

The Giving Jew: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Yachatz and Hachnasat Orchim

At the Pesach seder we engage in the curious custom of *yachatz*, breaking the matzah into two parts.

Why is this one of the fifteen steps to freedom?

One well-known explanation is offered in the Talmud (*Pesachim* 115b): “*Mah darko shel ani beprusa ... — just as a poor person eats a broken piece of a loaf, so too matzah must be eaten as a broken piece.*” The poor slave would break the flat crusty bread and hide away a piece for later, not knowing where his next meal would come from. The breaking of the matzah at the seder symbolizes the way we first ate matzah as slaves.¹

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt”l suggested an inspiring insight regarding this custom:

Although when we think of the enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt, we usually think that all the Jews must have been equally burdened by it, in truth this was not so. There were various degrees of slavery. Some Jews lived under bitter conditions, some worse. According to



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our sages, one tribe, the tribe of Levi, was never enslaved. What this means is that some had access to food and some did not.

Those that did, claims Rabbi Soloveitchik, broke their bread and shared it with other Jews who had less. Even the Jews who were enslaved in Egypt, but may have been better off, would split their piece of matzah and share it with those who suffered and needed it more than they did, hence the term “poor man’s bread.”

When we break the matzah and perform *yachatz* as our forefathers did, it is a symbol of the *chesed*, the loving-kindness and solidarity of Jew toward their fellow Jew, even under the harshest conditions.²

Bearing in mind this unique explanation, the flow of the seder,

which transitions from the breaking of the matzah to the invitation “*kol dichfin yese veyechol*” — all who are in need are invited to join in the Pesach meal, is poignant.

Inviting those who are in need activates a key virtue that permeates the Jewish heart: namely, *chesed* expressed through the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, hospitality.

The mitzvah of hospitality is most precious to the Jew.³ It is rooted in our collective souls from the beginning of our history, as early as Abraham and Sarah who distinguished themselves in opening their homes to strangers.

Rabbi Soloveitchik highlights five aspects of the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* that imbue it with special significance:

Gratitude to my rebbe, Rabbi Aharon Rakeffet shlita, for reviewing this article and for opening up the world of the Rabbi Soloveitchik z”l for me and for literally thousands of others.

1. It is Difficult and Uncomfortable

When we allow a stranger into our home we may find that the mannerisms of our guest are odd. He intrudes on our privacy, both in a physical sense and emotionally as well. At times, having a guest means that we sacrifice a part of our own comfort or our own privacy, which is not always easy to give up.⁴

In this same vein, there is another challenge when we open our homes to guests. Namely, we may find that the guest's opinions may be different from ours. The Rav taught that the quality of welcoming strangers into one's home reflects a spiritually noble attitude toward others. It reflects humility; that a Jew feels far from perfection, and that others can teach him something new. There is an openness to learning from others. When a Jew is convinced of his own righteousness, of his own scholarship and wisdom, he will be hesitant to perform the mitzvah of welcoming guests, for in his mind he is convinced that a guest has nothing more to teach him.⁵

2. Lightening the Burden of Others

Abraham, from whom we learn this mitzvah, experienced in his own life what it felt like not to have a home. He was a wanderer for many years of his life. He knew what it was like to come to the end of the day not knowing his next destination. He knew firsthand the feeling of sleeping on the ground on a freezing cold night; to be lost in a strange land. This intense experience taught Abraham and his descendants to feel for the stranger and to have compassion for those who are in need.

The Jew says, "I will open my home for those who need a warm meal and comfortable bed."

This teaching of empathy is a critical lesson that we learned from our enslavement in Egypt. We as a people felt the pain of being strangers and being homeless, and therefore knowing what this pain feels like, we will share in the distress of others. We will lighten the burden of others who suffer as much as we possibly can.⁶

One commandment is repeated in various formulations 36 times in the Torah. It is mentioned more often than any other mitzvah. "You shall not oppress the stranger, since you yourself know the feeling of being a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). The Rav suggested that we, the Jewish people, had to experience 210 years of slavery because it was critical in molding our national personality into one of compassion and concern for our fellow man.

