

The Hasidic Table and the Rebbe: A Powerful Encounter

SHULEM DEEN

“To be a Hasid, one must *push*,” my brother Avrumi used to say to me. It was back when I was 13 years old and he was 11, around the same time he’d started running around town on Erev Shabbat, on Friday night, to the *tischen* of various rebbes in our Hasidic neighborhood of Borough Park, Brooklyn.

While the rebbe is clearly the focus of the *tisch*, the *tisch* isn’t really about the rebbe but about a community experiencing itself fully as a single organism, each part playing its role.

The *tisch* (table) is the place where the rebbe eats his Shabbat meals on Friday night and Saturday evening. For the committed Hasid, it is the highlight of his week, when he gathers with his rebbe and his fellow Hasidim in an amalgamation of food, song, dance, prayer, and occasional words of inspiration. The rebbe sits at the head of a large table with his male family members by his side, with the rest of the community arrayed, sitting or standing, around them.

At the time my brother chided me about pushing, I didn’t enjoy *tischen* much, seeing them mostly as tedious affairs led by small-time rebbes who spoke in Old-World-accented Yiddish about Torah study, or prayer, or kugel, or good Jews, or bad non-Jews. There were uninspiring songs, tepid melodies sung half-heartedly and off-key by unenthusiastic crowds. I was far more concerned that my black, faux-silk caftan wouldn’t become creased, that my polished black shoes would remain shiny, and that my beaver-fur hat wouldn’t get knocked into a bowl of chicken soup. It was the crowds, most of all, that I disdained — the sense that in order to partake of this ceremony, to play a part in this theater (for the *tischen* were always overtly theatrical) one had to inhabit a space in which bodies were packed, often for hours on end, more tightly than a crowded subway at rush hour.

It was when I expressed this disdain for the crowds at the *tisch* that my brother rebuked me about the need to push: “*Tzi zein a khusid darf men zich shtippen*” — to push the crowd and to allow oneself to be pushed with it; to shove and

be shoved; to allow the force of bodies pressed closely together to permeate one’s senses — the tactile, the auditory, the olfactory — while crowding around the rebbe, who served as a conduit between his flock and whatever ethereal realm he had special access to.

It was only several months later, when I first visited the village of New Square, N.Y. that I grew enchanted with the *tisch*. As we gathered around an enormous table in the center of the large synagogue, I watched as hundreds of men and boys stood pressed tightly against one another on six-story bleachers, eyes fixed on the rebbe as he ate tiny forkfuls from oversized portions of boiled chicken and sweet carrots. Strange boys shook my hand and made room for me on the bleachers. Gruff middle-aged men offered me plates of roasted chicken and potato kugel and bowls of apple compote, insisting that I eat, eat, because there was plenty more. And then there were the songs and dancing that carried an energy that I’d never before experienced.

Despite Hasidism’s embrace of the spiritual capacity of the common man, it nevertheless asserts the elite status of the rebbe, the *tzaddik*, the perfectly righteous individual, of whom the Talmud tells us: “The righteous one decrees, and the Holy One, blessed be he, complies.” Among Hasidim, however, the *tzaddik*’s status stems not from demonstrable piety but from the power of the people who, by their very recognition of him, imbue him with his powers; it’s a theological democracy of sorts. Scholarship isn’t a necessary quality of a rebbe, even though many rebbes have undoubtedly been scholars. Neither is oration, although many have surely been great orators. It is the *tisch*, therefore, that serves as the primary venue for a Hasid’s interaction with his rebbe. The rebbe might offer words of Torah — pietistic homilies, typically, rather than scholarly discourse. The Hasid might partake of the rebbe’s *shrayim*, the leftovers from his meal, from which *nitzotztot* — the sparks of the divine trapped within — have been raised by the rebbe. There might be Shabbat songs, *zemirot*, and a snaking circle of dancing Hasidim around the synagogue. Whatever the form — and the form varied among different “courts”

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— the *tisch* is primarily a place of communion with the rebbe and also with fellow Hasidim.

I later realized that the *tisch* is also a mechanism for the Hasid to become enveloped within the communal experience of ritual performance. While the rebbe is clearly the focus of the *tisch*, the *tisch* isn't really about the rebbe but about a community experiencing itself fully as a single organism, each part playing its role: the young men and boys dancing; the elderly men sitting around the table swaying gently; the elderly *gabbai* setting food in front of the rebbe and then distributing his leftovers; the rebbe's family arrayed in their places of privilege; and, of course, the rebbe himself, to which all eyes are turned. The rebbe might be the heart, but an organism does not consist of a heart alone.

One of the most beloved times for a *tisch* (more common among the Skver Hasidim, my now-former community) is at *seudah shlishit*, the third meal of Shabbat. The *tisch* is held in total darkness in the final moments before the day of rest passes into the next weekday. Those

moments, the kabbalists tell us, are times of *ra'ava dera'avin*, when the divine presence is revealed with greater intensity to those who seek it, a time for *mokhin degadlut*, of expanded consciousness of the divine.

In a haunting poem, *Benei Heikhala Dikhsifin*, Isaac Luria speaks of the unveiling of cosmic light in those hours before Shabbat ends. Despite my having left the Hasidic community many years ago, I recently attended a rebbe's *tisch*. I noticed that hearing the poem no longer made the hair on my arm stand stiff; the rebbe's chanting now sounded irritatingly mournful. The words were still beautiful, carrying a faint but distinctive reminder of the ecstatic heights they once triggered in me. It was then that I remembered my brother's words, an eleven-year-old's aphorism, and realized how right he was. As someone who no longer holds Hasidic belief, or observes its practice, I no longer felt the tactile quality of participation; I no longer pushed among the crowd. For me, the *tisch* was now mere performance and I, as in childhood, only a tired audience member. 



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A Horizontal Table

RACHEL NUSSBAUM

A search for the phrase “rebbe’s *tisch*” on YouTube generates hundreds of hits. To the untrained eye, these videos have a similar look: men dressed in the black-and-white Hasidic “uniform”; a crowd hovering around one or more tables; singing with great devotion; a rebbe at the head table. That same untrained eye would also recognize that the *tisch* I hold at my home in Seattle looks very different.

Here in Seattle, the “rebbe” does not have a beard. On a more serious note, though, my experiments with creating *tischen* for a non-Orthodox community have raised broad-reaching practical and theoretical questions about leadership and community building in a liberal, egalitarian setting. At a *tisch*, the boundaries of the community are delineated, quite literally, by who has a seat at the table. The power of the traditional *tisch* emerges from a shared religious vocabulary and the authority of the rabbi. Can the intimacy and cohesive power of the traditional *tisch* be transposed into a more egalitarian and “horizontal” setting? And if so, how?

Although my egalitarian *tisch* may look different, the content and goals are largely the

same. Our *tisch*, like a traditional one, features words of Torah as well as spirited singing, with the mood alternating from mellow and reflective to energetic and frenzied. And, yes, these events contain moments of focus and closeness, when community members share both food and an experience, and feel connected to one another and to the transcendent. However, the very different audience and cultural context of a “horizontal” *tisch* elicits several interesting questions to ponder.

First, who is an insider to the experience? Classically, the act of breaking bread together — and, by extension, sitting at the table — plays an important role in defining who counts within the Jewish community (think about the laws of *kashrut*, for example). While the contemporary liberal Jewish community’s boundaries are already more porous than the boundaries of a Hasidic community, we have many more invitations to offer before all Jews will feel welcome at the Jewish table. The guests at my table, for example, include Jews and non-Jews, men and women, old and young people, and a wide variety of backgrounds and interests enliven the table talk.

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