

## THE REVERSAL OF THE SEDER

First Day Pesach 5779

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### I.

“We’re idiots.”

It was a strange choice of phrase for Ruthy to greet me with last Shabbat morning after I’d woken up. Now, it’s not uncommon for her to declare that *I* am an idiot, but it was striking for both of us to be guilty of the same crime. The issue, it turned out, was that, despite the fact that the shul hosted a *kiddush* lunch last Shabbat in tandem with my Shabbat Hagadol *derasha*, we had nonetheless invited some people for lunch. Hence why we were idiots: people would already have eaten; they didn’t need to eat again.

But, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that inviting already-fed people for lunch was not only not foolish, but perhaps captured better than anything else the actual purpose of our Shabbat and Yom Tov meals. An idea expressed most clearly on the first days of Pesach.

### II.

It begins with a *mishnah* from the tenth chapter of Pesachim. For those of you who attended or listened to the most recent series I gave, we explored the tenth chapter in detail because it is here that *Chazal* first outline the Seder. It is here that many of the crucial details we do to this day are first found. The second *mishnah* discusses and debates *kiddush* said right at the beginning of the Seder, before the next two *mishnayot* say the following:

הביאו לפניו, מטביל בחצורת, עד שמגיע לפרפרת הפת. הביאו לפניו מצה וחצורת  
וחצרת ושני תבשילין, ... ובמקדש היו מביאים לפניו גופו של פסח: מזוג לו בוס  
שני, וכאן הבן שואל אביו, ואם אין דעת בבן, אביו מלמדו, מה נשתנה הלילה הזה  
מכל הלילות...

The vegetables are brought before the Seder leader. He dips the lettuce until he reaches that which accompanies the matzah. Then matzah, lettuce, charoset, and two cooked foods are brought, ... and in the times of the Temple the korban pesach would be set before the leader. A second cup of wine is poured. And here the son asks his father. And if his son has no understanding the father teaches him by asking “why is this night different to all other nights?” (*m. Pes. 10:3-4*)

There's a lot to discuss, but I want to focus on the fact that there's some ambiguity over what, exactly, the *mishnah* is describing taking place before the second cup of wine is poured. Is it merely describing the Seder plate – we put all the things listed in front of the Seder leader before the bulk of the Seder starts as we do today – or is it describing something very different and alien to us, that, in the times of the Mishnah, they would eat their meal before (or during) *Maggid*?

Amazingly, this latter view is suggested by none other than Rabbi Dovid Zvi Hoffman, the brilliant rabbi, *rosh yeshiva*, and proto-scholar in Germany during the late-19th and early-20th century in his work *The First Mishnah*, which contains his attempt to reconstruct the earliest layers of the Mishnah. And, at least among scholars, this idea that Jews used to first eat their meal and then spend the rest of the evening learning Torah by elaborating on the story of Pesach during *Maggid* has become the standard understanding of these *mishnayot*.

But then, if this is the case, why would the Haggadah change the practice? Why do we all, instead of doing what they did in the times of the Mishnah, hold off on our meal – all the while getting hungrier and hungrier – until we've spent significant time learning Torah through our re-telling of the story? Why do we move the meal from pride of place and relegate it to the latter half of the Seder?

### III.

I'd argue that the Haggadah does this because it realizes something already found in the Torah and the literature of *Chazal*: the meal at the Seder is merely an excuse to perform two focal *mitzvot*, Torah-learning and *hakhnasat orchim/chessed*, hospitality and kindness to those in need. But it reverses the intended order to emphasize a crucial aspect of *chessed* that we can all too easily forget.

To understand what I mean, we have to begin with the laws of the *korban pesach*. Our Torah reading this morning picks up halfway through the 12th chapter of *Sefer Shemot*, after the laws have been stated, but earlier in the same chapter we read a crucial law of the *korban pesach*:

דַּבְּרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עֵדֻת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בְּעֶשֶׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם אִישׁ לְבֵית-אָבֹת  
שָׁנָה לְבָיִת: וְאִם-יִמְעַט הַבַּיִת מִהֵיִת מִשְׁהָ וְלָקַח הוּא וּשְׂכֵנֵוּ הַקָּרֵב אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ בְּמִכְסֹת  
נִפְשֹׁת אִישׁ לְפִי אָבָלוֹ תִּכְסֹו עַל-הַשָּׂה:

Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household. But if the household is too small for a lamb, let him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby, in proportion to the number of persons: you shall contribute for the lamb according to what each household will eat. (Ex. 12:3–4)

It's not enough to eat the *korban pesach*, it has to be done as part of a wider group – with a sense of community. So much so that if there's only one member of a family or it's a family too small to eat an entire lamb they must find others to partner with. And this is reinforced – yet, crucially, modified – at our own *sedarim* by the declaration we make at the beginning of *Maggid*:

הָא לַחֲמַא עֲנִיָא דִּי אָכְלוּ אַבְהֻתְנָא בְּאַרְעָא דְּמִצְרַיִם. כָּל דְּכָפִין יִיתִי וְיִיכַל, כָּל דְּצָרִיף  
יִיתִי וְיִפְסַח. הַשְׁתָּא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דִּישְׂרָאֵל. הַשְׁתָּא עַבְדִּי, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה  
בְּנֵי חוֹרֵין.

This is the bread of destitution that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Anyone who is famished should come and eat, anyone who is in need should come and partake of the Pesach sacrifice. Now we are here, next year we will be in the land of Israel; this year we are slaves, next year we will be free people.

We offer an open invitation to those in need. It's not enough to let those who can't afford a *korban pesach* by themselves or don't have anyone else to eat with figure it out for themselves. We realize that, if we are to fulfil the Seder properly, if we are really going to internalize the message of the *korban pesach*, then we have to proactively reach out to those in need and invite them.

But this only makes sense when the meal is the focus! After all, we say “anyone who is famished should come and eat!” If the point of the meal at our Seder is to provide for the needy, then why are we making them wait longer than they need to to eat! Why does the Haggadah insist on moving the meal and forcing the hungry to wait a little longer?

I think the answer cuts to heart of *chessed*. Too often, our relationship to *chessed* – whether consciously or not – is about us helping someone lesser than ourselves. We pity someone and, deep down, that pity carries with it a judgement. We don't think of that person as on the same level as us.

And this is why the Haggadah reverses the intended order of the Seder. Lest we think that our duty is simply to provide food to the hungry, the Haggadah insists that we first sit and learn Torah with those around our table, including – especially – those in need. We engage with them in discussion. We treat them as equals. They aren't around our table for a pity meal, they aren't there to receive our charity, they are around our table to help us fulfil the central *mitzvah* of Pesach: re-living the story. Before we give a hungry person food, says the Haggadah, give them their dignity.

The Haggadah teaches us an important component of *chessed* that we all too often forget: it's not about us giving charity to another, it's not about me helping someone else, it's about realizing the inherent dignity, the inherent equality, that rests at the heart of all Jews and all humanity.

The purpose of inviting others to the Seder – and for that matter, Shabbat and Yom Tov meals more broadly – is not about helping, it's not about people eating food, it's about sharing with one

another. It's about seeing those around you as equals. Our Shabbat and Yom Tov meals are not there to feed the hungry, they are there to facilitate community. And when we forget this, we not only misunderstand the purpose of community – we also misunderstand *chesed*.

But there's another crucial mistake we make with *chesed*. And I'm going to address that tomorrow. Because we learn how to avoid it from the actions of God Himself as He took us out from Egypt.