

Temple Beth Tzedek, Amherst
“Sale” of Chametz: Some background and Notes
by Rabbi Samuel Barth (March 2019)

During Pesach it is commonly known that it is forbidden to eat bread and all leavened products derived from specific species of grains. All these prohibited items are collectively called “chametz” and include all bread, pita, pizza, cakes, baked goods, vinegar, beer, whisky, etc. Less well known is a separate mitzvah (command) in the Torah that prohibits even the ownership of these products during Pesach, - whether the chametz is located anywhere in homes or office or business places.

In ancient times, and for many Jews today, the simplest way to fulfill this was to eliminate these products from home and office by literally “eating/drinking them up” before the eve of Pesach – or giving the products away. The literal last crumbs would be searched out by candlelight the night before Seder – traditionally with a spoon and feather (Bedikat chametz).

This became a true financial burden for Jewish innkeepers, merchants and bakers who had to maintain substantial inventory that could not easily be disposed of before Pesach – and initially it was for such merchants that the legal structure of a “sale of chametz” was first developed by rabbis concerned to avoid significant business losses caused by observance of Pesach.

In following centuries this practice spread to ordinary households; there are those who critique the practice because the sale is a “legal fiction” – the non-Jew who “purchases” the chametz is fully aware that the “Purchase” will be returned 8 days later. Nevertheless the sale is a legal transaction – and affirms a commitment and concern to fulfill the directives of the Torah.

By taking part in this centuries old transaction we remind ourselves of the authority and compelling Power of the Torah and rabbinic law; for some of us this serves as a reminder of submission to God, to Divine commands.

Jewish law traditionally “completes a deal” by means of an “in person” kinyan (transfer of a symbolic object) and so within our Congregation, Rabbi Samuel Barth encourages members of the community to come in person for the brief traditional kinyan – and to exchange personal Pesach greetings.

As this is a “business deal” – it cannot be undertaken on Shabbat.

If meeting in person is not possible – do please complete the form and return it after signature with details of locations, and names of other members of household, by mail, or scanned as an email attachment.

Donations are customary around Pesach, known as “Ma’ot Chittin.” Please be generous with these donations – whether or not you arrange the sale of chametz through TBT. We hope to be able to support the needs of the members of our local community, - and also to make meaningful donations for Jewish members of the Armed forces of the US and to Jewish students away from home.