

Remembering to Remember

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My oldest nephew is turning four pretty soon. The other day some friends and I thought about what that means for him. The first thing that we agreed on was that our earliest memories are of events that took place when we were around his age. Harkening back to those times – to our early playdates and Barney episodes – we essentially dwelled on what made us *us*. The earliest moments that we remember, as mundane as they may be, mark the beginning of our existence, despite the fact that we had actually been around for a few years already.

Likewise, memory can do the same thing on a community level: much of Jewish liturgy dwells on things of the past, reminding us and God of our relationship throughout history. So what do we do, say, with things like *Vayikrah*? Why do we spend so much time remembering its details, and how are we supposed to understand them? One of the best examples of a rabbinic attempt to make sense of the book can be found in the midrashic work known as *Vayikrah Rabbah*. Generally thought to have been edited in Palestine sometime during the 5th century CE, *Vayikrah Rabbah* succeeded in engaging with the terse details that fill the book of *Vayikrah* by radically adopting a whole new paradigm of *midrash*, abandoning the genre of verse-by-verse commentary for what is now termed "homiletic commentary." *Vayikrah Rabbah* picks up on words or themes found in the opening verses of the *parsha* at hand and runs with them – weaving together rabbinic sayings into beautifully spun cobwebs of wisdom.

While such a feat turns *Vayikrah* into interesting reading, those responsible for *Vayikrah Rabbah* had a larger dilemma to deal with than boring synagogue services. For the rabbis behind *Vayikrah Rabbah*, almost all of the precepts of the central book of the Torah could not be fulfilled due to the destruction of the Temple. Simply put, when the principal rituals are now defunct, what should one *do*? The rabbis, in taking on the project of creating *Vayikrah Rabbah*, both made the biblical text relevant by uncovering the ideas or goals underlying its prescriptions and also replaced its laws by providing alternative rituals (I would argue even that these two acts are interwoven – uncovering the ideas or goals allows one to pass them on to another ritual).

The commentary of *Vayikrah Rabbah* to our *parsha*, *Tsav*, which is full of laws of sacrifices, does just that. First, the very act of reading and commenting on the biblical text is already somewhat of a way of dealing with the inability to perform the sacrificial rituals. Commentary is in itself an argument that the text is still relevant, even if what it prescribes cannot be enacted. More practical responses also appear. According to one of the sayings found in this section of *Vayikrah Rabbah*, “one who repents – it is as if he went up to Jerusalem, built the Temple, built the Altar, and offered on it all of the sacrifices of the Torah” (*Vayikrah Rabbah* 7:2). An even more interesting move takes place just a few lines after that saying (*Vayikrah Rabbah* 7:3): (“Command Aaron and his sons, saying ‘This is the Torah of the burnt offering...’” [Lev. 6:2]) ... R. Aha [said] in the name of R. Hinana the son of Papa: Since Israel, when the Temple stood, would offer all of the sacrifices of the Torah, what is it now to study them? The Blessed be He said to them: Since you

are studying them, I consider it as if you had offered them.

One who “engages in” – studies – the sacrifices listed in Leviticus is considered to have sacrificed them. In the absence of the ability to perform the *actual ritual*, one can perform the text that describes said ritual through study – *through remembering the ritual*. To phrase it even wordier: *the ritual of remembering the ritual replaces the ritual*.

I find it fitting that we’re hitting Pesach right after we read *Tsav*, especially if we read it through this segment of *Vayikrah Rabbah*. After all, Pesach, the most ritualistic of nights, is also very much about rituals of remembering. The main thing that we remember during the *seder* is the Exodus. At the same time, one of the practices that we engage in over the holiday is *the ritual act of remembering ritual*, mainly the Passover sacrifice, which in itself was supposed to harken back to the original Pesach sacrifice performed in Egypt. So too we remember other rituals, such as historic seders of national importance – like that time that Rabbi Akiva and his friends went on for a really long time at their seder remembering things (the Exodus story), to the point that their student had to come to tell them that it was time for the morning *shma*.

Or – Slim Gaillard’s “Matzo Balls”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnz1nq8raP8>)

Nowadays, people at the Seder tend to remember many other things besides the Exodus and the now defunct Temple rite. People remember their Bubbie’s *matza* ball soup, a not-particularly-funny joke that someone once made at the family *seder*, the time so-and-so had too much Manischewitz, or perhaps their own personal Exodus story. What the never-endingness of this chain of things-to-be-

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remembered emphasizes to me is that the chief practice, perhaps even the main point of the holiday, is not necessarily remembering something *in particular*, but that it is rather the actual *act of remembering itself*. The imperative isn't to remember a larger quantity of material, to "memorize something." Rather, through the *seder* and other Pesach rituals we, like the rabbis of *Leviticus Rabbah*, work on *how* – qualitatively speaking – we remember things that are important to us. On Pesach we flex our remembering muscles. Regardless of what it is that we are remembering – let's remember to remember.

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