What Is and What Is Not Chamets?

We cannot eat, benefit from, or even own Chamets during Pesach. Today, we will explain what is and what is NOT Chamets.

THE FIVE GRAINS Chamets (also written hametz or chametz) is any fermented substance, solid or liquid, from one of the following five grains: wheat, rye, spelt, barley, and oats. These are also the five grains that are generally used to make bread. Our sages established that only bread made from one of these five grains is considered for the berakha “HaMotzi” and “Birkat Hamazon.” For example, bread made from soy flour, rice flour, or corn is not considered real “bread.”

LIQUID CHAMETS The fermentation process only affects “flour” that comes from these grains. For example, beer is made from barley grains, which are soaked and then fermented. Beer (like whiskey and other alcoholic beverages made from one of these grains) is considered Chamets, although the grain was never converted into flour.

OTHER FERMENTED FOODS On the other hand, a fermented food that does not come from or does not contain any of these five grains cannot become Chamets, even if it undergoes a fermentation process. For example, wine is fermented, but it is made from grapes. The same applies to other alcoholic beverages, such as sake (known in Japan as “rice wine”), made from fermented rice.

Finally, only some things that come from these five grains are Chamets. Matsa to be used for Pesach can only be made from one of these five grains. Matsa is also a kind of “bread.” In Hebrew, it is called the bread of poverty or “lechem oni,” and in English is called “unleavened bread.”

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHAMETS & MATSA

1. TIME The fundamental difference between bread and Matsa is time. Bread and Matsa are made with the same essential ingredients: flour and water. The difference is that when preparing Matsa, you cannot leave the dough to rest once the flour is mixed with water. The dough must be kneaded and baked in less than 18 minutes. If left idle for 18 minutes or more, from the time the flour gets in contact with water, that dough “ferments.” This fermentation is called “Himuts” in Hebrew, and the product of this fermentation is called “Chamets.” Regular bread is made with flour and water (and yeast, as we will later see), but the dough is deliberately left to rest. When fermented, the dough enlarges, and the bread-crumb, i.e., the soft, inner part of the bread, is formed.

2. WATER If the flour made from one of the five grains is mixed “exclusively” with fruit juice, honey, or eggs without water, the fermentation or Himuts will not occur. Technically, if a dough is made by mixing wheat flour with pure fruit juice, with no water, and baked after resting for 18 minutes or more, this food will be called Matsa Ashira, and it is not considered Chamets.

3. SE-OR Yeast (in Hebrew se-or □□□□) is similar to Chamets. The biblical prohibition of Chamets, consumption and possession also includes the banning of yeast, though yeast is not an edible food by itself but an additive. Until a century ago, yeast was usually produced at home. Flour and water are mixed and kept for four days to prepare yeast. That sourdough, which smells like alcohol, is known as “natural yeast,” and it is used as a catalyst for fermentation in the preparation of homemade bread. In other words, when preparing bread, once flour and water are mixed, introducing some yeast into the dough will accelerate the fermentation process,

and the dough will grow bigger, producing soft and tasty bread. All Chamets restrictions (use, possession, benefit) also apply to se-or, that is, natural or commercial yeast.