# Meals and Mourning: Seudat Havra'ah and the Seudah Mafseket of Tisha b'Av in Medieval Ashkenaz

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*Dedicated to the memory of my beloved father Moshe Fertig (1946-2020)*

**Abstract**: The study of foodways of Jews in medieval Ashkenaz reveals the social, cultural and religious significance of meals as part of the life cycle and the cycle of Jewish calendar events. This article examines two meals connected to mourning rituals: the *Seudat Havra'ah,* the first meal eaten by the mourners following the funeral, and the *Seudah Mafseket*, the meal eaten before the fast of Tisha b'Av. The *Seudat Havra'ah* signified a ritual “reintegrating” the mourners back into the fabric of life, whereas the *Seudah Mafseket* was eaten in an attempt to make the destruction of the Temple present. While comparing the meals' design in the domestic space and their components: foods, participants and their roles, and liturgy, the differences between the concepts of private and public mourning will be elucidated. This comparison exemplifies the ritual roles of meals and their contribution to constructing and reinforcing identities and belonging.

**Keywords**: Eating, symbolic foods, life cycle events, Hebrew calendar, ritual.

## Introduction

The meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals; each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In her well-known article, Mary Douglas discussed the meaning of meals as a social event and argued that a meal, whether everyday or festive, simultaneously echoes meals similar to and different from it. This article examines the customs of two meals connected to Jewish mourning rituals, which were eaten in the domestic space: *seudat havra'ah* (meal of condolence)*,* the first meal eaten by the mourners after the death of a close family member following the funeral,[[2]](#footnote-2) and the *seudah mafseket*[[3]](#footnote-3), the pre-fast meal eaten directly prior to the fast of Tisha b’Av, a fast day lamenting the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Fundamental to every meal is the fulfillment of a physical need. Mourners needed to consume nutritious food when they returned from the cemetery. Similarly, those about to fast needed sufficient food to do so successfully. But beyond the fulfillment of a physical need, these meals also served as socio-cultural events. In order to delve into the social and cultural boundaries defining each meal, I describe the medieval customs associated with these two meals of mourning. Comparison between them highlights similar components shared by the two, while illustrating the unique character of each and how it expresses the fundamental differences in the nature of private and public mourning.

While the post-funeral meal functioned as a rite that helped mourners come to terms with their loss, the pre-fast meal commemorated the destruction of the Temple as if it occurred in those very moments. To invoke the feeling of an immediate sense of mourning, practices were compared to those applied before the burial of a dead body. Unlike the Seudat Havra'ah, where the mourners were close relatives, the "death" of the Temple was a public event that made all the Jews simultaneously *onenim*, i.e., relatives of the deceased in the stage preceding burial.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Based on the different functions of these two meals, I show that the meals themselves had a significant part in the ritual process, and also that meals in general played a central role in the domestic religious practices. In the Hebrew textual sources from the time, the home is the most commonly mentioned eating and dining space, where meals eaten on holidays and celebrations of life-cycle events took place, as well as daily meals. Each domestic meal involved a different design of the domestic space: candle-lighting on Shabbat eve and holidays,[[5]](#footnote-5) cushions for reclining at the Passover Seder, and moving the household into the sukkah for the entire week of Sukkot. The two meals of mourning serve as case studies for understanding the culture of eating and dining among the Jews of Medieval Ashkenaz during life-cycle and the yearly calendar events.

Domestic space provides a window through which social boundaries can be examined. The circle of social belonging of the Ashkenazic family was first and foremost the "nuclear family."[[6]](#footnote-6) However, often domestic space also included servants and guests who needed a home or shelter for a while. These are referred to as members of the "household" – a group of people sharing familial, social or even occupational relations, eating and sleeping in the same house during a certain period.[[7]](#footnote-7) As people opened their domestic space to wider public participation in a meal, they created connection, intimacy and partnership, all indicating different relationships between the members of the community. Furthermore, active participation in a meal – preparing, serving and especially eating together – was an important way of expressing circles of belonging to the family and the community.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The main sources presented here are from halakhic literature and customs manuals originating in Germany and Northern France from the end of the 11th century until the middle of the 14th century.[[9]](#footnote-9) In these Hebrew manuals, we find discussions on meals, specifically those that were part of the Jewish calendar or a significant life-cycle event. Because of the nature of halakhaliterature, these discussions relate mostly to the symbolic significance of the meals; thus, when food was mentioned, it was the ritual foods.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nevertheless, these texts present limitations in the study of the prevalent customs, as they were composed by halakhic authorities, i.e., scholarly elitist men.[[11]](#footnote-11) Additionally, as the meals themselves as a one-time event, existing in a specific time and place, it is impossible to completely trace the events of these medieval meals. Nonetheless, I will illuminate the customs pertaining these meals, as discusses in the sources, highlighting the connections between the customs of these meals and how they reinforced and reified the circles of social belonging of Jewish families and communities in medieval Ashkenaz.

