

Can-Do Spirit in an Unsettled Time

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For several weeks, we have had special readings designed to help us prepare for the upcoming holidays of Purim and Passover. But now that it is finally the month of Nisan, the month in which we will celebrate the seder, we have a reading from the Torah that seems totally detached from what is going on in our Jewish calendar.

Less than two weeks before Passover, why aren't we reading from the book of Exodus? Surely, they could have jimmied the calendar better or assigned another special reading.

Instead, this week we are reading about the different sacrifices that were to be offered in the *Mishkan*, the portable sanctuary, with seemingly little connection to where we are in the Jewish year. While there may seem to be little in today's Torah portion to connect us to the Jewish calendar, there is something that might catch our attention at this time of year. One strange element of the sacrificial cult was that God's offerings could not be offered with bread—no nicely risen loaves, no brioche, no croissants or even challah for the service of the tabernacle—only unleavened crackers, tasteless matzah.

Why was that? Well, no one is sure. Rambam (Maimonides), said that leavened bread could not be used as part of the offerings to God because the local pagans had bread at their celebrations; thus, Israelite sacrifices had to be different. Such

an argument is frequently made when a cause is not known: Somehow it must have been suspect.

Sefer haChinuch, a medieval text which looks for ethical lessons, sees this as a reminder that in service to God, we should be humble and prompt, not like bread that takes so long for the yeast to rise that it results in a loaf that is all puffed up.

Ramban (Nachmanides), Maimonides's frequent sparring partner, suggests that we should word our quest for an explanation differently. Rather than asking why unleavened bread was used for the ancient sacrifices, we should ask why was unleavened bread used for Passover?

We all know the Haggadah's explanation that the fleeing Israelites didn't have time to bake bread, but this explanation seems questionable given that the Israelites had been told they were leaving so they were already packed up. As one modern commentator asks, why didn't they just start baking a little earlier? Ramban says matzah is not about not having time to bake but about something greater than that.

On Passover, it was the entire people who were saved from slavery. It was the entire people who became the fulfillment of God's promise that we should be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy People. On Passover, we are all *kohanim* (priests), and so, like the *kohanim* of ancient times, we are to eat only matzah.

At the virtual conference of Reform rabbis held earlier this week, there was a lot of talk about how this period we are in now, with all of its impromptu

innovations, is going to affect Judaism going forward as well. One aspect of the impromptu adjustments and innovations we have been making is a leveling of the distinction between clergy and laity, between experts and anyone who can set up a webinar. If you are a musician, then set up a concert; if you are a teacher, then open a class. You don't need an institution to back you, a committee to design your programming, a board to approve your efforts.

May this can-do spirit be indeed the heritage of this unsettled time. May we go into Passover with the confidence that whatever adjustments we need to make for Passover this year—whether it be our do-it-yourself seder or our meal of *kitniyot*: beans, rice, and corn—it is going to be enough, *Dayenu*.