

Actions Shape Character

In Exodus 12 we find the story of a momentous event that shapes Israel as a people and is told and retold through the generations to this very day. What event? The Passover: the ritual meal that the Hebrews shared on the night of their exodus from Egypt. With this story comes the first comprehensive list of religious precepts that we find in the Bible. Many more will follow, especially in Leviticus. But here, at the critical turning point that is the Passover, we find the first. Read this passage in Exodus 12:1-28, then let's focus on verse 14.

"This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time" (Exodus 12:14, JPS).

Note all the instructions detailing how this festival is to be remembered (in Exodus 12:1-28). Why does the sacred text interrupt the exodus story with a list of seemingly tedious domestic duties and laborious legalities? Doesn't this contradict the essence of the narrative which is all about liberation? The Jewish sages have pondered this question over the centuries, and so can we. What insights might we glean from Jewish interpreters?

A key insight is found in the Sefer Ha-Hinukh:¹ "Consider well therefore your occupations and pursuits; for you will be influenced by them and not vice versa. Do not be lulled into a false sense of security as if to say: 'seeing that my heart is perfect and unimpaired by its belief in God, what harm is there if I occasionally indulge in worldly pleasures, in idling in the streets...engaging in vain and boastful talk with the scorners...Why should they influence me?'"

The text goes on to say that "actions shape character." How fitting, say the sages, that Israel should commemorate its central salvific event by not only telling the story but performing an elaborate set of ritual actions. "Now that you know this, do not be puzzled by the large number

of precepts connected with the commemoration of the miracles of Egypt."¹

As I ponder this as a Catholic, I find myself appreciating how Jewish customs have influenced the development of the Church's liturgical traditions, including its central act of worship: the Mass. We don't just *tell* the salvific story of Christ's death and resurrection, we also perform an elaborate ritual: celebration of the Eucharist.

But wait! Didn't Jesus have strong words for people who become so ritually obsessed that their worship is mere lip service? Indeed, yes. And from where might Jesus the Jew have gleaned such ideas? Again, from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the Jewish prophetic tradition such as we hear in Isaiah:

"their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote" (29:13, NRSV).

The prophets of Israel warned against distortions of ritual excess, and they also warned against *lack* of practice (e.g., see Jeremiah 7:27-28).

Convictions of the heart are expressed in concrete action, while our actions confirm and strengthen the convictions of the heart. As a Catholic Christian I am familiar with the idea that faith and good works, what we *believe* and what we *do*, go hand in hand as we seek to love and worship God. This delicate interplay is core to Christian discipleship, and we find its anchored in the Scriptures and traditions of the Jewish people.

Reflection

Ponder your experience of liturgy. Do you experience it as an "action that shapes character"? •

1. Ha-Hinukh: first book of religious instruction among Jews of the Middle Ages. Quoted by Leibowitz, 179-180. Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996).

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