

From a Sacrifice to a Symposium

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The term "Seder Pesach" once meant the Order of the Passover Sacrifice in the Temple. But after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE, the Rabbis remodeled the Seder after the Greco-Roman symposium (*sym* - together, *posium* - drinking wine). At these Hellenistic banquets guests would recline on divans while servants poured them wine, washed their hands and served appetizers and dips before the meal. In the meantime the symposium host functioned as a talk show moderator. An ancient how-to manual for conducting such a symposium says:

"A symposium is a communion of serious and mirthful entertainment, discourse and actions. It leads to deeper insight into those points that were debated at table, for the remembrance of those pleasures which arise from meat and drink is short-lived, but the subjects of philosophical queries and discussions remain always fresh after they have been imparted." (Athenaeus, *Banquet of the Learned*, 2nd C)

Thus the Rabbis' prescribed such a banquet for the telling of the Exodus: much wine (four cups); appetizers (celery dipped in salt water); reclining on pillows; having our hands ceremonially washed by others; a royal feast; and most importantly – a philosophical discussion on the story of the Exodus and the issues of freedom versus slavery. The Rabbis wanted Pesach to be an experience of freedom, aristocracy and affluence – thus they chose to mimick the eating habits of their affluent contemporaries.

However, there is a fundamental difference: The Greco-Roman feast was for the rich only, it exploited slaves, it restricted asking questions and exchanging opinions to the ruling class, men only. But at the Pesach Seder all people are invited to eat like royalty, to ask questions and to express opinions, even the spouses and the youngest children. Alongside the wine of the rich, there is the bread of poverty. The needy must be invited to share our meal. Stylish banquets may easily turn corrupt, but the Seder encourages us to savor our liberty, without exploiting or excluding others.