



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > First Day

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Pesach

**The Kabbalah Of Roasts:
To Be Or Not To BBQ**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

If you thought you had seen it all, wait until you see the Torah's take on the barbecue!

One of the strangest items on the Seder plate is the shank bone. At the end of the night it and it alone remains in solitude, the only item that is not used. It is there for one reason and one reason only – to remind us of the Paschal lamb offering which was brought to the Temple.

The Torah teaches that the Paschal lamb had to be roasted well done over an open fire. What does that mean? Does God really care if you fire-roast the Paschal lamb or boil it or stew it or steam it or grill it? And why can the meat not be rare, or medium rare, but must be roasted until cooked through?

In short, what is the true meaning of the fire-roasting of the Pesach offering? And what does this memory of the Paschal lamb teach us today?

It all has to do with a roasting barbecue. And it all has to do with unity.

This sermon is well done – which is rare. Bon appétit.

THE KABBALAH OF ROASTS: TO BE OR NOT TO BBQ

Chag Pesach Sameach. Happy Passover!

1. The Brisket (Joke)

A young Jewish mother is preparing a brisket to serve at the Passover Seder. Her five-year-old daughter watches with interest as the mother slices off the ends of the brisket before placing it in the cook pot. The young girl asks her mother why she does this. The mother pauses for a moment and then says, "You know, I am not really sure. Growing up, I always saw my mother - your Bubby - make a brisket this way. Let's call Bubby and ask her."

So, she phones the grandmother and asks why they always slice the ends off the brisket before cooking it. The Bubby thinks for a moment and then says, "You know, I am not really sure; this is the way I always saw my mother make a brisket."

Now the two women and the five-year-old girl are very curious, so they all pay a visit to the great-grandmother in the nursing home. "You know how when we all make a brisket we always slice the ends off before cooking it. Why do we do this?"

"I don't know why you do it," says the old woman. "But I personally never had a cook pot that was large enough to fit the whole brisket!"

2. Tradition! Tra-di-tion!

Tradition really is a wonderful thing. And nothing shouts tradition like the holiday of Passover. From how you clean your home to how you prepare your bitter herbs to how you chew your matzah to how you slice your brisket, Passover tradition is tradition like no other.

Sometimes there is much meaning behind tradition, and sometimes the tradition is based on the fact that the pot simply wasn't large enough to fit the whole brisket.

One of the reasons, perhaps the primary reason, that Passover is so tradition-centric is in order that the children should ask questions – why do we do this, why do we do that ... why do we cut the ends off of the brisket.

Provoking children to question is a way to engage them and strengthen their commitment to the ... (ehem) tradition.

Some of the things we do on Passover are actual mitzvahs spelled out in the Torah – such as not consuming bread or foods containing leavened products, eating matzah and bitter herbs, and telling the story of the Exodus on Seder night. Others are rabbinic instructions such as drinking four cups of wine, reading the Haggadah, asking the four questions, saying Hallel and so forth. And still others are personal family or community idiosyncrasies – like covering your kitchen in tinfoil or not eating garlic or peeling every vegetable you consume.

But whatever it is – and it is good to know the difference between mitzvah and custom – maintaining a strong tradition is a way for us to educate our children and ourselves. Tradition is a tool used for understanding the important and essential things in life, such as freedom, purpose, education, family, Jewish identity, God – all the themes orbiting the holiday of Passover.

3. The Shank Bone

Many of the Passover traditions are connected to the Seder plate, which is the focal point of the first and second nights of Passover. The plate holds six items plus the matzah. Each of the items is used throughout the Seder, save for one item. As the night begins to wind down, and we are all a little tipsy from the four cups of wine, the shank bone sits on the Seder plate alone in its solitude – the only item with no actionable purpose.

The shank bone is an iconic memorial to the *Korban Pesach*, the Paschal lamb that God commanded the Jews to bring in Egypt, right before they left in the miraculous exodus.