3. "My Home is My Castle"

Rabbi Soloveitchik argued for the supremacy of the mitzvah of hospitality based on the fact that the Torah rejects the doctrine of "my home is my castle." This doctrine conveys two illusory ideas: first that the home gives ample protection and shields us in times of crisis. We know that this is not the case. Second, that our home is our property and that no one else can claim a share in it. This assertion is also false. Man is vulnerable. One is never fully protected. Man neither has a home nor a castle. When man shares his home with others he expresses the awareness that he is just a "tenant"; his home is his to be used for good and to

Rabbi Zonnenfeld's Paid Pesach Guests

A few American tourists knocked on the door of R. Yosef Chaim Zonnenfeld (1848-1932), a prominent rabbi in Jerusalem, asking if the rabbi would host them for the Pesach seder. They explained that they were supposed to eat in a hotel and their plans fell through and they insisted on paying hundreds of dollars for the hospitality. Rabbi Zonnenfeld graciously hosted them for the seder. On Chol HaMoed, Rabbi Zonnenfeld visited them and returned the money. The guests asked quizzically, "Why did you take the money from us knowing that you would return it?" Rabbi Zonnenfeld explained that he would never want to take money to perform the mitzvah of inviting guests. However, he knew that if he didn't take the money, the guests would feel as if they were imposing and wouldn't be able to fully enjoy the seder. Therefore, he accepted the money and allowed the guests to fully enjoy the seder. Now that the seder is over, he is returning it.

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help provide for others who may be in need.

When the Jewish people partook of the paschal lamb in Egypt, a new fellowship was formed. In contrast to the selfish and survival mode that they embodied as slaves, they began to share their lives with one another: "... then he and his neighbor who is nearest to his house shall take one according to the number of people ..." (Exodus 12:4). The Rav writes, "The slave spontaneously did something he would never have believed he was capable of doing: he knocked on the door of his neighbor, whom he had never noticed, inviting him to share the lamb with him and eat together. No wonder our seder commences with the declaration *Ha Lachma Anya*." In Egypt the Jewish people entered the *chesed* community; we are to do the same on seder night.

4. The Dignity of Every Person

Every individual is endowed with *tzelem Elokim*, the Divine image. The importance of *hachnasat orchim* is emphasized because it reflects appreciating each individual not only as a fellow human, but as a unique being before God.

The Rav commented that the name of the Book of Shemot, literally, "Names," is significant as it suggests the importance of every individual. A name signifies uniqueness.

Rashi, in the opening verse of Exodus (1:1), compares the counting of the children of Israel to the stars in the sky and quotes the verse, "He brings out and counts His heavenly hosts" (Isaiah 40:26). Each star is part of a universe, yet each star is

numbered, named, and accounted for individually by God. Similarly, we also need to view each individual as a singular "star," recognizing each person's uniqueness, Divine spark, and eternal value.⁸

Strikingly, the Ten Commandments were addressed not in the plural but in the singular, to emphasize that God relates not only to the collective but to the individual as well.

To open one's home to another is to be conscious of *kavod habriyot* — human dignity; it is a reflection that one is aware of the dignity and Divine essence found within every human being.

5. The Almighty is the Great Machnis Orchim

Rabbi Soloveitchik taught that it is God's hospitality that allows the world to come into being and allow for humanity to exist. The Almighty, like Abraham, invites people to partake of His boundless existence. Creation is an act of *hachnasat orchim*; God invites us to share this world with Him.

The Jewish mystics asked: Why did God create the world? Does God, the Almighty, infinite, eternal, omniscient and transcendent, need a frail, finite, transient world? Yes, they said, He needs the world in order to have another on whom to bestow kindness and mercy. To let someone share in the great "I" awareness of being; to give love and bestow *chesed*.⁹

The Rav referred to the Kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum* — contraction. God practices "self-limitation" and "self-control." By limiting the infinite in the process of creation, God makes room for the world to come into being. "By creating the world

Using Milk for the Four Cups

The Beis Halevi, Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik (1820–1892), the illustrious great-grandfather of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is the subject of this touching Pesach story.

