

# FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER CONSERVATIVE YESHIVA

## TORAH SPARKS

### Parshat Vayakhel—Parashat Shekalim

March 9, 2024 | 29 Adar I 5784

**Torah:** Exodus 35:1–38:20 **Triennial:** Exodus 35:1–36:19

**Maftir:** Exodus 30:11–16 **Haftarah:** II Kings 12:1–17

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**We believe that in times of great strife, words of Torah can provide stability and comfort in our lives.**

We know that you join us in praying for the safety of our soldiers and citizens, and that together we mourn the terrible losses already suffered.

**We stand together for a strong and secure Israel.**

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### They Also Serve

**Bex Stern-Rosenblatt**

*Parashah*

At the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, at the same spot where Moses would speak with God in the form of the pillar of cloud, the same spot where the Israelites assemble to meet God, the same place where Aaron and his sons offer sacrifices, a group of women do... something.

The word we encounter to describe these women is *haTZoVAot*, the root of which is צבא. Most of the times that this word appears in the Tanakh, it describes military might. As a verb, it usually means to go into battle or to fight. As a noun, it usually describes an army or military

service. It sometimes appears to describe those surrounding God, often translated as God's Host or God's Army. And God is often called the Lord of Hosts. Sometimes, it appears to have the connotation of everything included within or all the contents of a certain group.

The word appears in a few other places with reference to the Tent of Meeting. We learn in the Book of Numbers that the Gershonites and the Levites also do צבא by working in the Tent of Meeting. In these places, it seems unlikely that צבא necessarily has military connotations. After all, the Gershonites were the porters of the Tent and the Levites were the guards of the Tent. Neither job necessarily means that these groups acted as an army.

The difficulty in our parashah is that we do not have additional insight into what these women were doing as their צבא. We know that this particular group of women donated their mirrors to be made into implements for the Tent of Meeting. We also know that, hundreds of years later, another group of women is described similarly. In the Book of Samuel, during the Hannah story, the High Priest, Eli's, sons lie with "the women who were צבא-ing at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting," which is a serious offense. In a few passages in the Talmud, this act will be reinterpreted, saying that Eli's sons did not actually have sex with the women, rather they just caused a delay in the women's ability to lie with their husbands and thus conceive.

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Similarly, Midrash Tanchuma will interpret the word צבא as reference to these women's productive ability. These are the women, it says, who convinced their husbands to lay with them in Egypt despite all the hardship, thus producing the great numbers of us who would leave Egypt.

This hint of sexual impropriety at the entrance of Tent of Meeting runs throughout the Tanakh. We find it also in the incident of Baal Peor, with the story of Zimri and Cozbi killed for their sexual impropriety at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

So what is the צבא of these women? Are they an army? Are they the mothers and future mothers of Israel? Are the Israelites so sexually charged that the women need to give up their mirrors to prevent sexual impropriety? We do not and cannot know. However, whatever they will become in the rest of the Tanakh, the service of these women, in this liminal moment, is to give. They become God's host through their donation, through their service.

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## Creating Sacred Space in ourselves

**Rabbi Daniel Raphael Silverstein**

*Insights from Hassidut*

*Rabbi Daniel Silverstein teaches Hassidut at the CY and directs Applied Jewish Spirituality ([www.appliedjewishspirituality.org](http://www.appliedjewishspirituality.org)). In these weekly videos, he shares Hassidic insights on the parashah or calendar.*

Click below to watch the [video](#):



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## Getting Rid of Hametz: It's All in Your Heart

**Rabbi Joshua Kulp**

*Halakhic Essays on Pesah*

On erev Pesah, having completed bedikat hametz, I generally turn the lights back on, pick up my Haggadah (available [here](#)) and recite some Aramaic words that I understand but I'm not sure anyone else does. I'm imagining it sounds a little like Kaddish to them, and they know that somehow what I'm doing helps us in some way get rid of the hametz. How so? Not clear.

The good news for my family is that what I assume is unclear to them was unclear to some of the greatest Talmudists history has ever known. To understand why this is so, we need to go back a bit and look at how the laws of "bitul"--commonly referred to in English as "nullification"--developed. As we shall see, bitul was a late bloomer.