Today, some have the custom of using a literal shank bone on the plate, while others use a roasted chicken leg. No one, however, eats it. Indeed, according to Jewish law one is *prohibited* from eating the shank bone lest one forget it is not possible today to bring the Paschal lamb offering. Only in Temple times was the *Korban Pesach* brought and it will not be brought again until the Temple is rebuilt – may it be before I complete this sentence.

But if the shank bone is not eaten, then what is the point of it sitting there, merely as a reminder of bygone times? The egg on the Seder plate is a memorial to the festival (*chagigah*) offering, and we eat that. The bitter herb (*maror*) commemorates the bitter slavery in Egypt, and we eat that. In fact, we eat everything else on the Seder plate, which are all memorials to something, so why not the shank bone?

To intensify the question: The Paschal lamb is referred to in the Torah, Talmud and Haggadah as *Pesach*. The fact the lamb is called Pesach – the same name as the holiday itself – demonstrates the intrinsic importance the Paschal offering holds for the holiday. Yet, while we all eat the matzah and bitter herb, we are forbidden from offering and eating the Paschal lamb.

Why does the very tradition for which the holiday is named sit untouched on the Seder plate, prohibited for consumption? What type of tradition is this?

Perhaps the key to the Paschal lamb lies in its precise cooking method: the roast.

4. Roasted Lamb

In one searing verse, describing God's specific recipe for preparing the Paschal lamb in Egypt, the Torah seems to become less of a religious book and more of a cookbook:

And on this night, they shall eat the flesh, roasted over the fire, and matzah; with bitter herbs they shall eat it. You shall not eat it rare or boiled in water, except roasted over the fire...¹

The Torah here addresses the method of preparing the *Korban Pesach*, the Paschal lamb, for eating. It must be roasted over an open fire, well done, cooked through and through and not rare. It cannot be boiled in liquid but must be roasted.

The Mishnah and Gemara² elaborate on the cooking method and other ingredients of the roast. For example:

How do we roast? We do so on a spit of pomegranate wood...one may not roast on a metal spit or on a grill.

The Talmud explains that the lamb must be cooked roasted through direct fire application. This is why a grill cannot be used. For a grill is made of metal and metal is a conductor, if one part of the metal gets hot the rest of the metal also gets hot. But this is not direct *fire* heat – this is indirect heat. And the Torah clearly states *fire-roasted*.

And why, asks the Talmud, is the spit exclusively of pomegranate wood, and not wood of (say) a palm tree, or fig tree, or oak, or carob, or sycamore? Answers the Talmud: because all of those wood types are either porous or have knots, and thus will exude water, which will boil or steam the meat instead of fire-roasting it.

Okay, we get it – fire roasted, direct fire, no steaming, boiling, or baking.

But why? And what does it all mean?

Indeed, as the Talmud³ relates, in the times of the Temple, this question was one of the famed Four Questions (since changed) of the Seder:

¹ Exodus 12:8-9.

² Pesachim 74a. See also 40b-41a, for an extended discussion on roasting, boiling, and stewing.

³ Ibid 116a.

*Why is this night different than any other night? Why on all other nights do we eat meat that's roasted, stewed, or boiled but on this night only roasted?*⁴

What is going on here? Does God really care if you fire-roast the Paschal lamb or boil it or fry it or steam it or stew it or tartare it or grill it on a gas grill? And why can it not be rare, but must be roasted through and through until it is well done?

What is the true meaning of the fire roasting of the Pesach offering? And considering that we have no Temple and we don't do any of that today, what relevance can its presence on the Seder plate have for us today?

5. The Book Of Education

The *Sefer Ha'Chinuch* ("Book of Education") which lists the 613 mitzvahs and some of their reasons, explains⁵ that the spit-roasting over an open flame is the way the children of kings and princes and ministers eat their meat. Most people simply boil their meat to fill their stomachs, but royalty fire-roast it to intensify the flavor.

