

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

HILLEL'S PESACH SANDWICH

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Our thoughts are turning to Pesach at this time of year. (Certainly we're cleaning up a great deal and eating up all the pasta we have in our house!) Since we are learning about Hillel, it might be good to revisit his distinctive contribution to the Pesach Seder:

They said about Hillel that he would combine (or roll up) [the matsah, bitter herb and paschal lamb] as one dish and eat them [together to fulfill] what is said, "On matsot and bitter herbs shall you eat them. (Numbers 9:11)." (B. Pesachim 115a/B. Zevachim 79a/Y. Challah 1:1)

Hillel is drawing his conclusion from an extremely close reading of the verse from Numbers:

[No matter what the obstacles] In the second month on the fourteenth day at eveing you shall make [the paschal sacrifice of lamb and] eat it on matsot (plural of matsah) and bitter herbs. (Numbers 9:11)

Hillel takes this verse literally: the lamb and bitter herbs should be put between two pieces of matsah. It actually sounds like a very tasty dish. Today, different communities have different customs about serving lamb on Passover. Among Ashkenazim, lamb is generally not served at the seder because it might be thought that this meat had actually been sacrificed in the Temple. Among Sephardim, lamb is almost always served at the seder. Sephardim also eat beans and rice during Pesach and the Conservative movement has stated that their constituents may do so. I confess that each year I leave the beans and rice in the cupboard, determined to eat them...and each year I can't bring myself to eat them.

Discussion Questions:

1. Passover is the combination of two very ancient holidays: the barley harvest and the spring birth of lambs. Hillel combines these two aspects of the holiday together in the most symbolic way possible by eating the symbols together. What do the barley harvest and the lambing season have in common? Why do you think that in Judaism they were recast in connection with the exodus from Egypt?
2. How do you observe Pesach? Do you eat lamb, rice and beans on Pesach? Do you have a seder but eat bread thereafter? Do you have no seder? If you do not, why not?
3. In ancient Judaism, the idea was not "you are what you eat" but "eat what you want to become." What aspects of a lamb, matsah and bitter herbs would you like to incorporate into yourself?