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Title: Passover's spiritual cleaning

Before the holiday, observant Jews race the clock to remove any leavened food--even crumbs--from homes, cars and businesses

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Many people do spring cleaning, but few tackle it with the intensity of Chaya Rochel Zimmerman. She lines up the shoes of her children--all 11 of them--and wipes the soles with ammonia.

"When you think about it, shoes touch all kinds of things," she said. "So you really can't take any chances."

All over Chicago, Jewish households are engaged in preparing for Passover. Every crumb of bread or other leavened products must be removed before sundown Wednesday, when the eight-day holiday begins.

In Rogers Park, the city's Orthodox enclave, the seasonal cleanup would make the Board of Health look like a bunch of slackers. Virtually every surface--refrigerator, dishwasher, drawers and, yes, shoes--can harbor a sliver of cracker or a piece of pretzel, and therefore is subject to scouring.

"One crumb can make everything non-kosher," said Rabbi Sholem Fishbane, who directs kosher supervision for the Chicago Rabbinical Council, "which is why people go a little crazy."

For observant Jews who strictly adhere to the laws of Pesach (Hebrew for Passover) a cleaning marathon is as central to the holiday as matzo.

Passover commemorates the flight of the Jews from slavery in Egypt more than 3,000 years ago. The hasty departure left no time for the bread to rise, which is why even a trace of leavening--called chometz--is prohibited. All food or drink from wheat, barley, rye, oats or their derivatives must be purged from the household.

So unearthing the smallest morsel is not for those who run a vacuum over the carpet and call it a day. This requires the soul of a warrior--like Zimmerman, who removes all the nozzles from faucets to clean out the gunk.

"Have you ever seen the stuff that is collected in there?" she asks with a shudder.

Knowingly leaving a possession or part of the home unclean "is to miss the point of the holiday," Fishbane said.

Brocha Wolf, a mother of nine, takes a Q-tip to the tiny holes of the phone receiver.

"Everyone always grabs it with sticky hands," she said.

The frenzy is not just confined to the home, but extends to all possessions and domains, right down to scrubbing the floor mats of the mini-van.

"Today, people have bigger houses, more cars, a summer cottage," Fishbane said. "Our grandparents didn't have this hysteria because they owned a two-room house and a cow."

And if the sheer scope of the work weren't enough, it's all done against a ticking clock. On Tuesday evening, a ritual search takes place--complete with a candle and a feather--for chometz that is purposely left behind. The leavened items are collected and a prayer is recited, declaring that all remaining crumbs be considered "ownerless as dust of the earth."

Before that happens, however, there's that daunting to-do list--emptying the cabinets, drawers, refrigerator, freezer, tables and counter tops. Then, every surface is lined with shelf paper or foil. Many families cover the counter with a custom-cut slab of Formica or wood.

Zimmerman also patrols the ceiling and the undersurface of cupboards "because you never know what can splash up while you're cooking."

Porcelain sinks cannot be made kosher for the holiday, so plastic liners--sold at hardware stores in Jewish neighborhoods--are slipped into place.

Then the special dishes, silverware, pots and pans--even stoves--reserved for just this one week a year are hauled out of storage.

"It's not just about your house," said Zimmerman, who started rolling up her sleeves in February. "It's a spiritual cleaning as well."

The laws surrounding Passover preparations are so precise that the Chicago Rabbinical Council Web site is now averaging 38,000 hits a day.

Queries also pour into the Howard Street headquarters from all over the world. What about medication? When Viagra debuted, authorities had to weigh in on the pill's coating. Lip gloss? Pet food? Even fish chow contains chometz and must be altered.

Businesses are not exempt.

The council has a staff of 150 rabbis who regularly inspect retailers and manufacturers who have anything to do with the food supply. Non-compliance means losing the "Kosher for Passover" certification--and observant customers.

[At Illinois Nut and Candy in Skokie, co-owner David Levine is selling Passover confections for the first time, requiring him to power-clean his kitchen and buy new equipment.](#)

["It's almost impossible to get all the morsels out," he said. "Even after you thoroughly clean the machine, you still need to replace all the moving parts. ... So it just makes more sense to purchase new."](#)

Turning out cashew brittle and peppermint patties isn't just a matter of buying a new shaking table, but replacing all the molds and utensils and swapping a recipe's forbidden ingredients, such as corn syrup, for acceptable ones, like potato syrup. Levine declined to say how much the endeavor would cost for this one week of business, "but it's worth it."

Even without an economic incentive, the cleaning binge is viewed as a blessing, not a burden.

Brocha Wolf need look no further than her own father, who was poor and lived in Russia, for perspective.

"Thank God I have a refrigerator, a stove ... so many rooms to clean, food to cook and friends to share it with. I love it."