Cleaning for Pesach

The excitement of Pesach begins well before the actual holiday – Pesach preparations are an intrinsic part of this special chag. Rav Mordechai Eliyahu z”l shared a few thoughts on the importance and inner meaning of cleaning for Pesach and searching for chametz:

When there’s an argument between different groups of Jews, for example between different political parties, the discussion should be conducted in a dignified, respectful and “clean” manner. The Gemara teaches this: “The verse did not speak to the disparagement of [even] a non-kosher animal, as it is written: ‘From the pure animals and from the animals that are lacking purity’ (Bereishit 7:8).”

In other words, the Torah wanted to teach us how to speak cleanly, and chose a longer expression, “From the pure animals and from the animals that are lacking purity” (Bereishit 7:8), so as not to say “from the impure animal.”

The commentators question this though. In other places in the Torah, “impure animal” is specifically used, so why is the longer, ‘cleaner’ phrase not used there like it is in the above verse, listing the animals that entered the ark? They answer that when the Torah teaches us the laws of kosher food, there is no reason to shorten its words, because this is Torah and halacha, but when the Torah is only telling which animals entered the ark, which is not practical halacha, it is necessary to add extra words and avoid using unclean language. Wise people should learn from this. In the words of the Ran: אֵינֶנָּה טְהוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר אֶלְבּוֹטָה תָּהוֹרָה (“that are lacking purity”) contains five letters. דַּעֵמָם (“impure”) contains eight letters. Eight letters were added just so the language would be clean.

We know we must check for chametz in the holes and cracks. Our commentators suggest that a person should also check his own “cracks,” his pockets. One should check if one’s money is ‘clean,’ and whether one gave charity to talmidei chachamim. As Yirmiyahu says, money which is not clean and pure contains no sign of blessing: “the man who gains riches by unjust means – when his life is half gone, they [his riches] will desert him...” (Yirmiyahu 17:11).

The Shulchan Aruch writes: “In the beginning of the eve of the 14th of Nissan, chametz should be searched for by candlelight, in all of the places where one regularly brings chametz.

One should be careful not to begin any work or eat before he searches. And even if he has a set time to study Torah at that time, he should not study until he searches. If he started to learn while it was still day, he need not stop. And there are those who say he should stop.” If he is hungry and wants to eat before searching for chametz, he may eat fruits or less than a beitza-worth of bread. We also do not set time for learning Torah at the end of the 13th of Nissan, and a Rabbi should not begin a drasha, lest he continue late and prevent bedikat chametz from being carried out on time.

The time for searching for chametz is at the beginning of the eve of the 14th of Nissan. The Kaf HaChaim says this means right before night begins. The Magen Avraham says it means before tzzeit hakochavim, before three stars are visible, even though there is still some light.

LeHalacha, we say the time for bedikat chametz is when tzzeit hakochavim begins, since during bein haShmashot, the light of the candle doesn’t shine well, and the mitzvah is to search at the beginning of the night, זאר לארבעה ונע Stops (the eve of the 14th), which is why the Mishna uses the word זאuvo, and not מעשון (darkness), to imply the very beginning of the night when it is not yet fully dark.

“In Nissan we were redeemed and in Nissan we will be redeemed.” Chazal say: we don’t want to wait, we want redemption immediately.

As Rashi says, the future redemption may occur even at night, and the Beit HaMikdash will descend, built and complete. We believe in the coming of Mashiach every single day. Yehi ratzon that we merit to sacrifice the korban Pesach in its set time, and we should merit the geula shleima, speedily in our days, Amen.