



WEEKLY PARASHA

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The Seder without the Korban Pesach

The seder is one of the most powerful religious experiences of the year, attracting a large percentage of unaffiliated and secular Jews: 70% of American Jews and 80% of secular Israeli Jews say they will attend a seder this year. Even for religious and observant Jews, the seder is a profound event, a night that, certainly as children but even for adults, we eagerly anticipate and whose memory we cherish. Given the power of the evening, it is worth noting that we are missing a central part of the seder – the Pesach sacrifice. The korban Pesach is the one mitzvah that the Torah explicitly commands, many times and in great detail, to be done this evening. One would imagine that its absence would seriously undercut the meaning and impact of the seder, but instead this absence is barely noticed. How did this occur? How did the seder stop being about the korban Pesach?

Let us first look at the period immediately after the destruction of the Temple. Here was a time when the people still vividly remembered the Pesach sacrifice on the seder night, and its absence would have created a gaping hole in the seder. What was done to fill this hole?

An inspection of the Tannaitic sources reveals that there were those who actually continued to bring a pseudo-Pesach on this night. They would slaughter a lamb, roast it whole, and eat it on the seder night (Mishna Beitza 2:7). Some people, it seems, would even refer to it as a pesach (Tosefta Beitza 2:15)! While many Sages objected, Rabban Gamliel, who lived 30-50 years after the destruction, approved of this practice. According to one source, it would appear that he adopted this practice personally, and would roast a sheep and called it a pesach (Mishna Pesachim 7:2, and Reshash, ad. loc.).

Considering this practice of Rabban Gamliel, a new – and shocking – meaning emerges from the statement: “Rabban Gamliel used to say, whoever does not say these three

things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation: Pesach, Matzah, and Marror” (Mishna Pesachim 10:5). While in our haggadah the text is “The pesach that our forefathers used to eat – what did it symbolize?”, the text in the mishna does not place the pesach in the past, but rather in the present: “This pesach that we eat – what does it symbolize?” Perhaps this was the text that was said only when there was a Temple. But perhaps this was also the text that Rabban Gamliel said himself, when he ate his roasted sheep which he called a pesach!

We of course have moved away from such a practice, and many of us have the practice not to eat any roasted meat on the seder night so that it should not look like we are eating the korban Pesach. (Shulkhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, 476:1-2). There are those, however, who go out of their way to eat roasted meat, to continue this practice of commemorating the korban Pesach in the spirit of Rabban Gamliel.

This, then, was one response to the loss of the korban – to try to create a substitute, to try to continue the practice as it had been, only now with a pseudo-Pesach rather than the real thing. However, another response was possible, and this was the response of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was the leader of the Jewish People both before and after the Temple was destroyed. After the destruction of the Temple, we read that he promulgated many practices in memory of the Temple (Mishna Rosh HaShana, 4:1 and 4:3). Most of these revolved around the yomim tovim – the taking of the lulav all seven days, the blowing of the Shofar on Shabbat in the presence of a beit din – practices that had in the past only been done in the Temple. It is thus striking that what is noticeably absent is a similar practice to commemorate the destruction on the seder night, when the loss of the Temple is most obvious. Why did

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Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai ignore the seder night?

The answer is that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was not trying – through these practices – to make us remember the Temple and mourn its loss. He was rather helping us transition away from a Temple-based Judaism.

Remember that it was he who struck a deal with Vespasian Caesar, as Vespasian was about to destroy the Temple, to preserve Yavneh and its sages (Gittin 56b). Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had the foresight to realize that the future of the Jewish People, what would keep Judaism alive, was no longer the Temple, but rather Torah. Yavneh would replace the Temple, Yavneh would be the new center of our religious life.

Thus, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's post-Temple practices, far from directing our focus backwards, towards the Temple, focused our attention forward, to a Torah-centric Judaism. The blowing of the shofar in a beit din shows that the Temple is not needed – the shofar can be blown on Shabbat without it. Taking the lulav for seven days without a Temple demonstrates the same thing – we can do these practices with or without the Temple. And that is why there could be no special practice on the seder night. To make a practice to replace the pesach would only focus our attention backwards, would only focus us on its absence, on what we are missing. This perhaps was the response of other Sages, but it was not the response of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai.

So if we are to move on, what do we focus on if not the korban Pesach? The answer is obvious: talmud Torah. What is the central mitzvah of the seder night, other than the eating of matzah? It is the telling of the story of the Exodus. But it is not just a simple telling. If it were, we would just read the verses from Shemot that tell the story in a full and detailed manner. Our *magid* is not just a telling; it is an act of talmud Torah – it is the analysis of Torah verses through the medium of *Torah she'b'al peh*.

Consider, we begin the haggadah with a mishna – the mitzvah to tell about the Exodus in the evenings. We then move on with "Barukh HaMakom", a passage that Rav Soloveitchik has explained as a type of mini-birkat haTorah: "Blessed is the One who has given Torah to his nation Israel." We then go on to talk about the four children, quoting the relevant verses. But this explanation

– that these verses are referring to different types of children, not to different circumstances that evoked the questions – is not the simple sense of the verse, but rather how the Rabbis have understood these verses. Next up is the classic rabbinic teaching, "Perhaps this mitzvah should begin on Rosh Chodesh" – an inspection of the verses with rabbinic hermeneutics to prove that there is a mitzvah of *magid* tonight. This entire introduction is replete with talmud Torah and *Torah she'b'al peh*.

Then comes *magid* itself. *Magid*, as mentioned, is not just telling. The Mishna describes it as "One interprets, *doresh*, from *Arami oved Avi*, until he completes the entire portion." (Mishna Pesachim 10:4). What we engage in is classic Rabbinic interpretation, taking one section of the verse, giving a drasha one it, and then moving on to the next section of the verse. The mitzvah of the night is to tell the story through the process of talmud Torah. And not just any Torah learning, but specifically Rabbinic interpretation, *Torah she'b'al Peh*.

How did the seder stop being about the korban Pesach? The same why our religious life stopped being about the Temple. Through the leadership of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, talmud Torah has now become the center of our religious life. Yavneh was the successor to the Temple. Yavneh replaced the Temple, and the mitzvah of *magid*, of telling the story through Rabbinic talmud Torah replaced the *korban Pesach*. And it is through the vibrancy of talmud Torah, of engagement, discussion, and reflection, that our Judaism remains alive and vibrant till today!

Shabbat Shalom!

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