

MATZAH FUNDAMENTALS

On Pesach, we eat only matzah. We are forbidden to eat, to own, or even to derive benefit from all leavened products, called *chometz*. Reb Noson explains in *Likutey Halachot* that, on a higher level, *chometz* is considered to be in the same category as Esau – Jacob's twin bother and adversary.

The power of Esau is associated with anger, an aspect of strict judgment. Because anger is a fundamental character trait of Esau, he is compared to a "raging stormwind" or *ruach s'ara*. It is virtually impossible to confront a raging stormwind at its highest peak; one has to wait until the storm subsides. This is also true of anger. When someone is in the midst of a rage, it is fruitless to try reasoning with him until his anger has subsided.

Esau is also known as the "Great Accuser" – the spiritual force that seeks to magnify our bad points. When the Jewish people left Egypt, they were in serious physical and spiritual danger. Standing at the shore of the Red Sea, with the Egyptian forces rapidly closing in behind them, a fierce debate arose in heaven about whether the Jews were worthy of redemption or deserved annihilation. The forces of strict judgment, anger and accusation – synonymous with the power of Esau – were in confrontation with the holiness of the Jewish people.

This dynamic still exists during Pesach, but manifests itself on a higher spiritual plane, and is therefore more difficult for us to perceive. Nonetheless, we experience this same spiritual encounter with Esau each year during Pesach – the time of our redemption. Not only must we consider ourselves as being actively redeemed each year, but our Sages say that the future and final redemption will occur in the month of Nissan. It is precisely because Pesach is such a spiritually potent time for the Jewish people, that the anger and accusation from the Other Side is also very great.

How can we weaken this negative accusing force – Esau's "raging stormwind" – during Pesach? Everything in Creation is made up of four elements: fire, water, air and dust (*aish, mayim, ruach* and *afar*). Because Man himself is comprised of these four elements, he derives his vitality from eating food comprised of these very same elements. On a spiritual level, vitality is called *ruach chayim* or life-spirit. God uses food as a vehicle to channel *ruach chayim* to us. Understood in spiritual terms, it is not the food itself that is nourishing us, but the vital life-spirit that is channeled through the food to us. In the realm of holiness, the only way to draw down *ruach chayim* is by eating properly, according to the Torah. This means eating kosher food with the proper blessings as well as adhering to all of the other laws concerning food. In this way, the good – the holiness – is refined and extracted from the food.

The most fundamental food of Man is bread, and here we see the four basic elements clearly expressed. The flour itself is in the category of dust (*afar*). We then add water (*mayim*) and a leavening agent, allowing the dough to rise; this is the aspect of air/wind (*ruach*). Finally, the dough is baked in an oven using fire (*aish*).

The element of air/wind is highlighted by the difference between bread and matzah. Bread and matzah are distinguished from each other by the amount of time the dough is allowed to rise. In order to make matzah, we cut off the rising action before it gains supremacy over the dough and in a sense "rules over" the dough by its expansion. This parallels the "raging stormwind" of Esau at full force. During Pesach, this force grabs tightly onto bread and any other food containing *chometz*. By arresting the leavening process when we make matzah, we prevent the negative and spiritually destructive power of Esau from reaching its full potential. We subdue its power well before it reaches this stage and, in doing so, create a more potent opportunity for redemption. May this Pesach be the final one. *Amen.* ■

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