The *Korban Pesach* is a celebration of the Jewish people's exodus from slavery to freedom, to become a "kingdom of princes and a holy nation."⁶ It is certainly incumbent upon us, says *Sefer Ha'Chinuch*, to eat the lamb of Pesach in the royal fashion – that is, roasted on a spit over an open flame.

But this still doesn't really answer the exactitude with which the Talmud (and even the Torah) commands that it *must* be fire-roasted, and with a specific type of wooden spit, and it must be well done, never rare or medium-rare. Could one not demonstrate the royalty of freedom by skewering the lamb on a metal spit instead of one of pomegranate wood? Or by roasting it until only medium rare instead of charred?

⁴ Only after the destruction of the Temple, when we ceased to offer and eat the Paschal Lamb, was the question changed to ask why we recline during the Seder. See Ibid 70a.

⁵ Seder Bo, Mitzvah 7.

⁶ Exodus 19:6.

And this also still leaves us wondering why today, without a Temple, when we do not offer the Paschal lamb, we still have a memorial to it on the Seder Plate? Are we today not a “kingdom of princes and a holy nation?”

6. The Maharal Of Prague

The Maharal of Prague, the great 6th century Jewish mystic, scholar and leader,⁷ explains the Divine BBQ of the Pesach offering in mouth-watering fashion. The Maharal’s delectable elucidation will leave you salivating for a bite of this scrumptious delight.

When you boil or bake or fry or stew something – all methods of applying indirect heat – the longer you cook it the more it *falls apart*. When you roast something on a spit, barbecuing it over open fire, applying direct heat, the longer you do so the more *unified* it becomes.

The *Korban Pesach* is the exemplifier of unity. Every home had to be unified to offer the Passover offering. All of it, in its unified entirety, had to be brought,⁸ and all of it, wholly and completely, had to be consumed. The Pesach offering was the antithesis of and antidote to fragmentation and division.

For the Jewish people to be free, to go from exile to redemption, from slavery to exodus, they had to be one – one people with one purpose.

If the Passover lamb would be cooked by any form of indirect heat, then the more the meat would cook, the more its fibers would break down, and the more the meat would fall apart. Only by roasting it over an open flame, with not even a hint of indirect heat brought about by a metal spit or porous wood, could we ensure the unity of the meat.

⁷ Drashot Maharal m’Prague, Machon Torat Shlome p. 43.

⁸ Even its bones were prohibited from being broken. See Pasachim 70a.

This is also why the lamb had to be well done. Rare roasted meat would not unify as well as meat cooked through and through, forged together and with a solid crust.

Roasting is unifying and this is what Pesach – both the holiday and the offering – is all about.

7. Fire as Metaphor for Spirituality

In the Book of Proverbs we read:

Ner Havaya nishmat adam – the candle of God is the soul of man.

From here we see that fire is a metaphor for soul and spirituality.

Cooking is the process of transformation, of preparing raw materials for consumption. This can be done in two ways, either with indirect heat (boiling, baking, steaming) or with direct heat – fire roasting. The first type of cooking, indirect heat, makes the meat fall apart, the second way of roasting pulls the meat together.

The same is true with “spiritual fire” – the soul which is the “candle of God:” You can interact with the divine and with your soul in an indirect way, in which you may hear about Godliness through a third-party medium, or through osmosis. For example, another person inspires you with their spiritual experience, or you are warmed by witnessing someone else enlightened. But you yourself have not directly experienced the divine fire; it has not directly touched you.

However, to find true freedom, true exodus, we must be in direct contact with the fire itself. We Jews do not want or enjoy or desire indirect relationships with God, or even with our souls. We want and need to be one, unified, complete – in direct touch with the divine; to experience the fire without mediums. We do this by directly stimulating our souls with studying the spiritual dimension of Torah (the inner Torah) and directly experiencing spirituality, not through hearing someone else’s story.

⁹Mishlei 20:27.

