

Shabbat Hagadol Drash
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Several years ago, my partner, Alexandra, was moving in with a new roommate. As they were discussing the particulars of their new apartment, the friend said: "I should just warn you that I get a little carried away getting ready for Pesach," and she began going into a fair amount of detail about her preparations. To which Alexandra replied: "It's July 1st!"

I'd like to take this opportunity to look at a few of my favorite Talmudic texts on the subject of preparing for Pesach. I love looking at these texts during the month when we move from the silliness of Purim to the intensity of Pesach, because as we'll see, they're sterling examples of Talmudic humor. (Supposedly, some great rabbi was once asked whether there is humor in the Talmud. He replied: Yes, when it says that scholars create peace in the world.) Of course, much like with emails, sarcasm or humor in the Talmud can be hard to identify, but in these particular cases I think there's a very good case to be made that that is what's going on.

Let's jump right in. The first chapter of tractate Pesachim lays out the rules of searching for chametz prior to Pesach. This search is take place on the night of the 14th of Nissan, which is to say the night before the seder. Take a look at Source #1 on your sheets.

"(1) On the evening of the fourteenth [of Nissan] we check for *chametz* by candlelight. Any place where we do not bring *chametz* does not require checking. ...

(2) We do not worry that perhaps a weasel dragged [*chametz*] from house to house, or from place to place. For if so, how about from courtyard to courtyard, and from city to city — there would be no end to the matter!

(3) ... And what one leaves over, one must put in a concealed place, in order that checking after it shall not be necessary."

Right up front, the Mishnah seems to know it's that it's very easy to get carried away, and practically the first thing they tell us is that there are limits. To be precise, the scenario that they're describing is that we've already conducted our search for chametz, and we're worried - or rather, not supposed to worry - about the hypothetical possibility of a weasel, a *chuldah*, carrying chametz back into the areas that we've already searched, necessitating a new search. And the mishnah tells us, we don't worry about this!

The Gemara then proceeds to spend the next ten or so pages worrying about exactly this. I can't begin to do justice to the whole chapter, but I want to look at two particularly great parts which, I think, may be intended to be humorous looks at just what "There is no end to the matter" means.

The Gemara (source #2) starts by pointing out a bit of a tension between the second and third clauses of the Mishnah. If, according to Mishna #2, we're not supposed to worry about weasels re-hiding the chametz that we've gathered, then what's the point of Mishna #3, which tells us that we need to safeguard the chametz that we've gathered up (that one last bagel that we're planning to eat for breakfast on the morning of the 14th) so we don't need a new search? It sounds an awful lot like we're worrying about a rodent re-hiding it! The early 4th century sage Abaye suggests an intriguing explanation: "This is not a problem; the latter ruling is referring to the fourteenth, whereas the former ruling is referring to the thirteenth. On the thirteenth, when bread is still found in every house, the weasel does not hide chametz. However, on the fourteenth, when bread is not found in any of the houses, the weasel does hide chametz." There's a whole lot going on here, but Abaye's resolution of the seeming contradiction relies on some sort of assumption that the weasel knows what day of the month it is, and alters its behavior accordingly.

And now here comes the punchline: Rava - who was Abaye's contemporary and, let's say, his frenemy - chimes in to point out the absurdity of Abaye's position: "V'chi chuldah nevi'ah hi? Is a weasel a prophet?" Get it? This is one of those jokes that makes a lot more sense if you really know Nevi'im well - which I definitely don't. As you can see from Source #3 on the sheet, there is a story in II Kings in which a mysterious scroll is found, and the various officials bring it for verification to a little-known character named... Chuldah haNeviah, Chuldah the prophetess! So the answer to Rava's question is.... groan... yes. (Announcement: Next year's Great Durham Pun Championship will be held not at Motorco but in the new Beth El sanctuary.)

As you can read, Rava's solution to the seeming contradiction is a lot more sensible: he says, roughly, that we have to safeguard the bagel (as per Mishna #3) to prevent a weasel from snatching it from under our eyes (in which case a new search would be required), but we don't have to stay up at night worrying about a hypothetical weasel that we can't see. But I think what's really amazing here is the way that he's used humor - a howler of a pun - to refute Abaye and make his point. (I like this guy already.)

