Remembering Yerushalayim when hosting a meal

The Sages who lived during the generation of the Bet haMiqdash instituted certain traditions related to grief, to help us remember—during moments of celebration—that our Bet haMiqdash is still in ruins. We mentioned, for example, the custom of placing ashes on the head of the bridegroom, leaving an unfinished segment of a new house’s wall, etc.

Today we will examine another such tradition—lesser known and, in many communities, nearly forgotten.

Rambam writes the following (Hilchot Ta’aniyot 5:13):

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

“Likewise, [our Sages] decreed that when one sets a table for a meal with guests, some food should be left out, and a space should be left empty [on the table] where a dish would normally be placed.”

To better understand this halakha, we will explain several of its details:

1. This practice applies specifically to festive meals prepared for guests and does not refer to regular daily meals.
2. Meals held on Shabbat or Jewish holidays are excluded from this practice, since on Shabbat and Yom Tob we are not permitted to show visible signs of grief.
3. There is a discussion among the rabbis as to whether festive meals for personal religious celebrations (*se’udot mitsva*, such as a *Berit Mila*, *Bar Mitsva*, etc.)

fall under this practice. Rabbi Eliezer Melamed and others maintain that they do. According to Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu z”l and other authorities, they do not.

4. In indicating our obligation to remember the Bet haMiqdash, the Sages clearly did not want us to engage in overt or heavy displays of mourning when hosting a festive meal. Rather, the intention was a discreet and indirect expression: the absence of a dish.

The challenge—and perhaps the reason this tradition has fallen into disuse—lies in how to implement it today in a meaningful way. The methods of presenting, displaying, and serving food have changed significantly since the time of the Mishnah (1st–2nd centuries CE). In that era, food presentation followed a well-established protocol, including a set number of dishes and a fixed arrangement. As a result, guests could easily notice that a specific dish was missing, recognizing this omission as a subtle reminder that the celebration was not entirely complete without the Bet haMiqdash.

Over time, the number and variety of dishes served at festive meals changed. It became increasingly difficult—or impossible—for guests to detect that a dish was intentionally left out. Thus, as Maimonides describes, the symbolic gesture became primarily the act of leaving a section of the table empty, rather than omitting a specific dish. Even in Maimonides’ time, this empty space could still be understood as a meaningful expression of grief.

Today, with such a wide variety of foods and styles of presentation, it would be nearly impossible for guests to notice that a specific dish is missing, or to recognize that an empty space on the table is a gesture of mourning.

Nevertheless, since this enactment was instituted by the Sages—and is not merely a popular custom—many contemporary

rabbis believe it is appropriate to continue observing this practice, even if it is recognizable only to the hosts. For example, if a host plans to serve several types of dishes to entertain guests, they may choose, in memory of the Bet haMiqdash, to omit one of those planned dishes. Alternatively, when serving food buffet-style, they could leave a portion of the table empty, as described by the Rambam and Shulchan Arukh, even if this act is only understood by the host.

Some suggest that, from an educational perspective, when hosting a celebration, one could also place a discreet, decorative item on the table as a subtle reminder of Yerushalayim and the Bet haMiqdash.