirely soiled, e.g., it is soaked in bleach, is it okay to leave it. Of course, as mentioned, Yisroel kedoshim heim- the Jews are holy and go beyond the letter of the law, if they can.

### AFTER ALL MY CLEANING, *BEDIKAS* *CHOMETZ* FEELS LIKE A WASTE OF TIME. ANY SUGGESTIONS?

The purpose of all our cleaning is in order to make a proper bedikah. Traditionally, people swept their earthen floors on the 13th of Nissan in order to prepare properly for the bedikah at night. People certainly didn't start cleaning for Pesach in Adar Rishon. My grandfather z"l used to say, "In Rozhvodov [Galicia] they took a broom, and it became Pesach." We do the bedikah after sweeping because the broom might not reach into all the nooks and crannies where chometz could be lodged. Today, however, many people have confused the priorities: "sweeping" (cleaning) has become the overriding issue, while the bedikah, over which we make an actual brachah, is sometimes not treated so seriously and may be given minimal time and attention. As we know, the Alter Rebbe had only one room, but he spent all night doing bedikas chometz there. Our Rebbe has said that we always do bedikas chometz after Maariv because our custom is to do a very long bedikah and thus one might come to forget to daven Maariv. On the emotional level, we can understand people's feelings about bedikas chometz. The kitchen is particularly difficult: it is usually already Pesachdik on the night of bedikas chometz and people don't even want to walk into it with chometz, or with the bedikas chometz paper bag. Also, there are very few actual cracks and crevices in the home today. A proposal which the Rebbe Rashab suggested to Rabbi Yaakov Landau of B'nei Brak is worthwhile for us

to adopt. Before we make a room Pesachdik, the husband can do bedikas chometz in that room with a candle (or flashlight), any night before Pesach, so long that it is within 30 days of Pesach. This bedikah should be done without a blessing. In this way, the mitzvah, broken into smaller segments, is done carefully and properly. It also becomes extrameaningful for the woman, who usually cleans the home in preparation for the bedikah: it accentuates all her hard work in preparing each room, and not only the husband's carrying out the final bedikah, thus fostering sholom bayis. Of course, some areas must be left for the night of Erev Pesach bedikah, to be done with the blessing.

### DO I NEED TO BUY BRAND NEW SIDDURIM EVERY YEAR FOR PESACH?

There is no need to buy new siddurim each year for Pesach, so long as last year's Pesach siddurim were stored away from the chometz. You may also use siddurim that were not stored away if they were never used by the table throughout the year and have been checked to ensure that they are totally clean from chometz. It should be noted however that the Rebbe once spoke (Sefer Hasichos 5748 I:343) about buying the children new siddurim for Yom Tov, to make them happy.

### DO COUNTERS NEED TO BE BOTH KASHERED AND COVERED?

According to basic halachah, if one covers, one does not need to kasher, and if one kashers, one does not need to cover. Why do people both kasher and cover, despite the fact that both are not required? This is all part of the spirit of undertaking extra chumros. One reason is due to a concern (which was common in the wooden counters that were prevalent in days of old) that the area wasn't sufficiently cleaned and a minute amount of real chometz might have remained somewhere on the counter. Also, some counters are made of materials which not all agree can be kashered. The halachah is that areas that became chometzdik through fire cannot become Pesachdik by kashering with water alone. These areas might need a higher level of kashering, such as blowtorching, but then, blowtorching might destroy the surface. In such a case



(which isn't very common with kitchen surfaces), after kashering with water, people would cover the area. In addition, kashering with water is supposed to be done in a pot, a kli rishon. Pouring the water over a stone onto the surface is a second-choice solution. Since this is not the preferred practice, people cover the surface. Finally, it is a hiddur not to rely on kashering chometzdik items altogether and to purchase new utensils especially for Pesach. The Shulchan Aruch says to buy new knives, and some apply this ruling to all vessels and to covering their counters as well. Why would people not simply cover their surfaces without kashering? First, the halachah is that chometzdik utensils are supposed to be locked away. Accordingly, we are not satisfied with merely covering the chometzdik counters, rather we kasher them first. Second, in case the covering tears or moves, there could be a chometz problem. Third, heat might pass through the covering into the surface below and then back above. Especially problematic is a case where liquid penetrates the covering. Therefore, in order to be extra careful, many people both kasher and cover surfaces.

#### AFTER THE WALLS NEAR THE STOVE ARE WASHED, DO THEY HAVE TO BE COVERED AS WELL?

There is no real reason to cover walls, since we don't eat from our walls. People may cover their walls if they wish. In case one is concerned that a hot chometz pot has touched the backsplash or a wall near the stove, and then a Pesachdik pot would touch the same spot, there is room in halachah to say to cover the area.

#### AFTER THE REFRIGERATOR AND FREEZER SHELVES, DOOR, ETC., ARE THOROUGHLY WASHED, MUST THEY BE COVERED IN ADDITION? IF SO, WHAT COVERING MATERIAL IS BEST?

Covering the inside of the refrigerator has a real, practical reason, since chometzdik food is actually put there. Because we are not allowed even a mashehu of chometz on Pesach, and because it is very hard to clean every crevice of the refrigerator, people cover it to be safe. In days of old, when

they stored food in wooden closets, the Maharil cautioned to cover those closets used during the year for chometz, even though they were cleaned for Pesach. Covering with foil may lead to transgressing the important halachic prohibition of bal tashchis since foil is known to cause refrigerators to break. If a refrigerator breaks down during Yom Tov and all the food spoils, this greatly compounds the issue. Therefore, plastic refrigerator lining is a good choice for covering.

### IF CLOTHING HAS BEEN WASHED IN DETERGENT OR DRY CLEANED, DO POCKETS NEED TO BE CHECKED BEFORE PESACH?

There is no need to check the pockets of clothing which has been washed in soap or dry cleaned before Pesach (rendering all possible chometz inedible). This only applies to clothing which was not worn afterwards, so that there wasn't a chance to put fresh chometz into the pockets after cleaning.

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