PESACH: The Seder and a Broadway Show

We will celebrate the first night of the Seder B”H Saturday night, April 12th, 2025

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“From the dust, God raises the poor to sit with the nobles of his people.” Psalms (113:7-8)

ACTING FOR THE LITTLE ONES
One of Pesach’s most important mitzvot is the Seder’s celebration. At this very special festive dinner, we celebrate our departure from Egypt and the end of our slavery and thank God for rescuing us. During this dinner, we read the story of the exit from Egypt and we perform certain rituals to recreate and reenact the experience of slavery and freedom. We do this following the indication of the Sages who said that during that night, “one should ‘show himself’ (i.e., □□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□□, “act”) as if he had come out of Egypt.” The Pesach Seder, for this reason, requires a stage decor designed to “dramatize” slavery and freedom and thus entertain our children, that is, educate them without boring them in the process! This is why it is obligatory to serve during the Seder maror –bitter herbs– and charoset –a brown paste made with dried fruits, which looks like the mud used to make the bricks when we were in captivity. And on the other hand, during the Seder we drink four cups of wine to celebrate our freedom. Another “theatrical” gesture we do that represents freedom (cherut), is known in Hebrew as hasiba, reclining on our left side.

In the next lines, we will try to understand it better.

THE ROMAN TRICLINIUM

What is the origin and history of this custom? In ancient times, people usually sat down to eat on the ground, or slaves, who in Athens or Rome, for example, made up a large part of the population, ate standing up. But on celebratory occasions, nobles and aristocrats ate in “triclinium”, a set of three or six couches, arranged in a «U» shape– “… wide enough to accommodate three diners on each sofa, who reclined on their left side on cushions” (see here). The small tables with trays (in Hebrew *qe’arot*) where the food was served were semi-individual, and as can be seen below in the illustration of an ancient Roman mosaic, they were placed inside the U. What is also seen in this mosaic is that the diners did not eat sitting on the couches but reclining on their left side. Why did they recline on the left side? The Sages explained that reclining on the left side decreases the risk of choking, but it seems that the more practical reason for this custom, as seen in the mosaic, is that most diners used their right hand to eat, and that is why they reclined on their left arm.



PRETENDING TO BE NOBLES

Now we can understand a little better the symbolism of the

hasiba. The Sages of the Talmud established that to “act” as free men on the night of the Seder we must imitate the nobility and the aristocracy by eating while reclining on our left side. That night, all Jews, from the poorest to the wealthiest, sit and eat as free and noble people do, imitating not only the etiquette but also the status of the nobility. For this, I believe, the Sages found their inspiration in the verse of Tehillim that we recite in the Hallel on the night of Pesach, which states that God “raises the poor out of the ground and makes him ‘sit/ recline’, ‘next to/ like’ the nobles.

TIME FLIES

Over time the universal custom of eating on the triclinium fell into disuse. And some European rabbis, such as Ra-aban (Abraham ben Nathan de Provence, France, 1155-1215), proposed to interrupt this custom, since in Europe the nobles already sat on chairs around a table, and reclining would be an anachronism. But the vast majority of the rabbis insisted that we should preserve this ancient custom. They even asserted that if we do not recline when eating the Matsa or drinking the cups of wine, we are not obligated to behave like nobles (derekh cherut). Interestingly, other rabbis justified the re-adoption of this ancient tradition by reassigning it to a different but very important category in the Seder: *shinui*, that is, the parent’s obligation to dramatize unusual gestures during that night in order to attract the attention of the main audience of this theatrical work: our children, stimulating their curiosity and provoking their questions.

THE BEGINNING OF FEMINISM?

Another issue that has been discussed for centuries is whether women also had to recline during the Seder. The Talmud says ‘no’. And this is better understood when we consider that at that time, it was not part of the protocol for women to participate in the triclinium (in the Roman mosaic shown above, we can only see men). However, sometimes the Talmud

mentions *ishá chashuba*, important women, nobles, or close to the emperor's family who belonged to this privileged elite. They were known in Latin as "matrons", see here , (matronitá in the Gemara). Based on this, some rabbis from the Middle Ages, especially from Europe (Tosafot, Rama, etc.) said that women should also recline at the Seder, since all "Jewish wives should be considered important women." And who can oppose to that? Today it is expected that both men and women equally participate in the custom of the hasiba.