Our bodies divide us. Our souls unite us. Like all things material, the body is a self-absorbed entity, leaving no room for others. The soul, like all things spiritual, connects with others. Love and unity is a result of making your soul – your fire – primary and your body secondary.¹⁰ Allowing the divine fire of your soul to directly roast and consume your body and material life. This in turn allows you to transcend material self-absorption and connect with and love another.

For us to be the rare creatures we were meant to be, we must be well done, and this does not allow for medium (or *a* medium).

This is our sacred tradition.

8. A Bird Analogy (Optional)

I'll give you an analogy of what unity can do:

One day, a hunter ventured into the forest and with the intention of catching birds, spread his net. As he waited patiently, a bird came and fell into the net. Then yet another bird fell in, and then another.

The hunter was a happy man now. But does greed spare anyone? He thought, "If I wait a little longer, I will see more birds falling into the net! It is going to be a feast today!" And he waited patiently. But soon, he witnessed something that he least expected! The birds started to flap their wings and in no time, they started to fly carrying the net along!

This saddened the hunter. He repented that he lost not only the birds, but also the net that earned his livelihood. He began to chase the birds that were starting to soar. Those who watched the hunter running behind the birds laughed and called out: "Oh! Foolish hunter! Do you think you can match the pace of flying birds and ground them?"

The hunter replied, "It is only because of the birds joined together that they have tricked me. But unity seldom lasts! When the unity among these birds is lost, I win. It is only a matter of time..."

¹⁰See Tanya, chapter 32.

Just as he expected, very soon, one of the birds wanted to fly in one direction and another was bent on flying in the opposite direction. The stronger among the two dragged the net. The other one gathered all its strength and pulled the net the other way. Soon, they all lost balance and fell to the ground.

As the hunter approached the net licking his chops, an old wise bird said to the two fighting birds, "Little birds, don't you realize that the only way for you to be caught in the net, to be trapped in bondage, is if you all fly in different directions. Then your unity falls apart and you fall down. If we all fly together we can soar to the greatest heights and no one could ever pull us down!"

Right before the hunter reached the net, the little birds heeded the old bird's words, flapped their wings in unison and took off for the heavens.

9. Real Life Example: ZAKA¹¹

And now for a real life example:

Yehuda Meshi-Zahav was once a rapid anti-Zionist. Educated in ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) yeshivas, he joined an extremist organization called Keshet, which fought against autopsies in Israel, and also against archaeological digs and roadworks that might disturb gravesites.¹² His activities included desecrating monuments and stores in Jerusalem, spraying graffiti on Theodor Herzl's grave and calls for murder. He had been arrested 34 times in various anti-Zionist demonstrations.

And then his perspective was turned upside down overnight. On July 6, 1989, a terrorist hijacked the #405 bus on route to Jerusalem and ran it off the highway into a ravine. Sixteen people were killed and 27 were wounded. Meshi-Zahav came out to help gather the remains, and while doing so, he experienced an epiphany. He suddenly realized that such

¹¹ Adapted from *Journey Together: 49 Steps to Transforming a Family* by Sarah Hermelin, (Urim, 2014), pp. 88-89.

¹² In his book, *The Underground Youth*, he later revealed the group's methods.

attacks are aimed at the entire Jewish people, and he remembered from his yeshiva learning that the Jewish people are all bound to the same fate regardless of their level of religious conviction.

Six years later, he founded ZAKA¹³ as a volunteer group of (initially) *haredi* men like him who wanted to give back to all the Jewish people making up Israeli society instead of fighting against them.

Today, ZAKA is a rescue and recovery organization which brings together large groups of volunteers from all ranks of Israeli society (from ultra-Orthodox to secular) to work for an important common cause.

Meshi-Zahav says that the name ZAKA stands for *Zeh Kiruv Achim*, which literally means “this is the bringing together of brothers.”

ZAKA has 1,650 volunteers around Israel who respond to terrorist attacks, accidents and disasters. In accordance with Jewish law to honor the dead, the ongoing task of volunteers is to help identify and collect the remains in order to bury as much of the body as is possible. But ZAKA also has a fleet of motorbikes driven by paramedics who provide a rapid response to about 7,000 incidents each year, and it has a search-and-rescue branch – whose members dive, climb and rappel and also work with canine partners – responding to 2,000 incidents per year, including terrorist attacks overseas.

