

**Temple Israel**  
**Rabbi Adam Grossman**  
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**Drawing Close**

When I was in rabbinical school, a colleague and fellow student shared with me the following experience as a rabbinic intern prior to attending rabbinical school. When giving a tour of the synagogue to a non-Jewish group, he brought them up onto the bima, opened the ark and discussed the origins and importance of our Torah. As he was talking, he noticed a woman intently staring at the ark and downwards towards the floor, while constantly bending over gazing upwards under the Torahs, as though they were the under belly of a car. Following his discussion and as the group began to disperse the woman came up to this rabbi in training, and asked, “Rabbi, I am confused, where does the blood go?”

This query refers to the reality that there are those in our communities still unaware that we do not sacrifice animals. In fact, Jews have not performed this rite since the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed almost 2000 years ago. Yet, at the same time, for those unfamiliar with Jews or Judaism, the question regarding sacrifice is understandable. Our foundational writings, the Hebrew Bible and more particularly, the Five Books of Moses, discuss sacrificial rites at length. In our weekly Torah reading cycle we began to read Leviticus three weeks ago, which we break from this Shabbat to honor Passover, and the first eight chapters are dedicated to the sacrifices such as the offering of well-being, an offering of guilt and a burnt offering.

However, according to our tradition, we are not literalists! The words inscribed in our Torah are much more than a verbatim “play-by-play” of what we are supposed to do. Our rabbinic tradition, instead, teaches us that our Torah is an ever-evolving entity, which constantly reveals new possibilities and understandings through a balance of tradition and our modern sensibilities.

A great example of our rabbis endorsing this concept comes during our celebration of Passover, which began this past week. At our Seder tables all of us recited the four questions beginning *Mah nishtanah ha-lahylah ha-zeh mi-kol ha-layloht?* - “Why is this night different from all other nights” – and concluded with *She-b'khol ha-layloht anu okhlin bayn yosh'vin u'vayn m'soobin. Ha-lahylah ha-zeh, koolanu m'soobin?* - “Why is it that on all other nights we eat either sitting or reclining, but on this night we eat reclined?” Yet, in Exodus 12:11, as we recall our Passover obligations, we are told, “This is how you shall eat [the

Passover meal]: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly.” Immediately, we notice the difference between our biblical verses, which tell us to eat quickly, and the Seder we re-enacted on Monday evening, which required us to recline.

Logically, a discrepancy between our Bible and our tradition exists; however, as Raban Gamliel explains in our Talmud concerning Passover, “In every generation, it is your obligation to see yourself as if you had personally gone out from Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> This re-understanding of the Passover celebration in approximately 80 CE was more than a redefinition. Instead, our rabbis recognized the significance of modern realities in lieu of textual accuracy. They understood that the text, while foundational to our Jewish existence, serves as a catalyst for deeper thinking and discernment rather than mechanically following our ancient text.

Similarly, in reading the Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*, our sages realized that our Torah shared more than just a straightforward discussion of our sacrificial obligations. Instead, our rabbis saw that the Hebrew word *korban* and the word *kiruv* meaning to draw close are derived from the same Hebrew root. In understanding this linguistic characteristic, the rabbis recognized that sacrifice is not an act, but rather an on-going discourse on what it means to draw more closely and more genuinely to God. For our rabbis, personal commitment and prayer rather than sacrifice better served this purpose and thus became the foundation for our practice today.

A mathematician once explained to me that the laws of mathematics already exist in our world. Gravity, for example, existed before Newton ever defined it, thus mathematics is constantly uncovered rather than newly discovered. Likewise, our tradition is not static, but rather continually transforms through our uncovering of previously hidden revelations and insights. So as we honor Passover this week, a holiday celebrating our journey of discovery, may we continue to unearth new possibilities to *kiruv*, to draw closer to our self, to others, and to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Tractate Pesachim Chapter 10, Mishnah 5,