



Mitzvot as a Communal Project

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Parashat BeHa'alotkha returns us to the story of Pesah—this time, in the second year after the Exodus from Egypt—and underscores the ways in which observing God's *mitzvot* is a fundamentally communal project.

במדבר ט:א-ה

¹וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית לְצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן לֵאמֹר: ²וַיַּעַשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַפֶּסַח בְּמוֹעֲדוֹ: ³בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה בֵּין הָעֲרֵבִים תַּעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ בְּמַעַדּוֹ כָּל־חֻקֹּתָיו וְכָל־מִשְׁפָּטָיו תַּעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ: ⁴וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח: ⁵וַיַּעַשׂוּ אֶת הַפֶּסַח בְּרִאשׁוֹן בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לְחֹדֶשׁ בֵּין הָעֲרֵבִים בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי כָּל־אִשֶּׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה כֵּן עָשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Numbers 9:1-5

¹God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, on the first month of the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: ²“Let the Israelite people do the *pesah* sacrifice at its set time. ³You (*plural*) shall do it at its set time, on the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight; you (*plural*) shall do it in accordance with all its rules and rites.” ⁴Moshe instructed the Israelites to offer the *pesah* sacrifice. ⁵And they did the *pesah* sacrifice in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai. Just as God had commanded Moshe, so the Israelites did.



The plural form is used repeatedly throughout these verses, both in the command and in the description of its fulfillment: “Let the Israelites do... You (plural) shall do... They did...” This language makes it clear that the *pesah* offering is a collective endeavor—a *mitzvah* performed within and by a community.¹

Our *parashah* mentions the *pesah* offering at the exact moment where ritual law meets the realities of life. A group of people who cannot participate in the holiday at its appointed time because they are ritually impure approaches Moshe:

וַיְהִי אֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ טְמֵאִים לְנֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְלִפְנֵי
 אַהֲרֹן בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא: ⁷וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הִהֵמָּה אֵלֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ טְמֵאִים לְנֶפֶשׁ אָדָם לָמָּה נִגְרַע לְבַלְתִּי הַקָּרִיב
 אֶת קֶרְבֵּן ה' בְּמַעַדוֹ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

⁶But there were some who were impure by reason of a corpse and could not offer the *pesah* sacrifice on that day. Appearing that same day before Moshe and Aharon, ⁷they said to them, “We are impure by reason of a corpse; why should we be diminished by not being allowed to bring God’s offering at its set time **with the rest of the Israelites?**”

Our Rabbis explain that these people were impure because they were serving the community by carrying Yosef’s coffin.² They approach Moshe with a clear understanding of the holiday’s meaning, not just on a personal level, but on a communal one. Their primary concern is that their inability to observe the *mitzvah* will sever their connection to the community—removing them from among the Israelites. This communal awareness is also evident in the way they seek a solution: they approach as a group, as a community.

¹ The construction of the *mishkan* (tabernacle) was a communal project in a similar vein. We see this both in the biblical language of collective action (“and they shall make”) and in the diverse array of roles and forms of involvement. Everyone contributed to the building of the Mishkan in their own unique way.

² As the Talmud records in Sukkah 25a-b: “‘But there were some who were impure by reason of a corpse...’ Who were they? They were those who carried the coffin of Yosef—these are the words of R. Yose ha-Gelili. R. Akiva says: They were Mishaël and Eltzafan, who were occupied with [the burial of] Nadav and Avihu. R. Yitzhak says: ... They were occupied with a *met mitzvah* (an abandoned corpse with no one to bury it).”

The importance of the community as the essential context for fulfilling a *mitzvah* is also reflected in the answer they receive. They are given a communal response: a single alternative date (*Pesah Sheini*) so that they will do it together. This solution echoes and clarifies a fundamental principle: the observance of *Pesah* is meant to be done within a community of peers who share a common action. *Pesah Sheini* illuminates the dimension of communal partnership and fellowship—the space of peers where those who were impure can now perform the *pesah* sacrifice together on a new date, slaughtering the offering at an appointed time, and perhaps, suggesting a model for how we observe *mitzvot* in general.

With the insight gained from *Pesah Sheini*, we can return to *Pesah* and re-examine its nature.

שמות יב:א,ג-ד

¹וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר: ... ³דַּבְּרוּ אֶל כָּל עַדַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בְּעֶשֶׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם אִישׁ שֶׁה לְבֵית אָבִית שֶׁה לְבֵית: ⁴וְאִם יִמְעַט הַבֵּית מִהְיוֹת מֹשֶׁה וְלָקַח הוּא וּשְׁכֵנוֹ הַקָּרֵב אֶל בֵּיתוֹ בְּמִקְסַת נֶפֶשׁ אִישׁ לְפִי אִכְלוּ תִּכְסּוּ עַל הַשֶּׁה:

Exodus 12:1,3-4

¹God said to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt: ... ³“Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them (*ish*) shall take a lamb to a **family**, a lamb to a **household**. ⁴But if the household is too small for a lamb, let **him share it with a neighbor** who dwells nearby, in proportion to the number of persons (*nefashot*): you shall contribute for the lamb according to what each person should eat.