## 1. Seudat Havra'ah

Following the burial of a family member, a series of mourning rituals took place, beginning at the cemetery and leading up to Seudat Havra'ah, which occurred as the mourner returned home after the funeral. These rituals had a dual purpose: isolation of the mourning individuals from their surroundings to emphasize their difference, and incorporation or re-entry of the individual into the social system following this status change.[[12]](#footnote-12) The mourner walked from the cemetery in a ceremonial procession to the mourner’s house, where it was custom to eat the meal, as depicted by R. Yitzhak b. Dorbalo (d. 1175~):

The mourner goes to his house and the people follow him … he goes first; and when he enters his house and the people [enter] behind [him] … [they] give the mourner the first meal from others … it is customary to feed him at first with eggs … and after that, he can eat meat and anything else the participants wish.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Seudat Havra'ah was part of the sequence of mourning rituals held as a rite of re-incorporation, while still maintaining certain isolating restrictions of the mourners – such as the tearing (*kriah)* of their clothes and head-covering.[[14]](#footnote-14) Central to the meal was the symbolic food, signifying the continuity of life and the active choice to live it. The social encounters necessitated by the post-funeral meal and condolence visits (*tanḥum avelim*) during the seven days of mourning (*shiva*) force the mourner to come to terms with the death of their loved one and face their new social status (e.g., from being a husband/wife to a widower/widow).[[15]](#footnote-15)

While funeral customs symbolize the disruption of life and its daily patterns, the holding of the meal at the mourner’s house symbolized the beginning of the return to life and the mourner’s new reality. Still, the meal did not take place around the table like a regular meal, but rather sitting on the ground or cushions.[[16]](#footnote-16) In the time of the Mishna and the Talmud, mourners were expected to "overturn the bed" *(kfiat hamita)*, i.e., turn the bed upside down. However, this was not the practice in medieval Ashkenaz, where Jews would refrain from overturning the bed and instead sat on the ground.[[17]](#footnote-17) R. Eliezer b. Yoel (d. 1225~)*,* explained this contemporary custom:

And the overturning of the bed is mandated by the sages, [but] since we live among the Gentiles and maidservants (and) women Gentiles are in the house and frequently enter our home, one does not have to overturn the bed [because they might say] there are an omen and a spell in this act.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Given the presence of non-Jewish maidservants and neighbors in the lives of the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz, it was thought prudent to refrain from overturning the bed lest it be perceived as witchcraft.[[19]](#footnote-19) The Tosafists offered a further contemporary explanation for not following this halakha: because medieval beds were comfortable on both sides, turning them upside down would neither be felt nor seen, and was therefore unnecessary.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The public nature of the meal of condolence, reflected by the number of participants, depended on the size of the house of mourning. The meal was meant to be public, but would take place only in the mourning house and not be divided into two places: "it should not be eaten together with [such] a lot of people [that] they divide into two places."[[21]](#footnote-21) This restriction, which is contrary to the permission for a wedding feast to be held in several houses simultaneously,[[22]](#footnote-22) stresses the limited public participation in the meal.

The gender of the participants in the meal went according to the composition of the grieving family, as R. Moshe Parnas of Rothenburg (14th c.) wrote: “A woman who has no sons to mourn with her, men are not allowed to feed her, but the women should do it."[[23]](#footnote-23) Thus, if a woman grieved in her own home, the only participants at the meal were women. There are two hypotheses regarding the origins of this halakha: One posits that the supportive environment the meal required could be provided for women only by other women; this is similar to the postnatal support provided by the female social network, who would provide for the woman’s meals for the first two weeks after birth.[[24]](#footnote-24) The second posits that it was the fear of possible inappropriate physical attraction between the grieving woman and a consoling man; however, if the woman had young children, men could console them, and it would seem that they had come for them, and not for her.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Although the meal took place inside the house, the public nature of the post-funeral meal extended beyond the borders of the Jewish community. During the meal non-Jewish neighbors or servants could also be present in the house.[[26]](#footnote-26) These servants and neighbors constituted the social fabric of urban life within which Jews lived. Nonetheless, these non-Jews might be unfamiliar with the Jewish laws and send gifts of food, such as wine, which Jews were forbidden to accept from non-Jews.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The food for Seudat Havra'ahwas prepared by the consolers and brought to the mourner’s house.[[28]](#footnote-28) Society’s role was to take care of the individual during the mourning period of shiva. Bringing food for the first meal was based on the assumption that mourners would be grieving and not cook for themselves. Indeed, the mourner might not eat at all, due to deep sorrow and pain. But as written by R. Yitzhak b. Moshe of Vienna (d. 1250): "we do not let the mourner fast on the first day, but rather feed him and give him a drink."[[29]](#footnote-29)

It was a common practice at the time for consolers to bring pastries and eggs to the mourners: "Nowadays it is custom to feed with round pastry (*a'ugah*) and eggs in the first meal."[[30]](#footnote-30) Every meal opens with the blessing over bread, and the egg was eaten together with it (eating an egg alone was considered gluttony[[31]](#footnote-31)). The use of these simple foods for consolation had both nutritional and symbolic aspects.[[32]](#footnote-32) In Jewish tradition the egg is viewed as having unique nutritional qualities,[[33]](#footnote-33) and in the Middle Ages eggs were a common and attainable foodstuff.[[34]](#footnote-34) Similarly, pastries and cereals were the most basic dietary components of most medieval societies.

Rashi explains the symbolic meaning to the medieval custom of feeding the mourners eggs:

And on that day, Abraham died ... and Jacob cooked the lentils to feed the mourner [his father, Isaac]. And why lentils? Which resemble a wheel, for mourning is like a wheel turning in the world. And what else? Lentils have no mouth, and so the mourner has no mouth, for he is prohibited from speaking. Therefore, it is customary to feed the mourner with eggs at the beginning of his meal, since they are round and have no mouth. So too, a mourner has no mouth.[[35]](#footnote-35)

In this commentary Rashi refers to the talmudic custom of preparing lentils for those in mourning.[[36]](#footnote-36) Lentils symbolized two aspects of mourning: the first, the acceptance of death as part of the natural order; and the second, the mourner’s silence.[[37]](#footnote-37) The Talmud prefers lentils over eggs, because eggs are not completely round,[[38]](#footnote-38) but Rashi reveals that despite this preference, the medieval-European custom relied on eggs. Eggs were essentially given the same symbolic meanings as that of the lentils.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The egg and the bread, the two vital and round foods, were gifted and eaten in three rites of passage in the Jewish community of Rhineland: a new father sent these foods to his loved ones after the circumcision of a son;[[40]](#footnote-40) a mother gave them to her son when he began his education;[[41]](#footnote-41) and consolers brought them to the mourners in the post-funeral meal. The repetitive gifting and eating of these foods in the Ashkenazi rites of passage emphasizes the symbolism of the life cycle and highlights the links between all three. Once they had eaten the bread and egg, mourners could eat any type of food,[[42]](#footnote-42) including meat and wine, which symbolized joy.

