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Pesach Talmud

Greetings my Friends!

First, please accept my wishes for a *chag sameach v'kasher*, a happy and kosher holiday! It is appropriate to study about the holiday as it is observed, so herein is a short passage from tractate Pesachim. The entire tenth chapter of this tractate is a marvelous one to study. It contains much of the material that came to form the seder, a great deal of information on demons and angels, a large passage of advice on how to raise children and how to be a mensch and more. I had trouble picking something to bring you here because so much of this material is wonderful! In the end, I thought I'd bring you something that has real practical benefit. This short passage shows us how the sages sought to make the holiday relevant to everyone who participates in it.

Now, this may be the opportunity to address an issue we have not yet raised in this group; that is, what some will perceive to be the sages' sexism. Do the sages say sexist things? Absolutely. That's not really the relevant question, though. The relevant question is, "How are you going to react?" It's natural to go through a phase where you are angry at the sages for their sexism. But if you're going to stay in the Egypt of your anger, you'll never reach the promised land of acceptance of the sages and all the beauty and wisdom they provide (besides their admittedly sexist comments). I don't want to negate the pain we experience when we come across this sort of material. I want us to feel the hurt, work through it and move on.

Background

One of the mitzvot of Passover is the duty (!) to rejoice on the holiday (Deuteronomy 16:14). Making rejoicing into a duty may seem oxymoronic but it's not. It's the same philosophy behind making sexual relations in marriage a responsibility, which Judaism does. If you take these responsibilities seriously, you'll put them on the "To Do" List, plan for them and make sure they are done. If you approach them as something that can only be accomplished spontaneously, they're much less likely to be done, or done effectively. So the sages give us guidelines on how to ensure effective rejoicing. They tailor their advice to the constituencies who are to achieve this goal: men, women and children.

B. Pesachim 108b-109a

Our Rabbis taught: All are bound to [drink] the four cups, men, women and children. Said R. Judah: Of what benefit then is wine to children? But we distribute to them parched ears of corn and nuts on the eve of Passover, so that they should not fall asleep and ask [the questions].

It was related of Rabbi Akiba that he used to distribute parched ears and nuts to children on the eve of Passover, so that they might not fall asleep but ask [the questions]...

It was related of Rabbi Akiba [that] never did he say in the House of Study, "It is time to rise [cease study]", except on the eve of Passover and the eve of the Day of Atonement.

On the eve of Passover, because of the children so that they might not fall asleep. On the Day of Atonement, in order that they should give food to their children.

Our Rabbis taught: A man is duty bound to make his children and his household rejoice on a Festival, for it is said, "And you shall rejoice in your feast, [you and your son, and your daughter, etc.] (Deuteronomy 16:14)"

Wherewith does he make them rejoice? With wine.

R. Judah said: Men with what is suitable for them and women with what is suitable for them.

"Men with what is suitable for them", that is, with wine.

And women with what? R. Joseph recited: In Babylonia, with colored garments; in the Land of Israel with ironed linen garments.

Discussion Questions

This passage shows that preparing for the seder means planning to rejoice. Children have to be prepared for their role in the seder, too, and that is important enough to supersede study. Herewith are some questions to ponder as you prepare to rejoice.

1. Can you really feel an emotion "on command", as an obligation? Does preparation make rejoicing easier? In what ways do you agree and disagree with the sages' prescriptions for what makes different groups of people rejoice? What else would make you especially joyful at the seder besides treats, wine and clothes?
2. In this interpretation of Deuteronomy 16:14 the man is responsible for the rejoicing of his family. Can anyone be made responsible for someone else's joy? To what extent and how? How would you, man or woman, make someone's joy your job?
3. This schema of the sages implies that women bought new clothes especially for the festivals (Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot). How would your observance of Judaism be enriched if you saved certain "secular" practices for religious purposes. For example, what if you only bought new clothes before festivals or for Shabbat? What if you only ate chocolate on Shabbat and festivals (imagine how sad you'd be at Havdalah!)? What other secular thing could you make holy by abstaining from it and using it in this way?

Chag sameach v'kasher! I wish you a joyous feast of freedom!

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