

## **“Put the Audience Last”: On Authenticity, God, and Pesach**

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Every profession has its challenges that push your skills to the limit and give you that rush of excitement when you succeed.

For doctors, it might be using their knowledge of biochemistry to treat complex illnesses. For teachers, it might be helping 5- and 6-year-old children learn how to read and write.

For rabbis, it's figuring out how to give good sermons about *Leviticus*.

A book all about sacrificing animals, and splattering their blood all over the altar, and burning their fat and intestines because, well, apparently God thinks it smells good.

I feel like I've got about one good "sacrifice" sermon in me a year. But then you get to the second week of *Leviticus* and you're like: OK, what am I going to say now?

So, I open the Torah to this week's parashah, and here's what I find:

"Adonai spoke to Moses, saying, 'Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the burnt offering. The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it.'"

Riveting, right? Definitely need to know how to do *this*.

It goes on:

"The priest shall dress in linen raiment, with linen breeches next to his body; and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the altar and place them beside the altar. He shall then take off his vestments and put on other vestments and carry the ashes outside the camp to a pure place."

Oy. Taking off your breeches in the sanctuary? Why are we reading this again?

But then we get this part:

"The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out: Every morning the priest shall feed wood to it, lay out the burnt offering on it, and turn into smoke the fat parts of the offerings of well-being. A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out." (*Lev. 6:1-6*)

I notice that this thing about the fire has to be kept burning continually without out going is repeated *three times* in one paragraph. So, I think: Interesting; maybe there's something to this.

Then I'm out walking my dog, Freddy, the other day, and I'm listening to a podcast interview with a guy named Rick Rubin.<sup>1</sup>

Do you know who he is? I'd never heard of him. He's a major record producer, and he's worked with musicians in almost every genre you can imagine, from Jay Z to Justin Bieber.

I looked him up: It turns out he is considered to be the most important and influential producer in the business, at least according to Wikipedia.

Anyway, I found the interview fascinating.

He explained that his role is to help the artists he works with bring out the very best of what they have to give to the world.

And the only way to do this, he says, is for the artist to put the audience *last*.

That's a paradox, and he acknowledges it. Ultimately, of course, the aim of any musician who's going to hire Rick Rubin is to sell recordings and make money. To do that, they have to produce music that the audience will like.

So, you might think that they should put the audience *first*. But the problem, Rubin says, is that when an artist does that, they necessarily constrain themselves and end up creating music that is inauthentic— inauthentic because it comes from what they think *other people want* rather than from the true core of the artist's being.

And here's where Rubin—who came from a Jewish family—knowingly or not invokes *Leviticus*: He says he tells his artists to put the audience out of their mind and to imagine that they're creating music as an offering to God.

Why? Because if you're doing it for God, you're (a) going to dig deep and open yourself up and create the truest, best music you are capable of creating; and (b) because you're free from worrying about other people's opinions, you will create something that is fully authentic to who *you* are.

And *that*, Rubin says, is ultimately what the audience wants. In other words, in our commercialized, social-media-influencer, Insta-worthy ideal-life world, paradoxically, *authenticity* is what sells.

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*Aha!* I thought. *This is why we're reading Leviticus!*

That thing about keeping the fire burning continually, and don't let it go out? It may have been a literal instruction for the ancient priests, but it's a metaphor for us today. Like the Burning Bush.

"In the deep recesses of their personality, in the hidden center of every [person]," writes Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, probably my favorite Jewish philosopher, "there is a fire burning. The center is aflame, but the exterior remains cold. Somehow the fire cannot reach the exterior."<sup>2</sup>

Why not? Because we are slaves to the expectations and judgments of others: our peer group, our society, our family, our parents, our children, our colleagues, our neighbors.

We are hostages to the events, and circumstances, and tragedies that befall us from outside our control.

Like the artist who puts the audience *first* in their creative process, we let these external pressures drive us to try to be the person we think *others* want us to be.

And even more than that: We assimilate what we perceive to be the opinions and expectations of others into our own consciousness and identity, to the point that we mistake what they *think* we should be for who we truly *are*.

We convince ourselves that we are victims, that the world happens *to* us and there's nothing we can do about it, that we are hopelessly doomed by the hand we are dealt.

The result is that we become alienated, or estranged, from our own self: we forget, or devalue, or silence who we are—and who we were created to be.

We forget what our prayer book wants us to remember every day: that "the soul [God has] given me is pure," and that "If there had ever been someone like me before, there would have been no need for me to exist."

And forgetting this has damaging consequences: Like the cold thorns of the bush, it cools the fire that burns in the core of our being. And, in time, that fire will grow weaker and dimmer.

That's why the Torah commands us three times in our parashah: "Keep the fire burning on the altar. Do not let it go out!"

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At the Seder this coming week, we'll read that old familiar line in the Haggadah: "In every generation, one must see [themselves] as if [they] went out of Egypt."

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that this means that "A person must see in the story of the exodus, as in a mirror, the inward drama of his or her own soul."<sup>3</sup>

Pesach calls us to liberate ourselves from the social pressures and the delusion that we *are* what happens *to* us.

As Soloveitchik puts it: "Only through an act of sheer heroism can one free oneself...and mold a new inner experience. ...

"However, freedom is not the ultimate end of [our] questing," he says. "Freedom is only the viaduct leading to something higher and more sublime, to the final destination of [our] fellowship with God.

"The exodus," he goes on to say, "is the narrative of [a human being] who refuses to be satisfied with being a part of an order forced on [them], distant from the reality which peeps through...and who...pursues a paradoxical quest for the real Being, for God."<sup>4</sup>

This, as I interpret it, is exactly what Rick Rubin means when he says he encourages his artists to forget about the audience and create their music as an offering to God.

And this wisdom doesn't only apply to artists and musicians. Rubin just published a book in which he describes it as a "way of being."<sup>5</sup>

I haven't read his book yet, but as I interpreted him in the interview, anyone can take this approach in any of our various spheres of life.

Just as God, in our parashah, teaches the priests how to make their offering to God, the theologian Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, says that God can help us become our fullest and most authentic self.

Kaplan didn't believe in a supernatural God who pulled the strings in the world. Instead, he describes God as "the power that makes for salvation."

By reaching out to God in prayer and mitzvot, Kaplan teaches, we can tap into the core of who we are and harness the power that is God to achieve self-realization.

As he puts it: "What more comprehensive purpose can there be to human life than the complete and harmonious fulfillment of all the physical, mental, and moral powers with which the human self as a social being is endowed?"<sup>6</sup>

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On Pesach, we tell the story of how our ancestors went from slavery to freedom. But, more importantly, we are invited to *live out* this story of redemption in our own lives.

"Keep the fire burning," the Torah commands. "Do not let it go out!"

Authenticity is the key.

Put the audience *last*. Put God *first*.

Free yourself of the order, the expectations, the judgments, the predetermined outcomes imposed on you by other people and by the world, and live your life as an offering to God.

Stop looking to others to tell you who you should be. Instead, open yourself to God, and become your truest self, and bring out the very best of what *you* have to give to the world.

In the words of the psalms (13:6): "*Va'ani b'chasd'kha batachti, yageil libi bishuateikha*—I have trusted in God's kindness. My heart will rejoice in your salvation."

<sup>1</sup> "Honestly with Bari Weiss," Wednesday March 29, 2023: "Rick Rubin Says Trust Your Gut, Not Your Audience"

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Joseph B. Solovetichik, *Festival of Freedom*, 48

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 62

5 To wit, the title of Rubin's book is *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*

6 Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 41