

# Preparing for a Pain-Free Pesach

A Step-by-Step Guide to Cleaning, Kashering, and Celebrating Passover



## 1. Identify the Chametz in Your Possession

The Torah is quite insistent that we should not have *any* chametz in our possession when the holiday of Pesach begins. In order for us to be able to remove the chametz, we have to know what it is. So, what *is* chametz anyway?

Chametz / חָמֵץ (adj.) lit. 'leavened/fermented', in English (n.): a combination of one of 5 grains (a: wheat, b: barley, c: rye, d: spelt, e: oats) which has been mixed with water and left to stand and/or bake for longer than 18 minutes.

That means that the category is often much more narrow than some suspect. Flour (assuming it's been kept sealed and away from all water) is not chametz. Green beans are not chametz. Saké rice wine is not chametz. However, there are many things which *are* chametz which may not obviously be so. So many processed foods include wheat flour as a thickener (like soy sauce) which is why it takes a bit of detective work to discover the hidden chametz in our midst. Thus, the first step– best performed at least one week before the holiday begins– is to identify the chametz in your possession and isolate it.

Gather all your bread, cereals, crackers, biscuits, sauces which have flour, etc etc.– all your chametz– and keep them all in one place. All of this will either need to be a) donated (if unopened), b) eaten, c) disposed of, or d) sold to a non-Jew for the duration of the holiday, before we can begin to kasher the kitchen.

## 2. Dispose of Your Chametz (Literal and Otherwise)

The reason that chametz is seen as such an important symbol is not only that it is what the Israelites were unable to have when fleeing Egypt, but also because Pesach is, at least in part, about self-cleansing. The metaphorical chametz we aim to eliminate are those attributes which, like chametz, puff up and rise: arrogance, egotism, etc. That sort of metaphysical chametz is a bit harder to get rid of, but the physical kind is fairly straightforward.

You should always aim, if possible, to donate any chametz to charity. Through this you are doing a 'double-mitzvah'– observing the command to eliminate chametz while observing the command to care for the poor and needy. Food that has been opened or is inappropriate to donate needs to be either eaten, binned, or sold. If you have far more dried pasta stored away than can be consumed by yourself and/or your family in the few weeks before Pesach, then eating has may not be possible. If it cannot be donated *or* eaten, then the next best thing is to bin it (food waste bin, please!). If you cannot donate it, eat it, or bin it (because of severe financial loss), then you are permitted to lock it away somewhere in your home and sell it to a non-Jew (who is not obligated to remove chametz) for the holiday. This process of selling chametz is meant to be a last resort, for those for whom the possibility of binning certain items would create irrevocable financial damage (say, a whiskey collector). For everyone else, selling chametz should be the absolute last line of defence– with the other three options being much more preferable.

### 3. Get Cleaning!

Now that all the chametz is out of your home (or, locked away in a clean cupboard and sealed off), it's time to start cleaning. The chametz which is in packaged food that is easily identifiable is only one kind, but there's also all the crumbs which fell behind the cupboard, the soy sauce spilled on the fridge door, and that lone crust of bread someone dropped in a weird place some months ago. In order to get rid of *that* chametz, we clean our home thoroughly. For now, ignore the pots, pans, cutlery, etc. Start with the big things:

- A. Cupboards– take everything out, wipe them down well with warm water, make sure there's no crumbs still around.
- B. Fridge– take everything out, including the drawers, and wipe everything down with warm water and make sure there's no food stuck on anywhere.
- C. Floors– in some ways, these are the best thing to clean last, but a good place to start is with a good sweep and mop of the floors, just to grab any stray crumbs. If you have wood floors where bits of bread could be trapped, it's a good idea to get out the Hoover too.

As you can see from the above, we learn a rule: **things which do not have hot food eaten off of them do not need to be kashered, only cleaned.** Things that do need to be kashered (made kosher for Pesach) are: countertops, tabletops, hobs and stoves, microwaves, soup blenders (or other appliances that work with heat), plates, cups, pots, pans, baking utensils, cutlery, etc. Another rule: **something only needs to be kashered if you want to use it during Pesach**– if you don't intend to use it during the holiday, just clean it well and put it away in a clearly labelled place (so you won't accidentally use it). Most things can be kashered, although some cannot at all. This depends primarily on the material of which it's made.

