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In memory of their parents Dr. Irving & Mrs. Bernice Mehler & Mr. Gedalja & Mrs. Miriam Zupnik

לעילוי נשמת ר' יצחק מאיר בן אליהו ובריינא בת אברהם ע"ה ור' גדליה בן אברהם מנחם הכהן ומרים בת ישראל ע"ה

Pesach Cleaning

Rosh Kollel Harav Shachne Sommers shlita

Why are people so stringent when it comes to checking for chametz?

What kind of chametz am I looking for when cleaning for Pesach?

Pesach cleaning is an area of Jewish life that the Jewish People have taken extremely seriously for millennia. The image of our mothers and grandmothers spending weeks, sometimes months, preparing the home for Pesach is deeply etched upon the collective Jewish consciousness.

About 600 years ago, the Rosh (Pesachim 3:2) commented on this phenomenon and wrote that he feels it unnecessary to spell out the exact parameters of the halachic requirements to dispose of *chametz*, because the “the Jewish people are holy, and they dispose of even the smallest amount of *chametz*.”

In recent times, however, although the Jewish People are still holy, and the activity of extreme Pesach cleaning still works well for many people, for others it creates undue hardship which can and often does cause negative consequences in other areas, just one of which is the inability to properly enjoy and benefit from the Pesach Seder because of physical and emotional exhaustion.

Therefore, contemporary halachic authorities deem it important for people to clearly understand what the halachic requirements are for Pesach cleaning. With this approach, one can distinguish between the halachically-required cleaning and the type of cleaning that, while praiseworthy, is not halachically required. This enables a person to strike the proper balance between the various responsibilities that we have. Let us examine the sources for this mitzvah and gain some clarity in this crucial area.

The Torah tells us that “*chametz* shall not be seen nor found” (see Shemos 12:19, 13:7) in one’s possession during Pesach. Thus, one who has *chametz* in his home during Pesach would be transgressing a *lo sa’aseh midiOrayso*, a Torah-level negative commandment. However, the Gemara (Pesachim 10a) tells us that there is a way to avoid these Torah-level transgressions without physically removing the *chametz* from one’s property, and that is through the process of *bitul*. *Bitul* in this context refers to the nullification of the *chametz* in one’s mind and articulating that orally by declaring one’s *chametz* “nullified and ownerless as the dust of the earth.” The *bitul* declaration is said on Erev Pesach, both at night

after *bedikas chametz* and in the morning before the deadline for burning *chametz*. By doing so, one avoids the *diOrayso* transgressions of owning *chametz* even if there is *chametz* that remains physically on one’s property.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of Maseches Pesachim (2a, 4b) we are taught that the Sages instituted that one cannot rely merely on the *bitul*. Rather, one must search for and destroy the *chametz* in one’s possession. It is this Rabbinic enactment that is the basis for the requirement to clean our homes to eliminate *chametz*. The crucial question that we must address is, how much *chametz* must one search for? Is even a small crumb of *chametz* included in this requirement?

In order to address this question, we must understand the reason for this Rabbinic requirement.

The reason for this enactment is the subject of a dispute between Rashi and Tosafos. Rashi (Pesachim 2a s.v. *bodkin*, as explained by Ran dapei haRif 1a s.v. *bodkin*) says that we are concerned that one may not be sincere in one’s *bitul* and thus the *bitul* won’t take effect. One would then transgress the Torah prohibition of possessing *chametz*. Tosafos (Pesachim 2a s.v. *ohr*) explain that the concern is for a different reason: One who has *chametz* on his property, although not transgressing the prohibition of possession because of the *bitul*, may come to eat the *chametz*, thus violating the particularly stringent prohibition of eating *chametz* on Pesach.

We now return to our question regarding the minimum amount of *chametz* included. According to Rashi’s reason, that if *chametz* remains in one’s possession, we are concerned that the owner would not perform a sincere *bitul* and would thus transgress the Torah prohibition of having *chametz* in one’s possession, it stands to reason that one would not be required to remove an amount so small that one would not violate the Torah prohibition of possessing it. The Torah only prohibits the possession of *chametz* that is the volume of a *kezayis* (olive; in modern terms, this is approximately 1 fluid ounce, the size of a small shot glass) (Taz 442:5; Shaagas Arveh 81)¹. Thus, according to Rashi, one would only be

¹ Some question this. See Pri Megadim 442, Mishbitzos 4

required to search for *chametz* of that size (or for smaller pieces that may end up being swept together and combining to form that size).

