

RECLINING AT THE SEDER

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The opening mishna in the final chapter of Tractate Pesachim (99b) teaches regarding the Seder night, “Even the poor person in Israel may not eat until he reclines.” The obligation to recline (or, as it is often expressed, “lean”) during the Seder is one of the defining characteristics of the Seder, earning it a question of its own in the *Ma Nishtana*. Reclining was the position of choice for the free upper class while eating, and was therefore mandated by our Sages as a means of displaying our status as a free nation on Pesach (see Rashi and Rashbam *ibid.* s.v. *va’afilu*). This article will explore the who, how, and when associated with this obligation, as well as what to do if one failed to recline.

There is an important, albeit minority, opinion of the Ra’avyah, a medieval German Torah authority, who says that because people, including nobility, no longer recline while eating, there is no obligation to recline at the Seder. While this is not the normative approach followed in halacha, it does have halachic ramifications, as will be discussed.

Who?: The Gemara (Pesachim 108a) states that a woman needn’t recline in the presence of her husband. The Rashbam (*ibid.* s.v. *isha*) explains that a woman is submissive before her husband. He cites a second approach from the She’iltos diRav Achai, that it is not the norm for women to recline. The Tur (Orach Chaim 472:4) points out that an unmarried woman would need to recline according to the first approach, but not according to the second.

The Gemara concludes, though, that an *isha chashuva* (lit., important woman¹) must recline. The Bais Yosef (*ibid.*) cites Rabbeinu Yerucham in the name of Tosafos that today (medieval times), all women are regarded as *chashuvos* and must lean. However, the Darchei Moshe (*ibid.*:20) notes that he did not see women reclining in his time (16th-century Krakow). He explains that women rely on the opinion of the Ra’avyah, who, as mentioned earlier, says that there is no requirement to lean at all since people no longer recline while eating. The Rema (who authored Darchei Moshe) codifies this approach in his glosses to the Shulchan Aruch (*ibid.*). Practically, some families have the custom for the women to recline while others do not; for one without a particular custom, a halachic authority should be consulted.

There are several other potential exemptions from reclining –

some mandatory exemptions, some optional – such as a mourner (see Mishna Berurah 492:12) and a student before his *rebbe* (see Shulchan Aruch *ibid.*:5). A halachic authority should be consulted in such cases.

How?: The Gemara (108a) states that reclining in a *prakdan* position or to the right is not considered reclining. The Gemara explains that doing so may cause one to choke. The Tur (*ibid.*:3) quotes an opinion that *prakdan* means leaning forward. The Rashbam (*ibid.* s.v. *shema yakdim*) cites Rashi who understands *prakdan* to mean leaning backwards, and explains that the concern of choking is associated with reclining on one’s back while leaning. Leaning to the right is invalid since the right hand is needed to eat. The Rashbam offers a second approach from his teachers that leaning to the right may cause one to choke. The difference between these approaches would be a left-handed person. If the issue is leaving one’s hand free to eat, a lefty would lean to his right and leave his primary hand free. If the concern is choking, there would be no distinction. The Shulchan Aruch (*ibid.*) rules that one should lean to the left, and draws no distinction; the Rema (*ibid.*) explicitly states that there is no difference. The Mishna Berura (*ibid.* 11) explains that the concern of danger outweighs the other opinion. The Shulchan Aruch (*ibid.*) also rules that one cannot lean forward or backward, in accordance with both aforementioned opinions.

From the fact that some say that leaning to the right is problematic as the right hand will be unavailable, it is clear that “leaning” does not simply mean inclining oneself at an angle; rather, one must actually be leaning upon one’s arm. Preferably, one should prepare pillows and cushions upon which to recline in true aristocratic fashion (see Shulchan Aruch and Rema *ibid.*:2). Even if not, one should try to have some object upon which to lean (e.g., an armchair). One may lean on the person next to him, but not upon his own leg, as this gives the appearance that he is worried, and this would undermine the appearance of freedom that reclining is meant to invoke (Magen Avraham *ibid.*:3). However, the Mishna Berura (*ibid.*:8) says that one should not lean on another person unless he is stuck without a better option (see Sha’ar Hatizyun *ibid.*:9).

When?: The Gemara (Pesachim 108a) says that one must recline while eating the matzah and while drinking all four cups of wine.

¹ It appears that *chashuva* doesn’t mean “important” in the classic sense of the word but, rather, that societal norm provides women similar external trappings of prestige as men.

The Rosh (Pesachim 10:20) states that matzah includes both the *kezayis* (olive's-volume) eaten initially as well as the *kezayis* of the *afikoman* eaten later. One does not lean while eating the *maror*, which recalls the slavery and bitterness of the Egyptian exile.

