



My Dear Friends,

There have been few years over the entire course of my life, that I have approached Pesach with such redemptive feelings. While there are surely so many still suffering and we are not completely in the clear, we are already beginning to see the end of this extraordinarily challenging period.

In many ways, this pandemic feels like it was bookended by Pesach. Last year, nearly the entire Jewish community celebrated this holiday without family, without shul, without the normal structure and routines we associate with Pesach. This year, thankfully, Pesach will be different.

One idea I have returned to over and over again, as I reflect on Pesach this year and last year, is how we as a community learned how to build character under pressure. High stakes can be stressful but they also present opportunities. Moments of great consequence reveal and create character as our truest selves often emerge from the cauldron of crisis. We have all lived through this in some measure during the past year. In the way we masked, practiced social distancing and maintained proper safety measures, our actions had the potential to either save lives or put other people at risk.

Living in a time of challenge with high stakes is not just something we learned to do this past year—it is a central theme of Pesach. The unleavened bread, matzah, that we eat on Pesach night is created specifically from one of the grains that has the potential to leaven and become chametz. In fact, there is an old custom to bake matzah in the afternoon before Pesach specifically during a time when it could possibly become prohibited as chametz.

Why do we take such risks when baking matzah?

As I wrote in the most recent issue of our [YU Torah To-Go](#):

The message of matzah is learning how to forge ourselves individually and communally specifically in moments when our attention and focus matter. Matzah must emerge from a world where the prospect of chametz is possible. Because without the possibility of chametz there is nothing at stake. Like

matzah our personal and national character are forged specifically from moments when our actions make the most difference.

This has been the guiding theme throughout the past year—forging our identity specifically during moments when the stakes are high. And over the past year, our community has remained vigilant to the protocols, sensitive to others, and gracious especially when it mattered most.



And it is my wish to all of you, as we hopefully are turning a new corner on this year-long battle, that we all remember the enduring character lesson from the character of matzah. Our actions matter. Each of us matter. And when the stakes are highest we have the potential to truly distinguish ourselves.

Wishing you a Happy and Healthy Pesach,

Ari Berman

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