

Learnings From Leaven

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Did you know, “about 40 to 50 percent of your day is made up of habits? But you don’t recognize them because they’re unconscious.”

Michael Phelps started training at the age of 7, but his coach knew habits—not skills alone—would be the driver of his success. So, Phelps’s coach built a series of activities before every race designed to give him a sense of building victory. On the day of the race, he gets out of bed, eats certain things, does specific stretches and exercises, he thinks about certain things. By the time the race arrives, Phelps is already more than halfway through his unconscious habits and the pattern he lives by on a daily basis. That way, the race itself—and winning the race—is just another step in Phelps’s laundry list of things to do. He’s made winning a habit.

Wow – the mind is an amazing thing! But how do we transfer that to other parts of our lives?

Another author who’s also a teacher said this: “Teaching students how to convey their learning from one context to another is the difference between educating someone and simply training them to perform a particular task over and over again.”

This ability to extend what has been learned in one context to new contexts is called transfer. But this ability to transfer is not necessarily automatic. Rather, we need to teach it.

Leaven as an Indicator

Our food and the way we eat can become a habit. I’m in the habit of having something sweet after dinner. My night doesn’t seem complete if I don’t end it on a sweet taste. It seems like something is missing in my mornings if I don’t have a cup of tea – probably two. I use chocolate as a reward for doing nasty jobs.

Food can be a habit, a reward, even a punishment in some cases. During the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, food is a symbol and an indicator of our heart. This week leaven represents

sin, and we can learn a lot about our heart by watching how we behave toward Yehovah’s command about leaven.

How we obey Yehovah with leaven is how we obey Yehovah.

This is a bold statement, but I’m going to show you how your obedience with something as simple as leaven is a microcosm of your mindset in the rest of your life.

As in the examples above, we need to train ourselves to transfer what we learn in giving up leaven to other contexts and situations in our lives. We need to form habits that keep us from sin and help us throw out sin when we find it, just like we throw out and avoid leaven during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Over the past couple of years I’ve kept a list called “Lessons from Leaven.” It’s probably not quite as rigorous as Michael Phelps’ list of activities, but for the race I’m running, it has provided me a way to use this week as a training ground for the rest of my life. I will share eight of them here.

As you review these, I encourage you to reflect on your own experience of giving up leaven and write down what you’ve learned, and how that might shed light on other areas of your life.

Eight Things I’ve Learned From Leavened and Unleavened Bread

1. Get Rid of Sin Like You Get Rid of Leaven

Let’s talk about procrastination. I used to have Passover on my calendar, and I planned to throw out all my leaven before sunset on the night Passover began.

But that’s not what happened. Typically on the night of Passover, I was working during the day, home for a second and then left to get to a seder, or I might go straight from work to the seder. When I got home from the seder, I still had all this leaven in my house.

I need to plan further ahead. Passover is on the calendar, it doesn't sneak up on us. Why did I let that happen? What if I did that with sin? Maybe I do. Do I wait until the very last minute to stop sinning? Right before things are about to get really bad? Or take things as far as I can, stopping just barely before I sin? Maybe I need to watch for that in the rest of my life.

Now, as Passover approaches, I set aside all the things that have leaven in them about two weeks ahead. I start eating them, using them in meals and recipes, I bring them to potlucks. I make my shopping list, careful not to buy any more leaven than I can eat before Passover. I set aside an actual time on the calendar when I'm going to clean out all the leaven in my house – my floors, my toaster, underneath the tables, my pantry shelves. There's a lot to be done.

It takes a bit of planning ahead, changing my ways, choosing differently. And so does righteousness. It's not enough to intend to live righteously, we have to plan ahead for it. This is our first lesson from leaven. Don't procrastinate getting rid of sin.

Related to procrastination is my reluctance to get rid of leaven. I find that I really don't want to throw anything out. I'm tempted to either give it to someone else temporarily, or store it somewhere else outside my home (maybe at my office) then take it back afterward, when the week is done.

