

“Two Kinds of Hillel Sandwich”
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We all know what a Hillel sandwich is, don't we?

On the eve of the Seder, after the *kiddush* and the *karpas* and the four questions and the discussion of the Exodus from Egypt, ... after saying the *motzi* and eating matzah, and eating *maror* (bitter herbs), ... after all of that, just as we are about to begin the meal, we put *maror* in between two pieces of matzah and eat it. And we call that a Hillel sandwich, because we recite a short passage from the Haggadah, that goes like this:

Zecher l'mikdash k'Hillel: Thus did Hillel when the Temple was still standing. He made a sandwich of the pesach offering with matzah and bitter herbs and ate them together, in order to fulfill the statement in the Torah that “they should eat [the paschal lamb] with matzot and bitter herbs.”

Now it's interesting because we call this a *zecher l'mikdash*—a *reminder* of the Temple, a *reminder* of what our people did when the Temple still stood. It's not what they actually ate, it's only a reminder. Although we don't usually dwell on it, there is something missing in that sandwich. During the days that Hillel was making *his* sandwich, during the days of the Temple, the Jews would roast their paschal lambs and then, when they were all finished, they would take the meat and put it on matzah and smear some bitter herbs on top and eat it—sort of like a Pesach version of *shishlick*—that tasty meat that is cooked on a spit and served in a pita that's popular in Israel today.

(By the way, no one minds my talking about this on Yom Kippur, do they?)

Today, we don't do that. True, we take two pieces of matzah but in between them there isn't any meat; just bitter herbs. Following the destruction of the Temple it was no longer possible to sacrifice the Paschal lamb as it had been done previously. Hence, no more roasted meat. And yet we eat that sandwich as a reminder of the days when the Temple still stood and Jews were able to celebrate Pesach in the fullest possible manner. And you know, if we didn't do it, we'd feel



as if we were missing something. Even the incomplete sandwich has become an indispensable part of the Seder eve ritual.

There's another kind of Hillel sandwich.

I know, because I ordered one and ate it.

It wasn't on Pesach, it wasn't a matzah sandwich, but it was a Hillel sandwich all the same.

It happened this past summer, while I was in Israel. One evening, I went out for dinner on Emek Refaim Street, which is a smart, trendy street near where I was studying. I went into a particular cafe and, lo and behold, saw on the menu, among all the other interesting dishes that they serve, among the quiches and the salads and the main courses, a group of sandwiches, and one of them was called a Hillel Sandwich. Then it hit me: the name of the restaurant is "Cafe Hillel," so it made sense that, in addition to sandwiches with all sorts of exotic names, that sandwich, one of their specialties, would be called a "Hillel" Sandwich.

But as I ate my sandwich, I realized that, in fact, they didn't have to do that. They didn't have to call one of their sandwiches a Hillel sandwich. In a sense, any sandwich eaten in that restaurant could be called a Hillel sandwich. Let me explain why.

About a year and a half ago—on September 9, 2003, to be precise—on an otherwise pleasant late-summer evening, a suicide bomber entered that restaurant and blew himself up. It was horrible. Seven people were killed. Many more were maimed. The place was destroyed.

Yet, soon thereafter, the re-building began. Precisely one month later, on October 9th of last year, the place was up and running and ready to receive customers. The question was, "Would they come?" It's one thing for a proprietor to have the courage to re-open a restaurant after it's been destroyed. It's quite another for ordinary citizens to venture into it again. But they came. And they've kept that place alive and well.

Living with loss is not easy. It requires us to come to grips with a new reality—the "new normal" as it is sometimes called. The new reality can seem a bit like a Hillel sandwich: Flat and tasteless on the outside, bitter on the inside, ... and missing something really significant.

And yet, what is our choice? On the one hand, we could act as though we haven't experienced a loss at all. We could deny its impact. On the other hand, we could remain eternally focused on our loss. Both choices are problematic.

In the wake of the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, the rabbinic masters chose for us as a people a third alternative. At the seder, we eat a sandwich that reminds us of the sandwich that Hillel ate, and we talk about it. In memory of the Temple, *zecher l'mikdash*, we eat what we can, and we remember the rest.

