

On One Foot – Seder Night

Every family has its own traditional meals for Seder night. In Temple times the menu was very specific, with the Paschal Lamb, Matzah and Marror as the essentials. The lamb had to be roasted whole. In the Talmudic passage which gives the original text of the Mah Nishtana (Pesachim 116a), one of the questions was on all other nights we may eat meat which is roasted, stewed or boiled, but tonight we must eat roast meat. (The Jerusalem Talmud only has 3 questions, matzah, roast meat and dipping).

Since the destruction of the Temple, there has been a custom not to eat roast lamb at Seder because people might imagine that we are sacrificing despite the halachic abrogation of korbanot. This is one of the enduring distinctions between the Jews and the Samaritan community, who still slaughter their paschal lamb on Mt Gerizim.

The focus of halacha is not only on the lamb but also on means of cooking. The Shulchan Aruch rules (Orach Chayim 476:1) that in places where the minhag is to eat roast meat one should; but where the minhag is not to eat roast meat, one should not, lest someone might say that this is the Paschal sacrifice.

The position of the Mishna Berura is that for Ashkenazim, the minhag is not to eat roast meat of any sort. The Shulchan Aruch records that the prohibition on roast meat is not only against lamb, but also beef and even fowl, i.e. anything that requires Shechita (OC 476:2). It does not extend to fish.

Roasting includes pot roasting or baking meat exclusively in its own juices. However if the meat is marinated or cooked in a sauce, then according to most opinions it does not present a problem.

The Taz (1586-1667) considers that the restriction against roasting beef and chicken was a concession to those who wanted to extend the prohibition to all meat, lest one erroneously suppose that it was a roasted sacrifice. He discounted this additional stricture on the basis that this would impinge upon our enjoyment of the meal.

Enjoying the festive meal is a halacha. Whatever your minhag and whatever shiurim you follow for the obligatory quantities of matzah and marror, you should leave enough room to enjoy the Shulchan Orech repast that has been prepared – and indeed leave enough room to eat and savour the Afikoman which follows.

Bon Appetit, Good Yomtov, B'tayavon, Enjoy!