Is that what we do with sin? No, let's not do this with our leaven either. It treats the issue lightly and puts a wrong example in our minds. Get rid of sin like you get rid of leaven. Treat leaven as you would sin, so that you can get in the habit of obeying Yehovah quickly.

2. How Sin Tempts Us

I'm the type that wants to do things the most efficient and cost effective way. Getting rid of leaven really challenges this goal. With all the planning ahead I do, I still end up needing to toss some food in the garbage. That offends my sense of efficiency and thriftiness. I'll think, "I'm just going to have to buy another box of baking soda next week." I find myself trying to think of a way not to throw something out.

My reaction to throwing out leaven helped me understand just how strong my sense of efficiency and thriftiness is. Do I do this with sin? I realized I may compromise on righteousness because of those tendencies. How often have I not done what the Holy Spirit was pointing me to, because I was in a hurry or it was out of my way, or it might have cost me a little extra. Leaven teaches me that I need to keep those tendencies in check and obey despite them.

Here's another way sin tempts us. In our world of food mania, we're used to food entertaining us. Food with fancy frostings, sauces, toppings, gravies, dressings, even food with our own picture on it. We're used to food looking good, tasting good, smelling good and filling us up.

And then there's matzah.

So we take our matzah and we put honey on it, olive oil on it, chocolate on it, salt, butter, peanut butter – anything to make it more enjoyable.

Things with pizzazz are more appealing to us. We can easily overshadow or distract from the real thing if we require that our righteousness always looks good, and entertains us. Are we willing to eat just the matzah by itself because we're commanded to? Are we willing to do the right thing when it's boring, when no one will be impressed, maybe no one will even notice it? Maybe it won't be fun or even comfortable. We might be tempted to dress it up or spice it up. But are we willing to just do the plain and simple righteous act for the sake of obedience? The matzah brings this question to mind.

Even our own rules can tempt us to compromise Yehovah's instructions.

If you try to stay away from gluten, matzah is a problem. There are gluten-free options, but you'll have to go out of your way and spend more to get it. The commandment is to eat matzah for seven days. Are we willing to put our own rules aside for the sake of obedience?

It's the same with sin. Sometimes our own habits and preferences have to be abandoned in order to keep Yehovah's commandments. We have to

separate out what's ours and what's his, and make sure we're not forfeiting or compromising his for our own rules or preferences.

This is what Yeshua told us in Mark 7:8-13:

“You depart from God’s command and hold onto human tradition. Indeed,’ he said to them, ‘you have made a fine art of departing from God’s command in order to keep your tradition! For Moshe said, “Honor your father and your mother,” and “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.” But you say, “If someone says to his father or mother, ‘I have promised as a korban’ (a gift to God) ‘what I might have used to help you,’” then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus, with your tradition which you had handed down to you, you nullify the Word of God! And you do other things like this.””

Leaven also teaches us that when it comes to temptation, we can actually be proactive.

Last year my birthday fell during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. People know one of my favorite foods is Chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. I got three of them! Talk about a temptation. One came just before the Feast started, so I ate as much of that as I could. The others had to wait. It was torture.

This is how sin is. It tempts us at inopportune times. That's why it's called temptation – because it's tempting.

As soon as I saw the cake box, I knew I could really mess up my unleavened week. I could blow the whole unleavened week on that cake. I hoped that it wasn't what I thought it was in that box. But before I even opened it, I had to get a hold of myself, admit how weak I was when it came to chocolate cake, and resolve to remain strong – don't even smell it.

It's the same with sin. Know your weaknesses and be proactive. Resolve to stay strong as soon as you see the temptation coming. Know yourself and your weaknesses, so that you won't even be tempted to be tempted.

Remember 1 Corinthians 10:13:

“God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the

temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”

3. How Sin Entangles Us

Getting rid of leaven has also taught me how sin can entangles us. Here are some examples.

