

No Kneidelach on Pesach? Why would anyone do such a thing?

In many a Jewish home, the *Shulchan Orech* (the Yomtov meal served at the Seder), begins with a bowl of steaming golden chicken soup, with a fluffy white *kneidel* (Matzah ball) floating inside. This age-old custom of Ashkenazi Jews has taken on a status almost on par with the Matzah itself!

But believe it or not, there are many religious Jewish homes where you will not find any *kneidelach* throughout the whole week of Pesach (bar the last day as we will discuss below). For some this may sound sacrilege. How can you have a Pesach Seder without Matzah ball soup!? But just as many families have the custom to eat *kneidelach*, for others, their custom is to refrain from doing so.

Why is this?

Many Jews, especially Chassidim, have a personal stringency on Pesach to avoid *Sheruya*. *Sheruya* (literally soaking) refers to Matzah coming into contact with or being soaked in water. The custom is also referred to as not eating *Gebrochts*. *Gebrochts* is Yiddish for broken – a reference to Matzah meal or pieces which would be broken into soup. It has been adopted as referring to Matzah which has come into contact with water. Foods will be sold as or caterers may advertise non-*Gebrochts* foods. For those who “keep *Gebrochts*” there is no *kneidelach* on Pesach

What is the basis for this custom? To understand this custom, we first need to explore the basic Halocha.

Chametz (leaven which is forbidden on Pesach) is created when any of the 5 grains; wheat, barley, oats, spelt and rye, are mixed with water and left for 18 minutes without being baked. This applies to the raw grains themselves if they have cracked open, or to flour made from them. For this reason, Matzah is baked very quickly, with no more than 18 minutes passing from when the water first hits the flour until the Matzah is baked.

But once fully baked, Matzah cannot become Chametz even if cooked with water. This remains the case even if the Matzah is ground up into a fine flour-like Matzah-meal. And hence the culinary delicacy of *kneidelach* may be eaten on Pesach.

This Halocha derives from the Talmud¹ which teaches that Rav Papi would allow the bakers of the home of the Exilarch to place *Chasisi* into their cooking pots. Rabbeinu Asher (known as the Rosh) interprets *Chasisi* as Matzah-meal. The Talmud is teaching that Matzah-meal may be cooked in water. This is the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch² and is accepted as absolute Halocha.

If so, why do some have the custom to avoid this?

In a Halachic responsa³, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, known as the Alter Rebbe or Baal Hatanya, founder of the Chabad Chassidus, identifies the reason for the stringency and why there was a change in practise.

Even after baking, there is a concern that there may be some flour settled on top of the Matzah or flour that was not properly kneaded within the Matzah. If there is in fact any traces or pockets of flour, bringing it into contact with water on Pesach would create a Chametz situation.

¹ Pesachim 40b

² Orach Chaim 463

³ Teshuvah 6

In previous times the Matzah dough would be thoroughly kneaded. All flour would be uniformly mixed into the dough and baked as Matzah. Hence there was no basis to be strict of *Sheruya*. However at the end of the 18th Century, a new stringency was adopted in baking Matzah more quickly than in the past. Dough was now kneaded much quicker and was of a harder consistency. In these circumstances it is more likely and more common to have pockets of flour in the Matzah.

Therefore, the Alter Rebbe writes, the custom of avoiding *Sheruya* has basis and one who is stringent should be blessed.

Whilst Halocha does not require us to be worried about this even with faster-baked Matzah, Pesach is a time when people observe personal stringencies and acts of piety in avoiding Chametz. The famed Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (known as the Arizal) taught that one who observes all of the stringencies on Pesach in avoiding Chametz is assured that they will not (unintentionally) sin during the year.

Many go to great lengths to avoid even the slightest trace of water coming into contact with Matzah. Cups are checked for crumbs before pouring anything into them. Matzah is kept covered at the table. The Maror used in the *Korech* sandwich will be meticulously dried before the Seder. Even the *Mayim Achronim* water before *bentching* will not be passed over the lips as usually done⁴.

Many great Rabbis and halachic authorities did not adopt this stringency. The Vilna Gaon, Chacham Tzvi and Chasam Sofer were all known to eat *kneidelach* on Pesach. Many other great Rabbis and their communities did adopt the stringency of *Sheruya*.

(The Chazon Ish was stringent and would not eat *Sheruya* on Pesach. However he would have carefully prepared *kneidelach*. The *kneidelach* Matzah-meal mixture would be made without water. The *kneidelach* would be shaped put into the pot of water while it was actively boiling. Why was it done this way? Halocha refers to a practise known as *Chalita*. Technically flour or grains which are scolded in boiling water can no longer become Chametz. Halocha says that we do not do *Chalita* anymore because we are not expert in how to do and what is the required temperature. But for Matzah-meal which cannot become Chametz and there is only a remote doubt as to the presence of flour, for this we can rely on *Chalita*.)

Note: If one does see flour in or on their Matzah, it may not put into contact with water or into soup etc, even by those who do eat gebrochts. This is more likely to occur in handmade Matzos.

Even those who are careful with *Sheruya* throughout Pesach will enjoy a bowl of freshly-made *kneidelach* on the 8th day of Pesach – the last day of Yomtov in *Chutz Laaretz*. The reason for leniency on *Acharon Shel Pesach* is because the extra day of Pesach observed in *Chutz Laaretz* is a Rabbinic observance (as opposed to the first 7 days which are Biblically observed). Therefore in Halocha we have more scope for leniency. The Alter Rebbe rules that “one who is lenient on the final day of Pesach for the sake of *Simchas Yomtov* (rejoicing on the festival) does not lose out (on having kept the stringency)”.

Not only is *Sheruya* permitted on the last day of Pesach (for those who refrain during the rest of Yomtov), in a custom of great mystical significance, the Chabad Rebbes were *Mehader* and would intentionally dip their Matzah into all different foods and beverages as much as possible.

⁴ *Haggadah Im Likutei Taamim Minhagim uBiurim* – Shulchan Orech

In Eretz Yisroel there is no leniency for those who “keep *Gebrochts*” since all 7 days of Yomtov are Biblical in nature.

Ultimately whether you Matzah-ball or not is matter of family custom and personal stringency. Both approaches have halachic basis. Torah and Jewish tradition place great emphasis on Minhogim and following one’s family customs (that comply with Halocha). They create the flavour, richness and spice of Yiddishkeit.

To conclude with a powerful story related by Rabbi Nissan Mindel which puts our personal stringencies in perspective;

One year at the Pesach seder of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (the sixth Chabbad Rebbe known as the Frierdike Rebbe), one of the guests who was not a Chabadnik, unaware of the Chabad minhog of not wetting the Matzah, dipped his Matzah into the borsht. The bochurim who were present were horrified and made a commotion. Upon finding out what was happening, the Frierdiker Rebbe turned to the bochurim and with a serious expression said: “It is preferable to make the Matzah red, than to make one’s face red (i.e. embarrassing someone).”

The Yetzer Hara and forces of negativity are likened to Chametz which puffs itself up with ego and arrogance. Matzah on the other hand represents humility, the ultimate trait of Holiness. At the same time we go to the n^{th} degree to avoid even the slightest trace of Chametz on Pesach, we should ensure that we seek to avoid the spiritual Chametz with the same zeal. Ultimately Hashem Himself will remove the “Chametz” of negativity from the world with the ultimate freedom and redemption with the coming of Moshiach.