

## **Fortitude in the face of Fanaticism**

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In the popular discourse, the notion of the first 100 days has become something of a standard benchmark. But in the Torah, it's the first 15 days that are actually accorded special significance. And we know this because all of the first Mitzvot commanded to the Jewish people take place within exactly this time frame: From Rosh Chodesh through the 15th of Nissan. And so with your permission, I'd like to think about what the first 15 days of Jewish peoplehood might teach us about the first 15 days of this new presidential administration.

And the big question is this: Why Korban Pesach? Of all the Mitzvot or observances with which Jewish life might have begun, why is this the first?

And I'd like to suggest that Korban Pesach introduces us to three great ethics that will prove indispensable to the unfolding project of the Jewish people. The first we might call the radical democratization of power and authority. And it's best understood against the backdrop of its contemporary moment.

The ancient Egyptian power structure looked, unsurprisingly, something like a pyramid: Pharaoh was alone at the top; the massive castes of slaves and servants were at the bottom. And in between were the respective classes of nobles and priests; sorcerers and soldiers; scribes, artisans and so on.

Which is why, when Moshe suggests that all of the people – men, women and children – will be leaving to worship in the wilderness, Pharaoh is indignant. לכו נא הגברים – just send the men; what possible occasion could warrant the inclusion of anyone else? Participation that didn't discriminate against age, gender or station was simply incomprehensible to Pharaoh. And yet this is exactly what Korban Pesach demanded.

דברו אל כל עדת ישראל

Here was a commandment that applied equally to every member of the nation. This was something revolutionary. From the very beginning, the Torah insists: Every member of the Jewish people has a role to play.

In fact, Korban Pesach actually provides the context and the lived experience required to understand the soaring rhetoric we'll read in two weeks' time as the Jewish people stand at the foot of Sinai:

ואתם תהיו ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש

What does it mean to be a kingdom of priests?

Well, here we have the answer. Here we have a sacrificial rite. We call it קרבן פסח. It has all the trappings of a typical offering. Except there is no requirement to engage the services of the priest or cleric. Everyone participates because everyone is a priest!

This then is the first ethic to which Korban Pesach so brilliantly introduces the Jewish people: Young or old, woman or man, rich or poor – everyone matters.

But then there's a second message:

Yes, every individual matters. But don't operate as individuals, the Torah says. Function as a community.

ד ואם-ימעט הבית, מהיות משה--ולקח הוא ושכנו הקרב אל-ביתו, במקסת נפשות: איש לפי אכלו, תכסו על-השן.

No one person can perform the Mitzvot of Pesach by him or herself. To consume the entirety of the korban pesach – and to properly retell the story of the Jewish people, one requires the company of others.

In Talmudic parlance, the Korban Pesach is arranged and eaten in a חבורה – a group of friends who come together to form a covenantal community.

Each person needs his neighbor because Judaism is not meant to be observed in a silo.

The first message is that individuals matters.

The second is that community matters.

The third message is that the Jewish people matter, but it's a little more subtle. So let me back up for just a moment.

There's something in the text of the Exodus story that's very troubling. Moshe keeps on talking about a three day journey.

גלכה בא דרך שלשת ימים במדבר, ונזבחה לה' אלהינו

There's no indication as to whether or not the Israelites plan to return; nor is there any evidence that they actually sacrifice to their Lord three days after leaving Egypt.

So we're left to wonder: Is the whole thing a ruse?

Is Moshe actually peddling a falsehood that we somehow have to justify on account of the extenuating circumstances?

If these are precedent-setting moments in the history of our people, shouldn't it bother us that the entirety of the Exodus narrative is predicated on an untruth?

What I'd like to suggest is that the Jewish people did in fact make good on Moshe's promise and did in fact celebrate a holiday as he had pledged. And the holiday is called Pesach.

Consider the clues:

- Moshe keeps insisting that the people can't go without their flocks. And it's from those very flocks that the Israelites offer up their paschal lambs.

- Moshe tells Pharaoh that they will be celebrating a **חג**, the very word used to describe the celebration of Pesach.
- And Pesach is all inclusive. As we talked about a moment ago, Pharaoh and Moshe debated the question of who would participate in this service. Pharaoh couldn't possibly fathom why anyone other than the men would need to be present, but Moshe insists that everyone is required. And sure enough: It was everyone who participated in the Korban Pesach.

When Pharaoh had suggested to Moshe that the Israelites hold their celebration in Egypt proper, Moshe rejected the proposition of out hand.

הֵן נִזְבַּח אֶת-תּוֹעֵבַת מִצְרַיִם, לְעֵינֵיהֶם--וְלֹא יִסְקָלְנוּ.

“If we slaughter an Egyptian god, they’ll stone us!”

But after nine plagues, circumstances had changed.

When Moshe told Pharaoh the Jews would be stoned if they attempted to offer up an Egyptian god in front that god’s devotees, he was revealing the legitimate fears the Israelites surely harbored.

But by the end of the story, the tables had turned.

גַּם הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה, גָּדוֹל מְאֹד בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, בְּעֵינֵי עַבְדֵי-פַרְעֹה, וּבְעֵינֵי הָעָם.

Everyone recognized the greatness of Moshe. And everyone recognized the greatness of Hashem – which is why Pharaoh goes so far as to say **וּבֵרַכְתָּם גַּם אוֹתִי**. Bless me, too! Pharaoh has become a believer!

And so there was no further reason to leave the land of Egypt before offering up the Korban Pesach; the Israelites were comfortable doing it right then and there. They knew full well that no Egyptian would deign to challenge them.

The idea wasn’t to take some great risk by sacrificing an Egyptian deity while still in Egypt.

Pesach wasn’t a test of faith; it was simply an affirmation of Jewish distinctiveness. Which is plainly how the Torah describes the purpose of **מַכַּת בְּכוֹרוֹת** on Pesach night:

לְמַעַן, תִּדְעוּן, אֲשֶׁר יִפְלֶה יְהוָה, בֵּין מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל

All the world will know that we may be ensconced in Egypt, but we are not Egyptians. We answer to the highest authority.

- Korban Pesach revolutionized the notion of individual responsibility.
- It reified the idea that community matters.
- And it insisted that the Jewish people have a unique voice to contribute – even in times or places in which that distinctive voice may seem unwelcome.

To be a **מַמְלַכַת כְּהָנִים**, as the Seforno writes, is to be a source of wisdom to all people.

And so:

- When the place of Jews in Holocaust remembrance is omitted, it's our duty to speak out.
- When a nation of immigrants begins to forget its roots, it's on us to champion the cause of *ואהבתם את הגר* and remind our fellow citizens that embracing the stranger is a sign of strength rather than weakness.
- And when the foundation stones of the wall separating church and state begin to erode, we need to stand up and declare that religious freedom is sacrosanct.

Each one of us has a role to play.

Our community has a role to play.

And the Jewish people has a role to play.

Plenty of Israelites sat on the sidelines and declined to participate in the Korban Pesach. They went about their lives as the exodus passed them by. We can't say much more about them, because their passivity rendered them absent from the historical record.

It was the Jews who stood up and acted that are given pride of place in our national story. As the heirs to their great legacy, how could we do any less?