Rashi comments on the opening Mishnah in Pesachim (2a) that bedikat chametz was instituted in order to avoid potential violation of Chametz (having chametz in one’s possession). Tosafot questions this explanation, since the simpler method of bitul chametz (nullification of chametz) is sufficient to avoid the prohibition of owning chametz (Pesachim 4b). Tosafot therefore maintains that the chachamim were concerned that if chametz were left in a person’s possession, he might inadvertently come to eat it. They enacted bedikat chametz to avoid violating the issur of achilat chametz.

The Ran (Pesachim, 1a in dapei haRif), in explaining Rashi, writes that the chachamim were unwilling to rely on bitul alone because it is possible that an owner might not effect his bitul wholeheartedly, in which case it would be ineffective. Therefore, they mandated bedikat chametz to avoid potential violation of chametz. Thus, according to these Rishonim, bedikat chametz seems to be required only on a derabbanan level.

It is noteworthy that the Rema (Orach Chaim 431:2; see Biur HaGra) rules in accordance with a different comment of Tosafot (Pesachim 9a) and the Ran (Pesachim, 1a in dapei haRif). According to them, if one has not yet performed bitul on his chametz, the obligation to do bedikat chametz is midor’atra. The basis for this opinion is that the bedika constitutes the beginning of biur chametz (destruction of chametz), which is mandated by the passuk, as opposed to achilah, as opposed to biur chametz.

Rav Soloveitchik suggested that a parallel halacha that serves as the source for this notion is the din of biur avodah zarah. In discussing the destruction of avodah zarah specifically in Eretz Yisrael, the Torah commands: “You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations worshipped… their gods… and you shall obliterate their names from that place” (Devarim 12:2-3). Based on this, the Rambam (Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 7:1), in explaining Rashi, writes that the Rema (Pesachim 1a in dapei haRif), in explaining Rashi, writes that we know about in an area that we occupy.

The explanation may be that one who performs bedikat chametz in its proper time, on the night of erev Pesach, recites a beracha of “le d’rachim le iyyim” since it is considered a nefesh ha‘asrash, and the bedika can thus be considered the onset of mitzvat biur. However, if one does bedikat chametz on an earlier day, since the mitzvah of tashbitu does not yet apply, the bedika cannot be called techilat mitzvat biur. That bedika is performed only for the purpose of avoiding the violation of le d’rachim le iyyim or the issur achilat chametz, and no beracha is recited when one simply avoids violating issurim.