

To Eat or Not to Eat: *Pesach/Chag Matsot* Dietary Restrictions

Introduction

The Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread [פֶּסַח/חַג הַמַּצּוֹת] occurs in the first month of the Israelite year, and commemorates the exodus of our ancestors from Egypt. The feast, which lasts for seven days, starts with Passover, or *Pesach* [פֶּסַח], which falls at dusk on the 14th day of the first month. The 15th day marks the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, or *Chag Matsot* [חַג מַצּוֹת], and is a sacred occasion, or *miqra qodesh* [מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ], in which work is forbidden. The last day of the feast - the 21st of the month - is also a *miqra qodesh*.

During Chag Matsot, Israelites are instructed to eat unleavened foods called *matsot* [מַצּוֹת]¹. We are also forbidden from eating *se'or* [שְׂאֹר], *chameits* [חֲמֵץ], and *machmetset* [מַחְמֶצֶת]. The meanings of these three words have been heavily debated in our congregations and communities, and to date, there is still much confusion as to what is allowed in our Chag Matsot diet. Do the words refer only to baked goods? Are fermented products allowed? Are we only to avoid yeast, and not other leavening agents? Can we eat rice and beans, or drink wine?

As a response, many of us avoid rice, legumes, corn (called *qitniyot* [קִטְנִיּוֹת] as a group), and all fermented and processed foods, such as cheese, wine, and pre-packaged snacks, during *Chag Matsot*. It's unclear, however, whether abstaining from these foods is a matter of tradition, or a matter of law (Torah), and this lack of clarity contributes to the ongoing confusion as to what foods are permitted, what foods are forbidden, and why.

This paper will attempt to clarify the *Chag Matsot* dietary law, by examining the three key words we know for sure are forbidden - *se'or*, *chameits*, and *machmetset* - in the contexts in which they are used throughout the *Tanach*. Studying all instances of each word's use, rather than just those pertaining to the feast, will provide a greater understanding of its meaning.

¹ Leviticus 7:12 shows that *matsot* refers to the unleavened version of a food that can be leavened. I.e. *chalot* means cakes, and *chalot matsot* means unleavened cakes. Likewise *r'qiq* means wafer, and *r'qiquei matsot* means unleavened wafers.

Se'or Word Study

The word *se'or* [שְׂאֹר] appears five times in the *Tanach*. The verses are copied below in Hebrew, and translated into English, with the exception of the three key words. *Se'or* will appear in **bold** in both the Hebrew and English, and *chameits* and *machmetset* will be *italicized* in the English.

1. Exodus 12:15

שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִצּוֹת תֹּאכְלוּ אַךְ בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ שְׂאֹר מִבֵּיתְכֶם כִּי כָל אֲכָל חֶמֶץ וְנִכְרֹתָהּ הִנֵּפֶשׁ הִהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל מִיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן עַד יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי.

Seven days shall you eat unleavened [foods]; from the first day, banish the ***se'or*** from your houses, for all who eats *chameits* from the first day until the seventh day, his soul shall be cut off from Israel.

2. Exodus 12:19

שִׁבְעַת יָמִים שְׂאֹר לֹא יִמָּצָא בְּבֵיתְכֶם כִּי כָל אֲכָל מִחֻמֶּצֶת וְנִכְרֹתָהּ הִנֵּפֶשׁ הִהוּא מֵעֵדֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל בֶּגֶר וּבְאִזְרַח הָאָרֶץ.

For seven days, ***se'or*** shall not be found in your houses, for anyone who eats *machmetset*, his soul shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a citizen of the land.

3. Exodus 13:7

מִצּוֹת יֹאכַל אֶת שִׁבְעַת הַיָּמִים וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה לָּךְ חֶמֶץ וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה לָּךְ שְׂאֹר בְּכָל גְּבֻלָּךְ.

You shall eat unleavened [foods] for the seven days, and there shall not be seen unto you *chameits*, and there shall not be seen unto you ***se'or***, in all your borders.

4. Leviticus 2:11

כָּל הַמִּנְחָה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרִיבוּ לַיהוָה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה חֶמֶץ כִּי כָל שְׂאֹר וְכָל דְּבַשׁ לֹא תִקְטִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ אֲשֶׁה לַיהוָה.

