

The Bedikat Ḥametz Kit: Wax Candle, Wooden Spoon, and Feather

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In this article we trace the development and significance of each element of the *bedikat ḥametz* kit commonly found for sale: the wax candle, wooden spoon, and feather.

Wax Candle

The Mishnah (*Pesahim* 1:1) speaks about checking for *ḥametz* “by the light of the candle.” TB *Pesahim* 7b–8a provides verses to demonstrate that searching should be done by candlelight, and that candlelight is superior to sunlight, moonlight, and torchlight. Although among the Rishonim it was suggested that an oil lamp may cast better light for searching, Raavad,¹ Rosh,² and Rabbeinu Yeruḥam³ all rule that it is best to use a wax candle for searching. This because people would not search well with an oil or fat candle as it is difficult to use them for checking in narrow crevices, and people would be hesitant to search thoroughly with them since they would not want the oil or fat to drip on their household utensils. The use of a wax candle was codified in the *Tur* and *Shulḥan Arukh* (*Orah Ḥayyim* 433:2), and is therefore the most basic, and well attested, element of a *bedikat ḥametz* kit.⁴

¹ *Kolbo, siman* 48.

² *Tur, Orah Ḥayyim* 433:2.

³ *Bayit Ḥadash, Orah Ḥayyim* 433:4, *v-katav*.

⁴ Mystical and homiletical reasons were also given for using wax candles specifically, see Simcha Rabinovitch, *Piskei Teshuvot*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: 1995), p. 12, note 4.

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Wooden Spoon

R. Ya'akov Moelin (Maharil, 1365–1427) writes that if one did not find any *ḥametz* during one's search, one should at least burn the utensil that one used during the search in order to have a "remembrance of burning."⁵ This is based on the proposition raised in TB *Pesahim* 7a that it would be plausible to wait to nullify the *ḥametz* at the sixth hour, which Rashi writes is theoretically a foolproof time, since nobody would be negligent and forget to nullify then. Rashi explains since people are burning their *ḥametz* at that time, they will be reminded to nullify it as well. Maharil asks how we could be so sure that burning is taking place at that time? Perhaps all the *ḥametz* was consumed or destroyed at an earlier time? He concludes that it must be that either a little *ḥametz* was always left over to burn at the later time,⁶ or that even if there was no *ḥametz*, a vessel would be burned at that time.⁷ This vessel is described by Maharil as a bowl (קערה).⁸

Use of a bowl for collecting the *ḥametz* during the *bedikah* is found in illustrated *Haggadot* even before the time of Maharil, going back to the early 1300s.⁹ However, only once Maharil recommended burning the bowl, do we find an illustration of people using specifically a broken bowl for *bedikat ḥametz*, as it will be destroyed anyway.¹⁰ This avoids the prohibition of *bal tashhit*, destroying a perfectly good utensil, as noted by R. Ya'akov Hayyim Sofer.¹¹

The idea of burning the bowl into which the *ḥametz* was collected was included in the notes to R. Issac Tirnau's *Sefer Ha-Minbagim*.¹² R.

⁵ Shlomo Spitzer, *Sefer Maharil* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1989), p. 40, *siman* 8.

⁶ This is his explanation for the custom to specifically put out *ḥametz* to be found during *bedikat ḥametz*, in order to have something to burn the next day.

⁷ Yitzchak Seff, ed., *She'eilot U-Teshuvot Maharil Ha-Hadashot* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1991), p. 58, *siman* 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Daniel Sperber, *Minbagei Yisrael*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2003), p. 175.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 170, 174. See there for the idea that once it became customary to use ten pieces of *ḥametz* for the *bedikah* there would always be something to burn whatever the case, and the burning of the bowls was less prominent.

¹¹ *Kaf Ha-Hayyim* 432:32.

¹² Shlomo Spitzer, ed., *Sefer Ha-Minbagim L-Rabbeinu Isaac Tirnau* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2000), pp. 36–37. On the authorship of these notes, see pp. 17–18 of the Introduction.