

Pesach Mitzrayim

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The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

PARASHAT BO

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Pesach Mitzrayim - A Commitment to God

by

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In several places in parashat Bo, the Torah teaches us the laws of the korban Pesach. Some of these laws pertain to the korban which is brought and eaten every year on the fourteenth of Nissan known as Pesach dorot. Yet, much of what is mentioned in parashat Bo pertains to the first korban Pesach which was sacrificed in Egypt on the eve of the Jewish exodus from Egypt. This first korban Pesach is called Pesach Mitzrayim.

One can easily understand the logic of the Pesach dorot. It can be viewed as part of the educational experience of Pesach night. On this night we try to relive what our forefathers on that same night many years ago in Egypt experienced. But, we may wonder what was the purpose of the Pesach Mitzrayim? Why was a sacrifice called for proceeding the exodus from Egypt?

Furthermore, if we read the pesukim in chapter 12, we see that the command is first given to Moshe, who then passes it on to Bnei Yisrael. Chazal teach us that Moshe both received the command and passes it on to Bnei Yisrael on the first of the month of Nisan. The command called for choosing the lamb to be used for the korban Pesach on the tenth of Nissan, and then holding it captive for four days. Only on the fourteenth of that month would it be slaughtered, but before it could be eaten, and the blood from the slaughtered animal must be smeared on the door posts. Why did the Pesach Mitzrayim require all these preparatory stages? It should be noted that this lengthy preparation

process was unique to the Pesach Mitzrayim and is not practiced in Pesach dorot; why was this so?

A partial answer can be found in the Mekhilta on pasuk 6 of chapter 12.

Asks the Mekhilta: Why did the taking of the Pesach proceed its slaughtering by four days? The answer presented by R. Matya ben Charash states: The time to fulfill the vow God gave to Avraham to redeem his sons had come; yet, they had no merits of mitzvot to justify such a redemption. As it is said "shadayim nachonu u-sa'arekh tzime'ach ve-at erom ve-arya" - erom mi-kol mitzvot (The nation of Israel had matured and was ready to become independent but they were lacking of any garments - the garments of mitzvot.) Therefore God gave them two mitzvot to perform, the blood of mila and the blood of Pesach, as it is said "va-e'evor alayikh va-erekh mitboseset be-damayikh" [And I passed over you and saw that you were wallowing in your bloods]. That is why the taking of lamb for the Pesach proceeded its slaughter by four days, since there is no merits for mitzvot without actions.

The Mekhilta teaches us that a separation was needed between the taking of the animal and its slaughter to allow each to be considered a separate act of mitzva. If both actions were to be done at the same time, it would be considered one lengthy act of mitzva. Since Bnei Yisrael were lacking in mitzvot, God gave them the mitzva of Pesach in such a way that they would be credited for several acts of mitzva. Similarly, we may explain that the command was given several days before the time of taking to give them merit for learning the details of the mitzva before performing it.

This Mekhilta helps us understand another seemingly strange point in the pesukim. In pasuk 7, the Torah commands that after slaughtering the lamb, "they shall take from the blood of the animal and smear it on the door posts on the homes where they shall eat it." Later in pasuk 13, an explanation for the smearing of the blood is given: "And the blood shall be a sign on the houses in which you are, and I shall see the blood and pass over you and there shall be no plague when I punish the land of Egypt." What has the blood on the door posts have to do with the saving of the Jewish people from the plague of the first born? Would God not know where the Jew without blood on their doorposts?

The answer, teaches us the Mekhilta, is that the blood was not meant as an identification of a Jewish home. The blood is a sign of a home where the mitzvot of mila and Pesach were fulfilled. Since the mitzva of Pesach can not be fulfilled by an "arel" - one who has not gone through a proper mila, the blood of the korban Pesach is an indication of mila as well. That is what we find in the pasuk "Va-e'evor alayikh va-erekh mitboseset be-damayikh" - I went over the land of Egypt and I saw you -Am Yisrael - with blood. God saw the blood of the korban Pesach, which was indicative of the blood from the mitzvot of mila and Pesach.

