



## Rabbi Weiner's April 2009 Bulletin Article

### As we prepare for Passover

As we prepare for Passover, one of our most important religious responsibilities is to remove *chametz* (unleavened products) from our homes and places of business. The Torah (Exodus 12) lists several prohibitions associated with *chametz*. Three of the 613 *mitzvot* are devoted to the subject. It is one of the best-known observances in all of Judaism. We are so strict about this obligation to rid ourselves of forbidden products that we even sell any *chametz* that we might have forgotten was in our possession or were otherwise unable to remove so that even in the most technical, legal sense we no longer own it.

Yet our Rabbis have added much to our understanding of the obligation to rid ourselves of *chametz* before Passover. They remind us that the difference between *chametz* and *matzah* for example, is quite small. Imagine mixing flour and water together. What would happen? If the mixture is allowed to sit for up to 18 minutes and then baked, it is *matzah*. If it is allowed to sit for more than 18 minutes, even without adding yeast or another type of leavening agent, it is considered *chametz*. The difference between the two is rather small and minute. Thus in order to make sure that what is *matzah*, or unleavened does not become *chametz*, or leavened products, we must always make the effort to insure that the outcome of our efforts is consistent with the means by which we achieve them.

Our Rabbis teach that *chametz* and leavening agents can be compared to pride and conceit. If controlled and channeled into a socially acceptable direction, these natural human emotions can often lead in a positive and uplifting direction. But if left unchecked, and not controlled and overcome, *chametz* becomes a symbol of the evil inclination. Certainly the Bible is talking about the physical removal of those products that are forbidden on Passover. But see what our Rabbis have added to our understanding of what it means to actually prepare for Passover. The removal of *chametz*, even the most minute and insignificant amount is necessary to observe Passover properly. Similarly, to enjoy the experience of freedom that is at the heart of the Passover observance, the preparation for the holiday must include an understanding of the constant battle each of us must constantly wage against pride and arrogance, and evil behavior in all of its guises and forms.

As I prepare this Passover message to you today, Bernard Madoff, the Wall Street genius who is responsible for the largest securities fraud in American history has just pleaded guilty to 11 counts of fraud, and will be sentenced in June to what all expect will be a long prison sentence. The scale of his crimes is

well known: some 4800 clients including individual accounts, pension funds, charities, schools and educational institutions, were defrauded out of approximately 65 billion dollars. The numbers are staggering, but the human toll is even more profound. Now what could have led a man who was a leading figure on Wall Street, a former Chairman of NASDAQ, and, a leader in the world of Jewish philanthropy to behave in such a fashion? As he pleaded guilty today, he made the following statement to the court.

*"...I am actually grateful for this first opportunity to publicly speak about my crimes, for which I am so deeply sorry and ashamed. As I engaged in my fraud, I knew what I was doing was wrong, indeed criminal. When I began the Ponzi scheme I believed it would end shortly and I would be able to extricate myself and my clients from the scheme. However, this proved difficult, and ultimately impossible, and as the years went by I realized that my arrest and this day would inevitably come. I am painfully aware that I have deeply hurt many, many people, including the members of my family, my closest friends, business associates and the thousands of clients who gave me their money. I cannot adequately express how sorry I am for what I have done. I am here today to accept responsibility for my crimes by pleading guilty and, with this plea allocution, explain the means by which I carried out and concealed my fraud."*

Now admittedly this is an extreme case. But there is much that we can learn from this case because while we might dismiss some of the details as not being relevant to our lives, we cannot dismiss the common humanity that we do share with Bernard Madoff and his ilk. In that respect he becomes not only a criminal, but also a model of a certain direction in life that each and every person is capable of following unless they are constantly thinking about the proper path to follow in life, and what they must do to make sure that path is ever before them. Every day we stand at a fork in the road. Which way do we chose?

This struggle was always on the mind of our Rabbis. In a world of extremes our Rabbis taught of the "Shvil HaZahav" the golden mean. In a world of excess our Rabbis taught the virtue of moderation. And in a world of mediocre human behavior (or worse) our Rabbis taught us the value of holiness, and how each human being is capable of achieving it.

Let these ideas be on our mind as we work to prepare our homes and our hearts for the great festival of freedom that is but days away.

I wish you all a *Chag Kasher V'Sameach*.

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