### 4. Get Kashering!

Now that things are clean, what we are left with are all the bits of our kitchen which regularly come into contact with *hot food*. If we want to be able to use these things during Pesach, they need to be kashered for the holiday.

Before we can begin the kashering process, we need to 1) clean the things to be kashered well, and then 2) leave them for a full 24 hour period before beginning to kasher them.

The kashering process follows a basic rule: **things are purified the same way they are impurified**. That is, whichever way the material in question *absorbs* is the way that we can kasher it and *purge* chametz from it. This leaves us with a few methods:

- A. **Libbun** - lit. 'Whitening', this means that something is heated to a temperature where it appears white. This method is used for items which primarily 'intake' through high heat, for example: oven element, baking trays, hob top and bits, etc. If your oven has a self-cleaning feature, that qualifies as libbun (after the oven is thoroughly cleaned). If it does not, then running at the highest temperature for an hour achieves the same end.
- B. **Hagalah** - lit. 'Boiling', this is for anything which normally 'cooks' with water or liquid, or any other generic metal. This is achieved by immersion in boiling water. This method is used for: all metal cutlery, pots and pans (assuming all-metal bodies and handles), microwaves (by boiling water and letting it splatter the sides), non-porous countertops (formica, hard plastics), etc.

Some things *cannot be* kashered— namely, items which are made out of organic or porous materials: wood, enamel, stone, earthenware, pottery, etc. These items *cannot be* used during Pesach at all, and must be cleaned and safely stored away (and labelled).

Larger things which *cannot be* kashered can be cleaned and covered. For example, a wooden dining table. If the surface is cleaned well and then covered completely (with silver foil, tablecloth, etc) it can be used on Pesach providing no food touches the wooden tabletop itself.

Similarly, some items do not need not be kashered at all, other than cleaning. According to some authorities (myself included), glass falls into this category (along with Pyrex and other tempered glass and silica compounds), as it is completely non-porous.<sup>1</sup> Thus if you have glassware or glass dishes (including Corelle) they can simply be cleaned well and used for Pesach without Libbun or Hagalah.

A few miscellaneous items:

1. Dishwashers- To kasher the dishwasher, empty it completely, take out the racks and clean them well, ensure the food-trap is completely clean, and then run it on the hottest, longest cycle.

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<sup>1</sup> If you're unsure if something is porous, take R' Haim Ovadia's advice: boil 5 habañero peppers and put them on the utensil, rinse it off, then put plain cooked rice on it and eat the rice. If your mouth is on fire, the material is porous.

2. Stand mixers- If your stand mixer has a metal bowl and metal arms, those can be kashered and used for Pesach. However, many have components which are impossible to remove and to boil or which are not metal and kasherable. As you likely won't need a stand mixer when you can't make dough– it is best to clean the mixer very well (removing all visible chametz) and then sealing it off for the duration of the holiday.
3. Cutting boards- Most cutting boards are porous in some way. Wood or plastic absorbs and cannot be kashered. Completely metal cutting boards can be kashered via Hagalah but are rare. The best bet may just be to clean them well, tuck them away, and get a Pesach-specific cutting board.
4. One-time-use vessels can be an easy way-out of making a kitchen kosher at Pesach, but they come at an increasingly untenable cost for our planet. *Bal tashchit* is the halakhic principle that prohibits wasting natural resources. Please take whatever steps you can to reduce wastage caused by one-time-use-vessels and in particular please avoid the most ecologically damaging one-time-use-vessels such as those made of polystyrene.

