YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PESACH 5784**

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In memory of Pinhas ben Shalom (Paul) Cymbalista z”l

Niftar 20 Nissan 5752. Dedicated by his family.

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Dedicated in memory of Sidney Gontownik z"l, brother of Jerry Gontownik,

on the occasion of Sidney's upcoming 14th Yahrzeit, on the 24th of Nissan.

May his memory be for a blessing. The Gontownik Family.

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**Reclining at the Seder in the Year 5784**

**By Prof. Alan Jotkowitz**

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Dedicated in memory of the hero of Israel,

Lior ben Dan and Adina z"l,

husband of Liav and father of Tal and Shaked,

who fell defending his country and People

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Since we were young children, we have all been taught that one leans to the left while eating during the *seder* because that is how a free person eats. And we all have asked ourselves the question: How does reclining to our left when drinking the four cups of wine and eating the matza represent the eating of free people? In truth, it seems uncomfortable and even a bit comical. In fact, the Maharil writes :

[The obligation to recline applied] specifically in their days, when they were accustomed to reclining throughout the year. In that context, it was obligatory to do so on Pesach. But in our context, where we never recline the rest of the year, we should not do it on Pesach. What does this have to do with freedom? (*Sefer Maharil, Minhagim, Seder Ha­haggada*)

However, normative practice does not follow the Maharil. So, why do we follow this custom?

***Heseiba* as a Symbol**

To answer our question, we need to understand what is behind this *halakha*. The *Mishna* in *Pesachim* (10:1) teaches that "even the poorest of Israel should not eat until he reclines." But what, exactly, is *heseiba*? The Tosefta explains:

What is the order of a meal? Guests come in and sit down on top of benches and on top of soft seats until all [guests] come in. [After] all [guests] came in, and they [i.e., the servants] have given them [water to wash] hands, every one of them washes one hand. [When] they [i.e., the servants] poured them a cup [of wine], each one [of the guests] makes a *berakha* (blessing) [for the wine] himself. [When] they [i.e., the servants] brought them appetizers, each one [of the guests] makes a *berakha* [for the appetizers] himself. [After the guests] have gotten up [from their temporary seats, and moved to the main eating hall] and reclined [on sofas], they [i.e., the servants] gave them [water to wash their] hands [again]. Even though he already washed one hand, [still] he [has to] wash both of his hands [again]. [After] they [i.e., the servants] poured them a cup [of wine again], even though he already made a *berakha* on the first [cup of wine], he makes [another] *berakha* on the second [cup of wine]. [After] they (i.e. the servants) brought in front of them [more] appetizers, even though he [already] made a *berakha* on the first [set of appetizers], he makes a [new] *berakha* on the second [set of appetizers], but [this time] one [person] makes a *berakha* for all of them. (Tosefta, *Berakhot* 4:8)

The Tosefta is describing an elegant and extravagant feast in Greco-Roman times, something the authors of the Mishna and Tosefta were undoubtably familiar with. Reclining while eating is an integral part of this formal banquet. So, to answer our question, *heseiba* is not really about simply leaning to our left when eating, but part of an elaborate way of eating a meal, a type of meal that can only be eaten by free people, who have the time and money.

To borrow the terminology of Rav Soloveitchik, the *ma’aseh* *mitzva* (the formal act) of *heseiba* is reclining, but the *kiyum* *mitzva* (how one actually fulfills the mitzva) is to feel like a free person at the Pesach *seder*.

This understanding can have other practical manifestations as well. All the participants at the *seder* should feel like free people; no one should feel like a servant, having done all the preparations for and serving of the meal. The meal itself should be festive, more extravagant than usual, and eaten in the presence of family and loved ones.

***Heseiba* as Commemoration**

There is also another approach to understanding the mitzva of *heseiba*.

A *midrash* in *Shemot Rabba* teaches:[[1]](#footnote-1)

What is “led [the people] around [*va-yasev*]” (*Shemot* 13:18)? …

Alternatively, “God led the people around [*va-yasev*]” – from here our Rabbis said: “Even the poorest of Israel should not eat until he reclines [*yasev*]” (Mishna *Pesacḥim* 10:1), *as that is what the Holy One blessed be He did for them*, as it is stated: “God led [the people] around [*va-yasev*].”

Thus, we recline at the Pesach *seder* not as a symbol of freedom, but rather as a commemoration and reenactment of the Jewish People's redemption from Egypt and journey to the land of Israel.

And in 5784, not only do we have to remind ourselves of this miraculous journey to our ancestral homeland, but we must also broadcast it to the world at large.

The prophetic words of Rabbi Yitzchak, cited in Rashi’s first comment on *Chumash*, seem as if they were written yesterday rather than two thousand years ago.