Baking Soda. That little orange Arm & Hammer box that sits in the corner of your fridge. It's like a permanent fixture in your fridge or your cupboard. Some people use it in the bathroom for cleaning or brushing their teeth.

On the day or two ahead of Passover, you look through all your food for items with leaven or leavening agents in them. You get to the day of Unleavened Bread and realize you forgot about your box of baking soda – the ingredient that causes things to rise, just like yeast.

It's so common and so much a fixture in our kitchen, that we don't even see it anymore, even when we're looking for it.

This is how sin is. Sometimes we've lived with it for so long, we can't see it anymore. It's just the way things are. How many times has the Holy Spirit showed us something in our lives that we've been doing for a long time, maybe years, without realizing it was sin. That's what this time is about. Listen and watch.

Here's another example of how sin can entangle us: Ezekiel Bread. Ezekiel Bread is made from the recipe in Ezekiel 4:9. It's very nutritious, but it's about \$6 a loaf at my grocery store.

One year, the Feast of Unleavened Bread was getting closer and closer, and I had this whole loaf of Ezekiel Bread that I needed to use up. Pretty soon there was just one day to go. It's so expensive, I couldn't bear to throw it out, so I started carrying this loaf of bread in my car, looking for someone that might want it.

Well, not only is Ezekiel Bread expensive, but it doesn't taste very good. It's dense and sort of tasteless, and no one knows what it is. So I couldn't find anyone who wanted it. Then came the night of Passover and it was still in my car! And, of course, there's no one at Passover to give it to. They've all

gotten rid of their leaven. So I threw it in the garbage at our Passover Seder! That's leaven at Passover. That's not good. .

But this is where my head and heart were – because it was so expensive and had never even been opened, I just could hardly bear to throw it out.

Do I do this with sin? Are there things I'm so invested in, that cost me so much, that even though they're wrong, I'm still holding on to them? Let the de-leavening process shine a light on your tendencies. What stops you from throwing things out?

Here's another one: Sin hides in anonymous packages. Sometimes it isn't marked "sin" in the ingredients. Sometimes it even has a different label on it.

In our cupboard, we have these nice tin canisters with tight lids on them. I think originally when we bought them there were nuts in them, but they're so handy, now we use them for other things. One year, I'd already separated out all my leavened foods that I wanted to eat up before the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was my last night to throw things out, and I decided to look in this canister – it was crackers! These crackers had leaven. There they were in this innocent looking canister. I just about completely overlooked them.

Open the lid and look inside. What's really in that nice looking package? Maybe it's been there a long time and you've forgotten about it. Maybe it looks innocent on the outside. Open the lid and examine it.

4. We are Accountable for Our Own Sin & Righteousness

This is another thing I've learned while trying to avoid leaven.

Remember the chocolate cakes I was given during the Feast of Unleavened Bread? I was completely caught off guard, because the people that gave them to me knew I wasn't eating anything with yeast that week. This taught me two things about sin:

A. Knowledge of sin and righteousness alone isn't the same as actively avoiding sin and pursuing

righteousness. Even though these people logically knew about the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because they weren't practicing it themselves they hadn't thought through the implications of it. The knowledge of sin is not enough; we have to allow that knowledge to change our actions in order to actually serve the Lord and be in obedience to Him.

B. Ultimately others are not responsible for keeping our righteousness, even if they are supportive of it. We alone are accountable for our own righteousness. Remember what Adam said in the garden: "The woman you gave to be with me — she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." However, even though Eve knew eating the fruit was wrong and gave it to Adam anyway, Adam was held accountable for eating the fruit.

We learn these same lessons when we stop eating leaven for a week. Sin and righteousness are up to us, they are within our control and no one else can make us sin.

In addition, in the example of my birthday, I should have anticipated that I might encounter a cake during that week. I could have thought ahead and been ready for it. I could've even made my own flourless/yeastless cake that I could share, so that I wouldn't be so tempted to eat any others.