Every meal offering that you bring to Adonai shall not have *chameits* because all ***se'or*** and all honey you may not offer by fire to Adonai.

5. Deuteronomy 16:4

וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה לָּךְ שְׂאֹר בְּכָל גְּבֻלָּךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְלֹא יִלּוּ מִן הַבֶּשֶׂר אֲשֶׁר תִּזְבַּח בָּעֶרֶב בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן לַבֹּקֶר.

And there shall not be seen unto you ***se'or*** in all your borders for the seven days, and you shall not leave over any of the flesh that you slaughtered in the evening of the first day, until the morning.

These passages suggest that *se'or* and *chameits* can be used interchangeably, and seemingly refer to the same thing. For instance, Lev. 2:11 cautions against using *chameits* in a meal offering, and explains because neither *se'or* nor honey can be placed on the altar. Another verse, Ex. 12:15, instructs us to rid our houses of *se'or*, because anyone who eats *chameits* will be punished. The instruction in the same verse to eat *matsot*, as well as in Ex. 13:7, shows us that *matsot* are contrasted with *se'or* and *chameits*. Put simply, *se'or* and *chameits* are opposites of *matsot*. Since *matsot* are unleavened versions of leavened foods, we can infer that *se'or* refers to leavening agents, and/or the products that contain them.

Chameits Word Study

The word ***chameits*** [חָמֵץ] appears 17 times in the *Tanach*; in 3 instances, the meanings are not related to food (Psalms 71:4, cruel; Psalms 73:21, grieved; and Isaiah 63:1, crimson). The remaining 14 verses are copied below in Hebrew, and translated into English, with the exception of the three key words. ***Chameits*** will appear in **bold** in both the Hebrew and English, and *se'or* and *machmetset* will be *italicized* in the English.

1. Exodus 12:15

שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִצּוֹת תֹּאכְלוּ אַךְ בְּיוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ שָׂאֵר מִבְּתֵיכֶם כִּי כָל אֹכֵל חָמֵץ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל
מִיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן עַד יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי.

Seven days shall you eat unleavened [foods]; from the first day, banish the *se'or* from your houses, for all who eats ***chameits*** from the first day until the seventh day, his soul shall be cut off from Israel.

2. Exodus 12:34

וַיֵּשֶׂא הָעָם אֶת בִּצְקוֹ טָרֹם יְחִמֵּץ מִשְׁאֲרֵתָם צָרֶרֶת בְּשִׁמְלֵתָם עַל שִׁכְמָם.

And the people carried their dough from their kneading-troughs before [it was] ***yechemats***, wrapped in their garments on their shoulders.

3. Exodus 12:39

וַיֹּאפּוּ אֶת הַבֶּצֶק אֲשֶׁר הוּצִיאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם עֲגֹת מִצּוֹת כִּי לֹא חָמֵץ כִּי גִרְשׁוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְהִתְמַהֵּמֶה וְגַם צִדָּה לֹא עָשׂוּ לָהֶם.

And they baked the dough that they brought out of Egypt, unleavened cakes, for it did not ***chameits***, because they were driven out of Egypt, and were not able to tarry, and also did not make for themselves provisions.

4. Exodus 13:3

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם זְכוֹר אֶת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יֵצְאתֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים כִּי בְחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה
וְלֹא יֵאָכֵל חֻמֶּץ.

Remember this day when you left Egypt, the house of bondage, for with strength of Hand did
Adonai bring you out from there, and you shall not eat **chameits**.

5. Exodus 13:7

מִצּוֹת יֵאָכֵל אֶת שִׁבְעַת הַיָּמִים וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה לָּךְ חֻמֶּץ וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה לָּךְ שָׂאֵר בְּכָל גְּבֻלָּךְ.

You shall eat unleavened [foods] for the seven days, and there shall not be seen unto you **chameits**,
and there shall not be seen unto you *se'or*, in all your borders.

6. Exodus 23:18

לֹא תִזְבַּח עַל חֻמֶּץ דָּם זִבְחִי וְלֹא יֵלִין חֶלֶב חֲגִי עַד בֹּקֶר.

You shall not offer with **chameits** the blood of my sacrifice and you shall not leave over the fat
of my feast until the morning.

