**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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**PLEASE PRAY FOR A REFUA SHELEIMA FOR THIS CHILD,**
**ZACHARIA MORDECHAI BEN RENA CHAIA**

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The Seder: Part II

Must women recline at the Seder? Are women obligated in the mitzva of sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim?

# Reclining

Eating while reclining was common practice at formal Greek and Roman meals. The Mishna seems to take it for granted that men of means will recline for the meal. On *leil ha-seder*, however, the mishna teaches that even a poor man must eat in a reclining position:

Mishna *Pesachim* 10:1

Even a poor person in Israel may not eat until he reclines

Rashi explains that reclining is yet another way to experience our freedom.

Rashi *Pesachim* 99b

Until he reclines in the manner of free men, as a commemoration of freedom, on a couch and at the table.

Why is reclining a sign of freedom? In Mishnaic times, reclining at a meal was a symbol of status and was not customary for slaves. Slave quarters were unlikely to be furnished with the requisite couches. Furthermore, a slave would be hard-pressed to relax enough at a meal to eat it reclining, at liberty.

The Talmud stipulates that one must maintain a reclining position while eating matza and drinking all four cups. It then goes on to discuss whether married women must recline:

*Pesachim* 108a

It was stated: Matza requires reclining, *maror* does not require reclining. Wine…both [the first and second pair of cups] require reclining…A woman in the presence of her husband does not need to recline, and if she is an important woman, she needs to recline. A son in the presence of his father needs to recline. It was asked of them: What about a disciple in the presence of his master?

Why should a woman's reclining be called into question? Rav Achai Ga'on suggests that reclining simply was not done by the average woman:[[1]](#footnote-1)

She'iltot of Rav Achai Tzav 77

A woman does not need to recline. What is the reason? It is not the manner of women to lean over. If she is an important woman, she needs to recline.

On this reading, reclining was a typically male signifier of freedom, only taken up by a specific subset of women. Rav Achai Ga'on does not explain, though, why the Talmud introduces the qualifier that it is a woman "with her husband" who does not recline.

The passage goes on to discuss other hierarchical relationships – father and son, master and disciple. In this context, Rashbam explains the reference to a married woman as based on a particularly hierarchical understanding of the marital relationship:

Rashbam *Pesachim* 108a

A woman does not need to recline, for she is in awe of her husband and submissive to him

If a woman were fearful of and fully submissive to her husband, it would be difficult for her to physically inhabit a posture of freedom. Meiri takes this line of thought a step further, noting that the important woman singled out by the Talmud as obligated in reclining, is someone who experiences a different, less servile, marital relationship:

Me'iri, *Beit Ha-bechira Pesachim* 108a

A woman has no freedom in her husband’s presence, and if she is an important woman she needs to recline because there is no servility in her marital relationship

Perhaps in this light we can understand Mordechai’s assertion that in his era (the 13th century) all women had become important:

Mordechai, Addition to *Arvei Pesachim* 611

For all our women are important and need to recline.

It is hard to say that Mordechai means that the nature of women had changed. Rather, he may intend that the marital relationship of his era, or that women's status in general, was different from what it had been.

Rabbeinu Mano'ach of 13th century Provence adds more possibilities for what makes a woman important and why that should matter:

*Sefer Ha-menucha Chametz U-matza* 7:8

If she is an important woman, that is to say, she does not have a husband and she is the mistress of the house, she needs to recline. Or possibly, that she is important before God, a God-fearing woman, daughter of great religious personalities who encompasses the praises of *Eishet Chayil*, and this woman, though she is hard to find, needs to recline even if she has a husband. Or possibly, one can explain that she does not need to recline because since she is busy with preparing and setting up the food, they exempted her from reclining as they exempted her from positive time-bound commandments, but an important woman with servants and maids, who are busy with the matters of food while she sits in an armchair, needs to recline.

Two of his explanations depend on circumstance. An important woman may be a widow, who has gained importance as head of her household. Alternatively, she may be wealthy, and have servants to allow her to recline at liberty rather than busy herself with *seder* preparations.

