B”H. Parsha Halacha – Parshat Toldot

Se’udat Havra’ah

The First Meal After a Funeral; What, Why and How?

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In the Torah portion of Toldot we read how Eisav came back from the field and, due to his hunger, sold his status as the firstborn to Ya’akov for a bowl of lentils.[1]

What was Eisav Hungry?

- **Tired out by Killing**

The Torah says that Eisav was עָיֵף. Rashi (based on Bereishit Rabbah 63:10) says this means he was tired out as he had been murdering people that day.[2] (According to Sefer HaYashar, Eisav murdered Nimrod and his two assistants on that day. The Hadar Zekeinim explains that Nimrod had challenged Eisav to a duel after Eisav was caught hunting in his territory. On Yaakov’s

[1] Gen. 25:29 and on.

[2] According to the Talmud (Bava Batra 16b), Eisav committed five cardinal sins on that day; murder, adultery, denial of the Almighty, denial of the resurrection and disgraced the birthright. The Maharal explains that there are five aspects of the soul and that Eisav contaminated every one of them. Avraham’s life was diminished by five years due to these five sins (Yafeh Talmud by Rachamaim Nissim Palagi on ibid).

advice Eisav insisted that Nimrod remove the special clothes of Adam HaRishon that he was wearing, before the duel began as whoever was wearing these garments would be assisted by wild beasts. Eisav then managed to put on these garments on himself which is how he successfully killed Nimrod. Another Midrash says that the duel with Nimrod had been scheduled for the following day.) The Alshich explains that a kohen who kills someone is ineligible to serve as a kohen (e.g., to offer sacrifices) which is why Yaakov offered Eisav to buy his firstborn rights. This was to include the ability to serve as a kohen.

- **Starving after an Unsuccessful Hunt**

Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor says that Eisav had been hunting unsuccessfully for several days and was therefore starving to the point of nearly dying. His extreme hunger described as *bulmus* (polyphagia/ acute hypoglycemic episode) which can cause death if the person doesn't eat immediately.[3] He found Ya'akov outside the city pasturing his flocks and pleaded with him to feed him as, otherwise he might die of starvation before he reached the city. He was so hungry that he had to strength to feed himself which is why he asked Yaakov to pour the soup into his mouth. Due to his desperate state he referred to the food as "red, red" since people in extreme situations often repeat themselves.[4]

Why was Ya'akov Cooking Lentils?

There are various opinions as to why Ya'akov was cooking lentils that day.

- **To Impress His Father**

The Ohr HaChaim says that Ya'akov was cooking the lentils for Yitzchak in order to gain favor in his eyes much as Eisav had done by providing Yitzchak with the game he had hunted.

- **Cooking Dinner**

Some say that Ya'akov was simply cooking dinner for himself. Radak adds that Ya'akov made due with the minimum of physical pleasures and was preparing one of the simplest foods of all – lentil soup. The Midrash adds[5] that the wicked Eisav would eat from the game he hunted every single day. Due to his arrogance, he would not give Ya'akov even the smallest amount of his food. One time, he went out hunting but was unsuccessful. He saw Yaakov eating a dish of lentils, desired them in his heart and said, "Please let me swallow some of this red, red food."

- **The First Meal After Avraham's Funeral**

[3] Tur Ha'aruch. See Yoma 83a.
[4] Chizkuni.
[5] Pirkei DeRabi Eliezer 35:1.

According to Rashi (based on The Talmud[6]) Ya'akov was preparing the first meal after Avraham's funeral to give to his father – Yitzchak. This explains why Ya'akov refused to feed his ravenous brother without being compensated grandly, as he was giving away a very important and timely meal and was only willing to do so if he would receive a significant return.[7]

Why Lentils?

The Talmud explains that lentils are an appropriate mourner's food for the following reasons.

- Lentils are smooth and have no mouth (opening). This represents the mourner who is in so much pain that he can't speak (much).[8]
- Lentils are round and resemble a (turning) wheel. This represents that mourning is something experienced by every family sooner or later since no one lives forever. The round lentil also resembles the orbits of the heavenly bodies and alludes to the fact that people's passing is preordained and is part of G-d's great plan.[9]

It has been said that the first reason applies to a case where a young person passed away tragically and the mourner accepts G-d's judgment despite the pain and the second reason applies to a case of a older person who passed away at what seems to be "their time."[10]

Based on the first reason, the Talmud says that eggs can also be used since they too are smooth. Although the second reason doesn't apply since they are oval rather than circular.

Based on the above, the Shulchan Aruch writes[11] that at the first meal of a mourner after the funeral (*se'udat havra'ah*, see below), "At first they provide… eggs or a dish of lentils as a symbol of mourning, and then they eat their fill."

