

TABLE MANNERS

Ahh, the honeymoon is over. All the wonderful stories about bravery and devotion, miracles and love are giving way to HALACHA. From the beginning of B'reishit until the twelfth chapter of Sh'mot, we have story after story which stir our imaginations and move our hearts only to give way to Jewish Law. The romantics can go home til next year, as the lawyers step to the plate. In this particular case, 'plate' is a double entendre. Of course, there's the baseball reference coming up to bat, but this week there's the also the literal plate of food, with instructions about how to cook, serve and eat the KORBAN PESACH, the Paschal Lamb. There are many rules and regulations about how to prepare and consume this holy offering, but there's one particular rule which sounds more like etiquette than law. Call for Emily Post.

There are rules for how to cook the lamb: roasted over the fire, with unleavened cakes; with bitter herbs they shall eat it. You shall not eat it rare or boiled in water, except roasted over the fire its head with its

legs and with its entrails (Sh'mot 12:8-9). There are regulations for how to consume it: And this is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste (verse 11). Of course, there were even more rules for the lamb in that first year back in Egypt, like painting the blood onto the doorposts of the home. But I'm concerned with one particular law: It must be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the meat out of the house to the outside, neither shall you break any of its bones (verse 46).

Really, you can't break any bones? This is one of the first mitzvot that God gave the Jewish nation. Personally, I would have opted for something a bit more spiritual, like 'worship the Lord with all your might' or 'be holy'. But I'd be wrong.

Why this concern for the bones of the Pesach offering? A simple explanation is that by the time we eat the meal we should feel like free people. Only slaves and the very poor break the bones to consume those meager calories within. However, over the years many commentaries have found more profound approaches to this issue.

The great exposition on mitzvot, Sefer HaChinuch, makes the most famous attempt to put this rule in its proper perspective: Why did God

give us so many mitzvot to commemorate the Exodus? Couldn't one commemoration have been sufficient? ...Understand well that people are influenced by their actions. One's intellectual and spiritual life are conditioned by one's actions. Consider well, then, your actions, because you will be influenced by them and not vice versa (Mitzva 16).

Nechama Leibowitz adds: In other words, religious training should not proceed from mind to deed... Rather as the Rambam observes in his introduction to Pirkei Avot, 'A person should cultivate good deeds in order to improve one's character and forgo evil deeds for undesirable traits to disappear. Know well that good and bad qualities can only be cultivated by repetitive acts.' Mrs. Leibowitz then, chillingly, reminds us, 'for a moment recall those concentration camp officials, and remember how ordinary folk, who were neither angels nor devils, became brutalized as a result of the savage actions to which they had been assigned.' Look at photos of Adolf Eichmann, he looks more like an accountant than a mass murderer. Behavior made him a beast.

Back in B'reishit we were informed that our behavior during meals is important. When Ya'akov prepared the dinner of lentil stew for his brother Eisav, we're told that Eisav,

'ate it, drank, got up and left, therefore he denigrated the birthright' (B'reishit 25:32). How did he 'denigrate' the birthright? Perhaps, by the way he ate, drank, got up and left. I believe that we're being taught that we are not 'what we eat', but that we become 'how we eat'.

The Ma'or V'Shemesh (Harav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, 1753-1825) discussed this issue when writing about all the instructions about how to eat the Korban Pesach. He observed that the only commandment given to Adam and Eve was about eating, because 'they were being taught to resist the desire to eat out of lust for sweetness and appearance, but to appreciate that eating should be for sustenance. Eating should be appropriate to sufficiency for Divine service.'

A neighbor of mine here in south Jerusalem, Dr. Reuvein Schwartz, wrote a wonderful book combining psychology with spirituality in the area of weight loss, called Holy Eating. There are many helpful pieces of advice for improving our attitudes in the realm of food consumption, but I want to point out just one: Visuals. We can better manage our food intake with one simple expedient, use smaller plates. He cited a study (p. 71) where half liter and full liter bowls were

available for a buffet of ice cream. You guessed it! The people who took the larger bowls also took 34% more ice cream and calories (about 200 calories for 100g of ice cream). The Torah is setting the visuals for the Seder table. Don't voraciously attack the meat! Leave the bones intact and neat.

Nechama Leibowitz called her essay on this mitzva, Actions Shape Character, and she concluded: The profound implications of this event (the Exodus), through which the Almighty acquired us as His people, were engraved on the historic memory of the Jewish people through countless symbols and precepts applying to every facet of our existence.'

So, as we begin our annual journey through the unfolding of the Torah's long litany of mitzvot, it's very important for us to remember that not only are actions louder than words, but that our actions ultimately define who we are. We become what we do. 