

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Passover, Deprogramming, and Real Freedom



Our family always looked forward to celebrating Passover. At our Passover Seder [ceremonial meal], we retold the story of the Exodus, ate matzah to recall the bread of affliction, ate bitter herbs [*maror*] to remind us of the bitterness of slavery, and we proclaimed “Next Year in Jerusalem” to celebrate our freedom.

In the time of the Temple, Jews were also required to partake of the roasted paschal lamb. In fulfillment of Exodus 12:8, the sage, Hillel, would combine matzah, maror, and roasted meat and eat them together. At my family Seder, I would jokingly tell my guests that this was the “first deli sandwich.”

Since the destruction of the Temple, we no longer include the Passover sacrifice in our celebration. Nevertheless, the underlying spiritual message of this sacrifice lives on to inspire and connect us to God.

Ancient Egypt was a civilization renowned for its military might and famous for its monuments, including the great pyramids. Egyptian Temples were built for the official worship of their gods. Idolatry was rampant among the Egyptians, who worshiped many animals as manifestations of their gods. Sheep were also worshiped, and this idolatrous practice was well-known to the Jews.

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To achieve true spiritual freedom, the Jews had to eradicate any attraction to idolatry. To borrow a modern term, the procedure of offering the paschal lamb was a “deprogramming” to prepare the Jews for the Exodus, freedom, and the receiving of the Torah.

This “deprogramming” is alluded to in the Torah verse that commands the taking of the Passover lamb. The verse says, “*Draw [משכו—mishku] out and take [וקחו—v'kechu] for yourselves a lamb*” (Exodus 12:21). Our sages note that it would have been sufficient to say, “*take a lamb.*” By adding the word “draw,” the Torah is instructing us to “*withdraw yourselves*” from any association with idolatry.

Withdrawing from idolatry does not happen overnight. It can take time to confront your temptations and disassociate from idolatry. The regulations associated with bringing the paschal lamb are steps in the “deprogramming” process.

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Four days before the Passover lamb was offered, it was brought into the Jewish homes and tied to a bedpost. This provided an opportunity to contemplate that this so-called god lacked the power to free itself. As King David said, “*They have a mouth but do not speak, eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear*” (Psalms 115:4-8).

After the lamb was sacrificed, it was roasted whole, which accomplished several things. Once again, the Jews witnessed that idols [such as the lamb] had no power to save themselves. Secondly, by roasting the lamb whole, no one could deny that a lamb had been offered. Finally, by roasting the meat, the aroma traveled outdoors, and the Egyptians were made aware that their “god” had been destroyed.

These steps, as well as placing the lamb’s blood on the outside of their doors, forced the Jews to confront idolatry and publicly demonstrated their courage to reject it. This is real freedom.

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Since the day the Jews first brought the lamb into their homes was on the Sabbath before Passover, it is referred to as Shabbat HaGadol, “The Great Shabbat.” One explanation for the name is that it highlights the Jewish people’s great act of denying idolatry, something we must do in every generation. Furthermore, each year we commemorate this Sabbath and read a special prophetic reading [*haftorah*] that contains the word “great” in reference to God’s promise to “*send Eliyahu the prophet before the great and awesome day of God*” (Malachi 3:23-24).

This event will herald the promised messianic redemption, which is so central to our faith we recall it by pouring the special cup of Eliyahu during our Passover Seder.

For generations, the Jewish people have longed for this redemption. At great risk to body and soul, we distanced ourselves from foreign beliefs and adhered to the belief in one God. In the merit of this self-sacrifice, may we soon witness the ultimate redemption when idolatry and evil will fade from existence, and peace and the knowledge of God will fill the earth.

Happy Passover and Shabbat Shalom,

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