That showed me that we can anticipate situations or environments where we're going to be exposed to sin, and we can rearrange, plan ahead for something else, possibly change the scenario somehow. Keeping the leaven out requires we do this sometimes. It may require we bring our own food to places where leavened foods will be served. It may mean eating before you go to a certain place.

We can do the same thing with sin when we think ahead to the situations we're entering. When you know something not edifying is likely to happen, bring something different to the situation. Determine ahead of time that you're not going to engage in a certain conversation, for instance. This is how we keep ourselves holy and avoid sin. Anticipating and being prepared to be in the world, but not of it. We are accountable for our sin.

Related to anticipation is preparation. We know at some point during the week, you will either tell people you aren't eating bread, or you'll have to decline something someone offers you. The typical reaction is, "Why not?"

Prepare to take advantage of this question. This is a great opportunity to tell them what you're doing and why. Prepare an explanation that's appropriate for the various people in your life – co-workers, family, friends, Christians, non-Christians. What can you say that they would understand? Keep it simple and not a sermon, such as, "It's a Bible thing, we're instructed to fast from eating anything with yeast in it for a week, as a reminder that we're to avoid sin."

Expect questions and be ready to answer with grace, as Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 3:15:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."

This is part of being accountable.

Learnings from Unleavened Bread

We've reviewed what we can learn from leaven about sin. Let's now consider what we learn about righteousness from eating matzah.

Here's the first thing we see:

1. Righteousness is a Narrow Road

How many people do you know who are not eating leaven this week and instead eating matzah every day? It's a pretty small group compared to the mainstream. You thought being a Christian was going against the grain? Following the Torah is an even narrower path.

Matthew 7:13-14

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Matzah is life! It represents Yeshua's life – pierced and striped for our sin. He became sin for us, so

that we could have life. But not everyone will understand and partake in the matzah.

Isaiah 35:8-9:

*"And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,"*

Rejoice that the Holy Spirit has brought you to this "Way of Holiness," and that Yehovah is sharing himself deeply with you. And support others who are Torah observant. These are the people that are walking on this Way of Holiness with you, those that understand and appreciate your journey. There may not be very many followers in your area. Cherish those people and support them on the narrow road.

2. Our Righteous Acts Can Shed Light on Sin

As we said earlier, when you tell people what you're doing, you will get all kinds of reactions. Some people think you're crazy. Some people don't really care. Some people seem to be curious. Some will tell you their view on sin or the Bible or God.

You can learn a lot about sin from other peoples' reactions. I had one person say, "I don't have any sin in my life. I just make sure I do the right thing whenever I have the opportunity, and I thank God for my blessings."

Wow – that tells me a lot. The Bible tells us, *"If we claim not to have sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us."* (1 John 1:8) This person's statement is one of the lies the enemy uses to keep us from the truth. My righteous act of eating leaven and talking about it shed light on one of the enemy's schemes. What else can we learn about sin when we listen to peoples' reactions? What other schemes is the enemy using in my circle of friends?

On the other hand, when you tell some people what you're doing, they are actually inspired to observe

the Feast or do something similar, even if it's not eating matzah or avoiding leavened foods. It may be abstaining from something they know is bad for them or wrong, or a bad habit. Praise the Lord! Our righteous acts can be contagious.

I found that I have to continually remind myself to avoid leaven throughout the week. If I've taken all the leaven out of my home, I don't have to think about it. But when I eat out somewhere, I have to think about each ingredient when I'm deciding what to order. I'm treading carefully. It may even determine what restaurant I go to. I probably won't go to a hamburger, pizza or subway restaurant. I'll probably choose a place I can get a salad or steak.

It's the same with sin. We need to step carefully in our life, so as not to sin inadvertently. Consider the ingredients of your actions – your motives, your assumptions, the values that your actions express.

The more you distinguish between leavened foods and unleavened foods, the easier it becomes. The same is true of sin and righteousness. This week is great practice in distinguishing between sin and righteousness in the rest of our lives.

Again, our righteous acts shed light on sin. That's the point of this week.