This gift of food and nourishment from the community to the mourners built both personal and communal commitment in these individual members of the Jewish community. The act of personally bringing food created a particular commitment between each consoler and the mourner. By accepting the dishes, the mourner expressed acceptance of the reciprocity of the relationship with the consoler, and the deeper knowledge that in the future the mourner will reciprocate when it becomes another’s time to mourn.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The communal commitment and care for the mourner reinstated them within the social system. However, the custom of bringing dishes and feeding the mourner reversed the rules of the domestic space by expropriating the hosting from members of the household.[[44]](#footnote-44) Moreover, a person of higher socio-religious status was given the role of making the blessing on the bread and slicing and sharing it among the participants, instead of the head of the household: "the elder slice the bread (*hamotzi*) and not the mourner … Therefore, the consoler spreads [it]."[[45]](#footnote-45)

Following the meal, the participants said Grace after Meals (*birkat hamazon)* and included an additional Mourners Blessing *(birkat ha-avelim)*. The Mourners Blessing served as a unique liturgical ending to the meal, conditional on the presence of a minyan of ten men, not including the mourner.[[46]](#footnote-46) Another condition for reciting the Mourners Blessing was the participation of “new faces” (*panim ḥadashot*),[[47]](#footnote-47) i.e., people who had not participated at any former meal during the shiva:

R. Yitzhak said that for the blessing the *panim ḥadashot* are precisely the family relatives, and he told us that in Troyes there was a custom that all the relatives come [to *shiva*] from outside the city, and the neighbors were re-feeding the mourners and reciting the Mourners Blessingduring all *shiva*. And it seems that even if an important man is coming to console, and not a family relative, they [the neighbors] feed [the mourners] and recite the Mourners Blessing.[[48]](#footnote-48)

According to this opinion, the relatives of the mourners were considered as *panim ḥadashot*, and in Troyes the neighbors repeatedly provided food so that the extended family members could say the Mourners Blessing. This practice indicates the existence of a broader sense of family belonging, going beyond the nuclear family,[[49]](#footnote-49) and stresses the importance of local community support throughout the *shiva*; an important person could also be regarded as a “new face.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

The Mourners Blessing which reaffirmed the new social status of the mourners, was said over two cups of wine:

The consolers say the blessing over the wine. And they should not drink after the mourner from his cup, but from another cup. And they give him wine because one ought to *Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto the bitter in the soul* (Prov 31:6).[[51]](#footnote-51)

The symbolic and social separation at the post-funeral meal was expressed in the separation of the glasses and the abstention from drinking the wine from the mourner's cup, and also in the exclusion of the mourner from the minyan.

Thus, the sharing, eating and blessing that took place during the meal together represent the existence of a supporting social network, while at the same time the mourners were not fully part of this network. The ritual components of the meal demonstrate how Seudat Havra'ah provided linkage to reality, by expressing the hierarchy that was integral to the nature of communal life. Before, during and after the meal there were various rituals and social actions aimed at clarifying the familial and communal boundaries. Each of the acts of connection and isolation in the meal was intended to help the mourner come to terms with their new situation and social status.

## 2. The Seudah Mafseket

The pre-fast meal on the eve of Tisha b’Av was part of the preparation for the fast on the day it was believed that both the first and the second temples in Jerusalem were destroyed.[[52]](#footnote-52) The halakhic approach to this fast day and the customs built around it derive from accepted mourning customs, which are divided into several stages: in the stage before burial (called *aninut*), a mourner is designated an *onen*; after burial, in the period of *avelut*, a mourner is called *avel*. The pre-fast meal reflected the stage of *aninut,* where the participants likened themselves to *onenim*,[[53]](#footnote-53) while the customs of *avelut* started immediately after eating the Seudah Mafseket.[[54]](#footnote-54) Because of that, the Seudah Mafseketwas a mental and physical passage to the fast.[[55]](#footnote-55)

*Mahzor Vitry* describes the custom:

And for the pre-fast meal that makes a break in [*seudah ha-mafsik ba*] the eve of Tisha b’Av, one should sit on the ground like a mourner, not next to the table, and neither eat meat nor drink wine, nor eat two cooked dishes. And there are ascetics [*prushin*], who eat only bread with salt and drink water sparingly …. And there are ascetics, who eat a single egg on its own, a kind of dish that has no mouth, such as R. Itzhak b. Yehuda, and he relied on R. Yehuda b. Ilai, of whom it was said that he sat between the oven and the stove, and ate one egg and drank a ewer of water and ceased.[[56]](#footnote-56)

The pre-fast meal took place after returning home from the afternoon Minhah prayer at the synagogue.[[57]](#footnote-57) The meal was eaten at home while sitting on cushions or on the ground rather than at the table.[[58]](#footnote-58) At this meal, it was customary to restrict oneself to eat no more than one cooked dish (*tavshil*) and to refrain from eating meat or drinking wine. These customs originate in the Mishna,[[59]](#footnote-59) while the talmudic discussion on them focused on the changes required to make the meal modest and restrained. [[60]](#footnote-60) This was expressed through the design of the meal and its components: the position in the domestic space, number of courses, participants in the meal, and its liturgical aspects.