His second rationale differs in being more intrinsic. A woman is important because God views her as such by dint of her own religious standing and fear of Heaven. A true woman of valor must recline.

Are all women today “important”? What does that mean for us?

Specific halachot, most notably reclining on leil ha-seder, depend on whether a person is considered important.

Early halachic authorities offer a variety of explanations for why a woman would be called important. These include that she has a non-servile relationship with her husband, that she may be head of her household, that she may be a woman of means, or that she has a particularly high religious standing.

In the thirteenth century, Mordechai wrote that "all our women are considered important." What had changed?

Rav Moshe Feinstein rejects the idea that women of thirteenth century Ashkenaz had been suddenly transformed. Rather, men came to understand that they had nothing to lord over women, and women came to understand their importance to their husbands. A new depth of understanding about gender was reached at this stage.

*Iggerot Moshe* OC 5:20

…That they recognized over time that men have nothing to lord over their wives, and the women recognized the great need men have for them. And the minority of important women that existed in all eras were women like this, who recognized their husbands’ need for them, just as they need their husbands, and recognized that their husbands also know this. Reclining is not a new innovation, but [the sages] established that one’s act of eating and drinking ordained by the Torah to recognize freedom and redemption, should be in a manner that more clearly signifies freedom.

Our sages recognized that a woman could be considered important, free from the social disadvantages that many women faced. As women’s overall social standing improved, early halachic authorities were quick to recognize it, and its halachic implications here.

What is the practical halacha about women reclining? Shulchan Aruch rules like the Talmud. Rema adds that, although all women are important, women do not recline in practice, relying on the viewpoint that this is no longer how free people eat.

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 472:4

A woman does not need to recline unless she is important. Rema: All our women are called important, but are not accustomed to recline because they rely on the words of Ra’aviyah, who wrote that nowadays one should not recline.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Note that neither Shulchan Aruch nor Rema discourage women from reclining. That makes sense because, if reclining while fulfilling the *mitzvot* of the *seder* is a mitzva for men, it can be seen at least as a stringency for women.

Women with a family tradition of women not reclining may choose to continue that tradition. Women without a firm family practice, and even those that have one, may consider reclining as a reflection of women's importance and a desire to discharge all opinions about how best to fulfill the obligations of eating matza and drinking the four cups.

*Kaf Ha-chayyim* 472:28

The custom among Sefardim is to recline… it seems that also in the holy communities of Ashkenazim where the women had the practice not to recline, that a woman who is stringent and reclines should merit a blessing, since it is merely a custom to be lenient. Therefore, since they are important, as mentioned, it is good to fulfil the mitzva according to all opinions.

# Telling the Story

The Torah commands telling over the Pesach story, *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, on *leil ha-seder*:

*Shemot* 13:8

You shall tell your son on that day saying: it is on account of that which God did for me when I went out of Egypt.

While the verse specifies telling one's child, perhaps just one's son, the obligation is understood to apply more broadly than that.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The essential components of the story are Pesach, Matza, and Maror, which recount the Exodus in miniature: the bitterness of slavery, God's sparing us from the fate of the Egyptians, and eating the bread of redemption:

Mishna *Pesachim* 10:5

Rabban Gamliel would say: Whoever did not say these three things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation, and they are these: Pesach, Matza, and Maror. Pesach, because God skipped over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt. Matza, because our ancestors were redeemed in Egypt. Maror, because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt.

Food and narrative are deeply intertwined in the *seder* experience. Matza plays an essential role in telling the story. The Talmud expands on the Torah's description of it as "*lechem oni*" "the bread of affliction" with a play on words:

*Pesachim* 36a

*Lechem oni* – bread upon which we recite (“*onin*”) many words

The matza is not only important for telling the story; telling the story might be essential for proper fulfillment of the mitzva to eat matza. Ramban even suggests that the mitzva of eating is the one that cannot be properly fulfilled without mentioning Pesach, Matza, and Maror.

