PESAH, psychological Hamets

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We have explained that during Pesah it is strictly forbidden to eat any food that is or contains Hamets. Why? Beyond the well known historical reasons (Ex.12:39) our Rabbis saw in Hamets a very meaningful representation. The Rabbis compared Hamets with arrogance and vanity; the inflated dough with the individual who allows his ego to expand. Arrogance and Hamets are both mere air, an illusionary inflation of the self.

But why should we be thinking about arrogance/humbleness specifically in Pesah? Not every person is exposed to the risk of becoming arrogant. A Jewish slave in Egypt, for example, did not have the luxury to be exposed to vanity. Self-pride is only relevant if you are a free man. In Pesah, we commemorate our freedom from physical slavery, bearing in mind that as free individuals we might easily fall pray to a different kind of slavery, a mental self-enslavement, a sort of addiction to the inflatable aspects of our self. In Pesah, while celebrating freedom, we also become conscious of the risks to become arrogant by this sort of psychological Hamets.

Modern society, in its relentless efforts to turn us into loyal consumers, contributes a great deal to the feeding of our pride. Training us into being more egocentric and more hedonistic, into thinking that we are entitled to have everything we need, we wish and we want as long as we are able to afford it. This power might easily deteriorate into arrogance.

The Matza, a flat, thin and unpretentious bread, represents humbleness. Humility does not mean to allow ourselves to be degraded; it means that we realize the true dimension of human life, becoming aware of our inescapable mortality and recognizing that while alive we are totally dependent on God.

Humility is also the essence of a healthy dose of self-esteem, a prerequisite for being in peace with oneself. The arrogant individual is insecure and yearns for public praise and the applause of others, sometimes desperately, in order to compensate for his low self-esteem. Only the humble one, the person who does not need to seek people's praise to feel better, is truly free. He is able to change and constantly improve himself. The arrogant person, on the other hand, is psychologically unable to admit mistakes and therefore, incapable of change. He ends up adapting himself, enslaving himself, to his own shortcomings. Arrogance is a Pharaoh that condemns our personality to stagnation.

Moreover, while the humble person knows that every human being deserves dignity and respect and has the right to be listened and understood, the arrogant individual becomes an exclusive servant of his own inflated reflection. Arrogance is a layer of silver behind a glass which only mirrors our own reflection. Arrogance, this type of mental Hamets, is the main barrier between a man and his fellowman, and between man and God.

Pesah is an intense lesson on humility. In the same way we eliminate every crumb of Hamets from our homes, we should erase every trace of vanity from our hearts.

SHABBAT SHALOM

Candle lighting in NYC 7:04

Shabbat ends in NYC 8:05