

On Koreykh

Savoring Abundance in a Reality of Lack

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The step of the Seder called Koreykh—combining *matzah* and *maror*—is one of our more puzzling traditions. It may seem obscure or trivial, but it represents nothing less than the miracle that we have a Passover Seder at all, in light of the fact that we lack what was at its heart—the Passover sacrifice. In this vein, Koreykh represents much more than early rabbinic culinary traditions and the proto-sandwich. This “sandwich,” missing its main contents, becomes a catalyst for a rabbinic approach to *mitzvot* that is singularly focused on finding abundance in lack, and savoring the power of every *mitzvah* rather than being overwhelmed by chaos and loss.

After eating *matzah* and *maror* in two separate steps of the Seder, we go ahead and eat them again—together. This step of the Seder seems anticlimactic. Each *mitzvah*

already got center stage, with dedicated attention to their distinctive tastes and resonances. What is added by having them share a spotlight? What is the point of bundling these *mitzvot* together?

Besides its triviality, the problem of Koreykh is all the more stark in light of a principle against bundling *mitzvot* together: אין עושין מצוות חבילות חבילות, “*Mitzvot* are not performed in bundles.”¹ Thus, the *matzah-maror* sandwich is at best extraneous, and at worst wrong! What is the point of this bundling of *matzah* and *maror*?

Hillel’s sandwich seems to come from a straightforward reading of the biblical text. God dictates “On *matzot* and bitter herbs they shall eat it [the Passover sacrifice]” (Numbers 9:11). This instruction links all three ritual food items together. The Torah might suggest

this combination because it tastes good, like a hamburger on a bun with lettuce. Or it may be that this is a way to eat on the run, grabbing a sandwich before hitting the road.

The Koreykh comes to reject both of those interpretations. At face value, Hillel’s tradition of eating the Passover sacrifice with *matzah* and *maror* seems to suggest that these *mitzvot* are *interdependent*—the only way to fulfill any of them is to fulfill all of them at once. Taken to the extreme, this would mean that, without the Passover sacrifice, there is no *mitzvah* of *matzah* and *maror*! In the wake of the destruction of the Temple we would be staring into a void, left with no *mitzvah* to eat anything on the eve of Passover.

Instead, the Talmud deploys Hillel to teach the opposite lesson: that the *mitzvot* of *matzah* and *maror*, far from being interdependent and

¹ See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud Sotah 8a.

now defunct without the Passover sacrifice, are actually independently powerful.

תלמוד בבלי זבחים עט.

דאמר רבי אלעזר: כשם שאין מצות מבטלות זו את זו, כך אין איסורין מבטלין זו את זו.

מאן שמעת ליה דאמר: אין מצות מבטלות זו את זו?

הלל היא, דתניא: אמרו עליו על הלל הזקן שהיה כורכן בבת אחת ואוכלן, משום שנאמר: על מצות ומרורים יאכלוהו.

Babylonian Talmud Zevachim 79a

As R. Elazar said: Just as *mitzvot* don't nullify each other, so too forbidden foods don't nullify each other.

Who taught him that *mitzvot* don't nullify each other?

It is Hillel, as it is taught: They said about Hillel the elder that he would wrap them [*matzah*, *maror*, Passover sacrifice] into one unit and eat them, since it is said "Eat it on *matzot* and bitter herbs."

The Talmud takes for granted that *matzah* and *maror* are unique and independent *mitzvot*, and Hillel's sandwich then becomes a locus for magnifying the power of each separately, rather than a model where they are interdependent and meaningless without each other

and without the Passover sacrifice. This leads into a larger theory of *mitzvot*, where the identity of *mitzvot* in general are so strong, they aren't diluted when mixed with other *mitzvot*.

We should savor the taste of each *mitzvah*.

We could have looked at the Hillel sandwich without the meat of the Passover sacrifice and decided עיקר חסר מן הספר—there is no "there" there—and chucked the whole thing. Instead, our rabbis see it as an opportunity to see abundance and strength, and to amplify the power of each and every *mitzvah*.

This remarkable swerve in the Talmud can be better understood by reflecting upon the logic of the analogy between forbidden foods and *mitzvah* foods. R. Elazar extends the same principle to

forbidden foods: when they are mixed together, they don't nullify each other; each forbidden item remains in full force. The idea behind R. Elazar's position on forbidden foods is probably rooted in a robust psychological notion of taboo. If you think of a food item as forbidden, as taboo, then it will be impossible to ignore even if it is mixed with other items. The taboo draws your attention.

Going in the reverse logical direction from what the Talmud spells out: the same psychological attention to taboo for a forbidden item should apply to *mitzvot*, but in a positive direction. In the Talmud's view of the Hillel sandwich, it teaches us that we should hyper-attuned to the taste of *mitzvot*, just as we are hyper-attuned to forbidden items. We should savor the taste of each *mitzvah* so strongly we won't lose track of its taste even if it is mixed with others. And we cannot lose track of *mitzvot* that come our way even in the wake of many that don't.

In lives where so much constantly draws our attention, and when we might often notice absence and lack more than presence, I invite us to treat the Hillel sandwich as an opportunity to savor the unique power of each *mitzvah* we encounter. ♦