דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

The Freshest Grain

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If you bring a meal offering of the first fruit to the Lord, you shall bring grain in season parcel with fire, grits of fresh ear, as your meal offering of first fruits. . . . And the priest shall turn a token portion of it into smoke: some of the grits and oil, with all of the frankincense, as an offering by the fire to the Lord.

—Lev. 2:14–16

In a long narrative dedicated to sacrifices we find one hidden command to offer only the freshest and best grains, mixed with oils and scents. Through a multi sensory description the reader can sense the heavy kernels of grains, smell the scents, and vicariously participate in the powerful event of giving thanks to God with the offering of the first fruit.

One of my most vivid childhood memories is the offering of the first fruit during the holiday of Shavuot in a kibbutz in Israel. The difference between working the land and observing the biblical laws of the holiday disappear as the whole community participates in the most colorful, happy, and opulent celebration. Children wearing white cloths, adorned with flower wreaths on their heads, sit on the tractors and other heavy machinery, participate in a parade of dancing troupes and singing choruses. Observing the holiday away from our land and the natural home of our religion makes me long for the experiential aspect of giving thanks to God.

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The Rituals that Make a Nation

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I must confess that as someone who has spent most of my adult life studying and teaching modern history, Vayikra—both the parashah and the *sefer*—is not my favorite portion of the Torah or the Tanakh. We lovers of narrative are in for something of a letdown as we enter a biblical book that, aside from a few brief interludes, seems to be a long list of injunctions relating to priestly service and ritual purity. Indeed, there will be no more sea-splitting or plague-wreaking; the tablets have been given; the golden calf has been wrought and unwrought; and the Mishkan has been planned, plotted, and built. The fun is over, and now it's time to talk about the particulars of sacrifice, ceremony, and the sacred.

All that said, I will resist the part of myself that reflexively demands action and excitement in order to maintain focus, and will take a step back to touch on the intricacies of sacrifice and the seemingly endless parade of ritual injunctions and guidelines detailed in Vayikra (both *sefer* and parashah) through a different lens. Though the detailed instructions for animal sacrifice might seem arbitrary to contemporary observers, their function is not limited to their mere rote performance. Their purpose may also extend to the building up of the collective narrative and the reinforcement of the communal cohesion of a still-young people of Israel. These very sacrificial rituals connect to all aspects of Israelites' lives and behavior—both good and bad—and may in turn serve to cement their collective identification as an *am*, a nation.

Benedict Anderson, a leading scholar of modern nationalism, is best known for his argument that the nation itself is defined by the process of communal imagination. In his best-known book, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson strikes out a position somewhere on the spectrum of students of nationalism. At one end are the "primordialists," who posit that the nation and nationhood have

existed from time immemorial; on the other end are the "constructivists," who argue that nations are essentially a political and social invention conceived of and promoted by elites. In contrast with both of these extremes, Anderson sees the contemporary nation as an innovative phenomenon rooted in cultural traditions. In this vein, he argues that modern nations are primarily the product of collective imagination of the masses, not the invention of an elite set on recruiting those masses to their cause. For Anderson, it is the very process of people repeatedly engaging in the same activities simultaneously that promotes their self-conception as part of a community that is made real not only in the hearts and minds of its members, but in the world at large.

Anderson, who connects the advent of modern nationalism in part to increased availability of printed texts (and, by extension, increased levels of literacy), depicts newspapers as the "new prayer book." Keeping in mind that periodicals and the standardized languages in which they were written were still something of a novelty in the 18th and 19th centuries, Anderson presents the very act of reading them as a ritual that affirmed for readers that there were a multitude of other people who were reading the same words in the same language at the same time as them, even though they would never meet them. The seemingly mundane act of routinely reading a daily or weekly periodical, Anderson argues, contributed to the emergent sense of national identification that has since become a universal phenomenon.

The sacrifices and other seemingly random practices detailed in Vayikra, I would argue, promote the same sort of collective self-regard that Anderson discusses. An Israelite, at this point in the history of the people, still belonged to a mere collection of clans. She or he was likely tied more to her or his immediate family and extended tribe than to an unwieldy and hard-to-fathom confederation containing an immense number of people, most of whose members would never meet each other face-to-face. Keeping Anderson in mind, we can see how the performance of shared practices and rituals—regardless of their particular content or overt meaning—implicitly promotes the belief that one belongs to a greater whole, even if one won't ever meet the vast majority of the other pieces of that whole.

To take this one step further, I'll turn to two scholars whom many consider the greatest Jewish historians of their respective generations, Heinrich

Graetz and Salo Baron. Graetz points out that the people of Israel, when they were in the desert, already possessed the shared myths and common narrative that formed the foundation of their group cohesion. "[T]he marvelous occurrences in Egypt and in the desert…formed a link of fellowship among them…and nursed the sentiment of a common nationality" (*History of the Jews*, I, 58). However, the shared experiences and stories provided only the foundation. The sacrifices and the other rituals prescribed to the people in the desert provided the bricks and mortar that made up the durable, if somewhat more banal (when compared to the crossing of the Red Sea or the revelation at Sinai), structure that rests on the foundation of miracles, trauma, and catharsis.

Baron conveys a similar idea: "We have seen that the sacrifices in the nomadic age were not so much the remnant of prehistoric ancestor worship as an appropriate expression of the religious needs of a clan society, symbolizing the ideal blood relationship between the members of the various clans, or the people and their god" (*A Social and Religious History of the Jews,* I, 127). To add to Baron's assessment, the sacrifices and rituals that we see on extensive display in Vayikra are an expression not only of the religious needs of the nascent people of Israel, but a reflection of their *communal* needs as well—giving form and substance to an emergent sense of "groupness" that transcended the tribal and familial divisions that then characterized their society of wanderers.

Though the sacrificial order mandated by the Torah is something that has long since fallen out of use, thinking of it in this sociological frame reminds us that community and identity are not just "things" that exist in the world that we can simply "have," but rather that they must be continuously produced and maintained through persistent performance, practice, and action.

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