*Milchemet Hashem Berachot* 2:2 (Rif Pagination)

But certainly, what is “he has not fulfilled his obligation”? That he did not fulfil the mitzva according to halacha… But he does not need to go back and read. And similarly, we learn “whoever did not say these three things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation,” but not that he needs to go back and eat Pesach, Matza, and Maror…

Contemporary educator Rachel Sharansky Danziger reflects on how the *haggada* compels each of us to personally retell and re-experience the Exodus:[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rachel Sharansky Danziger, My Own Private Haggadah, *Tablet*

…the Haggadah doesn’t even give us the benefit of a discernible story arc. Since we must rely on ourselves to give the evening any form of coherence, we are forced to draw upon resources that lie beyond the bounds of the text itself, such as our familiarity with the Exodus story in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, and, even more importantly, our own concerns, experiences, and ideas. This process forces us to act as authors and interpreters and recreate the Exodus story in our own image….Perhaps when the authors of the Haggadah told us to see ourselves as if we came out of Egypt, they meant something more than envisioning ourselves wearing tunics, marching out of Egypt with matzos in our sacks. Perhaps they meant that we should take this opportunity to experience what it means to become the authors of our own story. By liberating us from the mindset of a passive audience, the Haggadah frees us to taste self-determination, in an echo of the very event which it so circuitously explores.

# Women Reciting Maggid

Are women obligated to tell the Pesach story?

Halachic consensus is that women are. Shulchan Aruch seems to suggest that women are obligated when he refers to “all the *mitzvot*” of *leil ha-seder*:

*Shulchan Aruch* 472:14

Women, too, are obligated in the four cups and in all the *mitzvot* that are practiced on that [*seder*] night.

As we saw [previously](https://www.deracheha.org/the-seder-part-1), Tur’s language is similar. Mishna Berura, for one, does take this halacha to refer to *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*:

*Mishna Berura* 472:45

The *mitzvot* that are practiced – such as matza and *maror* and reciting the *haggada*

Is this obligation on a Torah level or rabbinic? This question might have practical ramifications: if the obligation is only rabbinic, a woman cannot [discharge a man's obligation](https://www.deracheha.org/discharging-anothers-obligations) when reciting parts of the Seder.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Let's look at the two main positions regarding the level of obligation, and at the rationales behind them:

**I.** **Rabbinic Obligation:** As we saw in [Seder I](https://www.deracheha.org/the-seder-part-1), Rav Yosef Karo attributes his view to the [principle of *af hen*](https://www.deracheha.org/af-hen).

*Beit Yosef* OC 472:25

Both men and women are obligated in them [the four cups]. Women are obligated in the four cups because of inclusion in the miracle, and for this reason one must say that women are obligated in all the *mitzvot* practiced on that [*seder*] night.

This application of *af hen* makes sense, since *maggid* is indeed a commemoration of the miracle. Furthermore, if Tosafot understand women as obligated in *Hallel* at the *seder* because we recite it over the second and fourth cups, in which women are obligated, so, too, women should be obligated in *maggid* recited over the second cup.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We also saw [earlier](https://www.deracheha.org/the-seder-part-1) that Tosafot presented two different ways to understand *af hen*, one of which limited it to rabbinic commandments. Following this view, Minchat Chinuch articulates the position that women have a rabbinic level obligation in *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* by virtue of *af hen*:

*Minchat Chinuch* 21:6

Regarding the reason that women were also in that miracle, as with *megilla* reading and the four cups, Tosafot already demonstrated that this only works on a rabbinic level in any case…with telling the story of the Exodus, and really anyone who is not obligated in something cannot fulfill another’s obligation… and also, women are certainly obligated on a rabbinic level, since they are obligated in the four cups…

**II. Torah Obligation** Sefer Ha-chinuch asserts that women are fully obligated in the Torah-level commandment of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*:

*Sefer Ha-chinuch* Mitzva 21

To tell about the Exodus from Egypt on the night of 15 Nissan, everyone according to his skill in speaking, and to praise and glorify God for all the miracles that he performed for us there, as it is said, “you shall tell your son.” The sages already explained that this mitzva of telling is on the night of 15 Nissan at the time of eating matza, and when the verse says “your son,” it doesn’t mean specifically his son, but could even be anyone…and it applies to males and females, in every place and at every time. Violation is the negation of a positive commandment.

