

## Teach Your Children Well

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In Parashat Bo, we read about “*Pesah Mitzrayim*”—God’s instructions to the Israelites for the eve of their exodus—including slaughtering the lamb and placing its blood on the doorposts as a marker of divine protection. In Exodus 12:21–28, Moshe conveys these rites, including the need to explain them to children. Many of these passages are most familiar to us from the Passover Haggadah. What can we learn from the way they have been incorporated there? What was their historical significance for the ancient rabbis? And how can they help us understand the significance of ritual to a meaningful Jewish life?

Let’s start by examining three of these verses:

And when you enter the land that the Lord will give you, as God has promised, you shall observe this rite. And when your children ask you, “What do you mean by this rite?” You shall say, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord because God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when God smote the Egyptians but saved our houses.” The people then bowed low. (Exod. 25–27)

It is clear that the phrase that opens verse 27, וְאַמְרָתֶם (“You shall say”), is a response to previous verses. That is, the answer you are to give to your children when they inquire about the ritual they are witnessing is, “It is the Passover sacrifice because God passed over the houses of the Israelites . . .” Moshe is envisioning a future time—after the people are settled in their land—when this ritual will be unknown and remarkable to the children and will need “unpacking.”

But what ritual will these children be asking about? The simple answer is the ritual described in the immediate antecedent to their question, verses 22–24, which speak about dipping the hyssop branch in the Paschal lamb’s blood and smearing it as a sign on the doorframe. The plain meaning of the text is that future generations of children will ask about the unusual doorpost-daubing they are witnessing. The only problem is that the ritual of placing blood on the doorpost is, according to our tradition, limited to that first Passover in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> As medieval commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra (Spain, 11th-c.) wrote:

This interpretation [that the children’s question is about the placing of the blood on the doorposts] would be correct from a logical point of view were it not for the true tradition which states otherwise . . . The [correct] meaning of the children’s question is: when your children will see their family in a group eating an entire lamb . . . they will question you.

We limit our engagement with the blood ritual to mere remembrance. In fact, it has been suggested that the multiple “dippings” of the seder are a nod to this central rite of the Passover of Egypt. Thus, according to rabbinic tradition, it is the eating of the Pesah offering that will provoke the curiosity of the children. It is this act that we are instructed to explain and frame in the context of our covenantal connection with God. Of course, food in our tradition, as in many other cultures, is more than just nutrition; it has rich semiotic significance. Naming that significance is one way we pass on our tradition and values.

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<sup>1</sup> The Samaritan community of Israel continues to practice this lamb-slaughtering, blood-dipping ceremony using a hyssop branch.

But eating the Paschal lamb is—post-Temple—also just a remembrance; a remembrance that is reified in Rabban Gamliel’s famous dictum in the Haggadah:

Rabban Gamliel would say: Anyone who has not said these three things on Pesah has not fulfilled their obligation. And these are them: the Pesah sacrifice, matzah, and marror. The Pesah sacrifice that our ancestors were accustomed to eating when the Temple existed, for the sake of what [was it]? For the sake [to commemorate] that the Holy One, blessed be God, passed over the homes of our ancestors in Egypt, as it is stated (Exod. 12:27) “And you shall say: “It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord . . . “

The Haggadah’s version is, in fact, an embellishment of Mishnah Pesahim 10:5, which reads<sup>2</sup>:

Rabban Gamliel says: Anyone who did not say these three things on Passover has not fulfilled their obligation: The Paschal lamb, matza, and bitter herbs. The Paschal lamb [is brought] because the Omnipresent passed over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt. Matza [is brought] . . .

There are numerous subtle differences between the Haggadah and the Mishnah. One obvious difference is the Mishnah’s lack of prooftexts.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it seems evident that the intertext that Rabban Gamliel of the Mishnah is referencing is our verse, Exod. 12:27. Furthermore, Rabban Gamliel frames the passage in typical Mishnaic legal style: *Anyone who did not say these three matters on Passover has not fulfilled their obligation.* This exemplifies the Rabbis’ proclivity to crystalize, legalize, and institutionalize the ethos of more amorphous Torah mandates. Ultimately, the idea is that we must make our actions clear and meaningful to our children.

<sup>2</sup> Kaufman manuscript

<sup>3</sup> This should not surprise us given the generally terse style of the Mishnah and its tendency to not cite explicitly exegetical material, leaving that job to the classical Midrashim.

There is also a historical context for this Mishnah. Who is Rabban Gamliel? Most scholars are in agreement that he is Gamliel II of Yavneh, the great-great-grandson of Hillel the Elder, who lived at the end of the first century CE. This means that Rabban Gamliel lived after the Temple was destroyed and the sacrifices had fallen to desuetude. Rabban Gamliel is, then, asserting that despite the absence of the actual ritual of the Passover sacrifice, the act of ascribing meaning is, in and of itself, essential.

The historical context makes Rabban Gamliel’s statement contemporaneous with the writing of the Gospels, where foods are also ascribed symbolic meaning, most famously in the Last Supper:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. (Mark 14:22–24)

The fact that this Last Supper was most likely a Passover celebration makes it all the more intriguing. The notion that Jesus’s words might reflect a transformation of an extant Jewish ritual has been explored by a number of scholars.<sup>4</sup>

We know that consuming ritual foods and explaining their meaning are significant practices in many cultures. Ultimately, it may be our human need to make meaning out of the actions of our lives—to live with intention, as it were—that informs both instances as well as the Torah’s instructions to explain our actions to our children.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars go in the opposite direction and read Rabban Gamliel’s dictum as an anti-Christian polemic, a heresiology. Aware of the Gospel’s account of Jesus’s Passover seder, Rabban Gamliel’s injunction to declare the historical significance of these symbols in their Exodus narrative context is a means to assert that correct Jewish belief precludes any other understanding. As the anthropologist J. Z. Smith notes, “Ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference.”