## 5. Get Eating!

Food– now we get to the critical part! After you've done all the work above to find and destroy chametz, and after you've cleaned and kashered your kitchen, the next step is to buy food for Pesach. Several important things to know:

1. There is a big difference between food bought *before* Pesach and food bought *during* Pesach. Prior to Pesach, any food bought which has chametz in a ratio of 1/60th or smaller is okay to eat during the holiday itself. During Pesach, you can't buy food with **any** chametz at all, even if it is down to a ratio of 1/1000th! As a result, good preparation is helpful.
2. Not everything needs a heksher! 'Kosher for Pesach' hekshers are meant for food bought **during** the holiday, which is processed, and thus runs the risk of potentially having chametz mixed in. There are two easy ways to avoid buying these expensive (and often unappetising) products: a) buy processed chametz-free foods before the holiday, b) buy foods which are unprocessed, and thus avoid the issue all together.
3. On that second point– if you spend the week of Pesach eating fresh fruits and vegetables, milk and unprocessed dairy, nuts, etc– then there's no need to worry about a 'Kosher for Pesach' heksher *at all*. This is the safest, healthiest, and easiest way to eat during the week of Pesach. In addition to non-processed foods, there are also many ingredients and foods which are kosher for Pesach even without a heksher. For this we are hugely indebted to R' Yitzhak Abadi, who compiles a list: <https://www.kashrut.org/files/127059807.pdf>
4. Kitniyot– Ah yes, the infamous 'kitniyot.' Literally, 'legumes', kitniyot are a category of things which *some* Ashkenazi communities have avoided on Pesach during *some* points of Jewish history. These are things such as rice, corn, beans, etc. They were likely proscribed because of a resemblance to the 5 Grains which make chametz, but they **categorically cannot become chametz**. Thus, if you choose to observe this additional stringency (or if it is a long-held family practice to do so), they are not subject to the same rules and limitations as actual chametz, and should simply be avoided for those who make this choice. One of the

tricky things about 'Kosher for Pesach' products is that they, by definition, appeal to the 'highest common denominator' and thus there are many things that won't get that stamp even though they are perfectly kosher because they include kitniyot or kitniyot derivatives.

5. Matzah– Matzah must be eaten at seder (an egg-sized amount at a minimum) but that is the limit of the obligation to consume Matzah. If you wish to have Matzah to eat throughout the holiday, you can buy boxed processed Matzah or make your own at home. Matzah can be hard or soft, with egg or without, etc. Since Matzah and chametz are both made from the same 5 Grains, the only difference is the amount of time. A mixture of flour and water which is baked in under 18 minutes is Matzah, from 18 minutes and on it's chametz.

**In summary:** you do *not* need to raid Kosher Kingdom and spend 5x your monthly food budget in order to be 'kosher' during Pesach. Rather, by sticking to unprocessed fresh foods and by planning ahead, you can have an affordable and delicious holiday celebrating liberation from servitude!

## 6. Get Story-Telling!

Of course, the final step is to hold or attend a Seder in order to tell the story of Pesach. The story of our people's liberation from enslavement is the centrepiece of this holiday– not cleaning, not potato starch, and not digestive problems! Telling the story through the Haggadah doesn't need to be boring or confusing. Actually, the point of the Haggadah and the Seder is to educate, and to provoke the attendees to ask questions (other than, 'what page are we on?') *It's far better to do less of the traditional text (or do it in English) and provoke a conversation rather than blast through the Hebrew text with everyone there zoned-out.* There are many accessible and interesting Haggadot you can use, in addition to dozens of 'supplements' put out by a variety of Jewish organisations which help illustrate the story from a different point of view.

At the end of the day– all of our cleaning, all of our kashering, all of our shopping, and all of our eating, is meant to be serving the goal of allowing us to reach Pesach with the full-feeling of freedom upon us. To be free is far harder than we ever allow ourselves to believe– it takes constant work and a great deal of thought– to identify what enslaves us and to cleanse ourselves and our society of injustice. Pesach is that time which is programmatically-devoted to precisely that question: How, this year and next, can we make ourselves freer, more just, closer to the liberated ideal of our ancestors? The answers are many, but at least one of them is the answer with which we end the Seder: 'Next Year in Jerusalem'!

*Wishing you all a Chag Kasher veSame'ach– a Happy and Holy Holiday!*

**R' Adam**

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