

Women at the Seder Table:

The Social Status of Men and Women at the Seder Table from Ancient Rome to Twentieth Century Brooklyn

Dr. Joshua Kulp, Rosh Yeshiva
Conservative Yeshiva, Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center (fuchsbergcenter.org)

The Obligation to Recline

Mishnah Pesahim 10:1	משנה פסחים פרק י, משנה א
On the eve of Pesah close to minhah one may not eat until nightfall. Even the poorest person in Israel must not eat [on the night of Pesah] until he reclines. And they should give him not less than four cups [of wine], and even from the charity plate.	ערבי פסחים סמוך למנחה לא יאכל אדם עד שתחשיך ואפילו עני שבישראל לא יאכל עד שיסב ולא יפחתו לו מארבע כוסות של יין ואפילו מן התמחוי:

Reclining and Social Status: Men, Women and Slaves

Baruch Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder*, 461-463

The seder's act of reclining... would concretize a sense of liberation and freedom. But while this sentiment applies to a person's relationship to God and to the world in general terms, it is not automatically clear what impact it should have on a person's immediate social relationships... Does the egalitarianism that is prescribed by M[ishnah]. 10:1 and the festival's very nature, and that is graphically acted out by the reclining, mean that normal social roles be totally abolished

Yerushalmi 10:1, 37b

R. Yose asked in front of R. Simon: Even a slave in front of his master and even a woman in front of her husband [is obligated to recline]?

רבי יוסי בעא קומי רבי סימון אפי' עבד לפני רבו
אפילו אשה לפני בעלה?

Bavli Pesahim 108a

A woman who is with her husband—she is not required to recline.
But if she is an important woman, she must recline.

בבלי פסחים קח ע"א
אשה אצל בעלה - לא בעיא הסיבה,
ואם אשה חשובה היא - צריכה הסיבה.

Isidore of Seville (7th century), quoting Varro, a first century B.C.E. Roman scholar

Sedes [seats—i.e. places on the dining couches] are so called because among the old Romans there was no practice of reclining, for which reason they were also said to 'take a seat'.
Afterward, as Varro says in his work, *On the Life of the Roman People*, men began to recline and women sat, because the reclining posture was deemed shameful in a woman.

Valerius Maximus, the first century C.E.

[Concerning 'old Roman custom']. Women ordinarily dined sitting next to men who reclined, a custom that passed from human dining practice to the gods: for at the feast of Jupiter he himself was invited to dine on a couch, and Juno and Minerva on chairs... Our own age cultivates this type of discipline more assiduously on the Capitol [the location of the feast of Jupiter] than in our own homes, evidently because it is of greater consequence to the commonwealth to ensure the orderly conduct of goddesses than of women.

Women and Wine at the Seder

Tosefta Pesahim 10:4

A man is commanded to make his children and his wife happy on the festival.

With what does he make them happy?

With wine, as it is written: *and wine gladdens the human heart* (Psalms 104:15).

R. Judah says: Women with what is appropriate for them, and children with what is appropriate for them.

תוספתא פסחים י' ד:
מצוה על אדם לשמח בניו ובני ביתו ברגל.
במה משמח?
ביין דכתיב: ויין ישמח לבב אנוש (תהילים קד:טו)
ר' יהודה או' נשים בראוי להם וקטנים בראוי להם.

<p><u>Babylonian Talmud 108a</u> And R. Joshua ben Levi said: Women are obligated in these four cups, for they too were part of the miracle.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף קח עמוד א ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: נשים חייבות בארבעה כוסות הללו, שאף הן היו באותו הנס.</p>
<p><u>Babylonian Talmud 108b</u> Our rabbis taught: Everyone is obligated in these four cups, men, women and children.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף קח עמוד ב תנו רבנן: הכל חייבין בארבעה כוסות הללו, אחד אנשים ואחד נשים, ואחד תינוקות.</p>

Reclining in a Non-Reclining World

Ra'avan (Germany, 12th century)

They would sit on couches and lean to their left. But we, are not accustomed to act in this way, fulfill our obligation the way we sit, and we should not lean to the right or to the left.

Sefer Amarcal (Medieval Germany, author unkown)

Rabbenu Hayyim explained that on the contrary, it is now the way of kings to eat without reclining. However, in my opinion since we now eat without reclining throughout the year, now it is the way of freedom to recline.

