

Reclining

In reference to the Paschal sacrifice, God instructed the Israelites, “And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the LORD’s Passover.”¹ Why then, do Jews recline throughout much of the Seder, a tradition that dates back to the Mishnah (2nd Century C.E.)? The common explanation is that reclining was a sign of freedom in ancient days. Slaves were required to stand while they ate, ready to leave at once and do as their master desired. However, the freemen had leisure to recline, relax, and take their time at their meals. Thus, Jews recline when they drink the four cups of wine, and eat the first piece of matzah, the Hillel sandwich, and the Afikomen, in order to show that as they were once slaves to Pharaoh, they are now free and may have leisure to behave as the free.

Today, reclining has become less common for several reasons. One is that most people eat sitting in chairs rather than on the floor or the ground as they did in the past. In terms of practicality, reclining in this setting is not realistic and it is bothersome at best. Another reason is that there are many rabbis today who feel that reclining is no longer necessary, as it is no longer a sign of freedom.² In a sense, sitting has taken the place of reclining. However, for those Jews who delight in the rich symbols of Passover, the extra effort of reclining may remind them of the gratitude that should be felt as a result of their freedom from slavery. Often, we must do something a little bit out of the ordinary to remind ourselves of the goodness of our current situations.

Following are the appointed times for reclining:

- all cups of wine
- eating of the unleavened bread
- eating of the Afikomen
- there is no reclining for eating the bitter herbs³

¹ Exodus 12:11

² Klein, Mordell ed. *Passover* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973)

³ Kasher, Rabbi Menachem M. *Israel Passover Haggadah* (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1950)