

Pesach
Hallel: The Sacrificial Soundtrack
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Class of 2018

Erev Pesach in most Jewish homes is one of the most frenetic days of the year. As we prepare our charoset and chicken soup, it's worth taking the time, during the craziness of preparing for yom tov and burning *chametz*, to remember what this day looked like in the times of the Beit Hamikdash. The Mishnah in Pesachim 64a paints a picture for us:

The Korban Pesach was brought in three groups. The first would come in until the courtyard was filled, and then they locked the doors and sounded blasts of tekia and terua. The priests would stand in line, catching the blood from one slaughtered animal in a container of silver or gold and passing the container down the line until it reached the priest closest to the altar. That priest would throw the blood against the altar, and the process would continue. When the first group left the courtyard, the second would enter....They would read the Hallel and if they finished it they would repeat it and if they finished it again they would repeat it a third time-- but it never happened that they would read it again the first time. Rabbi Yehudah says that the third group never even got to "Ahavti ki yishma Hashem" because they were few.

הפסח הפסח נשחט בשלש כתות
....ונכנסה כת הראשונה נתמלאה העזרה
נעלו דלתות העזרה תקעו הריעו ותקעו.
הכהנים עומדים שורות שורות ובידיהם
בזיכי כסף ובזיכי זהב...שחט ישראל
וקבל הכהן נותנו לחבירו וחבירו לחבירו
ומקבל את המלא ומחזיר את הריקן כהן
הקרוב אצל המזבח זורקו זריקה אחת
כנגד היסוד יצתה כת ראשונה ונכנסה כת
שניה קראו את ההלל אם גמרו שנו
ואם שנו שלשו אע"פ שלא שלשו מימיהם
ר' יהודה אומר מימיהם של כת שלישית
לא הגיעו לאהבתי כי ישמע ה' מפני
שעמה מועטין...]

Time and again, I find myself utterly taken by this image of the Beit HaMikdash filled with continuous music. If they finished the whole Hallel once, they repeated it again, so there would be no moments without tune. Rashi¹ and Tosfot argue about who was doing this singing-- as the Mishnah itself is unclear. Tosafot believe that the Levites were singing; Rashi says that it was everyone present.

Tosafot's opinion fits in nicely with our standard idea of music in the Beit HaMikdash. We recall this image every day when we say Shir Shel Yom and remember the song that the Levites used to say in the Beit HaMikdash on that day of the week. The Mishnah in Arachin 10a describes the orchestra that used to play in the Beit HaMikdash, including pipes, harps and lyres, all accompanying the vocal music of the Levites.

¹ This reading of Rashi is put forward by Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin in HaMoadim b'Halacha 2:340. The Rashi on Pesachim 64a can be read in many ways, but in the context of the related Rashi in Sukkah 55b I find Rav Zevin's reading compelling.

But in a way, there's something even more lovely about Rashi's image of the Korban Pesach's music. The Talmud in Pesachim 95b says:

Is it possible that Israel were slaughtering their Korban Pesach or taking their Lulav and not saying Hallel?

אפשר ישראל שוחטין את פסחיהן ונוטלין את לולביהן ואין אומרים הלל?

It is impossible, according to the Talmud, for a person to undertake such a lovely mitzvah and not be moved to sing out the Hallel. And so Rashi looks at the ambiguity of our Mishnah and concludes that it wasn't just the Levites performing while the Korban Pesach was being slaughtered. It was every person in the courtyard, bursting out in grateful song as they slaughtered their Pesach offerings and brought the blood to the altar.

It was this same energetic Hallel that they carried home with them and continued into the nights. The Talmud in Pesachim 85b describes what a seder meal looked like in Temple times: אמר רב משום רבי חייא: כזיתא פסחא והלילא פקע איגרא. Rav said in the name of Rabbi Hiyya: There was [only] as much as an olive of the Passover-offering [to eat], yet the Hallel split the roofs!

We can imagine homes packed with so many people that each only ate a tiny portion of the Korban Pesach (leftovers are not permitted). They ate and sang, raising the roof in their joyful commemoration of redemption.

Today we do not recite the Hallel in the morning of Erev Pesach as we prepare for the night's festivities. Perhaps we can keep that energy with us, though, as we imagine our seder preparations to be in place of our slaughtering and preparing to eat the Korban Pesach. And as we recite Hallel at our seders, let it be the roof-breaking climax of a day's worth of song, repeated over and over, just as it was when the Temple stood.



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