7. Exodus 34:25

לֹא תִשְׁחַט עַל חֻמֶּץ דָּם זִבְחִי וְלֹא יֵלִין לִבְקֹר זִבַּח חֲגֵי הַפֶּסַח.

You shall not offer with **chameits** the blood of my sacrifice and you shall not leave until the
morning the sacrifice of the Passover feast.

8. Leviticus 2:11

כָּל הַמִּנְחָה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרִיבוּ לַיהוָה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה חֻמֶּץ כִּי כָל שָׂאֵר וְכָל דְּבַשׁ לֹא תִקְטִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ אֲשֶׁה לַיהוָה.

Every meal offering that you bring to Adonai shall not have **chameits** because all *se'or* and all honey
you may not offer by fire to Adonai.

9. Leviticus 6:10

לֹא תֵאָפֶה חֻמֶּץ חֶלְקָם נָתַתִּי אֹתָהּ מֵאֲשֵׁי קֹדֶשׁ קֳדָשִׁים הוּא בַחֲטָאת וּבְאַשָׁם.

You shall not bake **chameits**, their portion I have given of My offering of fire; it is most holy,
like the sin offering and like the guilt offering.

10. Leviticus 7:13

על חלת לחם חמץ יקריב קרבנו על זבח תודת שלמיו.

With the cakes of *chameits* bread shall he bring up his offering with his thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being.

11. Leviticus 23:17

ממושבתיתכם תביאו לחם תנופה שנים שני עשרנים סלת תהינה חמץ תאפינה בכורים ליהוה.

From your dwellings you shall bring two loaves of bread to be waived, each made of two-tenths of a measure of fine flour, *chameits* it shall be baked, as first fruits to Adonai.

12. Deuteronomy 16:3

לא תאכל עליו חמץ שבעת ימים תאכל עליו מצות לחם עני כי בחפזו יצאת מארץ מצרים למען תזכר את יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חייך.

You shall not eat with it *chameits*; for seven days you shall eat unleavened [foods], the bread of affliction, [all your days] because in haste you left the land of Egypt.

13. Hosea 7:4

כלם מנאפים כמו תנור בערה מאפה ישובות מעיר מלוש בצק עד חמצתו.

They are all adulterous, like an oven fired by a baker, who stops kneading the dough until *chumtsato*.

14. Amos 4:5

וקטר מחמץ תודה וקראו נדבות השמיעו כי כן אהבתם בני ישראל נאם אדני יהוה.

And offer a thanksgiving offering of *chameits*, and call out your freewill offerings and proclaim them, for this is what you Israelites love, says Adonai.

Chameits is an interesting word because unlike *se'or*, it is also used as a verb, which may help clarify its meaning. Ex. 12:34 explains how the Israelites, being rushed out of Egypt, took their dough *terem* (before) *yech'mats*; in Hoshea 7:4, Adonai condemns Israelites for their adulterous ways, out of control like dough in a hot oven that reaches *chumtsato*. These two passages suggest that *chameits* refers to the leavened condition of dough. Simply put, *chameits* is caused by *se'or*, or we can say that *se'or* creates *chameits*.

If we look at Lev. 2:11 again, which forbids *chameits* in an offering because *se'or* is not allowed on the altar, this conclusion makes sense. We cannot have leavened bread (an example of *chameits*) as part of a sacrifice, because yeast (an example of *se'or*) is forbidden in an offering. The same goes for other *chameits*/leavened products (cakes, wafers, muffins, etc), and other *se'or*/ leavening agents (baking powder, baking soda).

There are some Biblical Hebrew dictionaries that translate *se'or* as “sour dough,” and this further clarifies the definition of *se'or* as a leavening agent. In ancient times, Israelites (and other nations) would capture wild yeast from the air through a week-long process, creating what's called a sour dough starter. A slurry of flour and water would be left to sit for several hours, attracting wild yeast and bacterium that would begin to ferment the mixture. Flour and water would be added each day - a process called “feeding” the starter - allowing the yeast to multiply. After about a week, the Israelites would be able to use some of this *se'or*, or sour dough starter, to bake leavened bread; this would behave just like the commercialized yeast that we buy in the store today. Starters could be fed and kept without refrigeration for a long time, so Israelites would be able to bake leavened goods whenever they desired. Thus, the idea of “sour dough” within the concept of the Tanach falls right within the definition of *se'or* as a leavening agent, along with commercialized yeast, baking powder, etc.