*Mahzor Vitry* relates that R. Itzhak b. Yehudah (d. 1085~, Mainz) had the custom of eating an egg alone in the pre-fast meal on the eve of Tisha b’Av and that he relied on the practice of the Tanna R. Yehuda bar Ilai.[[61]](#footnote-61) At the meal, R. Yehuda behaved as though the destroyed Temple was his deceased relative, lying before him awaiting burial. As a result he ate only salted bread and drank a ewer of water,[[62]](#footnote-62) while sitting between the oven and the cooking stove. According to Rashi, this area is a "despicable place in the house,"[[63]](#footnote-63) which was probably dirty in ashes and accompanied by burning odors, and not suitable for dining. The choice of seating and eating in the space of food preparation, rather than in the usual eating space, while almost abstaining from eating intensifies this tension. The Tosafists deduced from R. Yehuda's custom that "one needs to change the place in which he usually eats."[[64]](#footnote-64)

Among the medieval rabbis, the custom of R. Yehuda b. Ilai was interpreted as a pious act to which one should aspire.[[65]](#footnote-65) Namely, the use of physical elements to simulate the feeling of destruction by imagining the body of the "deceased" in the house. As long as the deceased was not buried, the halakhic status of relatives was that of an *onen*,[[66]](#footnote-66) who was supposed to focus entirely on dealing with the needs of the burial, to the extent of being exempt from observing other mitzvot. Eating and drinking by an *onen* was considered an affront or a mockery of the deceased,[[67]](#footnote-67) and might also distract the *onen* from the burial needs of the deceased. Because of that, a series of restrictions were imposed during this period, including a restriction on eating, which could be for the sake of nutrition alone and was to be completed without pleasure. *Onenim* were also exempt from saying the blessing before or after the meal.[[68]](#footnote-68)

As meat and wine consumption was prohibited for *onenim,* so it was forbidden at the pre-fast meal. The halakhic discussion of animal protein alternatives demonstrates the assumed cultural hierarchy of these foods. In medieval northern Europe meat was most commonly consumed dried and salted. Therefore the talmudic permission to eat salted meat in the pre-fast meal, which in antiquity was not considered respectable, no longer carried the same connotations for German and French Jews, and they were forbidden to eat it at the Seuda Mefseket.[[69]](#footnote-69) The laws regarding eating chicken or fish were equally stringent. R. Yitzhak b. Moshe argued that although R. Shmuel b. Natronai (12th c.) permitted chicken to be eaten at this meal, as chicken does not create as much joy as one gets from eating meat, "Even though that is the truth, one should not do so, certainly not a God-fearing person”; one should also avoid eating salted meat, chicken or fish, since this was their fathers’ custom.[[70]](#footnote-70)

A meal that contained two dishes was considers "honorable." Hence, the custom to eat only one cooked dish during the meal was discussed by the Tosafists, who dealt with the question of what the Talmud means when it says, “On the eve Tisha b’Av a person may not eat two cooked dishes.”[[71]](#footnote-71) They explained that two dishes meant two foods that were cooked in two different pots and then assembled to be eaten,[[72]](#footnote-72) and that dish which made in one pot can be considered a single dish, even if it had several components, such as onions, cheese and eggs.

But there were differences in regional customs. The custom that allowed one dish to be mixed with several ingredients was common only in Northern France. The approach of the German Jews was more stringent, and it was customary by them to eat only an egg as a cooked dish.[[73]](#footnote-73) Ra'avyah wrote: "It is fitting to be stringent, because the Talmud did not explain what two cooked dishes are."[[74]](#footnote-74) The practice of R. Yitzhak b. Yehuda to eat a single egg, which was at first attributed to the ascetic group of Ashkenazic Jewry, became a practice of piety that identified the Jews of Germany.

In this stringent atmosphere, R. Elazar of Worms depicted the contemporary custom of the stricter Jews of Speyer, which he called ascetics (*prushim*). They took upon themselves the practice of R. Yehuda b. Ilai: "They do not eat even an egg, just meager bread and scant water, and sit like a mourner between oven and stove."[[75]](#footnote-75)

At the end of the meal, the participants, like *onenim*, omitted the *zimmun,* the invitation to join together for the Blessing after Meals. This transformed the collective eating of the household members into individual acts. Regardless of the number of participants, everyone ate and blessed privately:

All the sages in the Land of Israel observe the Seudah Mafseket on the eve of Tisha b'Av by not joining together, but each sits alone, and each blesses to himself, and they are not permitted to recite *zimmun* at the *birkat* *hamazon,* because they should liken themselves to someone whose deceased lies before him. So does every old sage in every land in the diaspora.[[76]](#footnote-76)

These practices evoked a parallel between the pre-fast meal and that of the *onen*. In the Seuda Mafseket, the group had no power, and unity was meaningless, as there is no comfort to be found on that day, because everyone is considered a “close relative" of the "deceased" Temple. Underlying these restrictions for the pre-fast meal was a perception among the rabbis that these practices were attributed to ascetics (*prushim)*, sages (*talmidei ḥakhamim)* and God-fearing persons (*yirei shamayim*). This categorization points to the place of eating practices in defining religious identification and pietism among the Jews of Ashkenaz.

