

Pesach
Chaos in Seder
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We emerged just a few weeks ago from the chaos of Purim. Purim is the quintessential holiday of chaos. As Rabbi Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin explains, unlike all other holidays on the Jewish calendar, Purim is picked randomly by a *goral* by a lottery (Resisei Layla, 18).

And how chaotic our lives have been since just before Purim. The effects of Covid-19 have thrown our lives into disarray. With each passing day as we learn about more loved ones who are ill or have died, our lives are thrown even deeper into chaos.

And, now, as Pesach comes, I am seeking some order.

Pesach is the quintessential holiday of order. Seder, means order, and the meal is a compilation of rituals that have precise measurements, precise timing, and precise ways in which we perform them. Even the structure of the seder is ordered- there are four sections, each made up of a question, story, thanks, and praise. From kiddush, right down to chad gadya, the story of seeing that God is the ultimate source in a seemingly chaotic world, there is order.

And yet, with all the attempted order, if your seder is anything like ours has been in past years, you know how disordered it can be. Little kids may be running around; someone inevitably spills wine or grape juice everywhere, someone falls asleep before the end; and in my house, little toy frogs get launched around the table at random moments.

And, in fact, many of the rituals, on deeper inspection do not fit the framework of "order." One of these disordered moments is the often overlooked ritual of yachatz- that moment when we break the middle matzah- half to be eaten after making motzi-matza, and half will become the afikomen. The truth is, breaking the matzah at that moment makes no sense. The entire section related to matzah comes after the maggid section- shouldn't we break the matza right before we wash and eat? In fact, this was the minhag of many, including even Rambam (רמב"ם הלכות חמץ ומצה פרק ח הלכה ו).

So, why break the matza early on in the seder? There are many answers to this question. But for me, the point is that as soon as we settle into the seder, we interrupt the logical order, and introduce brokenness. Introduce chaos. It seems that the authors of the haggadah knew all too well, what we have come to inherently understand this year. Chaos is inevitable.

And so the task ahead, I believe, is embracing both ethics: of striving for seder- finding order when possible AND equally leaning into the chaos, represented by the brokenness of yachatz. In the midst of ordered, organized rituals, we must recognize that there is much loss in the world, and give space to acknowledge that brokenness. We must also embrace the unknown, that which we cannot control. We cannot control who ultimately will succumb to the virus. We cannot control how others choose to react to this new reality.

And I work on accepting this, allowing disorder to wash over me, all the while seeking ways that I can bring order into our lives. The ways in which I can control our environments, how we can keep ourselves as safe as possible by staying home, and by social distancing. How we can control finding small ways to bring joy to our Pesach celebration. How we can practice radical empathy for those in need, and also be kind to ourselves.

One final thought. The Gemara in Pesachim (115b) explains that yachatz is associated with lechem oni, with poor man bread. We break the matza right before we recite: “ha lachma anya/This is the poor’s man bread” The gemara says: “ma darko shel ani beprusa...just as a poor person eats a broken piece of a loaf, so too matzah must be eaten as a broken piece.”

Our world is broken. Many of us are broken. This year, may we have the humility to scoop up the crumbs, and pray that we are able to withstand the disorder and chaos; And, at the same time, may we seek ways to find order, joy and empathy in the days ahead.

Chag Kasher v'sameach. And please, stay safe.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz is Co-Founder and President of Yeshivat Maharat, and also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. She completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, and was ordained by Rabbi Avi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. Rabba Hurwitz has received numerous awards, including being named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. She is also a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.