The Tur (ibid. 475:2) records that there is discussion regarding whether one should lean during *korech*, which features both matzah and *maror*. The Bais Yosef (ibid.) says that it is obvious to him that one should lean, since Hillel, whose opinion we are following by eating *korech*, surely leaned while eating the matzah-*Korban Pesach-maror* sandwich, since one must lean while eating the initial *kezayis* of matzah, and leaning while eating the *maror* would not impede the fulfillment of the mitzvah of eating *maror*. The Shulchan Aruch (ibid.) accordingly rules that one must lean during *korech*.

The Rema (ibid. 472:7) rules that it is preferable that one lean during the entire meal. The Mishna Berura says that *bidieved* (after the fact), one who leans during the matzah consumptions and the four cups of wine has fulfilled the basic obligation. The Mishna Berura's verbiage indicates that one should try to lean the entire meal. However, the Chazon Ish and the Steipler (Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievski) did not lean during the rest of the meal (Orchos Rabbeinu vol. 2, pg. 59). The Steipler explained (ibid.) that since today it is difficult for people to eat while reclining, we can apply the halacha used for a waiter, who may rely initially upon the *bidieved* ruling of leaning only for the matzah consumptions and the four cups. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Halichos Shlomo Pesach ch. 9, Orchos Halacha note 135) also did not lean during the rest of the meal.

If one failed to recline: The Rosh (Pesachim 10:20) states that one who fails to lean while eating matzah² or while drinking the first two cups of wine must do so again while leaning. However, for the third and fourth cups, one should not repeat them while reclining. The Rosh explains that since one may not drink additional wine following the third and fourth cups, drinking an additional cup would create the appearance of adding more required cups of wine. However, after the first and second cups, where one may drink additional wine, there is no such concern, and one should drink another cup while reclining. The Rosh then entertains another possibility, that since one failed to lean, the mitzvah has not been fulfilled and thus drinking again would not be considered adding to the four cups; therefore, failure to lean even during the third or fourth cups should require one to drink again while reclining. This final approach is followed by the Shulchan Aruch (ibid.:7).

The Darchei Moshe (ibid.:4), however, cites the Mordechai who states that *bidieved*, one can rely on the Ra'avyah's opinion that

today, one need not recline at all. The Darchei Moshe concludes that failure to recline during the first two cups (as well as matzah) requires repeating while leaning, but for the third and fourth cups, where there is an appearance of adding to the four cups, one should rely on the Ra'avyah's opinion and not repeat. This is, indeed, the Rema's ruling (ibid.:7). The Magen Avraham (ibid.:7) adds that since the custom has become that one does not drink wine between the first two cups, one who does so must make a new blessing. Making a new blessing on the cup creates the appearance of it being an additional required cup of wine. Therefore, the issue that prevents one from drinking another cup while reclining following the third or fourth cups would apply following the first cup, as well. The only way to avoid the issue, says the Magen Avraham, is for a person to have in mind at the outset that he may decide to drink additional wine prior to the second cup. One could then drink an additional cup following the first cup without having to make a new blessing.

The Mishna Berura (ibid.:22) rules that if one failed to recline while eating the *afikoman*, he should not eat it again while reclining, since one may not eat the *afikoman* twice. However, the Mishna Berura seems to contradict himself later when discussing the laws of *afikoman*, for he rules (477:4) that one who failed to recline while eating the *afikoman* need not eat it again if it is difficult to eat it again – the clear implication being that if one is able to eat it, one should do so. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe Orach Chaim 3:67) resolves this by saying that if one already recited *birchas hamazon* (or merely signaled an end to the meal, such as by washing *mayim acharonim*), he must wash anew for bread and make a new blessing in order to eat the *afikoman* again; this is forbidden, for this is clearly a second, separate eating of the *afikoman*. If, however, one has not ended the meal, eating matzah again simply looks like a continuation of the first eating of the *afikoman*, and is permissible. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Halichos Shlomo, Pesach 89, Devar Halacha 106) tightens this time frame up further and says that so long as one has not finished eating the *afikoman*, one may recline and eat another *kezayis*, but once one has finished eating the *afikoman*, despite not formally ending the meal, beginning to eat again creates the appearance of a second *afikoman*.

In conclusion, reclining during the Seder is an important part of fulfilling the mitzvos of the Seder night, and our Sages instituted this obligation as a means of manifesting the freedom we experience on this night. With a little contemplation, one can utilize this obligation as a means of expressing the freedom that is the focal point of the Seder.

² For *korech*, however, one who failed to recline needn't repeat while reclining (Shulchan Aruch Harav 475:20).