

Let us talk about the wonderful Seder, that serves as a beautiful family celebration; one that has no equivalent among the other nations or cultures. During the course of this celebration, we are all prepared and ready to participate - with a high level of spirituality-in a practice that we hope leads all who take part to a recognition and understanding of Judaism that inspires them to follow a religious life and to observe the Mitzvot diligently.

The celebration of the Seder begins with Kiddush over wine with the head of the household sitting at the head of the table. He then washes his hands-and unlike the regular custom- does not recite the Bracha of Al Netilas Yada'Yim. Next, the head of the household takes the Karpas, which has been set onto to the table and distributes pieces of it among those seated at the table; each one dips the Karpas in vinegar or salt water, recites the Bracha of Borei Pri Ha'Adama and eats the Karpas. It is not the only vegetable to play a role at the Seder. After eating the required amount of Matzoh, the Marror will be consumed-representing the slavery in Egypt. In order to reduce the bitter taste of the Marror-it is dipped into Charoset which is a mixture of sweet ingredients. Those are the two acts of dipping that take place during the Seder and which arouse questions from the children as to why these dippings take place. The dippings become an opening for the head of the household to relate the historical background behind our celebrating Pesach and instills religious meaning into those facts. What many do not recognize is that the question of the child as to why dipping is performed twice at the Seder-shines a bright light over the ancient eating practices of the Jews of Eretz Yisroel.

It was customary in Eretz Yisroel to open the main meal every day with sharp tasting vegetables-in order to stimulate the appetite. That they would not touch vegetables with their hands without first washing their hands-either on religious grounds or for hygienic reasons-explains why the head of the household, whose responsibility it was to distribute the vegetables to those at the table, would first wash his hands without reciting a Bracha. That is a hygienic practice that continues at the Seder until today. The custom also explains why the question of the child as found in early sources (and in the Talmud Yerushalmi) was thus-every night we dip once; why on this night do we dip twice. However, in Babylonia and in other locations, the custom to open the every day meal with the dipping of vegetables was not common which is why the question of the child was different- every night we do not dip even once; why on this night do we dip twice. That version of the question then became the norm.

The commemoration of a second ancient eating customs is preserved at the Seder as well; that all of us-including the poorest Jew-sits in a reclined manner, representing freedom and honor. This emphasis, which Halacha stresses and provides that even the poorest of the poor is required to recline during the Seder-leads us to the source of the custom. It corresponds to the table manners of the Romans. However, among the Romans, only the

noble class ate next to a table in a reclined position. Those in the middle class did so on festive occasions while the simplest people always ate in a hurried manner, with minimum preparation and in a regular seated position.

The custom to eat in a reclined position at the Seder became so common and accepted in earlier times among the Jews that the Talmud created a technical term for it and instead of saying-eat next to the table-they began saying: recline next to the table.

In later times, during an era when eating in a reclining position was no longer a common practice-a Halachic question arose as to whether it was still necessary to recline during the Seder.

The commemoration of a third ancient eating custom that we preserve-after the practice received Halachic approval-is followed every Motzei Shabbat. We recite Havdalah; i.e. we recite a Bracha in which we distinguish between Shabbat and weekdays. In addition, we recite a Bracha over a Havdalah light and before inhaling the aroma of spices. Their connection to each other and to Motzei Shabbat, I will explain in a moment. Among the early practices followed by the Jews of Eretz Yisroel was a custom that after a meal, they would bring in a plate with burning coals on which they would lay an assortment of spices that would create a pleasant aroma in the room. On Shabbat, after eating the third meal of Shabbat close to nightfall, they would light-once Shabbat had ended-a light (which they could not light during the day-one way of demonstrating the difference between Shabbat and weekdays). They would then bring in a plate of smoldering spices and recite a Bracha over both the light and the spices. A commemoration of that practice is still followed today in our lighting a Havdalah candle and smelling a packet of spices after Shabbat ends.

Despite the early roots of this Motzei Shabbat practice, the basis for the custom was reconstructed in later centuries; i.e. that the sanctity of Shabbat brings us blessing and rest not only to our physical beings but to our spirit as well by our being infused with an extra soul on Shabbat. Once Shabbat departs, our weekday worries and concerns return and the extra soul departs. The happiness and the poetry of Shabbat slip away and in its place comes the darkness and prose of every day life. To ease the change in mood, we smell spices to revive ourselves and to mend the wounds we feel from the loss of our extra soul. The aroma serves to heal both body and soul. From this we can suggest the root of the Hebrew word Rai'ach (smell). It comes from the word Ru'ach (inner spirit). This explanation appears later in history and is the outgrowth of Kabbalistic concepts. Talmudic literature accepted the revised explanation for the practice causing the original explanation to vanish.