

The Cost of Religion

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I love Pesach with all its laws and customs and even the preparation of cleaning out rooms, purging the kitchen, unpacking the special crockery, and pots and pans. But one thing really upsets me, and that is the cost!

My issue is that well over half the Jewish people are of very modest means and struggle to make ends meet. Increasingly, Judaism is becoming the preserve of the upwardly mobile and rich. To be Jewish and observant is getting more difficult because the cost of almost everything from food to synagogue membership to Jewish education is prohibitive. But specifically, to observe Pesach nowadays is a seriously expensive matter.

Let me start with the food. I understand that any product that appeals to a small sliver of the population is going to cost more than one that has mass-market appeal. Kosher food is indeed likely in general to be more expensive than non-kosher food. You have to include the cost of all the men and women employed working in stores, hotels, as caterers, slaughterers, butchers, supervisors, and contractors. In a way this is a sort of communal tax because providing employment, particularly for those with no qualifications to work anywhere else, which can be regarded as a mitzvah and communal obligation. But it is unfair that the burden of this should be shouldered equally by rich and poor. Reminds me of how in Medieval Europe rabbis tended to side with the rich and vote in favor of a poll tax instead of graduated income!

The Charedi world, known for its massive poverty and hundreds of thousands of men who study and whose wives earn meager wages, responds magnificently by subsidizing schooling, providing food banks, child support, emotional as well as financial aid, and altogether takes care of its own. Oh yes, and state subsidies, food stamps, and welfare help too. But for the rest, those who do not live in supportive ghettos there are real problems.

I was brought up to go to the supermarket and check ingredients, and if there was nothing un-kosher you could buy it. Later on lists of government-approved additives needed checking because often they included questionable stuff and were just shown as numbers so you might need a list of them. In those days the quantities mattered. So if the amount of a doubtful additive was minute, or if the question was whether the machinery had at one stage been used for something else, or if in the same factory non-kosher foods were present, it could still pass muster. This way you often had a cheaper option to pricier kosher supplies.

It is true that Pesach is a special case. All other forbidden food throughout the year is forbidden only above a minimum amount. But on Pesach any Chametz, however minute, is not allowed. Nevertheless, there comes a point when the law is extended to such a degree that it becomes laughable. Like worrying about microscopic creatures in the air or water. Refinements that were once considered the realm of the mystics have become the minimum. Eating one's

matzah into a paper bag for fear some might drop onto the floor is about as extreme as you could possibly wish for. If anything indicates a severe case of religious neurosis, this must be it. But nowadays some nutcases will tell you it's a halachic necessity. Totally non-absorbent materials, from stainless steel to granite countertops, are said to absorb forbidden matter. If so, you'd need a nuclear powered microscope to discover it!

The Talmud was satisfied with just looking for Chametz in places it was likely to have gone or be found. Now you have to fumigate every corner of your house from top to bottom for fear a spider might have taken a piece of bread into its web for safekeeping. The result is that cleaning for Pesach is so ridiculously extreme it gives Jewish women nightmares and nervous breakdowns. Unless, of course, once again, you are rich enough to pay others to do it for you while you relax reading "Hello". Terror of infringing the most extreme of strictnesses has made cleaning and purging a massive burden. If a hot water urn is never used for anything but hot water, what forbidden material could ever get inside that would require one to kasher it for Passover?

People are no longer willing to buy food where the possibility that a minute drop or a drop of a drop might could have accidentally found its way into one out of a whole batch of thousands that may have accidentally absorbed a non-kosher smell. Or a drop of non-kosher lubricator from the machinery might have dropped onto one of the bottles of water, or aluminum foil, plastics, or paper towels. So to cover against all this, everything has to be supervised, and approved, and priced up.

Jewish laws states that you need to consume at least an olive's worth of non-kosher food before you transgress. Or only worry about bugs you can see with the naked eye. Where non-kosher ingredients get mixed in or milk and meat get mixed up, if it's a dry solid, a majority makes it permissible, and if it's liquid, one sixtieth. But because we have raised the bar so high, most God-fearing Jews no longer want to take advantage of these let-outs for fear of losing their place in the World to Come.

Supervision itself is too often a sham. There are cases where a supervisory body has declared that for Pesach there has to be different machinery and extra supervision that explained the price difference, when in fact there was no such thing. They simply stuck on to the usual production a different label. Sadly, scams are widespread in the kosher business. Requiring kosher for Pesach water, cola, orange juice, sugar, pepper, coffee, and tea (not to mention detergents and chemicals) only makes sense if there's a little gnome standing over the process spraying real Chametz into it all year round and you have to pay him to stay away over Pesach.

I do not want to sound ungrateful for all those pious honest supervisors who trek around the most inhospitable of places to bring kosher food to my table. But I do strongly object to the assumption that without supervision you automatically cannot have it. In other words, you have to pay more to be a practicing Jew.

If people are so well off that they can afford a Pesach cruise for the family

or a milky and a meaty oven or fridge and two others specially for Pesach, then why not charge them to support religious life? But if you are struggling to support and feed your family, it cannot make sense, in the name of Heaven, to pay \$1000 for a ten-day supply of food when it normally costs you \$250. But that is the proportion of added costs buying supervised products for Pesach will cost you.

Sure, any basket of foods in New York will cost nearly twice as much as in Mississippi. Rent will cost many times more. But you can make choices. That's what rabbis ought to be telling us; they need to reassure their poorer congregants that they do not have to bankrupt themselves for legal refinements of refinements of refinements and stop scaring those who do not know better and are in fear for their spiritual welfare.

The Sephardi Rabbinat in Israel is very good at that. They have always had to deal with a much poorer but pious clientele. So they look for ways to make being Jewish cheaper and easier for the masses. It is worthwhile visiting [Rabbi Yitzchak Abadi's website](#) for an alternative authoritative Orthodox [list of approved products and ingredients](#) and answers to Passover questions, for both Sephardim and Ashkenazim. I wish more Ashkenazi rabbis were so accommodating. And I wish more laypeople knew more about the law themselves so that they could make informed decisions and realize why half the specially marked Kosher Le Pesach products do not need to be!

I have no gripe at all with anyone who wishes to and can afford to be as strict as he or she wants. But for the millions who struggle, we must find ways of making Pesach more affordable and doable. The spiritual beauty and inspiration of Pesach, the instructions of the Torah to be sensitive to the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged, must not be swamped by petty and minute restrictions. If kosher food is big business, religion should not be.

Enjoy the Festival.