The pre-fast meal enhanced the actuality of the “death” of the Temple through physical means − restricting food and drink, changing the location of the meal and sitting on the ground, imposing solitary eating and thus eliminating all social, communal, liturgical and hierarchical significance of the meal. In doing so, the Seudah Mafseketwas a unique ritual of passage that helped each individual take on mourning through the sensory experiences. The destroyed Temple was thus brought into the domestic space, and the mourning over it into a common imaginary space, which occurred on the same day at the same time in all Jewish households during the pre-fast meal.

## 3. Between the Meals

The comparison between Seudat Havra'ah and the Seudah Mafseket illuminates both the shared and the distinctive attributes of each one. Moreover, it indicates that even when the pre-fast meal on the eve of Tisha b'Av had motifs of mourning similar to the post-funeral meal, the underlying perception of mourning was different, with the former being private and new mourning for a deceased relative and the latter public mourning over the destruction of the Temple years ago.

The physical design of the domestic space was similar in both, with the meals being eaten on the ground or cushions. However, whereas the post-funeral meal was not specifically required to be eaten in a particular space within the house, the pre-fast meal was expected to be consumed in the most unpleasant space possible, to intensify the sense of loss and discomfort, facilitating the recognition of the magnitude of loss experienced by the destruction of the Holy Temple.

The participation of extended family, neighbors and people of significance in the post-funeral meal reinforced the validation function of the ceremony, while constructing social belonging, strengthening interpersonal ties and even creating social capital. The neighbors and the community took an important part in food preparation, feeding and sharing the grief with the mourners as formal components of the meal. The gifts of food and shared eating created reciprocal commitment and intimacy, and likely explain the creation of gendered dining spaces. The distribution of foods signified the communal recognition of changes of status, while strengthening communal bonds.

By contrast, in the pre-fast meal the household members participated, but they were required to bless individually. However, although consumed within the privacy of the home, because Tisha b’Av is part of the Jewish calendar, the pre-fast meal was on some level a public event that took place at the same time in every household. Thus, even if the community did not physically congregate or enter each home, the collective knowledge that everyone was eating the pre-fast meal and participating in public mourning simultaneously, served to bring the public into the domestic space. Thus, the public element existed in both Seudat Havra'ah and the Seudah Mafseket, and in both cases the public and the mourners "entered" the house.

The liturgy of the meals further highlights differences in meaning between the two. The importance of the post-funeral meal was emphasized by the addition of the special Mourners Blessing. The pre-fast meal, on the other hand, perceived as a kind of default meal consumed only out of biological necessity, had only minimal and unremarkable liturgy. Nonetheless, at the level of personal mourning, there are similarities between the two meals: In Seudat Havra'ah*,* the mourner did not say the *zimmun* and was not counted for a minyan. In the Seudah Mafseket, even if there were the requisite three men for a *zimmun*, each recited the blessing to himself.

Considering the type of food consumed, both meals featured the same symbolic food, an egg, signifying the despairing silence of mourners, as well as the cycle of life and hope for renewal. There were also, however, significant differences. Following the eating of ritual foods at Seudat Havra'ah, the mourners were permitted to eat all kinds of food and drink (on condition that they were provided and served by consolers). In contrast, the Seudah Mafseket consisted of only one cooked food; eating a single dish established the meal as informal, thereby emphasizing its role as filling a biological need alone. At the same time, this kind of eating intensified the sensory practice of the meal, bringing the collective history and memory of the Jewish people to the feeling of mourning that one should feel when a relative has just passed away.

The post-funeral meal was a significant event, with liturgy, public participants and abundant food, while the pre-fast meal was designed to minimize and nullify the liturgy, ensuring that the tragedy of the destruction of the Temple remain stark. In contrast, the core of Seudat Havra'ahwas the requirement for the mourners to dine together with their circles of belonging, representing the beginning of the acceptance process and designed to reincorporate the mourners into their daily life. Thus, the comparison of the two meals highlights the differences in the perception of mourning, as well as in the perception of the meaning of the meal itself.

## Conclusion

These two meals discussed in this article include detailed instructions for the design of the house, the sitting arrangement, the foods, the role of the participants and the liturgical elements that distinguished the events. Inherent to these meals is the tension between life and death, mourning and celebration, destruction and continuity.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin,

No meal can be sad. Sadness and food are incompatible (while death and food are perfectly compatible). The banquet always celebrates a victory and this is part of its very nature. … It is the triumph of life over death. … The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Seudat Havra'ah was part of the process of accepting death and the victory of the living through eating and as a stage in passage back to everyday life. The mourners who dealt with new grief did not need rituals to intensify their sorrow; it was present and fresh. In contrast, the Seudah Mafseket was the highlight of a ritual process that had started three weeks before; following the Seudah Mafseket, over the course of the fast day of Tisha b'Av, there was a gradual process of acceptance of the destruction and a return from mourning to consolationand finally – tolife.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Seudat Havra'ah and the Seudah Mafseket offer case studies for the two main types of meals marking events in medieval Ashkenaz: life cycle events and those of the Jewish calendar. Life cycle meals were connected to individual, personal events; participants expressed the public connection to these personal events by dining together and thereby bringing the community into the individual sphere. Celebration on (or before, as the pre-fast meal) a holy day by eating and dining in the domestic space reflected the public dimension of the holy day in its enactment by the members of the community, each in their own home, at the same time and using the same rituals.

Thus, the two patterns of meals, represented by Seudat Havra'ah and the Seudah Mafseket, exemplify the significant role the meals themselves played in the greater ritual process. By acknowledging the meal as a ritual in its own right, it is possible to uncover the unique cultural and social meanings of each event. The religious supervision of eating demonstrates the importance of meals as tools for instating religious and social boundaries in daily life, as signifiers of Jewish identities together with familial, social, communal and religious belonging, and as such, providing us greater insight into medieval Jewish daily life.