Unfortunately, Sefer Ha-chinuch does not lay out his rationale for saying women are obligated in the mitzva. Since he often draws his analyses from Rambam, it is natural to look there for an answer. Rambam, however, is at best enigmatic on the subject. On the one hand, he does not mention *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* as a time-bound mitzva in which women are obligated on Pesach:[[7]](#footnote-7)

Rambam, Laws of *Avoda Zara* 12:3

All positive commandments that are from time to time and not constant, women are exempt, except for *kiddush* and eating matza on Pesach night and eating the *korban Pesach* and sacrificing it and *hak’hel* and joy [on festivals], in which women are obligated.

On the other hand, he also does not list the mitzva *of sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, Mitzva 157, in his summary list in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* of *mitzvot* from which women are exempt.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Why would one say that women are obligated in this mitzva on a Torah level?

As part of a responsum ruling that women may recite the *haggada* on behalf of men, *Iggerot Moshe* raises two possibilities:

**1.** Perhaps the principle obligating women to eat matza extends to *maggid*. This stands to reason, since matza and the mitzva of telling the story are so closely related. According to this view, *af hen* is only relevant for the four cups, where we might have thought our sages would be lenient because the four cups are only obligatory on a rabbinic level.

**2.** Alternatively, the principle of *af hen*, as understood by Beit Yosef, may obligate women in the mitzva on a Torah level.

*Iggerot Moshe* OC V 2:3

Can a woman fulfil a man’s obligation in the *haggada*?… It seems simple that, since a woman is also obligated in reciting the *haggada* like men, because a woman is obligated in all the obligations of Pesach based on an analogy [*hekesh*], that whoever is obligated in [the prohibition against] eating *chametz* is obligated in eating matza, which also applies to all positive Torah-level commandments of Pesach. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (*Pesachim* 108a) needed the reason that they also were included in the miracle for women’s obligation in the four cups because, since it is only rabbinic, there is room to say that since it is time-bound, with which the Torah was lenient for women with other *mitzvot*, the Rabbis did not institute it for them, even on Pesach when they are obligated in Torah-level positive commandments. Therefore, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said that they established it for women as well, for the reason of inclusion in the miracle…But see Beit Yosef, who wrote that women are obligated in the four cups because of inclusion in the miracle, and for this reason one must say that they are obligated in all the *mitzvot* practiced that night. This is not in accordance with Tosafot, who thought that this reason does not apply to positive Torah-level *mitzvot*, as they proved from *sukka*, but Beit Yosef thinks that this reason also applies to positive Torah-level mitzvot.

Rav Ovadya Yosef, too, maintained that women are obligated in *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* on a Torah level:

*Yechaveh Da'at* II:65

Women are also obligated in the *haggada* and in telling the story of the Exodus on Pesach night, from the Torah, and can fulfil men’s obligations.

Familial customs differ regarding whether all Seder attendees or only a leader recite each section. According to Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Ovadya Yosef, a woman would not be limited in the role she could play. (For more on women discharging others' obligations in practice, see [here](https://www.deracheha.org/discharging-obligations-in-practice).)

# In Practice

It can be tricky even for important women to be present for all of *maggid*, whether because of being involved with children or with checking on and laying out the meal.

Chayyei Adam addresses the case in which a Jewish female servant is very busy *seder* night, presenting an absolute minimum of what she can hear of *maggid*.

*Chayyei Adam Kelal* 130

Women are also obligated in all the *mitzvot* and in reciting the *haggada*. Therefore, the maid must also sit at the table and hear the whole *haggada*. If she needs to go out to cook, she is at least obligated to hear *kiddush*, and when he reaches “Rabban Gamliel says, whoever did not…,” she should come in and listen until after the drinking of the second cup, for whoever did not say these three things, has not fulfilled his obligation. Our practice is also to call them to hear the ten plagues that He brought upon Egypt, in order to tell them how many miracles the Holy One, blessed be He, did for Israel.

