Remembering Jerusalem in celebrations and social events

Previously, we explained that the Sages who lived during the generation in which the Bet haMiqdash was destroyed instituted certain Rabbinical decrees (taqanot) –certain gestures associated with mourning– that will motivate us to remember in moments of celebration that our Bet haMiqdash is still in ruins. We mentioned, for example, the tradition of placing ashes on the head of the bridegroom in his wedding day, or the custom of leaving a wall of the house with a segment of it unfinished.

Today, we will see another example of these laws and traditions, a not very known custom that may have fallen into disuse in many communities.

Maimonides and the Shulkhan Arukh write the following (H. Ta'aniyot 5:13).

וכן התקינו שהעורך שולחן לעשות סעודה לאורחים מחסר ממנו מעט
ומניח מקום פנוי בלא קערה מן הקערות הראויות לתת לשם

"And [our Sages] decreed that when preparing the table to serve a meal for our guest, that some food would be left (outside) and a free space would be left (on the table}, without one of the foods that would normally be served there. "

We will explain this Halakha to understand it better:

1. This tradition is limited to celebration meals, when we have guests, and does not refer to daily meals.

2. Shabbat meals or meals on Jewish holidays are also excluded, since on Shabbat and on Yom Tob there can be no

manifestation of mourning.

3. There is a discussion among the rabbis if this sign of mourning should be also done in a personal religious celebrations (se'udat Mtsva), such as Berit Mila, Bar Mitsva, etc. According to Rabbi Eliezer Melamed and others, this sign of morning should be applied to these celebratory meals as well. According to Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu z"l and other rabbis, in these meals, when a Mitsva is celebrated, we should not introduce any signs of mourning. According to this second opinion, therefore, this gesture of mourning should not be displayed, not in Shabbat, Jewish Holidays, and meals that celebrate a Mitsva. The occasion where this custom would play a role is therefore in a "social" celebration, where one invites his friends to eat at home, etc.

4. Now, although the Rabbis indicated the obligation to remember the Bet haMiqdash in a special meal, our Sages did not want us to make a very visible manifestation of mourning, but something that is rather discrete and indirect. And for that reason they indicated that this symbolic act of remembrance would be done by *not serving* one of the meals that should be served on the table. And by leaving an empty space on the table where the food is served.

It is very possible that the reason why this tradition has fallen into disuse, is that it would be very difficult nowadays for our guests to notice "the absence" of a specific dish or course that should have been served and was not served. In older times, the menu was very rigid and all the dishes were served at the same time, like in a buffet. In those conditions, the absence of one of the main dishes, or the empty space on the table, would not have gone unnoticed by the guest and it would have served the noble purpose of representing a delicate gesture of mourning, by seeing a scene that is incomplete, same as Jerusalem – or the Jewish people – without the Bet haMiqdash.

In our days, however, there is so much variety of courses, dishes and food, and so many different ways of serving the table, that it would be virtually impossible for our guests to identify for themselves *the absence* of a particular dish, or to recognize that there is an empty place in one part of the table, and associate any of these with our mourning for the Bet haMiqdash.

Now, since this decree was explicitly mentioned by the Sages, many contemporary Rabbis consider it appropriate that we keep practicing it, even if this gesture is only recognizable by the hosts. For example, says Rabbi Melamed, when the hosts plan the meal and the various types of foods to serve to their guests, they should decide NOT to serve one of the main meals in remembrance of the Bet haMiqdash. One could also leave an empty place on the table, a corner of the table without any food, as indicated by Maimonides and the Shulhan Aruch, although this gesture would probably be recognized only by the hosts. And while it is very possible that our guests would not identify this gesture, our children will surely do so. And we will be educating them to long for, have in their hearts and pray for our Bet haMiqdash.