

## Fast of the First Born

The custom of first-borns fasting on Erev Pesach developed in the early Middle Ages and is first recorded in Massekhet Soferim, a Talmudic commentary. The fast was instituted to commemorate the tenth plague in the Exodus, the slaying of the first born of Egypt and the sparing of the Israelites' first born. Early on in the development of this custom, it became evident to Rabbinic authorities that it was harmful for a person to fast the day leading up to the first Seder, as the requirement to consume wine and only small amounts of food would obviously cause a person to feel unwell and thus unable to properly observe the festival. There thus developed a custom alongside that fast whereby one who participates in a *Seu'dat Mitzvah* (a celebration in which a meal is mandated by Jewish Law) on Erev Pesach is not required to fast that day.

In modern times, virtually no one observes the fast. Instead many synagogues host a *siyyum*—the ritual concluding a substantial portion of learning—along with a *Seu'dat Mitzvah*. For practical reasons, this would take place after morning minyan, which has more recently brought about a misconception that it is the *service* which breaks the fast. It has nothing to do with the prayer service. It was the opinion of the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) that first born Jews should fast rather than try to get out of it.

The above background serves two purposes. The first purpose is to make explicit that the fast of the first born is not Biblical in origin, nor does it originate in the Rabbinic period of the Mishnah. There is no mention of it in the Talmud either, rather it arose in context of Medieval Judaism after the Talmud was completed. This does not undermine the legitimacy of this custom but it does provide some leeway to those who do not observe it. In other words, it's a loose custom to begin with. The second purpose is to highlight the fact that attending minyan, hearing a *Siyyum* for a tractate of Talmud in which one only learned the final few folios, and then partaking in a celebratory meal (which usually consists of only coffee and bagels) is a rather weak argument on which to base the obviation of a fast. It's a loose argument to get out of practicing a loose custom.

Our present circumstances pose significant challenges to hosting a *Siyyum* this year, even a virtual one. In light of this, one who is first born still has the option of fasting. Alternatively, one may break the fast by reading [Pirkei Avot](#), making a donation to a local food charity or one in Israel, and then have a meal with washing and *hamotzi*. Please note that Pirkei Avot is six chapters long so you may want to start now. Also, the latest one can consume *chametz* this year is 11:08am.