

To Lean or Not to Lean?

Leaning During the Seder

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While the night of the certainly presents a wonderful educational and historical experience, many of us find some aspects of the Seder rather challenging. The Seder begins late, especially outside of Israel. We engage in lengthy discussions, long before we get to the food. Matzah and Maror aren't the easiest foods to consume, especially in the large Seder-night quantities. To me though, the most challenging aspect of the Seder is the issue of leaning. As we eat or drink during any meaningful portion of the Seder, we lean to the left and eat in an awkward, unusual position. Why do we do it? We lean to symbolize our freedom, of course. Funny though. When I lean during the Seder I feel anything but free.

Some Halachic and Historical Background

We can trace the requirement to lean during the Seder all the way back to the times of the Mishnah, which clearly assumes a requirement to lean. The Mishnah (Pesach 99b) states, **אפילו עני שבִּישראל לא יאכל עד שיסב** – "even the impoverished in Israel may not eat until he leans." The Gemara accepts the ruling of the Mishnah unconditionally, adding that one must not only lean during while eating matzah, but also as one drinks the four glasses of wine. Why must we lean? Rashi explains that we lean "in the manner of free people, as a reminder of our freedom, with a bed adjacent to a table."

Thank goodness for Wikipedia. How else would I have been able to easily learn about table habits during the Roman Empire? How did people eat their meals in the Roman era? Actually, it depended on who you were – which is precisely the point.

The dinner was consumed in a special dining room, which later was to be called triclinium. Here one would lie down on a specially designed couch, the lectus triclinaris. Around the round table, the mensa, three of these lecti were arranged in the shape of a horseshoe, so that slaves could easily serve, and a maximum of three diners would recline at each lectus. During the kingdom and early republic, the only people allowed a place on a lectus were men. By the late republic and imperial times, and especially among the aristocracy, women were permitted to recline during meals. Traditionally, women would dine sitting upright across from their husbands or fathers in chairs. More tables for the beverages stood beside the couches. All heads were oriented towards the central table, with left elbows propped on a cushion and feet at the outside of the dinner-couch. In this fashion at most nine people could dine together at one table. Further guests had to sit on chairs. Slaves normally had to stand.

On Pesach night, we're all the masters. There are no slaves standing around to serve, nor regular guests. In order to fully appreciate the level of freedom that we achieved on Pesach night, we each must recline on our own *lectus triclinaris*. No one dines upright on the Seder night because for at least this one night, we're all princes – or emperors.

There's only one problem with this halachic ruling: while the history of Roman dining is really fascinating, no one today – from the President of the United States to the Queen of England to the Prime Minister of Micronesia dines on couches, recliners, beds or especially *lectus triclinaris*. (or is that *lecti triclinari*?) So why must I recline in a manner that while certainly significant two thousand years ago has no meaning today?

This is not a new question, and was posed by no less than the Ra'avyah (Rav Eliezer the son of Yoel HaLevi, a member of the

Tosafists, lived in Germany from 1140 until 1225), who noted that even by his time people had long since stopped leaning on couches. For this reason, he and his disciples, including the Avi Ezri quoted in the Tur (Orach Chayyim 472:2) wrote that, "nowadays, as we are not accustomed in our land to lean, one sits in the normal manner and is not required to lean." After all, logic dictates that if we lean to demonstrate our feelings of freedom, we should display that freedom based on the customs of our time, and not on ancient Roman practice.

Yet, while Ra'avyah's ruling did carry significant halachic weight (as we shall soon see), major halachic authorities never adopted his position. In fact, R' Yosef Karo writes in the Beit Yosef that, "[Ra'avyah's] is an individual [opinion] in this matter; meaning that the position of all the *poskim* is that one must always lean even nowadays." He expresses his position clearly in the Shulchan Aruch writing not only how to lean (on the left, preferably against something like an arm of a chair, a pillow, or the person sitting next to you), but also that one who fails to lean has not fulfilled his obligation to eat or drink and must repeat the consumption in the proper position. (472:7) (Rama, following Ashkenazic tradition argues that in a case of *bedieved*, one can rely on the position of Ra'avyah and need not eat or drink a second time.)

What about the Women?

Shulchan Aruch writes that "A woman is not required to lean unless she is significant (**חשובה**)."

So, as Orot President Rav Neria Gutel explained, it's up to the woman: if she considers herself an **אשה חשובה**, then she should lean. If not, then at least according to Sephardic custom she need not lean. Rama argues on two critical counts:

- All of our (read here: Ashkenazi) women are **נשים חשובות**.
- Still, none of our very important, significant, honored and cherished women lean during the Seder. Why not? It must be because they relied on the ruling of the Ra'avyah.

Bottom Line and How Do I Do It?

As important as the Ra'avyah's position is, the bottom line is that everyone – men and women – must lean during the Seder. Unless someone suffers from a medical condition that would preclude them from leaning comfortably, halachah considers leaning an integral aspect of the Seder experience. Sorry.

There's still the question of how. What's the best and most proper way to lean? Ideally, get yourself a *lectus triclinaris* – or at least a chaise lounge. Place it next to the table, spend the night leaning to the left, eating grapes and living like a king. Barring that, one must lean to the left on something and not in the air, and lean the entire body and not just the head. I'd like to also add the suggestion of Rabbi Eliezer Melamed (the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Brachah) writes in his book *Peninei Halachah* on Pesach (page 226):

Instead of sitting straight upright against the back of the chair, one should pull his rear-end forward to the center of the chair, such that he is able to lean his back on the backing of the chair and lean himself towards the left.

In other words, nowadays the best way to lean on Pesach night is to...slump. What better symbol of freedom could there ever be? Throughout our childhood, our mothers told us to sit up straight and not slump in our chairs. On this night we slump! Finally, on this night, we are free to practice bad posture. Just make sure that you've got the number of a chiropractor handy. And have a wonderful, happy and Kosher Pesach!