The Jerusalem Post captured the essence of ZAKA in these words:

It's clear that Meshi-Zahav sees within his work a mission not just to help society practically, but also break down barriers, to unite people, to build bridges and bring disparate sectors of the public together ... ZAKA and Meshi-Zahav will keep doing what they excel at: providing services to honor the dead and save the living, as he eloquently puts it. And in so doing, the goals of both Jewish and human unity can also be advanced.¹⁴

¹³ An offshoot of the existing organization that collected body parts until then.

¹⁴ “Bringing Kin Together” by Jeremy Sharon, *The Jerusalem Post*, February 10, 2012, p. 15.

10. The Lesson

The lesson is this: the only way for us Jews to fly and soar in this universe is if we do so together, as one. When the fire of our souls directly touch each other they join as one, like flames that come in direct contact.

When we stand together, nothing can hurt us, and we can reach the greatest heights. When we are apart and divisive (and not in direct contact with the flame), we become vulnerable, and our energy is wasted on petty battles instead of propelling us forward.

This is why the Pesach offering must be roasted over an open flame – in direct contact with the fiery soul. And this is the message for all of us today. The most unifying aspects of our lives, the nucleus of the Jewish people, must be intensified in such a way that it comes closer together and becomes unified. Indirect heat, sooner or later will make the meat fall apart. Direct fire, direct Godliness, direct soul will melt us together. For the longer our spiritual fire is applied, the more concentrated and unified is the flesh of our collective being.

Today, in times of exile, there is no Temple and the Jewish people are not unified in a revealed way. Indeed, the Temple was destroyed due to baseless hatred and divisiveness.¹⁵ This is why we cannot bring the physical offering of the Paschal lamb. But we have a hint of it on the Seder plate to remind us of the work that awaits us – to truly act as a royal people, a kingdom of ministers, a kingdom of princes, and a holy nation.

We do this by applying direct spiritual fire to our nation, by ensuring that every Jew's soul is directly ignited, by never allowing ourselves to fall apart but to always come together in unity and peace. And as a result, our unity will repair the tear which caused the Temple's destruction and ultimately bring us the Third Temple.

When we unite as a Jewish people, the impact is universal and the world unites as well.

¹⁵Yuma 9b.

This is our answer to the conflict in the Middle East, or any other conflict. If we Jews become one, we can never be stopped, we can never be enslaved, we will always be free. We will soar higher than the heavens. And we will transform the earth from a raw ingredient to a well done delicacy – we will bring peace not only to the Middle East but to the entire world.

11. In Conclusion

Today, heartbreakingly, we do not live in a time and place where the Divine bonfire of God burns in a revealed way. There is no Temple in Jerusalem and the Jewish people are in exile. There is much pain and suffering in this world, and sadly the Jewish people are not unified.

For this reason, because there is no Temple, no obvious unified ideal, it is prohibited to offer the Paschal lamb or even create a semblance of consuming it. It would be cruel to try and reenact a unifying offering when there is no unity.

But we *must* have it on our Seder plate as a reminder of the unity and oneness we strive for every second of every day.

We must remember that on a soul level, we are always “a kingdom of princes and a sacred nation.” Because remembering inspires us to be “a kingdom of princes and a sacred nation” also on a bodily, revealed level.

We are taught that the ultimate redemption is founded upon and will resemble the redemption from the slavery of Egypt. Our unity today will lead to our offering the unified, roasted Paschal lamb at the Third and Eternal Temple.

This, my fellow royalty, my fellow princes and princesses, is the message and nucleus of Passover. And we shall never pass this over.

As with any good meal, enough prep. Let the roasting begin! And by roasting I mean unifying.

Chag Kosher v'Sameach and Happy Passover!

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