I've often wondered about the different words the Exodus story uses for chametz. There's chametz, se'or and machmetzet, without even starting to count the many different words Hebrew has for bread. Although we're used to translating chametz as leaven or leavened bread, it actually refers to anything produced by fermentation. Which is why we dispose of our whiskey and beer as well as all our less valuable crumbs.

Grain fermentation was crucial to the ancient Egyptian lifestyle. The Egyptians weren't the first to realize that bacteria forming on moldy bread can be utilized to aerate dough so that it rises, but they quickly adopted the technology developed in Sumer (somewhere around the fourth millennium BCE), improving and varying it to make a wide range of baked goods (think of the baker from the story of Joseph). At the same time, Egyptian society became known for its beer – also made using yeast bacteria. Bread and beer were the two staples of the Egyptian diet. Workers were even often paid in beer! ¹

One of the secrets of good beer – and good sourdough bread – is in the strain of machmetzet – or “starter” – used to ferment the liquid or the dough. This is essentially an old or sour piece of dough added to the mix that begins the fermentation process. To bake sourdough bread, you either need to make your own starter (a risky business!) or acquire some from a friend, relative or baker. You keep the starter refrigerated, taking off a small piece each time you bake, and “feed” the remainder with a mixture of water and flour. The taste of the machmetzet comes through clearly in the bread it produces, so if you have a tasty starter, it’s something you want to hold on to.

Although Egypt produced beer on an industrial scale, the process was similar. Now imagine you’ve had a strain of starter in your family pantry for three generations. It was first acquired when your family arrived in Egypt from Canaan, and your mother and her mother made sure it would never “die out.” And then someone tells you that not only are you leaving Egypt and you have 10 days to pack (while keeping a bleating lamb in your hovel along with all your family), but you’re not allowed to take your machmetzet with you! You are going to have to literally wean yourself off the taste of Egypt and leave your machmetzet behind.

It’s not even as if there was so much to look forward to on this desert jaunt to worship the terrifyingly invisible G-d of Israel in the wilderness. Every Egyptian festival was marked with beer flowing freely from the temple of whichever of its many gods was rejoicing, literally lightening up the party with the levity that comes with leaven – barley beer and bread. But there clearly wasn’t going to be any beer associated with the worship of the One G-d – He’d already banned it from the Israelites’ homes as they hastily downsized, slaughtered and roasted those irritating lambs whole, and gulped down their final meal in Egypt with girded loins andready-to-go packs on their backs.

So in stepping out of Egypt, the culture they’d known for at least three generations, our ancestors were really taking a hefty decision and making a clean break. They left not only slavery behind, but security – from the routine of getting up in the morning and knowing what you’d be doing all day, however mundane, back-breaking and repetitive – right down to the staples of what kind of comfort food they had available when the going got tough. And nevertheless, they went.

It’s not surprising that they were soon complaining and wishing they could go back, but notice how thoroughly they adopted G-d’s rejection of the puffed-up culture of ancient Egypt. They hungered for Egyptian zucchini, for Nile perch, for juicy watermelons – but not for the barley bread and beer that typified Egypt – the breadbasket of the ancient world.

Now we understand the emphasis at the end of the instructions of how to observe that first Pesach in Mitzrayim, with its threefold emphasis on se’or and machmetzet. “No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a citizen of the country.” ²

Because in the end, the tastes you grow up with are often the hardest ones to leave behind.

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1 The standard Old Kingdom (2686-2181 BC) ration for a laborer was 10 loaves and a measure of beer.
2 Shemot 12:19.

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