For what reason did He commence with “In the beginning?” Because “the strength of His works He related to His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations” ([*Tehillim* 111:6)](https://www.chabad.org/16332#v6). For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, “You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations [of Canaan],” they will reply, "The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it [as we learn from the story of the Creation], and He gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 1:1, s.v. *bereishit*)

In 5784, "You are robbers" has metamorphized into the libel of "settler colonialism" – somehow forgetting the thousands-years-old connection of the Jewish People to the land of Israel and the historical fact that the Jewish People were exiled from their own land. That Jews lived and prospered in this land thousands of years ago is a historical fact, and ever since then, we have prayed three times a day for the moment we will be able to return to our homeland. This is what we need to remember and teach our children on Pesach of 5784.

***Heseiba* and Unity**

But there is a third approach to understanding *heseiba*. The *Mishna* in *Berakhot* teaches:

If several people were sitting, each recites a blessing for himself. If they were reclined, one recites a blessing on behalf of them all. (Mishna *Berakhot* 6:6; *Berakhot* 42a)

Reclining enables the participants in a shared meal to say Grace after Meals together. In other words, it unites the people. In Temple times, what united the group was the creation of a *chabura* (group) to eat the *korban pesach*; after the destruction, what unites the participants at the *seder* is reclining together while eating the meal.

We have seen a remarkable coming together in Israel since the horrific events of October 7th. In this often fractured country, soldiers from all walks of life dropped everything at a moment’s notice and put their lives on hold to fight together to defend their homeland. There has been a massive outpouring of love and appreciation for their sacrifices, along with a renewed spirit of patriotism and volunteerism. Everywhere you look, there are signs with the slogan "together we will win." Here in Israel, you truly feel this coming together of the people – tragically, at funerals for the thousands of *korbanot* (victims), but also outpourings of love for the hostages and their families. In this "coming together," the true heroes are the younger generation, who teach their elders by their heroic and selfless actions the true meaning of unity, sacrifice, and love of Israel.

In its discussion of the above *mishna*, the Gemara notes that there is also another halakhic way to unite a group:

A contradiction was raised: “Ten people who were walking on the road, even if they were all eating from one loaf, each recites a blessing for himself. If they sat to eat, even if each eats from his own loaf, one recites a blessing on behalf of them all.”

It was taught “they sat” – even though they did not recline!

Rav Nachman bar Yitzcḥak said: in a case where they said: Let us go and eat in such-and-such a place. (*Berakhot* 42b)

If the participants in the meal have a common vision and plan for the future, this also can unite them as a group.

Tragically, the differences, distrust, and enmity among our people are vast and growing: left vs. right, religious vs. secular, religious Zionist vs. Charedi, Israel vs. the Diaspora. I pray we are up to the challenge of once again sharing a common vision for our beloved country, as our future and our children’s future depends on our ability to come together as a people, as we have always done when threatened. *Heseiba* unites us as a family at the *seder*, but in 5784, we desperately need to unite as a nation.

**True Freedom**

The Gemara in *Pesachim* (108a) states that a woman need not recline if she is in her husband's presence, with the exception of “an important woman.” (The Rema maintained that all women today are considered to be in this category.) It also determines that a student need not recline in the presence of his teacher, as reverence for his teacher may interfere with his ability to experience and express a full sense of freedom. This relates to a larger question of whether people who are objectively not free also perform the mitzva of *heseiba* on the night of Pesach.

On Pesach 5784, we need to ask whether are we reclining as kings and queens or as imposters and paupers. For what we are really celebrating on Pesach night is our relationship with *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*, both as individuals and as part of the Jewish People.

Is this a time of *hester panim* or of *gilui Shekhina*?[[2]](#footnote-2) Certainly, the horrific events of October 7th made it feel like God is in hiding from His people. But the Jewish People are no longer defenseless, and are able to fight back and defeat their vicious enemies – which to some is a confirmation of God’s presence.

It’s possible that both are right, depending on one’s perspective. From an individual standpoint, I know some people who have never felt closer to God than when praying in these last few months, and others who have simply been unable to pray. Considering the situation more broadly, many feel that God has abandoned His people – maybe in response to our own fractious behavior – while others see an unfolding of God's master plan. I have no idea who is right, but I know I will be reclining on Pesach night, feeling both distant and close to God, at the same time, more intensely than ever before. We will all lean together on *seder* night, and maybe that heralds a new and better future for us as individuals and as members of the Jewish people.

1. I first became aware of this *midrash* from a *shiur* given by Rabbi Moshe Taragin, available [here](https://etzion.org.il/en/talmud/seder-moed/massekhet-pesachim/heseiba-and-cherut-ii). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There is an interesting exchange on this topic between Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein and Rabbi Yaakov Medan, available [here](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Ugn-GZhUn2E). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)