



The Question of **LEAVEN**

What is leaven and what is not?
(ABRIDGED)

Every year people ask, “What do I need to get rid of for Passover?” They ask about pastas, tortillas, crackers, corn chips, and more. Hopefully, this article can shed some light on all of the confusion and bring clarity to this topic. First, let’s look at the biblical commandment for Passover and the week of Unleavened Bread:

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. (Exodus 12:15)

This English translation of our passage appears fairly straight forward. It seems that we need to get rid of anything that can act as a leavening agent. For most people this means simply discarding any kind of yeast, baking soda, baking powder, etc. or anything that has been made with them. But is this really what the Torah instructs us?

An immediate question arises that involves a nagging problem that I could not figure out when I first began observing Passover: How can wine be permitted during Passover since wine is made from grapes that are fermented—with yeast? How could Yeshua and his disciples have had wine at their Last Seder? It's only when I looked at the Hebrew terms behind this passage, that my understanding deepened. Let's take a look together to discover the truth about this mystery.

How can wine be permitted during Passover since wine is made from grapes that are fermented?

Three Hebrew Words

If we insert the original Hebrew terms back into our passage from above we will see three key words that we need to become familiar with:

Seven days you shall eat matzot (מַצוֹת). On the first day you shall remove se'or (שְׂאֵר) out of your houses, for if anyone eats chametz (חֻמֵץ), from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. (Exodus 12:15)

The key words in this passage are matzot (singular: matzah), se'or, and chametz. From these three distinct words in this single verse we can understand three different instructions from the Torah:

1. We are to eat matzah for seven days.
2. We are to remove all se'or from our homes prior to Passover.
3. We are not to eat chametz for seven days.

What is the difference between chametz and se'or? **Se'or** is a combination of water and flour made from one of the five biblical grains that had been cultured long enough to contain live bacteria that had the ability to work its way into a batch of dough. It is essentially a sourdough starter. A pinch of sourdough or a sourdough slurry was the principle ingredient added to a fresh batch of dough in order to begin the fermentation process that would produce enough gas in order to allow bread to rise. **Chametz** is basically food that contains se'or. Whereas se'or is the agent that introduces fermentation, chametz is what the se'or acts on. When se'or is added to a batch of dough or other foods the result is chametz. Therefore, any kind of food product that contains one of the five grains that has had any water added for 18 minutes or longer before being cooked or baked is considered chametz.

However, these terms only apply to the five grains that appear in the Torah: wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt. An easy mnemonic for remembering these five grains is the word [eye] BROWS: **B**arley / **R**ye / **O**ats / **W**heat / **S**pelt

Items that would potentially considered chametz would too extensive to list. However, a

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short list of chametz includes: cakes, cookies, pastas, breads, crackers, tortillas, pita chips, beer, and other alcoholic beverages made from distilled grains, vinegar (and products made from vinegar), anything malted, and anything that is battered. Even things that are not obvious such as pre-milled flour (because grain is often sprayed with water and allowed to soak before milling), sprouted grains, bouillon cubes, etc. could be considered chametz because they may contain grain products and water. As we can see, our topic has quickly become extensive and complicated. In short, any food product that contains a mixture of grains and water outside of matzah specifically made to be kosher for Passover is essentially chametz.

Matzah

Matzah that is kosher for Passover, however, is made with only two ingredients (flour and water) and must be cooked within 18 minutes of the water coming in contact with the flour so that there is no opportunity for fermentation to begin. There is also a stringent process by which the equipment, counters, etc. are all constantly cleaned to ensure there is no residual flour or dough from previous batches that could begin to ferment and then become mixed with new batches of dough. Matzah made from grains other than the five biblical grains are not to be used for Passover because they do not technically qualify as being matzah, especially in order to fulfill a biblical commandment.

Other Concerns

Lastly, items like active dry yeast, nutritional yeast, yeast extract, baking soda, and baking powder are generally of no concern since they are not produced by combining flour and water. However, if there is any doubt it is better to get rid of it and be wrong than keep it and be wrong.

There are also considerations to take into account of Ashkenazi observance over Sephardic observance. According to Ashkenazi tradition wheat-like food items such as rice, corn, lentils, soybeans, peas, etc. are classified as kitniyot ("legumes") and fall under the same classification as the biblical grains during Chag HaMatzot. Therefore, the definition of chametz is extended in Ashkenazi traditions to include these items as well. ❧

This paper should be considered merely informative and not halachic (legal) in nature. If you have any questions regarding specific food items you should contact a halachic authority for a definitive ruling.