

דבר תורה for Passover

4/25/05

"Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained"

This year, we got an education about Matzah. Since the first *seder* was on Saturday night, we needed to figure out a way to have our שבת (Sabbath) meals without leaving חמץ (*chametz*) around. One solution we found was grape matzah. Grape matzah is matzah that was made by combining flour and grape juice, rather than flour and water. This is helpful, because the Rabbis ruled that fruit juices are not capable of becoming *chametz* (Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 35b). Also, one is not allowed to eat matzah on the day before the *seder*. However, grape matzah is considered מצה עשירה *rich matzah*. Since we only use לחם עוני *poor bread* at the *seder*, grape matzah does not qualify. This is why we choose to eat grape matzah for Sabbath meals on the day before the *seder* (online readers should consult your own Rabbi).

It seems ironic. Grape matzah, which could not possibly become *chametz*, can't be used at the *seder*. But in fact, this is a general rule. In order for something to be used as matzah for the *seder*, it must be something that can become *chametz*. For instance, rice matzah could not be used at the *seder*. Though Ashkenazi Jews do not eat rice on Passover, largely for fear that there might be some other grains mixed in, rice itself can never be *chametz*, and therefore it can not be used as matzah at the *seder* (Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 35a).

Nowadays, Jewish religious practice has a tendency to become extremely careful. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way that people prepare for Passover - taking care to consider every possible scenario of where *chametz* could hide, and how it might rear its ugly head on Passover. Wouldn't it be convenient if we could just use grape matzah the whole time? Or if we could make our matzahs out of rice? It's tempting. But our sages of blessed memory did not consider that a possibility. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. And through this our Rabbis teach us: In order to fulfill a מצוה (*mitzvah*, good deed), sometimes we need to risk committing a sin.

The same thing that can be said about *matzah* and *chametz* can be said about humanity. The Rabbis talk about how we were created with two inclinations: a יצר הרע (*yetzer harah*), the evil inclination, and a יצר הטוב (*yetzer hatov*), the good inclination. One might think that the evil inclination is a design flaw. Why do we need to be burdened with the drive to do the wrong thing? But the truth is, we do need that side of our personality. Without it we could do no *mitzvot*. The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 89b) tells us that the angels wanted to receive the Torah, but were unworthy. Because they lacked the desire to do wrong, they were not worthy of the Torah's instructions. When the Torah describes the creation of humanity, it says that good looked "והנה טוב מאד" *and behold, it was very good.*" A midrash on this verse (Genesis Rabbah 9:7) says that the words "*behold it was very good,*" refers to the good inclination, but the word "*and it was very good*" refers to the evil inclination. The Midrash explains that without the evil inclination, no one would ever build a house, or get married, or have children, or engage in business. Without the evil inclination nothing would get done. The point of this Midrash is made best by Michael Douglas in "Wall Street:"

[G]reed -- for lack of a better word -- is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms -- greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge -- has marked the upward surge of mankind.

In order to become *seder* matzah, dough must have the potential to become *chametz*. In order to do *mitzvas*, we must have the inclination to do wrong. Following God's laws is not easy. It is not risk-free. God did not create us as automatons, nor give the Torah to those who are incapable of going down the wrong path.

On Passover, we cannot eliminate the risk of *chametz* by eating grape matzah or making matzah out of rice. In life, we cannot avoid sin by simply suppressing our personal desires. Were we to do that, we would never marry, have children, or develop our world. Instead, we guide our evil inclination with the words of Torah and by observing *mitzvot*. May we all be blessed with a happy and kosher Passover this year, and for years to come.