

# GM

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

No, not General Motors, but seeds that are Genetically Modified.

Pesach is a time when we “moderns” focus on grains more than at any other time of the year. Shavuot may be the main summer harvest festival, but very few of us nowadays are involved in commercial agriculture. (Even in Israel, the kibbutz dream of Jews returning to a nostalgic past of cultivating the fruit of the earth and getting their hands dirty with mother soil instead of bank notes, is itself a thing of the past, as a mass ideological movement.) Sukot is more concerned with fruits and temporary living.

We no longer bring the Omer sheaf of barley in the Temple. But on Pesach, when the Torah forbids us from eating grains except in matzah form, we do suddenly have to remember what a grain actually is. How many of us city dwellers can tell the difference between wheat, spelt, barley, oats and rye? Most of the Third World poor who toil to produce food for their starving families can.

Pesach gets us to think of produce in other ways too. The Ashkenazi world highlights absurdity by refusing to eat “kitniyot”, commonly called pulses or legumes claiming there is a definitive comparison between them and grain. There’s no logic to it. Forget the myths of wet European climates fooling rabbis into thinking that peas that sprout might be grains. It is like that other more modern anomaly of prohibiting gebrocks (baked matzah in liquid)—simply a fantasy of strictness that sends shivers of pietistic delight down the spines of those who want to feel better for being more kosher than kosher, more demanding than the Almighty (and you can see what the Talmud thinks about that at Yerushalmi Nedarim 29a).

The prohibition of kitniyot applies to maize, rice, peas, lentils, beans, peanuts, mustard, sesame seeds, and poppy seeds. (Lucky Sefardim, their rabbis were much more realistic.) But wait, there’s more (as American TV salespeople say), some improbably add coffee beans, chestnuts, alfalfa sprouts, and even marijuana (sorry, kids). And others want to ban quinoa, only because it is new to them and anything they haven’t come across before must be bad news!

And this leads me to GM. European lefties, desperate for moral causes to adopt, have successfully banned GM crops from Europe. This, despite the scientific evidence that they increase yields, reduce the need for pesticides, enable poor farmers to make a living, and help feed the poor. This is why GM crops are rapidly coming to dominate in Argentina, Brazil, India, and China to name only the biggest markets. But the European loonies who gratuitously destroy experimental GM crops spread unfounded scare stories about killing butterflies, causing genetic deformity, and sterilizing the planet. And they think nothing of fiddling statistics and experiments to further their cause, rather similar to those who discredit the campaign to

stop global warming by telling lies.

Why ? Because in true Marxist (and Fascist) ideological tradition, the end justifies the means. According to them you may overrule any moral or civil law if it achieves the goals they want. Incidentally in Jewish morality the only time you can deceive is if you are trying to protect someone's hurt feelings. This 'Ends justifies the Means' approach underlies all left-wing political idealism and it explains the increasing rise of anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism. (I am not for one moment suggesting that all criticism of Israel is necessarily anti-Semitic or anti-Israeli, but then neither am I saying it never is.) There is a lot in Israel to criticize, on all both sides of the spectrum. But when it is a matter of ideological warfare in which political victory is all that matters not honesty or truth, then as with GM crops, it is honesty that is the loser and in the end humanity.

Idealism is a wonderful and necessary thing, and there is not enough of it. But it is also dangerous. All fanaticism is dangerous—I don't care which end of the spectrum or which religion it comes from. The only antidote is openness, honesty, and debate. But if this is being prevented by fanatics who will simply not allow civilized discussion, then what are we who value freedom of thought do, capitulate?

Passover celebrates freedom, and that includes freedom of expression and freedom of debate. We have strange customs and laws to encourage questions and discussion. We are reminded that there are different ways of looking at life and of living life. Variety is the glory of humanity. Suppression of ideas leads to oppression of humans and a return to slavery. If you try to prevent any group from defending itself, like Pharaoh did, you will end up enslaving everyone.