

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Shulchan: *Gathering Around the Table*



For many of us, some of our fondest memories are made around a table. In many homes, the family table is the centerpiece, the place where we gather to be nourished and nurtured, to be heard and to share stories, to celebrate and commiserate, and to simply enjoy being together.

Likewise, some of our most joyful moments with friends happen over a good meal sitting around a table. Some of our most vivid childhood memories emanate from the dining table, where holiday meals were served at the homes of our grandparents or other relatives.

Indeed, the table is a powerful element in our lives that serves a purpose much greater than simply a space on which to serve our food. The table — and more importantly, what happens at the table — is a powerful symbol of community, unity, and fellowship — not only for our family and friends, but also for people of faith.

The *Talmud*, Judaism's oral tradition, teaches: "Eating has great power — it can distance those that are near and bring close those that are far." The *Talmud* goes on to explain that the nations of Ammon and Moab were cut off from God's people because they did not offer the Israelites food when they were leaving Egypt.

Jethro, on the other hand, who was a Midianite and later became Moses' father-in-law, was welcomed into God's family because he had provided Moses with food and offered him a place to stay when Moses fled Egypt. There are other examples provided where withholding hospitality brought ruin upon a person, while offering provisions was rewarded.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of this is the story of David and Nabal in 1 Samuel 25. Nabal had refused David and his men's request for hospitality — food and drink — while in the wilderness, and consequently, David had set out with his men to kill Nabal and his entire household. Only the quick

thinking of Nabal's wife, Abigail, helped avert disaster when she herself offered David food and drink. In the end, Nabal died of a sudden heart attack, and Abigail became David's wife!

When we use our tables for godly purposes, the act of eating and gathering around the table has the ability to bring us closer to the Lord.

This month's *Limmud* is all about the holy power and potential of the *shulchan*, the table. As many of us will soon gather around tables to celebrate Thanksgiving, we will be reminded of the important role the table plays in our holy festivals. We will acknowledge how sharing our table with others is an important way to show kindness and generosity and learn how the table can be the catalyst for significant conversations about God, values, and life. Through our shared meals, we can foster fellowship with one another. This is not just a Jewish tradition; the early Christians "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46).

We will also discover that even a simple meal, on a regular day, spent alone or with just one person, can become an experience that moves us further on our walk with God. In Psalm 23:1 King David wrote: "*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*" David then went on to say, "*You prepare a table before me... my cup overflows*" (v. 5). It is important to note that David wrote this while in the desert, hiding from King Saul. He affirmed that even in our most difficult circumstances, God will provide for our needs.

Every time God "*prepares a table*" for us, it is an opportunity to recognize God's goodness and blessings. It is an experience that can increase our awareness of God in our lives. In this way, eating is transformed from physical to spiritual. Our home becomes a sanctuary; our table becomes holy.

Rabbi Eckstein

*You prepare a
table before me
in the presence
of my enemies.
You anoint my
head with oil;
my cup
overflows.*

— Psalm 23:5



A Place of Grace

“Don’t be afraid,” David said to him, “for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan . . . and you will always eat at my table.”
— 2 Samuel 9:7

Numerous places in the Bible direct us to feed the hungry and help the needy. Proverbs 22:9 assures us that *“The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor”* and Isaiah 58:7 instructs us that a true fast pleasing to the Lord is *“to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter . . .”*

No other item better symbolizes the act of providing hospitality to those in need than the table. At our tables, we feed the body and nourish the soul. It is a place of nurturing, of giving and receiving, of kindness. More than just a handout, when we invite others to join us at a meal in our homes, we bring them into our lives, and hopefully, touch theirs in a meaningful way.

In the very first verse of Genesis 18, we find that Abraham was in communion with God as he sat outside his tent. Yet, in the following verse, as soon as Abraham saw three men approaching — which we later learn were angels — Abraham immediately ran to greet them, offering them food and water.

According to Jewish teaching, we learn from this instance that it is greater to provide hospitality to strangers than to greet the presence of God. Such is the extent to which hospitality is valued in Judaism. Through inviting guests into our homes, we take God’s Word and transform it into action.

We find this concept echoed in the Christian Bible as well. As noted earlier, hospitality was the hallmark of the early church (Acts 2:46). In writing to the church at Rome, the Apostle Paul instructed the Christians there to *“Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality”* (Romans 12:13), and similarly, Peter wrote, *“Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling”* (1 Peter 4:9). The author of the book of Hebrews harkened back to Abraham and the three strangers when he wrote, *“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it”* (Hebrews 13:2).

The Hebrew word for table is *shulchan*. Taken apart to form two separate words, we read *“shel chen,”* which means “of grace.” Indeed the table is a place of grace — a place where we are blessed and where we bless others. As we share our food, our warmth, and a welcoming atmosphere, we receive God’s blessings.

