

To Do Lists and To Be Lists: Parashat Vayikra/Shabbat HaChodesh

As anyone who knows me well will tell you, I am fanatical about making to-do lists! I have work lists and personal lists; long-term lists and weekly lists; lists of big, time-consuming projects and lists of small, discrete tasks easily accomplished. I have lists of ideas I haven't quite gotten to yet and lists of initiatives already in process; lists of people to call, books to read, new restaurants to try, sermons I hope one day to write. When it comes to managing all these lists I'm surprisingly old-school, especially considering the huge variety of digital tools available online, writing them out – for the most part - by hand largely because of the enormous satisfaction I feel when crossing something off, physically scribbling it into oblivion. I've even been known to write down a task already completed on one of my lists, just for the sheer pleasure of subsequently being able to mark it off as done!

So perhaps it will come as no surprise that I feel quite comfortable in the section of the Torah that we begin reading today, the opening chapters of the Book of *Vayikra* (Leviticus). Leviticus, indeed, is a veritable list-maker's dream – an enumeration of the different kinds of sacrifices that were offered in Temple times, the ingredients that each sacrifice contained, the precise steps that were to be followed in order to enact the ritual, and much more. Leviticus reads, in fact, like a how-to manual for the ancient priests who presided over the work of the Tabernacle and later the Temple which is why it is sometimes called *Torat Cohanim*, the Instruction Book for the Priests. It specifies exactly what they are to do and how they are to do it, in exquisite – and sometimes tedious - detail.

As a list-obsessed individual, I also feel quite comfortable in this moment on the Jewish calendar. This morning we celebrate the last of four special Shabbatot that have brought us from Rosh Hodesh Adar, the Shabbat right before the new month during which Purim falls, to Rosh Hodesh Nissan, the Shabbat

right before (or this year coinciding with) the new month during which we celebrate Passover. And next week we will commemorate Shabbat HaGadol, not included with its counterparts just mentioned because it contains only a special *haftarah* without a special *maftir* Torah reading, but still part of the cycle of counting-down towards Pesach all the same. Certainly there is no holiday on the Jewish calendar more typified by lists than Passover – lists of 10 plagues and 4 questions, lists of permitted and forbidden foods, lists of guests to invite and groceries to buy and rooms still to clean, lists of so very many different things that need to be done in order to be ready for Yom Tov (the holiday). This is surely one of the reasons that we start marking off towards Passover so far in advance, beginning a full month early with Adar. We want to make sure to be fully prepared for the holiday when it arrives!

My teacher, Cindy Chazan of the Wexner Foundation, recently gave a speech at the annual conference for alumni of Wexner's graduate fellowship programs of which I am one. The Wexner Foundation takes as its mission Jewish leadership development and Chazan, as its retiring Vice President, is well known for the achievement, quality, and drive that you might expect from a foundation devoted to professional excellence and advancement. In this farewell speech, which I unfortunately did not hear myself but rather heard about from others, Chazan wondered aloud whether too many high-performing, organization-transforming, seriously effective Jewish leaders are sometimes concentrating too much on their personal and institutional "to do" lists and not enough on their personal and institutional "to be" lists. That is, are we sometimes sacrificing character or values or purpose on the altar of efficiency and achievement? Tasks and action items and projects and deliverables are all very well and good, Chazan argued, but only if they serve some higher meaning or ideal. Rather than concentrating so strongly on all we need to do - as leaders, as parents, as bosses, as human beings - we might also do well to think about all that we want to be.

I feel drawn to the Book of *Vayikra*, to the holiday of Passover, because I can relate to the idea of creating order out of chaos by imposing organization. Making lists helps me, personally, to feel a sense of control and even comfort, to believe that if I can structure my environment that I'll ultimately be able to manage it, and I believe that the lists of tradition are not so very different. How did a people recently freed from slavery in Egypt and left to wander in the desert for 40 years in service of a God they could not see come to feel a sense of safety and security? They created elaborate structures – both physical ones like the Tabernacle (itself governed by lists!) and spiritual ones like the sacrificial system - tools that they were given by God, I believe, in order to help the Israelites feel rooted and in control. And after the destruction of the Temple, when it became clear that the old way of celebrating Passover by slaughtering a lamb could be no more and that religious life as it had been known until that time was being utterly transformed, how did the ancient rabbis inspire belief that Judaism would survive into an uncertain future? They created a *seder* – a ritual whose name literally means “order” –to hold the people together and make them feel that they still had agency, even when the world was falling apart around them. The lists of yore served a particular purpose, giving the people concrete steps they might follow in order to build hope, trust, and community. But Chazan is right in questioning rubrics that are too much about what we are “to do” and too little about who we are “to be.”

