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

*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.

Key words: 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

Mary Douglas discussed the meaning of meals as a social event and argued that a meal, whether everyday or festive, simultaneously echoes meals

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1 Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in *Myth, Symbol, and Culture*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Norton, 1974) 69.