



FROM THE VIRTUAL DESK OF THE OU VEBBE REBBE

RAV DANIEL MANN



Participation in a Siyum by Skype

Question: On Erev Pesach, I will be in a small Jewish community that will not have a siyum. Is it permitted for me – a bechor¹ – to break the ta'anit bechorot² based on a siyum³ in which I “participate” via Skype?

Answer: In the context of the *halacha* not to fast throughout the month of Nisan, *Massechet Sofrim*⁴ states that an exception is that *bechorot* fast on Erev Pesach. The *Tur*⁵ and *Shulchan Aruch*⁶ cite this practice as normative, and the *Tur* explains that it is in commemoration of the miracle that the Jewish firstborns were saved in Egypt.

The idea that one may eat at a *seudat mitzva* and thereby cancel the fast is

debated among the *Acharonim*. The *Magen Avraham*⁷ does not allow firstborns to eat even at a *brit mila* on Erev Pesach. The *Mishna Berura*⁸ reports, however, that the *minhag* in his time was to allow eating at *seudot mitzva*, including the meal at a *siyum*. The idea that a *siyum* meal can serve this role as a *seudat mitzva* is found in the Rama⁹ regarding the permissibility of eating meat and drinking wine at a *seudat mitzva* during the Nine Days.

In these contexts, there is room to distinguish between those people who are the main individuals involved in the *seudat mitzva*, for whom the day is like a *Yom Tov*, and the other participants. For example, one who is a *sandek* on the day of his parent's *yahrtzeit* may eat on that day, even if he ordinarily follows the *minhag* of fasting on that day, whereas a simple participant in the *brit* may not.¹⁰ Similarly, even those who do not allow firstborns to eat at another's *seudat mitzva* are lenient regarding a firstborn who serves as the *mohel* or *sandek*, as well as the father of the circumcised baby.¹¹ In any event, the *minhag* is to allow all participants at a

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siyum to eat at the *siyum*'s meal, and as a result, to continue eating the rest of *Erev Pesach*.

The simple logic for this leniency is that each individual's participation makes the celebration more special, thus heightening the *ba'al simcha*'s¹² event. Therefore, participation in the *ba'al simcha*'s meal is what is crucial regarding our discussion. Indeed, some allow even a firstborn who missed the *siyum* itself to take part in the *seudat mitzva*.¹³ Following the logic that it is the enhancement of the *ba'al simcha*'s event that matters, the *Minchat Yitzchak*¹⁴ says that even the *Chavot Yair*,¹⁵ who rules that a meal held the day after the *siyum* was made is still considered a *seudat mitzva*, is discussing only a *seuda* in which the one who made the *siyum* participates.

The *gemara*¹⁶ relates that Abaye was especially emotionally involved in the Torah successes of others, to the extent that he would make a party for the rabbis when a young scholar finished a *massechet*. Some¹⁷ understand that the halachic status of such a party extends even to one who is not present at all at the celebration of the one who finished the Torah section; the vicarious joy of all those who are happy about the *siyum* is equivalent to their participation in the *seudat mitzva*. The *Minchat Yitzchak*¹⁸ writes that according to this approach (which he discourages

relying upon but considers legitimate), one can be considered a "participant" in the *seudat mitzva* even if he does not actually eat together with the main party.

In most cases, it would not seem logical to consider one who "takes part" in a *seudat mitzva* via Skype as being a halachic participant, certainly in regards to increasing the *simcha* of the one who made the *siyum*. However, according to the approach that anyone connected to the *siyum* is entitled to celebrate his happiness due to the occasion, it is at least somewhat plausible to say that witnessing the event via Skype is sufficiently significant.

A number of authorities take a surprisingly lenient approach about *siyum* standards for *ta'anit bechorot*,¹⁹ relying heavily on the following two factors: 1) The fast is only a *minhag*. 2) For many people, fasting would have a significantly negative impact on the *Seder*. While not actually cancelling the *minhag*, some seem to lower the bar of who is included in the *siyum*, such that they enable almost anyone to eat. If one feels a need to be lenient, Skype participation can indeed be contemplated. If so, it is best to watch the *siyum* and celebrate it as a group, and/or to witness a *siyum* that brings one true *simcha* (e.g., based on one's connection to the person or to the level of accomplishment).

We now apply our past response to those under Coronavirus quarantine or limitation on gatherings if the present situation (as of the time of this writing) persists. There are important factors that indicate that it is fully permissible, even as a single participant, to eat based on remote participation in a *siyum* via live streaming. In the area of need, many people will be unable to take part in a *siyum* in person, which creates a *she'at hadechak*, as above. This is combined with the fact that doctors have raised reservations about the advisability of fasting during the time of a serious infectious outbreak.

On a more positive note, such remote participation in a *siyum* has much more power than usual. While normally, such participation is abnormal, which detracts from its efficacy, this is presently the “new (temporary) normal.” Furthermore, the one who makes the *siyum* will be fully aware of his remote participants, and he will be honored and touched to share his personal *simcha* with many others, instead of being limited to a small group where he is. The remote participants will also feel part of the *simcha*, as the light of Torah, which unites us at happy times, like the recent *siyum hashas*, unites us as well in difficult times.

Undoubtedly then, taking part in such a *siyum* at this time is absolutely fine. In contrast, if one would have to break or even bend the instructions or advice of medical authorities and/or one's rabbi, *chas v'shalom*, to take part in a *siyum* in person, that is unacceptable. ■

Endnotes

- 1 *Firstborn.*
- 2 *The fast of the firstborn.*
- 3 *The completion of a significant section of Torah.*
- 4 *21:1.*
- 5 *Orach Chayim 470.*
- 6 *Orach Chayim 470:1.*
- 7 *Ad loc. in the introduction to the siman.*
- 8 *Ad loc. 10.*
- 9 *Orach Chayim 551:10.*
- 10 *Mishna Berura 568:46.*
- 11 *Ibid. 470:10.*
- 12 *The person to whom the happy event is directly related.*
- 13 *See Teshuvot V'Hanhagot II:210.*
- 14 *VIII:45.*
- 15 *Shut Chavot Yair 70.*
- 16 *Shabbat 118b-119a.*
- 17 *See Az Nidberu XII:58.*
- 18 *IX:45.*
- 19 *Including Az Nidberu and Teshuvot V'Hanhagot op. cit.; Yabia Omer, I, Orach Chayim 26, is quite stringent.*

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