When we dig a bit deeper, I believe that both the sacrificial system and our Passover celebrations of today do, in fact, embody a notion of “to be” in addition to “to do” – or at least they can, if we approach them in a certain way. As many of us know, the root of the Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*, means “to draw close” and this etymology gives us a very strong sense as to how the true purpose of the sacrificial rites were intended – as a way of getting close to God and God’s desires for us here on earth. It would have been easy, we can imagine, to go through the rituals of sacrifice as if by rote – to take a sheep for a sin offering, for example, and bring it to the priest without feeling any remorse for wrong-

doing or to bring a cow for an offering of well-being without feeling any true sense of gratitude; to do so would have technically fulfilled one's religious obligation. Likewise, it is possible to think of a person who cleans scrupulously for Passover, letting not a single stray piece of *hametz* touch a plate or pot, without meditating but at all on ideas of freedom and justice and tradition passed down from one generation to the next. That person, too, would be in *halakhic* (Jewish legal) terms considered *yotzei* – he would have fulfilled his duty and checked the box on Passover. But, as Chazan reminds us, rituals are not only about behavior but also about higher ideals and values. They should bring us closer to who we are meant to be.

And there is one more potential pitfall as well, at least when it comes to Passover! In 1932, the Maxwell House Haggadah appeared on the scene as part of a marketing campaign for Maxwell House Coffee. In order to emphasize the fact that their product was kosher for Pesach, the company began distributing haggadot in supermarkets complimentary with purchase. The burgeoning interest in holiday observance among American Jews, no longer as Judaically knowledgeable as their grand-parents, combined with the haggadah's simple, user-friendly Hebrew-English (rather than Hebrew-Yiddish) design and easy availability in grocery stores made the haggadah an instant hit. Since then, over 50 million copies of the Maxwell House Haggadah have been published.

For all that it contributed to American-Jewish life, however, the Maxwell House Haggadah had one significant drawback. By its very format - a fixed text to be recited seemingly without departure, a list of steps to be followed seemingly without embellishment – the haggadah inadvertently indicated that having a seder meant reading every single word of this particular book rather than crafting an experience to engage in the themes of the Exodus. It made it seem as if Passover was an exercise in “to do” rather than in “to be,” that by following this particular litany word-for-word without conversation or

reflection one had fulfilled her obligation of the holiday. In fact, this could not be further from the case. At its core, the seder is not at all about passively receiving a tradition but rather about actively participating in an experience.

The central *mitzvah* of Pesach is *higad'ta l'bincha* – you should teach your child – and the central vehicle for this instruction is the posing and eliciting of questions, so much so that certain elements of the seder (like hand-washing once with a blessing and once without) were included just so young people might notice curiosities and ask about them. While the seder does, of course, have a list of steps that should be followed, the haggadah is not meant to be a rigid script but rather a helpful jumping off point, the learning objectives, as it were, to develop an exciting and engaging lesson plan - about slavery and freedom, justice and responsibility, family, identity, leadership, courage, the compassionate treatment of those who are other, and so very much more. Passover might look, superficially, like it's about doing or not doing any large variety of things but it's really our meta-narrative as a people for who we want to be: a nation who uses our own experience of slavery and persecution in order to ensure that such pain never be visited upon others. Each step of the seder is not a means unto itself but rather a concrete way of embodying Passover's grand themes. If we "do" without reflection on why, we're not doing nearly enough.

And so it begins now! Many of us have already started preparing for Passover by developing guest lists and shopping lists, trying to eat down our *hametz*, dragging out Pesach dishes, cleaning cupboards. But those of us who are seder leaders, and especially those of us who will have young people around our table, should be preparing now too, beginning to plan an experience that will engage and perhaps even delight our guests, one that is tailored in appropriate ways to their ages, capacities, and interests. The text of the Four Children that we recite Pesach night is so important because it reminds us that

individuals connect and absorb in different ways; it is our responsibility to find the strategy that will best reach the friends and family members joining us seder night.

There are a wide variety of resources available in my office, in the synagogue library, and beyond – from books and games and plague bags to haggadot of every shape and stripe; there is also information on our website from years past about ways to enhance the seder ritual; there are easily Google-able art projects and videos and parenting blogs with great ideas. If I can be of help in any way as you begin crafting this experience, please let me know! It should be a great one.

I know that there are still more than a few items left on my Passover to do list – I've barely started my shopping and cleaning; I have sermons to write; I'm hoping the friends with whom I'm celebrating the holiday will allow me to contribute some cooking to the meal. But rather than scribbling off tasks, what I most hope to arrive at seder night with is a better sense of who it is that Pesach calls us to be: individuals grateful enough to enjoy great freedom and thus obligated to secure such freedom for others.

Shabbat Shalom.