A poor man came to the home of Rabbi Joseph Baer. The man said that he had come to ask a question regarding Pesach. He had a halachic question to ask. He told the rabbi that he could not afford to buy wine, so he wished to know if he could fulfill the obligation to drink the four cups of wine during the seder by drinking four cups of milk.

Rabbi Joseph Baer said to him that one cannot not fulfill this important command by drinking milk and then proceeded to give the man 25 rubles with which to buy wine.

After the man had gone, the Rabbi Yosef Baer's wife approached her husband with this question: "Why, when wine costs two or three rubles, did you give him twenty-five?"

Rabbi Joseph Baer smiled and said, "If he is so poor that he cannot afford wine for the seder, I doubt that he has the money to buy chicken and matzah for the seder nights. And you know something, if he is asking about drinking milk, that means he has no meat or chicken because he would not be mixing it with milk! I want to give him enough money so that he can buy the proper food that he needs to fully enjoy the yontif of Pesach."

From 'The Night That Unites' Haggadah by R. Goldscheider

in general, and man in particular, God surrendered His aloneness and allowed a physical universe to share in His infinite being ... He allowed something else to share with him what had been exclusively His own.”¹⁰

The Almighty is the great *Machnis Orchim*. When we open our homes to others, we participate in an act that resembles God’s ways; the Jew emulates God and also practices *tzimtzum*.

A central motif in Judaism may be best captured in two words: *vehalachta bidrachav* (Devarim 28:2), to walk in His ways. This means that we are summoned to live our lives emulating God’s attributes and conduct.¹¹ When we discipline ourselves to withdraw and share our space with others, this is an essential part of our service of the Almighty.¹² In practicing compassion and kindness we come close to our most Godly selves.

A Great Nation

The Torah teaches that the Israelites in Egypt became a “*goy gadol*” — a large nation, we became large in number;

the Torah counts over 600,000 men alone. However, the Pesach Haggadah is not satisfied merely with this definition of *gadol*. *Gadol*, also has the connotation of *metzuyanim*, which means distinct or to excel. Our greatness, the Rav taught, was not based on our increased population. Rather, we became great because we distinguished ourselves in the area of righteousness. *Gadlut* (greatness) for a Jew consists in excelling in the areas of kindness, selflessness, charity, and hospitality.¹³

This remains the spiritual yardstick by which we measure our nobility — both as individuals and as a nation. If we wish to lay claim to our greatness we must assess our progress regarding our fairness, kindness, and mercy.

Sharing is an essential lesson that we endeavor to pass on to children on seder night. The Rav declared, “The mitzvah of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* means inscribing one’s entire religious consciousness on the next generation.”¹⁴ We fulfill the beloved mitzvah of “*vihigadeta levincha*” — and you shall teach your children, in the fullest sense, when we inculcate

in their hearts and souls mitzvot that reflect selflessness and sensitivity.

Notes

1. Numerous other insights have been suggested for the symbolism of *yachatz*, for example see: *Da’at Zekeinim Al HaTorah* (Shemot 12:8).
2. *The Night That Unites Haggadah*, p.64.
3. Talmud, *Shabbat* 127a.
4. Lustiger, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, Bereshit, 2012 p.169.
5. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Five Addresses*, p.159.
6. *The Night That Unites Haggadah*, p. 95 ; Lustiger, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, Shmot, 2014,p. 59.
7. *Ibid*, p.87.
8. *Ibid*, 2014, p. 3.
9. Lustiger, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, Bereshit, 2012, p.225.
10. Clark, Wolowelsky, and Ziegler, ed. *Days of Deliverance*, 2007 p. 109.
11. Rakeffet, *The Rav*, 1991 p. 7-9 ; Schachter, *Nefesh Harav*, 1994, p. 72.
12. Lustiger, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, Bereshit, 2012, p.203.
13. *Ibid*, 2012, p.338.
14. Lustiger, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, Shmot, 2014, p.77.