Yet, even the Mekhilta does not give us a full answer to our questions. If all that was meant to be achieved was a separation between two separate acts of mitzva, then much less time would have sufficed. For the purpose of separation the Torah could have commanded the taking of the lamb in the morning and its slaughter in the afternoon. If a clearer separation of different days was desired, it could still be achieved by taking the animal on the thirteenth and slaughtering on the fourteenth. Why then did the Torah require a four day waiting period from the time of taking the lamb to the time of its slaughter?

A similar midrash in the Midrash Lekach Tov might help shed light on this question.

The Midrash Lekach Tov teaches that the Bnei Yisrael neglected the mitzva of mila to find favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Came God and commanded them to take the lamb and tie it up. This, in turn, brought hatred from the Egyptians. Then, Bnei Yisrael slaughtered the animals; at this point the Egyptians were infuriated but due to fear instilled by God could do nothing to harm the Jews. At this point Moshe came and commanded them that no one may eat from the Pesach if they have not had a mila. This, in turn, forced Bnei Yisrael to perform the mitzva of mila, since they understood that if they would not do mila they would lose God's protection and the Egyptians would kill them. Consequently, all men were circumcised, and the blood of Pesach and mila were mixed, fulfilling what is said "Va-e'vor alayikh va-erekh mitboseset be-damayikh va-omar lakh be-damayikh chayi."

The Midrash Lekach Tov teaches us that it was not only to gain merit that Bnei Yisrael were commanded with these mitzvot. Rather, Bnei Yisrael had lost touch with God, they no longer performed even the most basic mitzvot. Mila, which was a tradition from the time of Avraham, the most basic distinction between Bnei Yisrael and other nations, the symbol of Jewish identity, was no longer observed.

The Mekhilta (12:6) further stresses this point.

"Bnei Yisrael were absorbed in idolatry and idolatry is equal to all other mitzvot, said (God) to them: Remove your hands from idolatry and adhere to mitzvot."

In a similar Mekhilta on pasuk 21 we read:

"On the words 'Mishkhu u-kekhu lakhem' (remove and take for yourselves) stated R. Yossi: Remove your hands from idolatry and take for yourselves mitzvot."

The Jewish people had lost contact with God and went as far as idolatry. They were attempting to

assimilate into Egyptian culture hoping that assimilation would bring about a change of attitude on the part of Egypt. If, as we read in parashat Shemot, the reason for their enslavement was a fear of some sort of uprising, then, reasoned the Jews, assimilation would resolve such fears. By so doing, Bnei Yisrael lost all personal merit for redemption. But God had given a promise to Avraham and the time had come to fulfill this promise.

To resolve this problem God gives Bnei Yisrael a mitzva to fulfill. As with any mitzva, accepting and fulfilling it states a belief in, and recognition of, the one who has commanded its performance. But in this case the demand goes beyond the usual commitment expected with any mitzva. The mitzva given leaves no room for any duplicity, no place for dual identity. No one can come and say: I am an Egyptian who fulfills certain Jewish rites. The mitzva given to Bnei Yisrael requires them to make a of belief in one and only one God. It is a mitzva that calls for "mesirut nefesh," an absolute trust in Ha-kadosh Barukh Hu.

The korban Pesach constitutes an act of provocation to Egyptian culture and religious values. If Bnei Yisrael were attempting to find favor in the eyes of Egypt, if they hoped to assimilate into Egyptian culture, they are called to take steps that will undo any such efforts. They are asked to make a clear and public choice, Egypt and its values or the God of Avraham. The korban Pesach calls for taking that which is sacred to the Egyptians and sacrificing it to the God of the Jewish people. "Mishkhu u-kekhu:" miskhu - remove your hands from idolatry, the Egyptian way; ukekhu - take mitzvot on yourselves, worship God.