The Mishnah and Tosefta, the earliest texts to spell out how hametz is removed or destroyed from one's house, deal extensively with bedikat hametz (searching the house for hametz) and biur hametz (destroying hametz). The Tosefta never mentions bittul and the Mishnah mentions it only once ([Mishnah Pesachim 3:7](#)). A person who is traveling to either circumcise his son, offer the pesah sacrifice or attend his own betrothal feast and remembers that he has hametz at home and cannot get back in time to destroy it without missing the event he is traveling to may continue on his way, but he should "nullify it in his heart." At this stage, nullification is sort of a last ditch move that seems to work only if he cannot actually destroy the hametz himself.

Both Talmudim begin to expand on this. Rav, in the [Yerushalmi](#) offers a recitation that expresses one's desire to nullify the hametz and on [Bavli 6b](#) turns this into a standard practice--everyone who does bedikah must also do bittul. On [Bavli 8a](#) we learn that if there is hametz deep in a hole that cannot be reached, one should nullify it. On [31b](#) referring to hametz covered by an avalanche, R. Hisda says it should be nullified. What is common to all of these cases is that nullification helps in some way to remove hametz that cannot be physically removed--either it was not found or it cannot be reached. Clearly, the amoraim, the early Talmudic sages still prefer physical destruction of hametz, either by burning or some other method.

But one comment by the anonymous editors of the Talmud on [Bavli 4b](#) threatens to turn this all on its head--bittul is from the Torah and bedikah (and perhaps biur) is only of rabbinic origin. The context of this statement is not crucial. What is crucial is the problems this causes for Talmudic commentators. If mental nullification is sufficient to fulfill the biblical command to remove hametz from one's home, then why do we bother with bedikah and biur? And even more puzzling to them--how does this process of bittul work? What exactly are we doing when we make this recitation?

The [Tosafot](#) on 2a explain that the concern is that if one only does bittul and does not physically remove the hametz from one's home, one might find hametz during Pesah and eat it. This is of course prohibited. The Tosafot here seem to have hit upon what might be the original reason why the Torah prohibits one to even possess hametz during Pesah--the fear is that possession might lead to eating. Thus, bittul is sufficient from a purely legal perspective--it is the fulfillment of the biblical commandment to "remove" hametz. But since this form of

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removal does not distance the threat of eating hametz on Pesah, the rabbis instituted that it must be physically removed. Other medieval authorities added that if one could “get away” with just bittul, there is a concern that one might say the formula without really meaning it. Bittul without inner conviction does not work, and therefore it would turn out that the person had transgressed the biblical commandment.

The bigger dispute among rishonim is how bittul works. What does it even mean to “nullify” hametz? What are we thinking and saying in this process? The **Tosafot** on 4b explain that “bittul” is like declaring something ownerless. The rabbis rule in many places that one does not transgress by seeing hametz that belongs to others, and therefore if one declares hametz ownerless, he is not transgressing the biblical commandment. The Tosafot, or those who followed in their footsteps, enshrined this in the bittul formulation, where to this day we say, “let it be ownerless (הפקר) like the dust of the earth.”

The Ramban goes to town against the Tosafot, as he usually does to his opponents, and cites multiple problems with their understanding of bittul. Perhaps the strongest one is if bittul is a form of making something ownerless, hefker, then why is it called bittul? The Ramban therefore offers his own understanding of bittul. The best phrase he uses to explain how this works is as follows:

One who performs only verbal nullification has fulfilled his duty, for this declaration removes it from being considered hametz, since the person is stating that he wishes to treat it as prohibited, and he does not want it to exist, and he wants to view it as dust that cannot be eaten.

The Ramban’s formulation seems to me to best encapsulate the way this declaration works. The formulation is recited twice, once at night and once in the morning. It immediately follows the two main ritual acts we do to rid our homes of hametz—bedikah at night and biur (usually done through burning) in the morning. While the declaration did not originate as an act demonstrating kavanah, intent, it seems to function that way. The person declares that their intent was to find and destroy all the hametz that was in their possession, and if they have failed, they are declaring that they have no desire to be in possession of any unfound hametz. And while in his gloss on the **Shulkhan Arukh**, the Rema rules that the person must understand what they are saying, the **Mishnah Berurah** chimes in that as long as the reciter has a general understanding, they have fulfilled their duty.

So to return to my own practice, after I read the statement in Aramaic, I read it again in English, to make sure that my family understands what we are doing. Now I would love to then go into a shiur with them about the Tosafot’s dispute with the Ramban, but as you might imagine, there are other things to be done around the house the night before Pesah.