Machmetset Word Study

The word ***machmetset*** [מַחְמֶצֶת] is used twice in the *Tanach*: Exodus 12:19 and 12:20. The verses are copied below in Hebrew, and translated into English, with the exception of the three key words.

Machmetset will appear in **bold** in both the Hebrew and English, and *se'or* and *chameits* will be *italicized* in the English.

1. Exodus 12:19

שִׁבְעַת יָמִים שָׂאֵר לֹא יִמָּצֵא בְּבֵתֵיכֶם כִּי כָּל אֹכֵל מַחְמֶצֶת וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעֵדֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל בֶּגֶר וּבְאֶזְרַח הָאָרֶץ.

For seven days, *se'or* shall not be found in your houses, for anyone who eats ***machmetset***, his soul shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a citizen of the land.

2. Exodus 12:20

כָּל מַחְמֶצֶת לֹא תֹאכְלוּ בְּכָל מוֹשְׁבֵיתֵיכֶם תֹּאכְלוּ מִצּוֹת.

All ***machmetset*** you shall not eat; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened [foods].

The word *chameits* [חמץ] is present in the word *machmetset* [מחמצת], suggesting the words are synonyms, much like the Hebrew words *ochel* [אכל] and *maachal* [מאכל] which both mean food. In the two instances that *machmetset* is used in the Tanach, it's used in exactly the way *chameits* is used in similar verses copied above. Thus, we can conclude that like *chameits*, *machmetset* refers to leavened foods.

Based on the study of *se'or*, *chameits*, and *machmetset* in the Tanach, it is safe to conclude that during *Chag Ha-Matsot*, Israelites are forbidden from eating any leavened products, or products that contain any leavening agents. But what is a leavening agent? A dictionary search reveals that leavening agents are substances added to dough that cause fermentation, which makes the dough rise.² These leavening agents may be biological, or chemical. Yeast is an example of a biological leavening agent. It consumes sugar, and releases byproducts of carbon dioxide, alcohol, and gas. Baking powder and sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) are examples of chemical leavening agents. When combined with certain liquids, these agents release carbon dioxide very quickly, causing the dough to rise much more rapidly than if yeast was used. Note that sodium bicarbonate can be found in food items beyond baked goods, such as bottled water or iodized salt. Another lesser-known leavening agent is tricalcium phosphate, which is typically added to store-bought breads and baked goods to help them rise before and during baking. Since it also doubles as an anti-caking agent, tricalcium phosphate can also be found in powdered seasonings, such as Lawry's Seasoned Salt.³

Fermentation is the chemical breakdown of a substance caused by bacteria, yeast, or other microorganisms.⁴ Since the process of fermentation creates leavening - *chameits* and *machmetset* - it raises the question of whether other fermented products, such as wine and yogurt, are also forbidden during the seven days of *Chag Matsot*. In reviewing all the passages that reference *se'or*, *chameits*, and/or *machmetset*, they all seem to be related to dough, but it's worth examining other fermented and typically questioned products just to be sure.

² New Oxford American Dictionary, 2009.

³ <https://www.mccormick.com/lawrys/flavors/spice-blends/seasoned-salt>

⁴ New Oxford American Dictionary, 2009.