1. \* Research for this article was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) project “Beyond the Elite: Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe,” led by Elisheva Baumgarten, under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program (grant agreement no. 681507). I thank the members of the research group and especially Aviya Doron, as well as Rina Bennett and Susan Weingarten, for their

   insightful suggestions.

   Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” in *Myth, Symbol, and Culture*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Norton, 1974), 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the Jewish post-funeral meal and its customs through the years, see Chaim Talbi, “*Seuda’t Havra'ah* Customs” (Hebrew; M.A. thesis, Bar Ilan University, 1989); Shmuel Glick, *Light to the Mourner: The Developing of the Main Mourning Customs in the Jewish Tradition from after the Burial until the end of the Shiva* (Hebrew; Efrat: Keren Ori, 1991) 49-58; Nissan Rubin, *The End of Life: Rites of Burial and Mourning in the Talmud and Midrash* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuḥad, 1997) 235-242; For a definition of who is considered a mourner, see Shmuel Glick, *Light*, 32-45; Chana Friedman, "Laws of Mourning and their Significance in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Mo'ed Qatan and Its Parallels" (Hebrew, PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2008) 87-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The meal was also called "the meal that one stops at" (*seudah hamafsik ba*), i.e. the last meal before the fast, after which one should refrain from eating, see Rashi, Ta'anit 30a, "*kol she-hu mi'shum Tisha b'Av*" [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rashi, Pesahim 90b, "*ha-onen*." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ariella Lehmann, "Between Domestic and Urban Spaces: Preparing for Shabbat in Ashkenazic Communities, 13th –15th Centuries," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 28 (2021) pp. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to Kenneth Stow, the "nuclear family" lived separately from the extended family: Kenneth R. Stow, “The Jewish Family in the Rhineland: Form and Function,” *American Historical Review* 92 (1987) 1085-1110; Elisheva Baumgarten, "The Family," *Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 6, *The Middle Ages: The Christian World*, ed. Robert Leon Chazan and William D. Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 440-462. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This situation was similar to the Christian society; see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "Introduction Part 2: Medival Households," in *Household, Women, and Christianities in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005) 125-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil, “Food, Family, and Community,” in *Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society* (London: Routledge, 1997) 73-99; Paul Freedman, "Medieval and Modern Banquets: Commensality and Social Categorization," in *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast*, ed. Susanne Kerner, Cynthia Chou and Morten Warmind (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 99-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The study of Jewish foodways in Ashkenaz is informed in many ways by the study of German and French foodways. However, research into food and eating events in medieval European Christian societies has focused mainly on the courtly ruling classes. Since the post-funeral meals of an urban Jew are not comparable those commemorating the death of a noble or a king, this article examines the two meals from an intra-Jewish perspective only. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Since the halakhawas supposed to apply to all Jews, the ritual foods mentioned should have been attainable for most of the people, such as the honey, cakes and eggs used as ritual foods at the coming-of-age ritual: Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 59-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is most evident in the design of the Seuda Mafseket of Tisha b'Av, as the principles shaping it and the customs mentioned make reference to rabbis and scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On the role of the post-funeral meal, see Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1960) 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This text was addition to *Mahzor Vitry*, see Simhah b. Samuel of Vitry, *Mahzor Vitry,* ed. Aryeh Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Makhon Otzar Haposkim, 2009), vol.3, Mourning Laws, #33. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On the practice of head covering, see: Eric Zimmer, *Society and Its Customs: Studies in the History and Metamorphosis of Jewish Customs* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1996) 191-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rubin, *End of Life*, 235.‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Sefer Haneyar* (anon., 13th c., Northern France), ed. Gershon Appel (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1994) Mourning Laws. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Eric Zimmer, "Overturning the Bed during Mourning, Development of the Halakha and Customs" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 115 (1995) 228-253. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Eliezer b. Yoel ha-Levi (Ra'avyah), *Sefer Ra'avyah,* ed. Victor Aptowizer (Berlin: Makhon Harry Fischel, 1914; Jerusalem: Mekizei Nirdamim, 1983) vol. 3, Mourning Laws, #841; JT Mo'ed Qatan, 3, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For mourning rituals interpreted by non-Jews as witchcraft, such as throwing grass over the shoulder before leaving the cemetery, see Elazar b. Yehuda of Worms (d. 1235~), *Sefer Rokeaḥ Hagadol* (Jerusalem: S. Weinfeld, 1960) #316*; Mahzor Vitry*, vol. 3, Mourning Laws, #31. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Attributed to R. Shmuel b. Elhanan (12th-13th c.); Tosafists, Mo'ed Qatan, 21a, "*ve'elu*.” See E. E. Urbach, *The Tosaphot: Their History, Writings and Methods* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1986) vol. 2, 618. Also Zimmer, "Overturning," 241, and the appendix of illustrations of beds through the centuries, 252-253. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Sefer Ra'avyah*, vol. 3, Mourning Laws, #841 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. BT Brakhot 50a-50b; Yitzhak b. Moshe of Vienna, *Sefer Or Zarua*', ed. Yaakov Farbstein (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 2000), vol.1, #204; Meir b. Yekutiel of Rothenburg, *Hagahot Maimuniot* (Venice, 1528) Brakhot 2, 10*; Sefer Haneyar,* Bridal Laws*;* on the parallels between the customs of weddings and the shiva ,see Shmuel Glick, *Upon Them the Light Shined: The Connection Between Marriage Customs and Mourning Customs in the Jewish Tradition* (Hebrew; Efrat; Keren Ori, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Moshe Parnas of Rothenburg, *Sefer Haparnas* (Vilna: 1891) #229. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Takkanot of the Rhineland (SHUM) Communities, in Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York: P. Feldheim, 1964) 228. For discussion of this practice in late-medieval and early-modern Ashkenaz, see Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 117-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Meir b. Baruch of Rothenburg, *Hilkhot Semaḥot*, ed. Akiva Landa (Jerusalem: Landa, 1976) #148. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. It is unlikely that non-Jews ate or took an active part in this meal, although they might have been present at the house. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Sefer Rokeaḥ*, Mourning Laws, #313, notes that there was a concern the grieving women might receive wine from Gentile neighbors; drinking wine during the Seudat Havra'ah was a common practice. There are several instances in the Talmud that describe post-funeral meals in which drinking wine led to debauchery among the consolers. To prevent this possibility, medieval laws required mourners and consolers to restrict their wine and food consumption; see *Sefer Ra'avyah*, vol. 3, Mourning Laws, #841. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. BT Mo'ed Qatan 27b*; Mahzor Vitry*, vol. 3, Mourning Laws, #33. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Sefer Or Zarua'*, vol. 2, Laws of Mourning, #430. A kind of psychological explanation was given in 13th-century Provence: "The mourner worries and sighs for his deceased, and he does not worry about eating and cooking because he wishes to die too"; Aharon ha-Kohen of Lunel, *Sefer Orhot Hayyim*, ed. Moshe Shlezinger (Berlin: 1902) vol.2, Laws of Mourning, #13. There is evidence for the practice of mourners fasting on the day of the funeral; see *Sefer Haneyar*, Mourning Laws; *Responsa of R. Meir of Rothenburg and His Colleagues*, ed. Simcha Emmanuel (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2012) 377; for discussion, see Elisheva Baumgarten, *Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz: Men, Women, and Everyday Religious Observance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) 81–82. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Sefer Ra'avyah*, vol. 3, Mourning Laws, #841 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Moreover, according to Aharon ha-Kohen of Lunel, it was customary to peel the eggs for the mourners so they would not be suspected of gluttony (*Sefer Orhot Hayyim*, Mourning Laws, #13). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For a modern example, see David E. Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (New York; Oxford: Berg, 2001) 31-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. BT Brakhot, 44b; Rashi, Brakhot 44b, "*Kol she-hu ke-beitza*." See Susan Weingarten, "Eggs in the Talmud," in *Eggs in Cookery: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium of Food and Cookery 2006*, ed. Richard Hosking (Totnes: Prospect, 2007) 270-281. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Melitta Weiss Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times* (Westport: Greenwood, 2004) 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. R. Yitzhak b. Shlomo (Rashi, d. 1105) on Gen 25:30, "*Me-ha-adom adom*." [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Rashi based his commentary on the midrash *Bereshit Rabba,* Toldot, 63:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The mourner’s silence, which is required from the grieving family, derives from the interpretation of Aaron's response to the death of his two sons: "Aaron remained silent" (Lev10: 3)*; Vayikra Rabba*, Shmini, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. BT Baba Batra 16b. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ari Yitzhak Chwat, “Eggs as a Sign of Mourning: Study of the Origin and of the Problems in This Custom” (Hebrew), *Sinai* 114 (1994) 53–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Jacob and Gershom the Circumcisers, *Sefer Zikhron Brit,* ed. Jacob Glassberg (Berlin: Zvi Hirsch Itzckowski, 1892) 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals,* 59-67.‬ [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Mahzor Vitry*, vol.3, Mourning Laws, #33. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. On the creation of commitment and reciprocity by exchanging gifts, see Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2002). The exchange of food gifts was a common practice both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages; for examples from medieval England, see Chris M. Woolgar, “Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England,” *Journal of Medieval History* 37 (2011) 6-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The ideal of hospitality was taught especially in *Sefer Ḥasidim*; for example, see *Sefer Ḥasidim to MS Parma H3280* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Dinur, 1985) #843. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Sefer Rokeaḥ*, Mourning Laws, #313. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Sefer Haparnas*, #259; another opinion, brought in the name of R. Baruch Haim, was that Birkat Ha-avelim required only three men, including the mourner (*Sefer Haneyar,* Mourning Laws). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Glick, *Upon Them ,*274-279. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Sefer Haneyar*, Mourning Laws. In his edition, Appel identified the city as Troyes and R. Yitzhak with Yitzhak b. Shmuel of Dampierre (d. 1190~); *Sefer Haneyar,* introduction, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. This custom sheds a different light on the story about Rabenu Tam, who was eating after his sister had passed away but was not buried yet; see *Hilkhot Semaḥot*, #68. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Including important persons as *panim ḥadashot* was similar to the custom at wedding feasts; see Tosafists, Ktubot 7b, "*ve-hu she-bau panim ḥadasot*”; the Tosafists on *Ktubot* also related to R. Yitzhak of Dampierre (Urbach, *Tosaphot,* vol. 2, 625-629). