

Searching for the Leaven

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This Shabbat before Pesach is known as Shabbat HaGadol: The Great Sabbath of the Lord. Its name derives from the closing verses of the Haftarah portion, Malachi chapter 3:23.

Behold, I will send you
Elijah the prophet
Before the coming
Of the great and terrible day of the Lord.

Centuries of tradition have required the Rabbi to preach this Shabbat on the finer points of the dietary laws of the Passover Festival. Prior to the arrival of the Passover holiday, arrangements need to be made to prepare the Jewish home, and that means ridding it of chametz, which is prohibited.

Now, what is chametz? Leaven! chametz is any of the five grains (wheat, spelt, barley, oats, rye) that come into contact with water for more than 18 minutes. Matzah is approved because it is baked in less than 18 minutes, after flour and water are combined.

This is a serious prohibition, spelled out in Exodus 13, because any of these grains plus water, plus 18 minutes, equals leaven.

In addition to the prohibited chametz, there is another category of food called Kitniyot (sometimes referred to generically as “legumes”). These Kitniyot include rice, corn, soy, string beans, peas, lentils, peanuts, mustard, sesame, and poppy seeds.

Now, listen: even though Kitniyot cannot technically become chametz, Ashkenazi Jews do not eat them on Passover. Why? Well, because they appear so much like chametz, it’s difficult to tell them apart. Would you know rice flour from wheat flour? So therefore, all Kitniyot are prohibited, too.

Now, here’s an interesting distinction. Whereas one is obliged to remove all chametz from your house for the duration of Pesach, Kitniyot may be owned and even used (though not eaten). For instance, cornstarch may be used for baby powder.

Now, I remember helping my mother the night before the day of the Seder in the B’dekat Chametz: the search for the leaven. After our house had been entirely cleaned of leaven and prepared for the festival of Pesach, that night we would take a wooden spoon, collect ten randomly placed pieces of bread, and wrap them in white cheesecloth.

The next morning, prior to eleven o’clock, we burned that leaven –spoon included as well as the feather we used to collect the bread. That ceremony is called Biur Chametz.

Those of you who know me will be quick to conclude that I am not primarily motivated at Passover time to focus the attention on the finer points of Pesach Kashrut. Not that I don’t urge you to refrain from eating any and all leaven bread products for the

full seven days of Passover. I want you to keep Passover beyond the two nights of the Seder. This is, after all, a festival of unlimited importance and relevance. And, its timeless message, ceremonies, songs, and memories never cease to inspire me.

But, I also feel that we sometimes expend too much attention on the minutia of what is and what is not Kosher for Passover – especially we who think nothing of Kashrut the rest of the year. Search for the leaven! Leaven during Passover is to be removed and excluded. But, I want you to join me for a few moments as we consider and search for the leaven that builds us up the rest of the year.

Especially who are those individuals whose caring presence and sweet influence have built you and made you into everything that is good and noble within your character and being. They are your leaven, your yeast.

Yes, as Passover – the ultimate family occasion of the Jewish year – approaches, I invite you to search your mind for those beloved ones whose transforming influence have been leaven to your ethical and moral being.

Who are those whose unforgettable leavening presence have served as essential ingredients to your personality and combined to make you a kinder, more caring, more wholesome, and decent child of God? I am speaking of other than parents and siblings, spouses and family, per se. Ought we not search ourselves for the lasting presence these leavening agents of our souls who, by a gift of God and serendipitous good fortune, entered powerfully into our lives?

I've lost two such individuals within recent days. I grieve their passing because they bestowed on me their awesome and generous love. They lifted me, leavening my conscience, helping me to believe in myself, and to see worth and beauty, poetry and grace, within not only my frail self, but also within the world that I share with others.

I.

The first such person who was leaven to my unfolding personality was Odette. She and her husband, Pierre, were furriers who came to this country immediately after the Second World War. They were very, very distant relatives who, after a brief stay in New York, came to live just blocks from us in Glen Burnie.

They were hardworking and deeply in love. Pierre was Jewish – though other than possessing an enormous fondness for Matzah balls, did nothing about it. Odette was a non-practicing Catholic. Odette's first husband had been killed when the Germans shot down his plane. She was left with an infant son. Pierre and Odette met and fell in love in occupied Paris, where together they took great chances by participating in the French underground.

Odette, beautiful and stylish, could fashion anything with her hands. Unbeknownst to all but a few in her farming community, Odette specialized in making forged identity papers in her rural area outside of Paris.

Jews were hidden there until, with new papers, they could be smuggled into Paris to escape into its crowded populace. Once, when a farmer betrayed a hidden Jew, turning him into the Gestapo representatives before he could be returned to the city, Odette went herself to his farm and stabbed him to death before he betrayed her and others.

