

Is it Permissible to Invite a Gentile to the Passover Seder ? ¹

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Question:

Rabbi, some days ago, I had 'observant' friends call me and invite my sister and her partner for the second Seder of Pessah. The friend then wanted to extend her invitation, and asked me if I wanted to join my sister. When I told her that my husband was not Jewish, she told me that she was sorry, but could not invite him for the Seder, for "this is the only Jewish celebration where non-Jews are not invited to take part." She seemed surprised that I do not know this halakha. In fact, I do not know it. Where does it come from? Where is it mentioned? At first I was understanding and simply thanked her, but after a while I felt uncomfortable. What do you think?

Response:

There is a well-established halachic ruling which forbids inviting a non-Jewish person to festival meals prescribed by the Torah, as opposed to those of Shabbat, where this is permitted. [1] The reason for the prohibition is that the law authorizing cooking in these days (in contrast to Shabbat) applies only for those who observe the laws of the festival, which is, of course, is not the case with non-Jews. This is not the place to detail the relevant sources. But we maintain that as long as certain precautions are taken, such as cooking for all of the guests together (and not in separated utensils) - one would not transgress the basic law.

These measures should be followed in order to remove all difficulties. But in fact, there exist, in our humble opinion, major religious reasons which support inviting non-Jews to festival meals:

1. "*Mishum chinuch, letzorech mitzva*" : for educational reasons, for the purpose of performing the commandments" - allowing conversion candidates to initiate themselves in Jewish practice. [2]
2. "*Mishum K'vod Horim*" :Respecting one's parents -- honouring a non-Jewish parent. Many Rabbis have ruled that this principle remains binding after the conversion of the child to Judaism. [3] It is hurtful for a parent not to be invited to a meal because of his status of "gentile" [4]
3. "*Mishum Kiruv*" :To bring people close" -- This is applicable for both partners of a mixed marriage. It is not right to refuse the Jewish partner the opportunity to perform a commandment, just so that he holds to the prohibition. [5] It is preferable to include the non-Jewish spouse in Jewish life, rather than to move

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them away. [6]

4. "*Mipnei Darkei Shalom - Mishum Eiva*" (To walk in ways of peace or: to prevent animosity)": Many halachic authorities, in different circumstances, have preferred to ignore various antique rules of discrimination, in order to reinforce confidence and to edify the brotherhood between religions and between people. [7]

As to the specific question of the Passover seder, in my enquiries in the halachic sources I never saw a specific prohibition forbidding the participation of non-Jews. I even heard explicitly from my teacher ("Manitou", Léon Askénazi) that the presence of non-Jewish people was permitted, according to certain conditions mentioned below. Nevertheless, I know that this "rule" circulates and that certain rabbis uphold it. Where does it originate? In my opinion, it comes from the biblical prohibition to consume the Paschal lamb:

"The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, These are the regulations for the Passover: No foreigner is to eat of it. Any slave you have bought may eat of it after you have circumcised him, but a temporary resident and a hired worker may not eat of it. It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. The whole community of Israel must celebrate it. An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you". *Exodus 12, 43-49*

From this passage, we see that in the era where the ritual Paschal lamb was consumed -- that is, as long as the Temple existed, and possibly for some centuries after -- only those "members of the alliance of Israel" were allowed to eat of it. This consumption constituted the essence of the celebration of the Passover Seder. It excluded the male uncircumcised "not carrying the alliance of Abraham in their flesh" and the foreigners. But not all the foreigners! Those that lived in the Hebrew society and identified themselves with their destiny, to the point that they would enter into the circumcision alliance, could consume the ritual offering without any discrimination. On the other hand, one with only "sympathy" towards the Jewish people was not enough to authorize this consumption.

It is necessary to understand the fundamental ideas: to consume the lamb was a sign of allegiance, of "communion", and did not therefore hold significance for those who were not part of the community of Israel. This point is raised in an aggada of the Jerusalem Talmud [8]: the Roman commander Antonin expressed his bitterness to Rabbi (Judah the Prince) on the paradoxical fact that Judaism promised him that he would be able to consume Leviathan [9] in the world to come (as a "righteous one among the nations"), but forbade him (as non-Jew) to consume the Paschal lamb! Although contradictory at first sight, the rule has its coherence. Only the conversion to Judaism could hold as allegiance to the people of Israel, and therefore be expressed symbolically by the consumption of the Paschal lamb. That did not remove any dignity or deservingness of the non-Jews who were promised "bliss" in the world to come if they had behaved in a just way during their earthly stay.

Since in the era of Rabbi (3rd century CE.), the Temple had already been destroyed for more than a century, some were able to deduct that what Rabbi had forbidden Antonin was not the lamb itself, but its symbolic substitute, the "afikoman". [10] In fact, in a later era, one sees in the Babylonian Talmud Rav Yehuda teaching in the name of Shmuel that henceforth a piece of unleavened bread, matza, was to replace symbolically the lamb, or at least to remind us of the ritual that accompanied it. [11] This piece of matza substituted in memory of the Paschal lamb later took on the greek name "Afikoman."