3. Discontinuing Sin Makes Room for Righteousness

Eating Matzah instead of leaven teaches demonstrates the principle of putting off and putting on.

Often the first thing we do this week is look for substitutes for the foods we're not going to be eating. We know we're going to eat matzah instead of leavened bread, but we're probably also going to buy some other substitutes – maybe rice cereal instead of wheat, soups without baking soda instead of some of those in our cupboard, planning for more salads vs. sandwiches. We aren't likely going to just go without, we're probably going to eat something else.

That's the principle behind Ephesians 4:21-24:

“When you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being

corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

This is how discontinuing sin makes room for righteousness. Not only is there less sin, but there's also more righteousness.

Furthermore, it's a lifestyle change. Here's an easy one – chocolate candy bars can replace chocolate cake and brownies. That's not a hard switch. In fact when I made that switch, I never went back. And, once I switched from wheat cereal and wheat crackers to rice cereal and rice crackers, I never went back.

We can do the same with sin. Once we replace sin with righteousness – there's no need to ever go back. This is how righteousness leads to more righteousness.

This is what Romans 6:19 tells us:

“For just as you used to offer your various parts as slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led to more lawlessness; so now offer your various parts as slaves to righteousness, which leads to being made holy, set apart for God.”

I don't crave the old foods, I don't even think about them anymore. Once you give up sin, you realize you don't really miss it. And pretty soon, sin becomes easier and easier to walk away from. In fact, each year you observe this week without leaven, it gets easier. Pretty soon the things that used to seem so hard to give up don't seem that tempting anymore. Giving into a temptation just to appease our taste buds doesn't compare to obeying Yehovah.

And this is how sin is too. Pleasing Yehovah, being holy, clinging to him and having him speak to you and guide you - it's just not worth giving all that up for the temporary feeling of satisfaction that sin might give us. Righteousness gets easier when we're practiced at it and we've experienced the benefits.

Romans 6:19 teaches us another thing:

“For just as you used to offer your various parts as slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led to more lawlessness; so now offer your various parts

as slaves to righteousness, which leads to being made holy, set apart for God.”

This tells us that both are true: lawlessness leads to more lawlessness, and righteousness leads to holiness. That means that sin and lawlessness (life without the Torah) blocks us from becoming holy and being set apart for Yehovah. We can't ask Yehovah to bless us and consecrate us for his purposes, and then not get rid of sin. The two are mutually exclusive - you can't be both sinful and holy. On the other hand, righteousness and holiness are mutually compounding. The more you eliminate sin, the more his purposes can be accomplished through you. Wow! That's where I want to be. Eliminating sin creates that environment. Discontinuing sin makes room for more righteousness.

4. Righteousness Satisfies Us

Have you ever tried to share your matzah with someone who's never had it? It can be like throwing pearls to swine. They don't understand why we love it so much. To them it's dry, tasteless, completely unsatisfying, disappointing - a pointless food.

But when you know that you're obeying Yehovah, that's satisfying in itself. Worshiping Yehovah with an act of righteousness goes beyond taste or texture.

Pretty soon it doesn't matter what it tastes like. Yehovah rewards us for our obedience. He meets us with new revelation and his own presence, his voice, his love.

It's true that matzah itself is not satisfying as a food. And the first year or so when I ate it every day, I didn't know why I was doing it, except that it was commanded. That's a good enough reason! But the cumulative effect of seeking Yehovah while you're obeying him with the matzah fills us up, completely satisfying our soul. It's a sacred time with Yeshua, eating his body as he instructed us to. I've started doing it more than once a year, because it's such a special time.

Can you see that how we obey Yehovah with leaven has everything to do with how we obey Yehovah in general?

I have learned so much about sin and righteousness from observing this week of Unleavened Bread each year. I encourage you to take what you're learning about how you relate to leaven this week and transfer it into the rest of your life. Find new habits you can use to consume more of his righteousness and eliminate sin when you see it. Dig in and get all you can during this special time of Yehovah's presence with us.