



Demanding a Seat at the Table

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Pesah^h Sheini 5784

I am lucky to live a life with no food sensitivities. I can eat what I want and I'm happy to be an "easy guest," quick to assure hosts that I have no special food needs. However, several years ago, in an attempt to identify the cause of my migraines, I found myself a person suddenly with many food sensitivities I was told to avoid. I went from being a person who could eat everything to a person who approached each meal with anxiety, wondering what food I would find to fill myself up. I was no longer the easygoing guest able to eat whatever was served to me. Rather, in people's homes, at conferences, in restaurants, if I was going to eat, I needed to advocate for myself. I needed to speak up and ask for what I needed. I found this experience very challenging: I felt uncomfortable identifying my list of food sensitivities; I felt awkward being on the receiving end of special accommodations. "I would make do," I thought, "I would manage." What happened to being the "easy guest" I pride myself on being? This experience gave me a small window into so many other people's lived experiences who are forced to advocate for their needs on a daily basis.

The Torah teaches us that observing Pesah^h is a commandment that is incumbent upon everyone. This is not a holiday to be missed. On the eve of the very first Pesah^h, the Israelites still in Egypt, waiting to be redeemed, Moshe instructs them:



שמות יב:כד

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְחֹק־לָךְ וּלְבְנֶיךָ עַד־עוֹלָם:

Exodus 12:24

You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants.

This commandment finds its way into the language of the Haggadah with the instruction,

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאלו הוא יצא ממצרים

In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see themselves as if they came out from Egypt.

Pesah is the holiday in which there is a special emphasis placed on the obligation of everyone in this particular *mitzvah*.

And, yet, when it came to observe the very first Pesah since leaving Egypt, a group of people found themselves excluded. They had not done anything to warrant exclusion: all they had done was come into contact with someone who had died. Perhaps, they had lost someone, they had mourned someone, they had cared for someone in death and, as a result, they were in a state of impurity such that they couldn't bring the *korban* (sacrifice) necessary for Pesah. They were not to be included in this ritual that the Torah goes out of its way to tell us is incumbent upon everyone in all generations.

Amazingly, this group of Israelites didn't sit quietly in the corner, allowing themselves to be sidelined from this story. Rather, they advocated for themselves. They said, "Why must we be debarred from presenting God's offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?"



(Numbers 9:7). The words at the end of their question are key: they wanted to be amongst Benei Yisrael; they wanted to be a part of this pivotal collective experience.

In response to their question—or perhaps: demand—Moshe asks them to sit tight and seeks guidance from God. God responds by adding something new to the Torah, a *Pesah Sheni*, a second *Pesah*, that would make it possible not only for this particular group to offer a sacrifice, but future groups as well. God says,

במדבר ט:י-יא

דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי-יְהִי-טָמֵא לְנֶפֶשׁ אוֹ בַדֶּרֶךְ רַחֲקָה לָכֶם אוֹ לְדַרְתֵּיכֶם וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח
לֵה': בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם בֵּין הָעֶרְבַּיִם יַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ עַל-מִצּוֹת וּמִרְרִים יֹאכְלֶהוּ:

Numbers 9:10-11

Speak to the Israelite people, saying: When any party—whether you or future generations—who is defiled by a corpse or is on a long journey would offer a *pesah* sacrifice to God, they shall offer it in the second month, on the 14th day of the month, at twilight.

They asked for themselves and they received an expansive accommodation that would benefit not only them but future generations as well. This is a story where it seems all's well that ends well. This group asked for what they needed and they got what they wanted. *Pesah Sheni* then is a holiday that highlights the necessity of inclusion and the importance of advocating for one's needs.

I wonder, however: why did this group of Israelites need to advocate for themselves in the first place? Why didn't Moshe—or even God—anticipate their exclusion and already have a plan to ensure their participation? Granted, this was the first time the Israelites were celebrating *Pesah* since leaving Egypt, but still I wonder: couldn't God have anticipated that there would



be individuals excluded from this very important communal ritual and already have a plan in place to include them? Is it the responsibility of those left behind to advocate for their needs, or is it the obligation of the community and its leaders to ensure the inclusion of all of its members?

The Talmud debates this very question when it comes to ensuring that every body has a proper place to sit. Rabbi (known also as R. Yehudah ha-Nasi and one of the greatest leaders in his generation) once noticed that a certain place was too crowded and there weren't enough spaces for students to sit.