We can, therefore, conclude that the purpose of Pesach Mitzrayim was to make a statement of identification with Elokei Yisrael. To make this statement properly, Bnei Yisrael needed to break all ties with Egypt and Egyptian values. For this purpose the Torah called for taking a lamb, the symbol of Egyptian Gods, four days before the time of slaughter. The purpose was to make the act public and confrontational with the Egyptians. This idea, and the tensions caused by it are described very well in some of the Midrashim.

In Pesikta de-Rav Kahana we read:

"They (Bnei Yisrael) would tie (the lambs) to their bed posts and the Egyptians would enter and see this and their spirits would be lost."

Or as stated in a midrash brought in the Torah Sheleima:

"They took the lamb in midst of Egypt and placed it at their doorstep for four days. It being

alive would cry out and they (the Egyptians) would see their gods caught but were unable to save it or hurt the Jews."

The purpose of holding the animal in captivity for four days was to make it impossible for any one to hope and hide their participation. This could also be the reason the command is given to Moshe such a long time before its fulfillment. Some commentaries claim that Moshe did not give the command directly to each individual, but rather, Moshe taught the elders and they taught others. Such a chain of teaching could not remain a secret and would put the Egyptian people on guard to see who will be willing to take such provocative steps.

Korban Pesach as a way of disassociation with the ways of Egypt and a statement of identification with God is further projected in a Tannaic dispute as to where the blood of the animal was smeared. The Mekhilta teaches us that R. Yishmael and R. Natan are of the opinion that the blood was put on the inside of the doorpost. R. Yitzchak rejects this opinion and states that the blood was put on the outer side of the doorpost. R. Yishmael and R. Natan derive their opinion from the words "ve-haya lakhem le-ot," the blood shall be a SIGN TO YOU. R. Yitzchak states that the blood was on the outside so the Egyptians would see it. In R. Yitzchak's opinion the blood-smearing was meant as another act of provocation to the Egyptians. R. Yishmael and R. Natan see the smearing of the blood as a means of reinforcing the commitment to God. Every time the Jew would raise his eyes and see the blood he would be reminded of the great act of commitment he had performed.

If we are to understand the korban Pesach of Mitzrayim as an act of choosing identity and a statement of identification with the God of our forefathers, we can also understand one other requirement mentioned in reference to Pesach Mitzrayim. In pasuk 22 it is stated "va-atem lo teitz'u ish mi-petach beito ad boker," you shall not leave your homes until morning. Why was it forbidden to leave the home where the korban Pesach was eaten? Why could one not leave the house with the blood on the doorposts?

It may be suggested that sitting all night in the company of those with whom one has performed this mitzva, an act of Jewish identity, is a further reinforcement of one's identity. One is asked to make the choice, the outside world and all it represents, or this group of people who have just stated: The God of Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov is our God. By remaining indoors one is making a statement of choice and identification with the people of God.

Further points and questions:

1. The mitzva of korban Pesach Mitzrayim is preceded by "ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem" (12:1), the basis of the Jewish calendar. Why is this here? Why is it the first mitzva given to the Jews?
2. Korban Pesach has a requirement that there be enough eaters to finish the lamb (this is true of Pesach dorot as well). A consequence explicitly stated in verse 4, is that you would join with a neighbor in sharing the meal. Why is this important?
3. 12:1: "... you shall eat it in haste (be-chipazon)." How does this requirement of Pesach Mitzrayim, to eat while already dressed for travel, fit in with the theme of the shiur?
4. The end of the parasha has a command of Pesach, embedded in the commands concerning bekhor (man and beast). This is especially striking since it all takes place before matan Torah. Obviously, bekhor (at least human bekhor) is connected to makat bechorot, but does this mitzva also have a place in the scheme outlined in the shiur? The parasha ends with one more mitzva - tefillin. Is there a connection here as well?

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