About a page later (source #4 on the sheet), Rava returns with another discussion that beautifully probes the limits of the rules. The Gemara has largely established that if you actually see a mouse carrying chametz into a room or house that you've already searched, you need to perform a new search. This one is a real treat, so I want to go through it in all its detail.

"Rava asked: What if one saw a mouse enter with a loaf in its mouth, and he saw a mouse leave with a loaf in its mouth? Do we say that the mouse that entered is the same mouse that left [and there is no more leaven left in the house]? Or perhaps it is a different mouse [and there could still be leaven]! And if you say that the mouse that entered was the one that left, what if a white mouse entered with a loaf in its mouth, and

a black mouse left with a loaf in its mouth? This is certainly a different mouse [and hence different bread]. But perhaps the black mouse took the loaf from the white mouse! And if you say that mice do not take from each other, what if a mouse entered with a loaf in its mouth, and a weasel left with a loaf in its mouth? The weasel certainly took it! Or perhaps it is a different loaf, for if it is so, that the weasel took the loaf from the mouse, the mouse itself would also be found in the weasel's mouth! And if so, what if a mouse entered with a loaf in its mouth, and a weasel left with a loaf and a mouse in its mouth? This is certainly the same mouse and loaf. But perhaps not! If it is so, that this is the same mouse, the loaf would have been found in the mouse's mouth rather than in the weasel's mouth. Or perhaps the loaf of bread fell from the mouse's mouth due to its fear and the weasel took it! *Teiku.*"

That last word, *teiku*, which I left untranslated, is important: literally it means "let it stand," the Gemara's word for "enough already." In yeshivish, they joke that it stands for "Tishbi yetaretz kushyot ube'ayot" - Elijah will resolve all remaining questions and difficulties. So when you see him at your seder on Friday night, you can ask him what the answer is.

It's hard to know for sure what's going on in this sugya, this passage. Is it really intended seriously? Is it a joke? Somewhere in between? It's hard to know for sure, but I think by the end, this text is meant to be at the very least intellectually playful, if not a full-out satire. One of the tipoffs for me is the move of reintroducing the weasel to the discussion (after a bunch of discussion of mice), which, in light of the chuldah haneviah comment a page earlier, brings us right back into the realm of fun. And don't forget, all of this got started with the Mishnah's statement that we don't need to worry about hypothetical weasels. So once we're back in weasel-land, Rava may be saying, this is exactly what the Mishnah means that there's no end to the matter! And if so, we can have a bit of fun with it.

Fundamentally, I think these texts are a beautiful example of Chazal's ability to step back and laugh a bit at themselves, without for a moment detracting from the seriousness of their commitment to their sacred project. Rava is definitely not attacking the whole framework of worrying about rodents carrying chametz; don't forget his serious answer in source #2, where he says that we have to safeguard against the weasel stealing our bagel breakfast! And while some of the modern parodies of rabbinic reasoning that one finds definitely have a bit of a hostile tone, Rava's jokes here are done in a spirit of love, both for the legal system and for the community of people who build it.

I definitely find myself thinking of Rava when I'm in the middle of my Pesach prep. Obviously the parameters are different - if I find weasels running around my apartment, the chametz they're carrying probably isn't going to be the first thing on my mind. But sometimes, as I'm scrubbing the inside of the oven and pouring boiling water everywhere, including every now and then on my feet, I find it's useful to be able to step

back and laugh a little bit at what I'm doing. Do I really think that pouring boiling water on the counters is actually going to zap some microscopic particle of chametz that might otherwise get in my food? Nope. But I find that this experience of putting in the work, in these weird and quirky ways that we've arrived at over centuries of discussion and argument and occasional laughter, has a way of helping us to prepare ourselves for the real work of celebrating our liberation and continuing to strive for liberation in our time. Shabbat shalom and chag sameach.