Women Reclining

Sheiltot of R. Ahai Geon, Tzav, 77

A woman need not recline. Why? It is not the way for a woman to recline.

R. Nissim, Commentary on the Rif, Pesahim 23a

A woman need not recline: For she serves her husband.

R. Asher, Pesahim 10

A woman need not recline: The Rashbam explained that this is due to the fear of her husband, to whom she was subordinate. And according to this, a widow or divorcee must recline. But in the Sheiltot of R. Ahai, he wrote that it is not customary for women to recline. And

according to this, even a widow or divorcee as well. But an important woman, it is her custom to recline.

Toledot Adam Ve-Havah, Netiv 5, Part 4, 42d, R. Yeroham, Spain, 14c.

The Tosafot wrote that all of our women are considered important and thus are obligated to recline. But Rambam simply wrote that the average woman need not recline.

Shulkhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 472:4

A woman need not recline, unless she is important. Hagah: And all of the women in our day are considered important (Mordecai and R. Yeroham). However, they do not have the custom to recline, for they rely on the words of the Raavyah who wrote that in our day [no one] needs to recline.

Darkhei Moshe Hakatzar (R. Moshe Isserlich, 16th century Poland) Orah Hayyim 472

In truth, I have not seen women reclining in our day. And it is possible that they were lenient on themselves based on the words of the Raavyah who wrote that today, reclining is not required.

Turei Zahav, R. David Halevi Segal (17th century Poland)

It seems to me that whenever it says that one does not have to recline, it is forbidden to recline, as it says with regard to the sukkah, that anyone who is exempt from something but does it anyway is called “ordinary.”



The Sarajevo Haggadah, 1350 Spain

Rav Chaim Karlinsky (influential Haredi rabbi in early 20th century Brooklyn) “Women and Reclining” in Hadarom 51

Question: As is the custom in our area, yesterday all of the families who are members of the synagogue were gathered in the hall for the seder. And I saw there a new custom—All of the chairs around the table were set up for reclining, and when the time to eat the matzah and drink the four cups came, the women reclined like the men. This is something that was not done in my father’s house. I should admit that this made a great impression. But as one who was raised and bred in a religious house on the purity of holiness and who remained faithful to Jewish tradition, I wanted to know if there is any source for this in halakhah. Or is this just something “new” that came from [the influence] of this area.....

The summary of the sources is as follows: 1) All important women must recline. 2) All women today are important. And if during the time of the geonim they already said that all women were important, all the more so is this true in our time and in our place, where a married woman rules the house, and her husband is subordinate to her, and he fears her...and

also, it is their custom to recline..And especially these women who don't trouble themselves to celebrate the Seder in their own homes lest, heaven forbid, their fragile hands absorb [the cleaning detergent]. And they sit on couches with their husbands and the members of their household when the seder is proceeding, and their work is done for them by others---servants, cooks, and waiters...And according to this it would seem clear that today women are required to recline. On the contrary, maybe men should be made exempt from reclining for the same reasons they wanted to exempt women. ...

And now I come to a practical halakhic conclusion as to what you asked: “A woman who fulfills all of the requirements of the statement, “All of the glory of the daughter of a king is inside” and who celebrates the seder in her home and with her family, about her the great rabbis ruled that she is not allowed to be stringent upon herself and recline. All the more so for a woman participating in the a public seder in one public room, and it might be that men and women from many families are reclining at one table. We must be concerned that women reclining would result in lightheadedness and would do harm to public modesty—particularly for the last cups for when wine goes in....This is strengthened by the fact that the question was presented by a man whose writing is proof that he is a Torah scholar and man of tradition and he testifies that the impression made by the women reclining was great. If the women's reclining increased the impression of the holiness of the holiday of redemption, even by the tiniest amount, then care should be taken to avoid this reclining, just as we avoid the smallest amount of hametz on Pesah. Clearly, at such a seder is forbidden for a woman to practice the extra mitzvah of reclining in public. Certainly the sages would not be pleased by this extra mitzvah. And about this we could recommend, “Better sit and do nothing” (שב ואל תסב).



Second Cincinnati
Haggadah, 18th
Century Moravia