The *pesah* offering is performed in a *havurah*—a cohort or group consisting of a household, a family, or a neighborhood.³ It is a *mitzvah* deeply rooted in community. R. Yehudah goes as far as to say: “אֵין שׁוֹחֲטִין אֶת הַפֶּסַח עַל הַיָּחִיד - We do not slaughter the *pesah* on behalf of an individual” (Mishnah *Pesahim* 8:7). According to R. Yehudah, the *pesah* sacrifice should not be

³ See, e.g., Mishnah *Pesahim* 9:9-10.

offered without a group. Each individual has an obligation but it can only be done properly in community.

Even rabbis who don't hold R. Yehudah's strict opinion agree, as the verses testify, that the sacrifice is taken by a "household," and there is an immediate solution for a situation where "the household is too small": community. Community helps—provides a group, so you can eat the sacrifice as commanded—but not eat beyond your abilities. This demonstrates the community's role: to help, support, and provide the space that enables and strengthens one's own observance.

Furthermore, the *midrash* in the Mekhilta de-R. Shimon ben Yohai clarifies that this does not refer to a homogeneous group of people or a community lacking human diversity. The verse explains that every person eats in their own way: "Each person according to what they should eat." The *midrash*, as is its way, scrutinizes the wording of the verse—specifically the word "man" (*ish*)—to learn about the human diversity involved in the *pesah* offering:

מכילתא דר' שמעון בן יוחאי יב:ד

לתוך שנאמר "איש", אין לי אלא איש, מנין לרבות את האשה ואת הקטן? ת"ל "נפשות".

Mekhilta de-R. Shimon ben Yohai 12:4

Since it says "man," I only have a man. From where do I learn to include a woman or a child? The verse says "souls" (*nefashot*).

This idea is expanded in the verses themselves:

שמות יב:מח-מט

⁴⁸ וְכִי יִגֹּר אֶתְּךָ גֵּר וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לֵה' הַמּוֹל לּוֹ כֹּל זָכָר וְאִזְ יִקְרַב לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ ... ⁴⁹ תֹּרֶה אֶחָת יְהִי לְאִזְרָח וְלִגֵּר הָגֵר בְּתוֹכָם:

Exodus 12:48-49

⁴⁸If a stranger who dwells with you would offer the *pesah* for God, all their males must be circumcised; then they shall be admitted to offer it. ... ⁴⁹There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.”

The individuals who make up the community are not identical: citizens, residents, men, women, and children all take part in eating the *pesah* sacrifice. The Torah does not direct us to build a world of sameness or uniformity; rather, it invites us to build a diverse fellowship. A community that provides a framework for a life of Torah is a community of different individuals—“according to what each person should eat,” each person in their own way—supported by the collective in their life of Torah and *mitzvot*.

This human diversity has another implication. Not only is there no need for the participants to be identical, but the threshold for participation and involvement in the community can be basic and accessible. It is not necessary for every partner to be exceptional. For example, regarding the *pesah* offering, the *midrash* in the Mekhilta continues:

אם כן למה נאמר “איש” מה איש שיכול לאכול כזית אף קטן שיכול לאכול כזית.

If so, why is “man” (*ish*) stated? Just as a man can eat a *ke-zayit* (an olive-sized portion), so too a child who can eat a *ke-zayit* [is included].

One of the things a community enables is a basic level of involvement rather than a maximalist one. It is enough to eat a *ke-zayit*—the basic halakhic amount; that is the level of involvement required to belong to the community. In addition, in these spaces, there is no single, prominent “leading actor.” Instead, there is a communal space where as many people as possible take part—and take part actively and together.

The *mitzvah* of Pesah is the first commandment given directly to the people of Israel as a nation. In this sense, it serves as a paradigm for all *mitzvot*; its foundational characteristics illuminate the nature of religious observance as a whole. It teaches us that, at their core, *mitzvot* are fundamentally communal. The community plays a vital role in fortifying and sustaining my own observance as an individual. This suggests that a life of Torah and *mitzvot* becomes a way of life when it is lived within a community of peers—one defined not only by shared ideas but, perhaps first and foremost, by shared practice. The community envisioned as a space for a practical life of Torah is one characterized by human diversity, where participants can be involved in various ways and differently.

The importance of the community as the essential context for fulfilling a *mitzvah* is also reflected in the answer given to those who cannot fulfill Pesah in its original time: a single alternative date (Pesah Sheini) is offered, clarifying the observance of Pesah is meant to be done within a community of peers who share a common action. It does not require priests or hierarchy, nor exceptionalism nor perfection—it is accessible and inclusive and simply requires a *havurah*, a collective.