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Sefer Rokeah*, #313; [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. In medieval Ashkenaz, Tisha b’Av also commemorated the destruction of Jewish Communities wrought by the Crusaders; see Ephraim Kanarfogel, “The History of the Tosafists and Their Literary Corpus According to Rav Soloveitchik’s Interpretations of the ‘Qinot for Tisha b’Av,” in *Scholarly Man of Faith*, ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Dov Schwartz (Brooklyn: KTAV, 2018) 75-107. This commemoration is also mentioned on other occasions; see Jacob J. Schacter, "Remembering the Temple: Commemoration and Catastrophe in Ashkenazi Culture," in *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah*, ed. Steven Fine (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 275-302. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Dov Herman, "Different Approaches of the Rabbis in Yavneh, Lod and Galilee regarding the Ninth of Av as Reflected in the Laws of the Day" (Hebrew), *Hebrew Union College Annual* 73 (2002) 14-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Sefer Minhagei Debei Maharam,* ed. Israel Shenhav Elfenbein (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminar of America,1938), Tisha b'Av. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. BT Yevamot, 43b; Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *The Lord Is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tisha be-Av Kinot*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Jersey City: KTAV, 2006) xii, 26-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *Mahzor Vitry*, vol. 3, Tisha b'Av Laws, #2. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *Mahzor Vitry,* vol. 3, Tisha b'Av Laws, #2. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Sefer Haneyar*, Tisha b'Av and Fast Day laws. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. M. Ta'anit, 4:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. BT Ta’anit, 30a; Tosafists, Ta'anit 30a, "*ve'im haya ragil lyiso'd bea'sarah yiso'd b'hamishah.*": "Should reduction in his honor". [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. BT Ta'anit, 30a-30b. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. The description in *Mahzor Vitry* is in fact a distortion of a talmudic story in which R. Yehuda bar Ilai drank water and ate bread, but did not eat an egg. It is possible the distortion is due to a quotation by R. Yehuda in BT Eruvin 41a, saying that R. Akiva ate an egg before Tisha b'Av when it fell on Shabbat eve, so he would not enter Shabbat in torment. Perhaps the purpose of this version was to set a precedent for the Ashkenazi custom of eating eggs alone. In eating the egg, one can also see the layer of "a wheel that turns in the world" in expectation of a religious (and perhaps even political) revival in the form of the rebuilding of the Temple. Yuval Shahar suggests that Akiva's practice of eating an egg and scheduling the fast days shows faith in the temporality of the destruction of the Temple and the hope of redemption; see Yuval Shahar, “Rabbi Akiba and the Destruction of the Temple: The Establishment of the Fast Days” (Hebrew), *Zion* 68 (2003) 153, 160-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Rashi, Ta'anit 30b, "*bein tanur l'kirayim*." [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Tosafists, Ta'anit 30a."*ve-af al gabei*." The Tosafists on Ta'anit were probably redacted during the 14th c. in Germany, (Urbach, *Tosaphot*, vol. 2, 615-616). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah,* ed. Shabsai Frankel(Jerusalem: Kehilat Bnei Yosef, 1975), Fast Day Laws, 5,9. According to Maimonides, one should not eat a single cooked dish, not even lentils. Maimonides is a clear example of an elitist rabbinic ideal that separates the sages and the common people. On the spreading of *Mishneh Torah* in Ashkenaz, see Avraham Grossman, [“From Andalusia to Europe: The Attitude of Rabbis in Germany and France in the 12th to 13th Centuries toward the Halakhic Writings of Alfasi and Maimonides” (Hebrew), *Peamim* 80 (1999) 14-32](https://www.academia.edu/36194738/Avraham_Grossman_From_Andalusia_to_Europe_The_Attitude_of_Rabbis_in_Germany_and_France_in_the_Twelfth-Thirteenth_Centuries_toward_the_Halakhic_Writings_of_Alfasi_and_Maimonides_Peamim_no._80_Summer_1999_14-32_Hebrew_). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Rashi, Pesahim 90b, "*ha-onen*." [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Rashi, Brakhot 17b, "*ochel be-bait aḥer*" [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. BT Brakhot 17b-18a; Rashi, Brakhot 17b, "*ve-eino mevarekh*," "*ve-eino mezamen*"; Tosafists, Brakhot 17b, "*ve-eino mevarekh*." [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. BT Ta'anit. 30a; Tosafists, Ta'anit 30a, "v*e-af al gabei de-amar*";Itzhak b. Yoseph of Corbeil, *Sefer Amudei Golah Hanikra Sefer Mitzvot Qatan* (Kapost: Israel Yafe, 1820; repr. Jerusalem, 1979) #96. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *Or Zarua'*, vol. 2, Tisha b’Av Laws, #415. However, R. Meir of Rothenburg permitted eating chickens at the Seuda Mafseket (*Responsa of R. Meir of Rothenburg and His Colleagues*, #245); chicken was considered easy to digest (*Sefer Minhagei Debei Maharam,* Seder Yom Kippur, 53). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Tosafists, Ta'anit 30a, "*erev*."; even fish could be included in this kind of dish, see *Sefer Haneyar*, Tisha b'Av and Fast Day laws. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. The Tosafists used the vernacular word *mishon* which possibly comes from the German word *mischen (müschen),* i.e. to mix. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. R. Asher b. Yehiel (Harosh, 1250-1327), *Piskei Harosh*,Ta'anit 4, 34, in BT, Ta'anit (Jerusalem: Vagshel, 2008); on the eggs one can add fruit, milk and other raw food (*Sefer Minhagei Debei Maharam,* Tisha b'Av). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *Sefer Ra'avyah*, vol. 3, Fast Day Laws, #848. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *Sefer Rokeah*, #311. The term *prushim* was also applied to those who assumed regular practices of fasting (Baumgarten, *Practicing Piety*, 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. *Or Zarua'*, vol. 2, Tisha b'Av Laws, #415. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. This process began at noon when it was permitted, among other things, to begin preparing the meal for the end of fast. *Sefer Ra'avyah,* vol.3, Fast Day Laws, #848; *Hilkhot Semahot*, #57; Soloveitchik, *The Lord*, 41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)