In fact, the *Talmud* states, “A person who sits at his table

for a long time is blessed with long years and a long life.” This doesn’t refer to someone who enjoys eating for hours on end. Rather, it refers to a person who hosts the hungry, the needy, and the lonely at his or her table, spending many hours sitting together with others and providing their needs. Such a person is worthy of a long, blessed life.

In the Christian Bible, Jesus taught similarly, *“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed”* (Luke 14:12-14).

Interestingly, Jews in France once had the custom of using the wood from the table of a deceased person’s home in order to build a coffin when he or she passed away. In doing so, they were demonstrating that all a person can take with them from this life are the good deeds and kindness that they have done for others.

Echoing this sentiment, the Jewish sages taught that the word *shulchan* is also an acronym. It stands for the Hebrew phrase: *“Shamur Likevura Chessed Nideevotecha”* which means, “Saved for your burial is the kindness of your generosity.” Welcoming guests into our home and serving them a meal at our table blesses us in this life and in the next.

When King David wished to display kindness to the offspring of Jonathan, his beloved friend and the son of Saul, David searched for any living progeny. He found Mephibosheth, a disabled man whose prestige had long been forgotten. King David could find no better way to bestow everlasting kindness on the son of Jonathan than to give him a permanent seat at the king’s table.

He told Mephibosheth, *“I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan . . . you will always eat at my table.”* We find this practiced throughout the Jewish Bible. In Nehemiah 5, while the people were hard at work restoring the city walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah routinely invited *“a hundred and fifty Jews and officials”* to eat at his table, along with others from *“surrounding nations”* (Nehemiah 5:17).

Our tables are far more than just a piece of furniture — they are a vehicle for kindness and grace, a place where we bless others, and in turn, we are blessed immeasurably.



A Vehicle for Holiness

“Make a table of acacia wood—two cubits long, a cubit wide and a cubit and a half high.”

— Exodus 25:23

Before the tables of our homes became a focal point of our service to God, there was a different table that served that function — the table that God commanded the Israelites to make which would stand first in His Tabernacle and then in His Holy Temple. Like our tables at home, this table would be a place to hold bread, which would then nourish the people, in this case, the priests.

The Jewish sages noted that three of the main vessels of the Temple – the table, the ark, and the altar – were all made out of acacia wood. In Hebrew, the word for acacia is *shittim*. The sages teach that *shittim* is an acronym for *shalom, tova, yeshuah, and mechila* – peace, goodness, salvation, and forgiveness. These four represent all blessings, and during Temple times, it was through these vessels that all blessings were spread to the world.

With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, our tables have served as the vehicle to bring about those same blessings. When we use our table to carry out God’s directives, such as feeding the hungry or welcoming guests, it becomes a place of holiness. Every meal we prepare with love and share with others is an act of lovingkindness. All the work that goes into setting a table and serving a meal can become acts in service of God’s people.

Moreover, the table, which can represent our most physical desires and actions, can also become the place where we make those actions holy. Instead of sitting down to our meals just to consume sustenance, we can elevate the act of eating food when we thank God for it by saying grace and taking notice that all sustenance is from God alone. Our eating then becomes a form of service, as every meal increases our awareness of God.

The Bible directs us to thank God *after* we have eaten as well. In Deuteronomy 8:10 we read: “*When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God . . .*” Notably, we are commanded to thank God once we are satisfied as well. It’s one thing to turn to God when we are hungry; it’s another to remember God when we are satisfied. This goes for the food that God provides as well as all other blessings we receive. When we remember Him when our needs are met, we elevate all our possessions.

The table is also an ideal place for sharing God’s Word. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, every time two people share a meal, a *Torah* (Bible) thought should also be shared. In this way, the table becomes the place where we not only fill our stomachs, but also our souls. We will

learn more about this in the next section, “A Forum for Fellowship,” when we discuss the rabbi’s *tisch* (Yiddish for table).

Every Sabbath meal or festival meal begins with reciting the *Kiddush*, the sanctification, over wine (or grape juice). We take wine that can so easily be used or abused for purely physical pleasure, and we literally raise it up and use it to bless the holy day. By doing so we demonstrate that our tables are places of holiness and that our meals are service to God.

In the Christian Bible, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Whatever we do, even the mundane task of eating and drinking can be, and should be, done in a way that honors God and those around us.

