

THE OPEN DOOR

R. Avi Killip

WHEN I WAS a child, my mother would announce at each Pesah Seder that she had made a donation to a food bank in honor of each guest. She explained that she began this annual practice since today we cannot open our doors directly to the poor. I always understood this to be a wonderful example of caring for the wider world, never once questioning the underlying assumption—and the lesson I was learning—that we cannot actually open our doors directly. Why not? Why couldn't we invite someone hungry to come and eat at our table with us?

It turns out that resistance to opening the door is as ancient as the mandate itself. We learn both within two lines of each other in the same page of Talmud on Ta'anit 20b-21a. A recounting of the wonderful behaviors of Rav Huna ends with a description of his practice to open the door for the hungry:

כִּי הָיָה כָּרֵךְ רַבִּי חֻנָּה, הָיָה פֶּתַח לְבַבְיָהּ, וְאָמַר: כָּל
מֵאֵן דְּצָרִיךְ לִיתִי וְלִיכּוֹל.

*When [Rav Huna] would eat bread, he would
open the doors saying: Whoever needs, let
them come in and eat.*

Rav Huna's behavior is presented as a model for us. The Haggadah features his invitation almost word for word as we open our Seders: "This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat." We are meant to imitate Rav Huna, and invite the hungry into our homes.

We encounter resistance to this idea, however, in the very next line of the Talmud:

אָמַר רָבָא: כּוּלְהוּ מְצִינָא מְקַיִמְנָא, לְבַר מַהָא דְלָא
מְצִינָא לְמִיעָבֵד, מְשׁוּם דְּנִפְיִשִּׁי בְּנֵי חֵילָא דְּמַחוּזָא.

*Rava said: I can fulfill all these [customs of
Rav Huna] except for this one, which I cannot
do, due to the many soldiers in Mahoza.*

Rashi explains Rava's concern: there are so many poor people that they would eat all the food. No sooner does the Talmud present us with the open-door model than someone explains that it cannot really be done.

Our fear of opening our homes to the hungry is not new. The impulse to keep the door closed is ancient, and it comes even from a great sage like Rava. Today there are many reasons we might share Rava's feeling that we cannot open our doors to welcome anyone who wishes to join our tables. According to the Food Bank for New York City, 1.1 million city residents—or 12.5 percent of its population—are food insecure.¹ The number of hungry people is overwhelming. Like Rava in Mahoza, I cannot invite them all to dinner.

At today's Seder, we customarily don't open our doors while reciting the invitation to the hungry, but we do open the door at a different point in the evening: near the end when we pour a cup for Elijah. Why open the door to welcome the prophet Elijah so long after the plates have been cleared? A commentary from the Ma'aseh Rokei'ah² offers a different reason to keep an open door: "This is our custom: that the doors of the house should remain open, so that when Elijah comes, we will speedily go out to meet him without any delay, for on Pesah Israel will be redeemed in the future."³

1 <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/research-reports/>, accessed August 2023.

2 18th century, Amsterdam.

3 For more on these questions and this source, see the teaching of my colleague R. Elie Kaunfer, available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=valjq_VQWAI.

The Ma'aseh Rokei'ah is preparing for another moment of redemption, one that is coming soon, maybe even tonight. We know from the biblical book of Malachi—the passage from the prophets read on the Shabbat before Pesah (3:4-24)—that Elijah is the prophet who will come to announce the final redemption. The Ma'aseh Rokei'ah keeps the door open on Seder night, not to let others in, but to ensure that the people inside can get out. His custom imagines that when Elijah comes to announce the redemption, there will be no time to waste. The open doors remind us—and the prophet—that we are ready and eager to be redeemed.

Taken together, these two customs have an important lesson to teach: the closed door that keeps out the hungry may also be holding us back from redemption. The Seder traditions teach us that Pesah is a time for open doors. Only when we are ready to open our doors to the hungry—when we have addressed the systemic hunger outside to a point where all who are hungry really do have a seat at the table—will we really be open to redemption. May it come speedily in our days. ♦

WAITING IS THE HARDEST PART

R. Micha'el Rosenberg

FOR MANY OF US, the worst eating day of the year is the day before Pesah, the 14th of Nisan. Though the holiday has not yet begun, after a third of the daylight hours have passed we are prohibited from eating any more *hameitz*. Challenging our attempts to have a filling meal further, on Erev Pesah we are also forbidden to have *matzah*:

תלמוד ירושלמי פסחים י"א, דף לז טור ב
אמר רבי לוי: האוכל מצה בערב הפסח כבא
על ארוסתו בבית חמיו והבא על ארוסתו בבית
חמיו לוקה.

Talmud Yerushalmi Pesahim 10:1, 37b

R. Levi said: One who eats matzah on Erev Pesah is like one who has sex with their betrothed in their father-in-law's house—and one who has sex with their betrothed in their father-in-law's house is lashed.

We do not receive any details about this provocatively phrased prohibition. Medieval and early modern authorities therefore disagree about exactly when it goes into effect. Many commentators take the language of “*erev ha-pesah*” in a straightforward way and accordingly rule that the prohibition goes into effect at dawn on the 14th.¹ R. Zerahyah ha-Levi (the

1 See, for example, Rema Orach Hayyim 471:2. Commentators do not take seriously the possibility that the prohibition would go into effect at sundown the night before, even though that is also, technically, *erev ha-pesah*. Though the Yerushalmi prohibits *matzah* only on the day before Pesah, customs extending the prohibition back further develop later; see, for example, Mishnah Berurah 471:12.