I didn't learn of that incident until after her death. Neither Pierre nor Odette cared to talk very much of those years. But what she did enjoy was the opera and fine dining, and champagne, and great art and scotch manhattans, and conversation, and every kind of animal you can think of – and especially her horses. She loved to ride and care for her horses.

We became the closest of friends as my parents played cards with both Pierre and Odette, sometimes almost every week, throughout the whole night. Needless to say, my Halloween costumes, rendered by a professional seamstress, were always prizewinning. When I wanted to grow up and be a Sioux Indian, she made me look like one with authenticity.

When I wanted to be a doctor, Odette made me look like one. And it was Odette who, when I built the synagogue in our basement at age 10, sewed a white pulpit robe that made our rabbi's look like a shmatte! I also have a library of books on art and music, all lovingly selected for me by Odette. She also gave us about 50 cookbooks, which we have never opened!

Over the years, Odette's love extended to Andrea and Jennifer and Debra, and to Stan's wife, Karen, and to their children. She was always keenly concerned how we all were doing, and she wanted always to follow my progress in the rabbinate. We enjoyed, along with Pierre, many long and deep conversations about politics, about faith and God and truth and human nature. And I will forever hear her pronounced and charming French accent, which she never lost.

Odette died last week, four years after Pierre, in her mid-80s. Her ashes will be joined with Pierre's and they will be buried in Glen Burnie close to where we all lived and grew for so many good years.

I am the person I am in part because of Odette's leavening effects on my personality and interests. We always saw eye to eye, except on horses. I never felt comfortable on a horse. There, I disappointed her. That was a passion I never was able to return.

II.

Miss Mary Boyle – Mary Fitzmaurice Boyle – left this world about a month ago. Word of her passing reached me only a week ago. She, too, was a leaven to my spirit, my mind, and my heart.

Mary was my high school creative writing teacher at Glen Burnie High. That was only the pretext of our friendship. Though she tried in vain to make me into a poet, what

she did accomplish was to make me into a lover of words: biographies, essays, and collections of sermons. And I love to read poetry, even if I don't write it.

Mary Boyle never married, but believe me, her students were her children. Several of us remained so, even when we had children of our own. She taught at our school for 31 years. And she took her classes every year to meet Maryland poets and authors. How honored we were to be included in select audiences for poetry readings on Maryland's eastern shore at St. Michael's and Easton.

Mary invited us to write for the school's literary magazine, *Impressions*. And in the 1960s, she began our "Partners for Peace Club" to aid needy students in Brazil. That began an exchange program that resulted in Mary's visit to Brazil as a board member of Partners of the Americas.

On November 22, 1963, we stood beside our teacher as she wept uncontrollably when we heard the news of President Kennedy's assassination. Mary was a devout Roman Catholic and she blossomed with the ecumenism and interfaith openness of those Vatican Council years.

On a winter's Shabbat in 1965, she came with me to her first Temple service and was enthralled by the beauty of the music and the majesty of the prayers of our Union Prayer Book.

Mary was a seasoned listener. Our problems were hers, and she would ponder long and hard to reach a possible solution to any predicament life presented us. She was intent on my writing a book and, in a letter I recently uncovered, she wrote: "I will try hard to come up with some ideas for your book."

Mary was here for Jennifer's Bat Mitzvah, and I assure you, no one read the Temple Sinai bulletin more thoroughly than Mary, with the exception of my mother and Herbert Barton!

Whenever I went home to visit Mom, I would arrange to spend some quality hours with Mary at her retirement home. Sometimes, we'd go out for Maryland seafood. Our topics of conversation were theology and the glories of a living faith.

The letters Mary sent me in her meticulous handwriting are among my most cherished possessions. I can't even begin to tell you how thrilled and proud of me she was when I met the Pope a year ago. I sent her a rosary that John Paul had blessed. It was a simple rosary of fragrant wooden beads, and I learned a few days ago that she was buried with it.

Who has been leaven in your life? Who has made you proud to be you? Who has expressed such delight in your gifts and, in return, inspired you to reach higher and dream nobler?

In 1965, our class presented Mary with a copy of Dag Hammarskjöld's wonderful book, *Markings*. We each signed our names under the title – "Creative Writing Class." Some years ago, Mary insisted I have that book as a sourcebook for my sermons. She loved my sermons. She took time to analyze and critique them. And yes, I loved her all the more for lavishing her attention on my efforts.

There in that wonderful book I found the Hammarskjöld's prescription for a life that has been gifted by leaveners. He insists:

Is not beauty created at every encounter between
a man and life, in which he repays his debt by
focusing on the living moment all the power which
life has given him as an obligation?

Searching for the leaven? It's a debt – pass it on to others.

Amen