Food Study

Food	How It's Made	Verdict
Beer	Beer is made of dried, mashed grains that are mixed with hot water, then fermented with yeast. Sake, a fermented Japanese drink made from rice, is also made with yeast.	Forbidden: processed with yeast, which is <i>se'or</i>
Buttermilk	Buttermilk refers to the liquid byproduct of churned whole milk, which would be left to ferment overnight; a bacteria (not a yeast) called <i>Lactobacillus</i> converts the sugars into lactic acid, giving the buttermilk its tangy, sour taste.	Permitted: does not contain <i>se'or</i>
Cheese	Cheese is made by first pasteurizing filtered milk to kill any harmful bacteria. Bacteria is then added to ferment the milk sugars (lactose) into lactic acid. The added bacteria are usually <i>Lactobacilli</i> (not a yeast) or <i>Lactococci</i> (not a yeast), but dozens of microbes can be used.	Likely permitted , but only with confirmation that yeast microbes were not used.
Chocolate	Chocolate is made from cacao seeds, harvested from cacao pods that grow on the Cacao tree. The seeds (also called cocoa beans) are cleaned, and left out in an open, hot environment to ferment. The fermentation is caused by wild yeast, which feeds on the natural sugars of the cacao seeds for several days.	Forbidden: processed with yeast, which is <i>se'or</i>
Citric Acid	Citric acid is a naturally occurring acid found primarily in citrus fruits. However, most citric acid found in foods is produced by a fungus called <i>Aspergillus niger</i> (not a yeast).	Permitted: does not contain <i>se'or</i>
Coffee	Coffee seeds (commonly called coffee beans) are extracted from the fruit of coffee trees, called coffee cherries. There are three methods of this extraction process - dry, semi-washed, and wet (washed). In the dry process, the coffee cherries are spread out to dry in the sun. In the semi-washed process, pulp is removed from the cherry, and the beans are sun-dried. In the wet process, the beans are removed from the cherries, and fermented by wild yeast in open tanks; most commercial coffee is processed using this wet method.	Permitted, except for wet-processed coffee. One should avoid prepared coffee drinks (Starbucks, DD, etc.) and purchase dry processed coffee beans or ground coffee.
Pectin	Pectin is a gelling agent that's naturally found in fruits, especially citrus, and is used as a thickening agent for jams, jellies, and sauces. Pectin is extracted from its natural sources, then filtered and purified with ethanol, which is alcohol. Alcohol is produced by fermenting sugar with yeast. Note that it is possible to make pectin at home without any forbidden ingredients; there are plenty of recipes available online.	Forbidden, unless homemade with permitted ingredients: processed with ethanol (alcohol), which uses yeast, which is <i>se'or</i>
Soy Sauce	Soy sauce is made from mashed soybeans, wheat, and salt, and are fermented with <i>Aspergillus</i> molds, <i>Lactobacillus</i> bacteria, and yeast.	Forbidden: processed with yeast, which is <i>se'or</i>
Tea	Tea leaves are dried, rolled and broken into thin shapes, then left out to oxidize for up to two hours. After oxidation, the teas are heated to dry. Oxidation occurs when a product's natural enzymes react to the air, i.e. when a cut apple or banana turn brown.	Permitted: does not contain <i>se'or</i>
Vinegar	Vinegar can be made from any product containing sugar, which is fermented with yeast to convert the sugars into alcohol.	Forbidden: processed with yeast, which is <i>se'or</i>
Wine/Alcohol	Wine is made from grapes or other fruits that are fermented with yeast, mold, and other bacteria. Even wines that are labeled as Kosher for Passover contain yeast; the yeast is simply taken from fruit as opposed to grains. Other alcohols are made in similar fashion (fermented with yeast), including but not limited to vodka, rum, and gin.	Forbidden: processed with yeast, which is <i>se'or</i> (this includes "Kosher for Passover" wines)

Food	How It's Made	Verdict
Yogurt	Yogurt is made by adding <i>Streptococcus thermophilus</i> or <i>Lactobacillus bulgaricus</i> bacteria (not yeasts) to heated milk. The bacteria converts the milk sugars into lactic acid, which gives yogurt is thicker texture and tart flavor.	Permitted: does not contain <i>se'or</i>

Food Study Conclusions

Leavening is a result of fermentation, not **the** result. For example, oxidation is a type of fermentation that affects plants and plant products, such as tea leaves and fruit. An apple or banana that has started to turn brown (through oxidation) does not suddenly become *chameits* or *machmetset*. The evidence suggests that only leavening - the fermentation caused by *se'or*, or leavening agents - is forbidden. As such, fermented foods that do not contain leavening agents, such as yogurt, teas, buttermilk, and some cheeses, appear to be permissible during the week of *Chag HaMatsot*.

It's even more clear that *qitniyot* - rice, beans, legumes, corn - are certainly permitted during the feast, as they don't contain leavening agents, nor are fermented (although fermentation isn't necessary a problem, as discussed above). A product that swells (i.e. rice) or pops (i.e. popcorn) is very different from a product that rises due to the addition of a leavening agent.

Furthermore, there's no need to discard food after a 24-hour period, as practiced in some communities. There is no possibility of leftover chicken or potatoes or even *matsot* suddenly becoming leavened; if it's not *chameits*, then it's not *chameits*, and if it doesn't contain *se'or*, then it will never be considered *chameits* or *machmetset*.

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