Probably, it was this transposition of the ban from the Paschal lamb to the afikoman that induced the opinion that it was not permitted to share the Passover meal of with non-Jews. Nevertheless, I did not see anything written that such a "rule" exists in Jewish law . The afikoman is a symbolic memorial, and has not therefore an equivalent value to the Paschal lamb. And if there is a prohibition against non-Jews eating from the Passover meal, it concerns only the consumption of the afikoman, that is, the small piece of matza eaten symbolically at the end of the festive meal. Apart from this, a non-Jew can certainly be invited and attend the Pessach Seder, as long as at some point he is told that he should not eat from the afikoman. It may be easier for those coming from Christian backgrounds to understand, if one explains with the required delicacy that the afikoman has a similar function to the communion host, and that this is a ritual act of allegiance for the one that is part of Israel. It is an act that respects the identity choice that each person makes. It goes without saying that a person that decides that in the future he will convert to Judaism will consume the afikoman like every other Jewish person.

In conclusion, and in response to the original question, I would say that if it is true that Passover is a festival of Jewish identity which concerns at first the Jews, one must not ignore the fact that inviting a non-Jewish partner of a Jew to the Seder table not only allows the spouse to maintain his or her Jewish identity, despite the mixed marriage, but is also likely to awaken in him the desire to be part of the community of Israel. This especially allows their children to maintain that identity. Inviting a non-Jewish parent produces the same positive effect. On the other hand, an abrupt exclusion is not only offending but risks having harmful effects. Inviting a non-Jew to the Seder, even without family considerations, constitutes equally, in an era of wide communication and of globalization, a tremendous opportunity to make our religion known and understood, which allows us both to banish the old suspicions, and to establish better comprehension and brotherhood between the religious families.

Notes:

[1] Cf. *Shulchan Aruch*, Orach Chaim, 512.

[2] For example: Moshe Feinstein, *Igerot Moshe*, Yore Deah 3:90 authorizes teaching Torah to a conversion candidate.

[3] Example: There is a duty to pray for the health of a non-Jewish parent, or to say Kaddish in his memory. cf. Ovadia Yossef, *Yechavei Daat* 6:60.

[4] Example: On the importance of not humiliating a non-Jewish parent, cf. Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe*, Yoreh Deah 213:130.

[5] "Even if it causes resentment towards the person who reproves, the Torah Says: ‘Reprove your kinsman’, meaning: relieve the wrath that is in your heart. On the contrary, this is an order to counter it with love. Maybe he will succeed in preventing it this way" (Moshe Cordovero, *Palm Tree of Debora*, 1:5).

[6] Why does one fear the "mixed marriages"? Because of the assimilation and the dissolution of the Jewish people. But by pushing away these families, one pushes them to the very assimilation that one claimed to fight! See in this direction, the responsum of the great rabbi: "It is evident that in similar circumstance (of mixed marriages), it is an obligation to attract them" (BenTzion Uziel, 1880-1953, *Piskei Uziel be-cheelot hazman*, siman 65).

[7] Examples: Tosefta, Gittin 3:13-14. It continues: " In a city where Jews and non-Jews, one those responsible for charity collections collect from the Jews and non-Jews to walk in the ways of peace; one supports the poor of the Jews and non-Jews to walk in the ways of peace, one visits the ill of the Jews and non-Jews to walk in the ways of peace, one buries the dead Jews and non-Jews, one consoles their bereaved at time of mourning to walk in the ways of peace " (T.J. Gittin, ch. 5, halakha 9). The Hafetz Haim (1838-1933) evokes the of Poskim (post-Shulchan Aruch), such Moshe Isserles that permit sending prepared food during the festivals to non-Jews, if the foods were prepared in a same cooking, "mi-shum eiva : To prevent animosity" (cf. *Mishna Brura* 512: 100, 6).

[8] Cf. Megila 1:11, 72B.

[9] The Leviathan is a sort of mythical cetacean whose flesh is preserved from the time of the Creation World and reserved for the consumption of the just ones in the world to come.

[10] Indeed, it is more probable than the lamb again was consumed ritual during some generations after the destruction of the Temple (cf. Shmuel & Ze'ev Safrai, *Haggadah of the Sages*, Jerusalem, Karta, 1998, p. 27-30; and infra ,note 3)

[11] Cf. Pessachim 119b. This is from this passage that commentators such Rashi and the Rashbam declare that it is necessary to consume a quantity of matza equivalent to the volume of a big olive "ka-zait matza" as last food of the meal. It is in the Mahzor Vitry (XIe-XIIIe c.), and other works from this time, that this last piece of matza takes the name of "afikoman". Two possible explanations are given to the substitution of the Paschal lamb by the matza: "To remember matza that was consumed at the same time that the Paschal lamb" (Rachi, Rashbam on Pessachim 119b) or "to remember Paschal lamb that was consumed to satiation" (Rosh, *ibid.*, Tur and Shulchan Aruch OH 478a). The latter explanation is found in the Haggadot Sefaradot (cf. Safrai, *op. cit.* p. 170). But in both cases, it is evidently that it refers symbolically to the lamb that is no longer consumed.