However, according to Tosafos' reason, that if one has *chametz* on his property, one may end up eating it, there is a question as to what minimum size would be included in the requirement for *chametz* to be removed. The prohibition against eating *chametz* has two levels. Eating a *kezayis*-volume of *chametz* is a particularly stringent prohibition which carries the punishment of *kareis*. This is one of the most stringently forbidden foods in the Torah. Eating pork, for example, although strictly forbidden by the Torah, does not carry the punishment of *kareis*, only *malkus* (lashes), when eating a *kezayis*. Eating less than a *kezayis* of *chametz* is also prohibited by the Torah, but it is of lesser stringency and there is no *kareis*, nor even *malkus*.

Some make the argument that even according to Tosafos, it is only necessary to remove *chametz* that is the volume of a *kezayis*. According to this reasoning, the Sages only required the removal of *chametz* as a precaution for the particularly stringent prohibition of eating a *kezayis* of *chametz*. The significantly less-stringent prohibition of eating a smaller amount of *chametz* requires no such special precaution (Pnei Yehoshua Psachim 45, Pri Megadim 438 Mishbitzos 4).

However, other authorities say that according to Tosafos, the requirement to remove *chametz* applies even to pieces smaller than a *kezayis*, because they, too, are forbidden to be eaten on Pesach (Taz 442:5).

As far as the practical halacha is concerned, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 442:11) and many others (see Aruch Hashulchan *ibid.*:27) rule in accordance with the opinion that the requirement to remove *chametz* applies only to a *kezayis*. Smaller pieces of *chametz* (that have no reasonable chance of combining to form a *kezayis*) need not be removed from one's home on Pesach. However, the Magen Avraham (442:10) and others (see Mishna Berura 442:33) disagree and rule in accordance with the opinion of Tosafos and apply the requirement to remove *chametz* to less than a *kezayis*-volume, as well. However, even according to the Magen Avraham, one would only be required to remove small pieces of *chametz* if they are in palatable condition, thus creating a concern that one would eat them. Pieces of *chametz* that are smaller than a *kezayis* and somewhat dirty would not require removal even according to Tosafos, because there is no concern that one would eat them (Magen Avraham and Mishna Brura *ibid.*).

The discussion up until this point applies to *chametz* that is not located in a place where it may come into contact with one's Pesach food. However, if there is *chametz* on the kitchen counter, the dining room table or similar places where food will be placed on Pesach, there is an additional concern. If even a very minimal amount of *chametz* (even if not palatable) becomes mixed into one's Pesach food, it is forbidden to eat that food on Pesach. Thus, the surfaces upon which food is placed must be cleaned thoroughly in order to remove all *chametz*, even minute amounts.²

An interesting application of the above rules is the question of whether it's necessary to clean out *seforim* and books for Pesach. There are many people who do customarily clean these items for Pesach. Our question is if this is a halachic requirement or if it is just another example of the "holiness of the Jewish people" described by the Rosh.

According to the opinion of the Shulchan Aruch that one need not remove less than a *kezayis* of *chametz*, it would seem unnecessary to clean books or *seforim*, because it generally would be quite unreasonable to assume that there is a *kezayis* of *chametz* there. Even according to the Magen Avraham that palatable *chametz* smaller than a *kezayis* needs to be removed, it seems that checking *seforim* would not be necessary because any small crumbs that may be trapped between the pages would likely be unpalatable. (*Benchers* and *zemiros* books that are used consistently with food are in a separate category and should preferably be put away for Pesach.)

However, the concern that *chametz* may become mixed into one's Pesach food could be present with *seforim* and books. If someone brings a *sefer* or book to the table, a crumb of *chametz* that was trapped in or stuck on the book may make its way into one's food. In order to alleviate this, books or *seforim* that may have been used with food during the year and are not being thoroughly cleaned for Pesach should not be brought to the table on Pesach.

In summation, although it has always been customary to "go all out" when Pesach cleaning, the basic halacha does not generally require the removal of unpalatable small pieces of *chametz* unless they are in a place where they may end up in one's Pesach food. Keeping this in mind can help us enter into Pesach with the necessary joy and energy to celebrate this wonderful Yom Tov properly.

² As a precaution, many people cover all surfaces used for food. Those surfaces used for hot food may require covering or *kashering*. Details are beyond the scope of this article.

Points to Ponder:

What areas of one's property must be checked for chametz?

When may one "sell" entire areas of one's property for Pesach instead of checking for chametz?

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Please consult with a qualified halachic authority for all practical questions of halacha

Halachic Editor: Rabbi Shachne Sommers · General Editor: Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

1395 Wolff Street, Denver, CO 80204 · 303-820-2855 · info@denverkollel.org · www.denverkollel.org

To receive Halacha Weekly by email, contact info@denverkollel.org