In many ways, this is but one example of the general approach of the rabbis following the destruction of the Temple. Even though it had been very much centered on the Temple, *the rabbis didn't want Judaism to disappear*. They realized that the only way that Judaism could survive that loss was if it changed. Never losing sight of the enormity of their loss, the rabbis helped Judaism evolve until it became independent of the Temple.

We're the same way. When we lose a loved one, it can feel as though one of our limbs has been cut off. When we lose a partner or a spouse, going to a restaurant, going to the movies—even sitting in our own homes—can be unbearable. How can we carry on in the absence of our better half? When we lose a parent, it can be equally impossible. I met someone once who used to speak with her mother every single day. And then her mother died. Afterwards, she would sometimes find herself picking up the phone before remembering that she wasn't going to hear her mother's voice on the other end. The loss of *any* loved one who occupied a significant role in one's life—to lose such a person is to lose a piece of ourselves.

And yet, each day brings us new opportunities: to live, to love, and to heal. If we are to be fully present in the world, we have to eat Hillel sandwiches: we have to find ways of nourishing ourselves with our memories, allowing them to strengthen us, not to overwhelm us.

Three years ago, approximately 3,000 boys and girls lost their parents in the 9/11 attacks. [See "Legacy of Loss: The Children of September 11: Growing Up Grieving, With Constant Reminders of 9/11", by Andrea Elliott, *New York Times*, September 11, 2004, p. A1.] It's not entirely clear "how they're doing": four major studies are exploring the effects of suffering such an unusual loss ("at once so brutally intimate yet so spectacularly public"). Some of the children appear quite resilient, while others are visibly struggling. Their average age at the time of the attacks was 8 1/2.

Danielle DiMartino's parents had been married for 16 years before her mother, Debra, died at the World Trade Center. Her parents were talking on the phone to each other when the plane sliced through the building where her mom worked. According to Andrea Elliott, a New York Times journalist who interviewed her, Danielle is a pensive young woman. She has a runner's temperament, steady and quiet. For four years, she ran track with a team her mother coached. When Mrs. DiMartino was killed, Danielle quit running.

"For a long time, everything halted in a house that became consumed with the act of memorializing . . . A wood carved memorial of the World Trade Center hangs framed in their living room, dedicated to Mrs. DiMartino. A silver mercy bracelet bearing her name circles Mr. DiMartino's wrist. Everything remained: Mrs. DiMartino's doll collection, the ... [kitchen counter tops] she chose . . ." Everything.

But then, this past summer, Mr. DiMartino did what had seemed impossible. He fell in love with a friend of his neighbor. One day soon thereafter, Danielle came crying to her father. She told him that she had had a bad dream: that a woman had entered the house and had started to change the furniture. Mr. DiMartino knew it was no dream.

In fact, Mr. DiMartino and his friend have started thinking about getting married, and a few weeks ago they went shopping for new furniture. Danielle doesn't want to talk about it. But recently, it turns out, she told her father that she wanted him to be happy. And a funny thing happened at the start of this school year, something that hadn't happened in 2002 or 2003: Danielle joined the track team again.

It's hard to eat a sandwich with its main ingredient missing. Yet not to eat it at all—that would be worse.

Immediately following a Jewish funeral, what do mourners do? They're supposed to go to the house where they will be sitting shiva, they're supposed to light a candle, they're supposed to take off their shoes, and then, before doing anything else, they're supposed to sit down and eat. That meal—that first meal after the funeral—is obligatory: it's called a *seudat havraah*, a meal of revival.

Why serve mourners food? To those of us who've suffered losses, it may be obvious: they might not otherwise eat. Eating distinguishes us from the dead; it symbolizes powerfully the challenge of living through and beyond a loss. Commanding that we eat—in the absence of our loved one—expresses our tradition's view that this is the way we live following a loss: namely, by continuing

to eat, one meal at a time. And so we put food before the mourners, whether they're hungry or not.

The authors of the Haggadah understood that, the proprietors of Cafe Hillel understood that, and we understand that. In the wake of a loss, our meals will never be what they once were. There will always be empty seats at the table, and the food—it may not taste the same. But let's not hesitate to carry on. Let us not be afraid to remind ourselves of our losses. Let's eat our Hillel sandwiches, and then, as we do on Passover, let's continue eating. Let's continue to be grateful for each day of life, nourished and sustained by the memories of our loved ones.

Amen.