Se'udat Havra'ah

The Talmud says[12] that a mourner may not eat their first meal (on the first day of mourning) from their own food, rather it should be provided by others. This is derived from the verse regarding the prophet Ezekiel who was told,[13] "Do not eat the bread of (other) men." (G-d told

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[6] Bava Batra 16b
[7] Me'or Einayim on ibid.
[8] See Job 2:13 that Job and his friend were silent for even days after Jobs terrible losses. See Y.D. 385:1 regarding the restrictions of a mourner greeting people. See Shabbat 67b that silence was considered appropriate for cooking lentils (Rabbi Yosef Engel quoted in Margaliyot HaShas by Rabbi Ahron Perlow). According to the Alexander Rebbe (quoted in ibid.) "an avel has no mouth" can mean, that even if he (G-d forbid) speaks disrespectfully towards the Almighty, G-d forgives him as if he said nothing since he's speaking out of pain.
[9] Maharal on Bava Batra ibid.
[10] Me'or Einayim.
[11] Yoreh De'ah 378:9.
[12] Mo'ed Kattan 27b.
[13] Ezekiel 24:17.

Ezekiel that his wife would pass away but that he shouldn't mourn for her in the customary manner. This symbolized the coming destruction of the first Beit HaMikdash where there wouldn't be any comforting of the mourners since everyone would be in mourning. Thus, we learn many of the laws of mourning from what Ezekiel was told *not* to do.)

Several reasons are given for this halacha.

- **Otherwise, he Won't Eat**

"A mourner is distressed and moaning over the loss of his relative, and doesn't care about eating, as he too wishes to die. Therefore, G-d commanded others to provide for him." [14]

To Show that we Care

"This is included in the concept of comforting the mourner; by providing this meal, the people demonstrate that they are thinking of him and have not abandoned him."[15]

- **To Honor the Deceased**

The sages wanted to make sure that the mourners wouldn't "drown their sorrows" by making a large meal. As such they established that the first meal be provided by others. Presumably this meal will be on the modest side, allowing the mourners to focus on the deceased.[16]

- **Bad Spirit**

The Talmud says that when someone passes away it's time of judgment for the family.[17] As such, all of the food in the house can be considered to have a bad spirit (associated judgment) on it. And we therefore provide food from other houses.[18]

- **Breaking the Spirit of Judgment**

The Zohar says[19] that Ya'akov cooked lentils because he "knew the spiritual origin of Eisav and the (negative) side that he cleaved to. Therefore, he cooked a red dishes, for this dish breaks the power and might of the red blood, and can break the power and might of Eisav, who is the secret of the red blood, as it is written, 'And the first came out red.' It was through that dish, that Eisav sold Jacob his birthright and became Ya'akov's slave." As such, the mourners also eat

[14] Rabbeinu Yerucham, Chava, Netiv 28, section 2. Quoted in Beit Yosef Y.D. 378.
[15] Levush Y.D. 378:1.
[16] Mahari Ayash (of 18th century Algeria) in Shevet Yehudah 378:1.
[17] Shabbat 105b.
[18] Shevet Yehudah, ibid.
[19] Toldot, 139b.

a lentil (or similar) dish through which they can break the power of judgment that is upon them.[20]

Some Laws of the *Se'udat Havra'ah*[21]

- If a woman is sitting shiva, her meal should be provided by other women. If her (male) children are also sitting shiva, men may bring the food for the family.
- This meal should not be prepared by the spouse of the mourner.
- If no one brings a *se'udat havra'ah,* the mourner may eat his own food.
- If a mourner doesn't want to eat the *se'udat havra'ah* he should fast on the day of the funeral and he may eat his own food that night.
- It's best not to eat anything before the *se'udat havra'ah.* Some say that one may have a snack (even if it's from their own food) before the *se'udah.*
- The common custom is that others provide the mourners with bread and eggs while the rest of the meal can be prepared by the mourner's family.[22]
- The bread is customarily placed directly in the hands of the mourners.
- The mourners should not peel the eggs themselves as this makes them appear ravenous.
- It's customary not to have a *se'udat havra'ah* on Friday afternoon within the last three hours before Shabbat. If the funeral finished at that time the mourners shouldn't eat until the Friday night Shabbat meal.
- The mourners should first eat the lentils, eggs and any other round foods such as bagels. After this the mourners may eat their fill of other foods and even some wine (in moderation).
- The *se'udat havra'ah* should be primarily attended by family. It's not proper for a large crowd of non-family members to join[23] as it then may turn into a celebratory meal.
- When saying the birkat hamazon, the avel (mourner) does not count towards a zimun with a minyan but does count as one of the three for regular zimun.
- The avel should not lead the zimun.

May we soon experience the joy of the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash speedily in our days!

Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom Umevorach!

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[20] Ma'avar Yabok, Sefar Emet, chapter 28
[21] Y.D. 378 and commentaries, Penei Baruch by Rabbi Chaim Binyamin Goldberg, siman 7 and Nitei Gavriel, Aveilut, 83.
[22] Aruch HaShulchan 378:2.
[23] I.e., if there are so many people that "they have to split up into groups."