

Hillel Sandwich

The Hillel Sandwich is named after its creator, Hillel the Elder (1st century B.C.E. – 1st century C.E.) who took the scriptural injunction: “And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it”¹ to mean that it was incumbent upon him to partake of matzah, bitter herbs, and a portion of the Paschal sacrifice together in order to fulfill the commandment of keeping Passover. Thus, he would place a small portion of bitter herbs and Paschal sacrifice (according to some versions, just bitter herbs) on a piece of matzah, creating a small open-faced sandwich. Because he was the first known person to do this, and because of his influence and stature in Palestinian Judaism, this practice was added to the Seder and the sandwich was named after him.

Today it is customary in almost every seder to partake of the Hillel Sandwich using the bottom piece of the three matzot with the explanatory words: “In memory of the Temple according to Hillel.” The Hillel Sandwich is a reminder of the temple today because there is no Paschal sacrifice to put on it. Therefore, its absence reminds celebrants of the Temple that existed in the days of Hillel near the close of the Second Temple Period (516 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.). Many celebrants include an additional reminder by replacing the portion of the sacrifice with a small amount of charoseth. This practice of using charoseth was also instigated by Hillel after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. as recorded in the Mishnah: “When food is brought before [Hillel] he eats it seasoned with lettuce [bitter herbs], until he is come to the breaking of bread; they bring before him unleavened bread and lettuce and the charoseth, although charoseth is not a religious obligation. R. Eliezer b. R. Zadok says: It is a religious obligation. And in the Holy City [Jerusalem] they used to bring before him the body of the Passover-offering (i.e. – before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.).”²

¹ Exodus 12:8

² *Mishnah*. Pesachim 10:3