In addition to mentioning sections of *maggid* we would expect, Chayyei Adam singles out hearing the ten plagues. He explains that reciting the plagues emphasizes the miracles God performed for Israel. What is he getting at? Perhaps he means to suggest that this mitzva is so basic and essential to our understanding of Torah, and ourselves as Jews that it's crucial for women to participate as much as possible in it in a way that will maximize our awareness of what God has done for us.

How can I manage my home responsibilities and the mitzva of maggid?

It can be hard to be present for the entire mitzva of maggid while also laying out a meal or tending to young children or others who need care. Here are some ideas for making it work:

1. As much as possible, enlist others in advance to shoulder these responsibilities together with you.

2. Try to plan a menu that will not require you to do anything (or almost anything) between kiddush and eating. Also, it is helpful to have food available that can be offered to kids easily, with no preparation involved.

3. Arrange with someone to lead a discussion, activity, or song when you have to leave the table, so that you don't miss essential parts of the Seder.

4. If breastfeeding, try to set up a place or way to nurse comfortably within earshot of the Seder. If there are young children to tend to, set up resting spots near the table where they can lie down and "rest" when tired without needing to be formally put to bed. If kids are preschool age or older, do everything you can to involve them in the Seder, which is, after all, a central element of the mitzva of maggid.

Putting the time and thought into troubleshooting in advance can make a big difference in creating a rhythm that will work for you even if you can't sit or recline all night long.

In practice, in *maggid*, women should make every effort to hear or read: *Ma Nishtana*, *avadim hayyinu*, the ten plagues, and the paragraphs explaining Pesach, matza and *maror*, the beginning of *Hallel* and the *beracha* before the second cup.

In addition to *maggid*, women must also make or hear *kiddush* and drink the first cup, eat a festive meal, and recite *Hallel* and *birkat ha-mazon*.

May we merit a speedy redemption in our time!

1. Perhaps not coincidentally, respectable women did not participate in formal banquets in ancient Greece. Roman banquets, however, did include some women of high social stature, which may have been true in the Hellenistic world as well. (Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22, 25.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ra’aviyah part II, *Pesachim* 525

Nowadays, …when free people are not accustomed to recline, one should sit normally. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, *Sefer Ha-chinuch* infra. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rachel Sharansky Danziger, “My Own Private Haggadah,” *Tablet*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/holidays/articles/my-own-private-haggadah> . [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Whether the mitzva of *sippur yetziat mitzrayim* can be fulfilled by hearing another, through the vehicle of [*shomei'a ke-oneh*](https://www.deracheha.org/discharging-anothers-obligations), or must include reciting the words oneself is a matter of debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rema may understand him in this way, when he comments on the requirement to make the *haggada* understood to women at the table. Mishna Berura takes this position. Alternatively, Rema may intend that one does not fulfill the obligation of telling the story without taking pains to make it understood:

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 473:6

Rema: They should recite it in a language that the women and children understand, or explain the meaning to them, and thus Ri of London did the entire *haggada* in the vernacular, so that the women and children would understand.

Mishna Berura 473:64

So that the women would understand – for women are also obligated in the *mitzvot* of the night and in reciting the *haggada* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is possible that Rambam sees the mitzva not as time-bound, but as a yearly fulfillment of a constant mitzva, something like the discussion of [*parashat Zachor*](https://www.deracheha.org/arba-parashiyot) in the context of *mitzvat zechirat Amalek*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rambam Sefer Ha-mitzvot 157

The 157th mitzva is that He commanded us to tell the story of the Exodus on the night of 15 Nissan, at the beginning of the night, according to the teller’s skill in speaking.

Rambam Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, Conclusion of Positive Commandments

When you look at these 248 positive commandments, you find 60 essential mitzvot….and the 155th, 156th, 157th, 158th, 159th, and 160th. And the 161st, women are not obligated in… Of these 60 essential mitzvot, women are obligated in 46 of them and are not obligated in 14 of them… [↑](#footnote-ref-8)