

Pesach and OCD: A Frum Psychologist's (and homemaker's) Perspective

By: Dr. Leah Adams

First, let's start with a disclaimer: I am not a Rav and this article should be read in its entirety before setting up a game plan for yourself to get ready for Pesach. Those of you who know me realize that I have no beard, frock or semicha but, for those of you who don't know me, now I have clarified what I consider to be obvious! I was listening to a "Captain Dovid" CD with Pesach stories about a little boy who seems to be humorously confused about Pesach preparations. In one scene he mows down his mother's garden so that no 'flower' (flour) should be around. While we are able to laugh at the antics of this well-meaning child, in some cases it is not so far from the way people behave at this time of year. Now is the time that the line between religious observance and psychiatric illness can become blurred. People spend hours performing back breaking, nail fraying work to ready their houses for Pesach. In order to help us understand whether our work is "normal" or "pathological" (such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) two questions need to be answered. The first question is this: Is your level of religious practice in this area (housecleaning) commensurate with that of your performance of other mitzvos? The second question is, how much emotional distress is this practice causing you?

Rabbi Levitan has a classic vignette that he tells over at this time of year during the women's shiur in Olympia. There was once a Sephardic woman who used to empty out her feather quilts, check that they were clean and re-stuff them for Pesach. Her children, looking to lighten her load, and unable to convince her to change her ways, got her an appointment to meet with the Chacham. He, after all, would be considered the expert in Sephardic law! After this momentous meeting her children asked her, "Nu, Ima?". The woman proudly responded, "Yesh lo haminhagim shelo, yesh li haminhagim sheli" (He has his customs and I have mine!). We Jewish women are a tough bunch and tradition, rightly so, is hard to break from.

Pesach preparation poses a particular challenge. Halacha does require strict adherence to guidelines and, when it comes to Pesach, we are particularly careful because of the severity of the punishment associated with the prohibition from eating Chametz (Kares). Rabbi Avrohom Pessin, Zatzal, used to remind his kehilla that shmutz, however, is not chametz. Keeping this in mind, the first step in proper Pesach preparation is learning the actual laws involved (not just the Buba Meises). To do this correctly you must establish yourself a Rav whose opinion you trust and who has an understanding of your needs. This trust and willingness to follow pertains both to stringencies that he might teach you as well as to leniencies that he holds are acceptable. As in all areas of Yiddishkeit, much spousal disagreement can be avoided by establishing a Posek that the two of you respect.

The other step of the Pesach preparation process is figuring out a realistic timeframe in which to get all of your work done. If, for example, the Rav tells you that a certain method of cleaning is acceptable albeit an added level is even better then, start with the basic level of acceptance. Once that is done in all areas of your home so that now your whole home is acceptably Kasher Lipesach, then, if there is time, work the chumras into your cleaning. Often times people start with the most extreme chumras (above and beyond what their Posek has prescribed) in one area and might then run out of time getting the rest of the house even up to the basic level required! This would be like polishing your hubcaps with expensive, time consuming products so that your car looks nice enough to pick up your grandmother at the airport, and then running out of time and money to buy gas for the trip!

At this time of redemption, let's remind ourselves what true freedom involves. Cherus, freedom, is not the ability to make up our own rules. It is the liberating feeling of knowing what is really expected of us and of performing this to the best of our abilities. Enjoy your matza. Remember, matzah crumbs aren't chametz!

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