תלמוד בבלי שבת קכז.

אמר רבה אמר רבי חי'א: פעם אחת הלך רבי למקום אחד, וראה מקום דחוק לתלמידים, ויצא לשדה ומצא שדה מלאה עומרים, ועימר רבי כל השדה כולה.

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 127a

Rabbah said R. Hiyya said: Once, Rabbi went to a place and saw that the place was crowded for the students. He went out to the field and found a field full of bundles of grain. He cleared whole entire field.

What did Rabbi do? He went out and cleared a field of all of its bundles to make sure there was adequate space for each student to sit. On the face of it, this is a story about moving chairs and the leader ensuring that everyone had a place to sit. However, the story goes deeper. Despite the fact that moving all the bundles would require a significant amount of labor which would ordinarily be prohibited on Shabbat, Rabbi still goes ahead and does it.¹ Rabbi could have easily failed to notice that students were overcrowded or he could have noticed and chosen not to intervene. However, it was so important to him that each person have a proper place to sit that he violated the prohibition around excessive work in order to

¹ See R. Pinhas Kehati's commentary on Mishnah Shabbat 18:1.



clear a space for each person. As the leader, he saw and anticipated the needs of others and he acted himself to ensure their inclusion.

Interestingly, the Talmud then seems to take issue with this.² The Talmud asks: if is it really the job of one person to clear the field for everyone, or perhaps each person should clear their own bundle, creating a space for them to sit? This opens the question: who is responsible for ensuring the inclusion of each student? Is it the job of one person to look out for everyone else or is each person responsible to advocate for their own needs and make sure they have a seat? Do I have to set up my own chair or should someone else see that I need a seat and set one up for me?

The Talmud answers in the affirmative, yes, given was Rabbi who cleared all the bundles, it therefore must be the role of one person to ensure the inclusion of others rather than the obligation of others to advocate for themselves. But, again, the Talmud is uncomfortable. The rabbis seem uncomfortable imagining Rabbi, and great leader of his generation, doing the manual labor of clearing a field just so students can sit. The Talmud asks again: but really!? Rabbi really cleared the field? This time it answers: no, he must have ordered someone else to clear the field. The leader himself wouldn't lower himself to do this. And, then even after we had already resolved the earlier question about who clears the bundles, the Talmud reverses its answer and says: really, it's each person's responsibility to clear their own bundle and make their own seat.

There is a tension embedded in this back and forth question in the Talmud regarding who is responsible for ensuring the needs of individuals are met. Is it the role of the community—and perhaps more specifically: the leader—to anticipate the need and clear the

² ועדיין תבדעי לה: חד גברא מפני (ליה) לכולהו, או דילמא קל גברא וגברא מפני לנפשיה? תא שמע: ועימר רבי. ולטעמיה, רבי בדנפשיה עימר! אלא צוה עימר, ולעולם כל חד וחד מפני לנפשיה.



field? Or, is it the role of each individual to advocate for their own needs and make sure they have a seat? If you want to sit, clear your own bundle.

Taken together, of course, it's both. The Torah teaches us the importance and necessity of individuals advocating for themselves and demanding what they need. Were those Israelites not to speak out about the unfairness, it seems that God wouldn't have created an accommodation that would allow for a more inclusive ritual for many generations to come. However, despite the ambivalence, there is also a strong thread in the story of Rabbi and the grain bundles, which suggests that not only is it **not** the role of individuals to secure their own seats, it's the role of the highest leader to create an environment in which everyone has a place to sit.

To return to my temporary foray into the world of food sensitivities, rather than worry about being “easy guests,” every person should feel good about prioritizing themselves and asking for what they need. This is easier said than done from a person who self-admittedly struggles with self-advocacy. At the same time, this is not solely the responsibility of the guest. Even here, the language of *hakhnasat orḥim*, welcoming guests, fails us. When we talk about inclusion and self-advocacy, often we are not talking about guests and hosts, implying visiting outsiders and people with permanent claims to the space. Rather, in community, we all have an equal claim to the space; the language of *hakhnasat orḥim* when applied to inclusion falls short as it implies otherwise. As the Talmud teaches, it is our role to be like Rabbi and to create environments where everyone has a seat.

What if the Israelites didn't need to demand a chance to observe Pesah? What if God had already anticipated their need and sought to include them? May we together build inclusive communities in which we not only feel empowered to ask for what we need but in which we anticipate the needs of others before they even need to ask.