Jews are taught that since the destruction of the Temple, our homes are a small Temple. As the table symbolizes, all our mundane actions that are necessary for daily living can be uplifted in holiness. Every meal is an opportunity to connect with God and to bring sanctity into our lives.

think about it

1. Think of a positive childhood memory that happened around a table. What was the occasion? How did you feel? How did gathering around the table play a role in making memories that helped shape the person you are today?
2. How can you use your own table to do more good in the world? How can your table be an integral part of your service to God?
3. What can you do at every meal to make the physical experience a more spiritual one?
4. How might you extend your table in a figurative sense? How might you feed the hungry, nourish others, and comfort the lonely even if they are not in your home?
5. Studies have shown that shared family meals correlate with children who are happier, healthier, and receive better grades in school. How does that shift your perspective on the power of gathering around the table for family meals?
6. How can we educate the next generation about the importance and potential of sharing meals with others around a family table?



A Forum for Fellowship

*How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!*

— Psalm 133:1

At the heart of Judaism is the Sabbath, and at the heart of the Sabbath (*Shabbat*) is the table. Typically covered in a white tablecloth symbolizing purity, adorned with flowers, set with our best dishes, and aglow with candlelight, the *Shabbat* table creates an ideal atmosphere for friends and families to come together to enjoy good food and good company.

In Psalm 133 we read: “*How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!*” When translated from the original Hebrew, this verse literally means: “How good and pleasant it is when brethren sit together.” Interestingly, the Hebrew word in the verse meaning “sit,” *shevet*, שבת, contains the exact Hebrew letters as the Hebrew word for “Sabbath,” שבת, *Shabbat*, only the pronunciation is different. In our fast-paced society, the value of sitting together and just being together is often overlooked. However, it is one of the central aspects of *Shabbat* and all Jewish holidays.

In many Jewish communities around the world, it is customary to this very day for the community's leading rabbi to hold a “*Shabbos tisch*,” a Yiddish term that means “Sabbath table.” At the *tisch*, anywhere between a handful to thousands of followers will gather around the rabbi's Sabbath table as he inspires them with God's Word and soulful singing. The goal of the *tisch* is to foster fellowship while cultivating closeness to God.

When we “meet” through these *Limmud* teachings, it is this image of the rabbi's *tisch* that I have in mind! Each month, through these pages, I invite you in the spirit of fellowship and unity to join with me in learning about these important concepts and tenets in Judaism and their significance in Christianity.

However, the Sabbath is not the only time that the table becomes a vehicle for fostering unity and fellowship. All our Jewish holidays center around festive meals shared at the table. Some holidays emphasize the importance of the table more than others do. For example, when Mordechai instructed the Jewish people to observe the holiday of *Purim* in the book of Esther, he told the people to “*observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor*” (Esther 9:22).

Yet, perhaps it is the Passover observance in which the table plays the most central role of all. At its very establishment, when the Israelites were commanded to bring the Passover sacrifice, God specifically directed the people to consume the offering in groups: “. . . *each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor . . .*” (Exodus 12:3-4).

Today, the Passover *seder*, the ritual meal commemorating the events of Passover as well as the Passover offering, takes place with family and friends around the table. Set with symbolic foods and ritual objects, the Passover table is the quintessential example of a gathering. It is around the table where we share our stories, both collective and personal.

We bridge generations as the older generation passes on stories, traditions, and wisdom to the younger generations. In turn, the children are encouraged to ask questions throughout the *seder* meal. Together, we enjoy our finest foods while thanking God for all His bountiful blessings and salvation.

We see this tradition of gathering around the table in the Christian Bible where Jesus gathered with his disciples at the Passover table for his last supper with them (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-23). In the book of Acts, the early church “*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*” (Acts 2:42).

On the Sabbath, on the holidays, or simply on any given night of the week, the table is our point of connection. It brings us together as families and communities – and together, at the table, we are nurtured, strengthened, encouraged, and inspired.

apply it...

- 1. INVITE GUESTS.** Whether it's family, strangers, friends, or those in need, one of the best, most powerful acts of kindness is to invite guests into our home and share a meal at our table. (Job 31:32; Romans 12:13)
- 2. CREATE TABLE TRADITIONS.** Establishing traditions helps us seamlessly integrate meaningful moments into our lives. Some examples include saying grace or inviting new guests over once a month. (Deuteronomy 8:10; Matthew 14:19)
- 3. FEED THE HUNGRY.** We can bring people in need of food to our table, but we can also bring our table to them. We can volunteer in soup kitchens or partner with organizations like *The Fellowship* that bring food to the poor and needy. (Isaiah 58:7; Luke 3:11)
- 4. MAKE YOUR TABLE HOLY.** Read from Scriptures or share some inspirational Bible teachings at every meals. Expressing gratitude to God for our food and sharing our food with those in need are also ways to transform our table into a place of holiness and godliness. (Psalm 95:2; 1 Timothy 4:4)
- 5. SET A BEAUTIFUL TABLE.** On holidays, or at any meal we choose, we can enhance our tables by setting them with our best table linens, dishes, flowers and candlelight, to make our table feel like a warm and sacred space. (Psalm 29:2; Hebrews 12:14)