

The Uniqueness of the Korban Pesach By Rav Amnon Bazak

a. What is the Nature of the Korban Pesach?

The parasha containing all the details of the "pesach offering" gives rise to a number of questions:

1. Is the Torah speaking about a sacrifice?
Among the laws of the pesach we find some which are familiar to us from the halakhic realm of sacrifices, alongside others which represent significant deviations from that which we find elsewhere, as will be explained below.
2. What is the significance of eating the matzot together with this sacrifice, as stipulated in the command: "Roasted over the fire, it shall be eaten with matzot and bitter herbs" (verse 8)? Attention should be paid to the fact that the matzot are mentioned even before the description – "And they baked from the dough... matzot cakes, for it was not leavened, for they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait" (39). This being so, the significance of the matzot in the context of the korban pesach is not connected with the events of the exodus!
3. A similar question arises concerning the prohibition of chametz, which is already mentioned in verse 19 of chapter 12 ("For anyone who eats of chametz – that soul will be cut off from the congregation of Israel"), i.e., prior to the exodus. The prohibition of eating chametz with the korban pesach is mentioned several times elsewhere in the Torah (see Shemot 23:18, 34:25, and Devarim 16:3), and its significance therefore requires some explanation.

b. Similarities and Differences Compared to Other Sacrifices

With regard to the pesach being perceived as a sacrifice, there are – as mentioned above – several elements common to it and to other sacrifices:

1. "And they shall take of the blood and they shall put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel" (7) – the painting of the blood on the doorposts is reminiscent of other sacrifices, and in particular we are struck by the similarity between verse 22 - "And you shall dip it (the branch of hyssop) in the blood that is in the basin, and touch it upon the lintel," and Vayikra 9:9, where we read: "And he dipped his finger in the blood and put it upon the horns of the altar." (There may be some

connection between the "basin" in our chapter and the "foundation of the altar" in Vayikra.)

2. The prohibition of eating the remains - "And what remains of it until the morning you shall burn with fire" (verse 10) – also exists with regard to other sacrifices, such as the "shelamim" (peace offering) (Vayikra 7:17) – "But the remains of the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burned with fire."

3. The definition of the korban: Concerning the korban pesach there is a specific requirement as to the preconditions of the animal, as is the case with other sacrifices: "An unblemished lamb, a male of the first year... from the sheep or from the goats" (verse 5).

4. Matzot: Other sacrifices also require matzot as accompaniment, such as the mincha (Vayikra 2:4) and, particularly, a sacrifice of thanksgiving (Vayikra 7:12).

However, there are also several exceptions to the usual guidelines for sacrifices:

1. no altar;
2. there is no action of giving (a portion of the sacrifice);
3. the animal is not cut up and stripped;
4. there is no kohen.

c. Which Category of Sacrifice?

Likewise, a problem arises as to the categorization of this sacrifice, for it would seem that the korban pesach represents a combination of the three free-will offerings:

1. Ola (burnt offering) – Here, too, the Torah requires an unblemished male animal, either sheep or goat (Vayikra 1:10). This is in contrast to the peace offerings, where either a male or a female animal could be brought (Vayikra 3:1), and is certainly different from the obligatory sin-offerings ("chatat" – an ox or male goat; "asham" – a female animal).
2. Peace offerings – Here, too, the sacrifice is consumed by the person who brings it, and the remains are prohibited.
3. Mincha (meal offering) – Prohibition of chametz, as commanded explicitly in Vayikra 2:11 – "Any mincha which you offer to God, you shall not make with chametz."

d. Why No Need for an Altar?

In order to explain all of the above, let us first examine the question of the absence of the altar. What is the usual significance of the altar? It would seem that the altar represents the resting-place of the Shekhina, as understood from Shemot 20:21 –

"You shall make an altar of earth for Me... in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you."

For this reason, inter alia, the forefathers were not prevented from calling their altars by God's name, such as where we read of Yaakov that "he built an altar there and called it E-I-lohei Yisrael" (Bereishit 33:20).

It is likewise clear why those seeking to escape punishment found their way to the horns of the altar: they believed that this place represented an extra-territorial dimension, in which they would enjoy "diplomatic immunity." Examples, as we know, include Adoniyahu (Melakhim I 1:50-53) and Yo'av ben Tzeruya (ibid. 2:28-34) in their flight from Shlomo. In contrast with this perception, the Torah emphasizes that "if a man attack his neighbor slyly, to kill him, you shall take him from My altar to his death" (Shemot 21:14). But without God's explicit permission to do so, indeed no one would have the right to take anyone "from the altar" – from the "territory" of the Holy One.

In light of the above, it would appear that in the case of the pesach, a person's entire house becomes an altar, as it were – a place that is dedicated in its entirety to God, and placed in His guardianship. This helps us to understand a number of halakhot:

1. The placing of the blood on the doorposts is reminiscent, as we mentioned, of the placing of the blood on the horns of the altar. The same idea arises from Rav Yosef's comment (Pesachim 96a): "There were three altars there: the lintel and the two doorposts."
2. In verse 45 we find the prohibition, "You shall not take any of the meat outside, out of the house," which is understandable if the house is perceived as an altar.
3. Likewise we can understand the prohibition of chametz, for chametz may not be offered on the altar (Vayikra 2:11-12): "You shall not burn any leaven nor any honey in any offering to God. The offering of the first-fruits shall you offer to God, but they shall not be burnt on the altar for a sweet savor."

This being the case, it would seem that the parasha of the pesach gives expression to the idea that the Holy One protects the inhabitants of each Israelite house as if the house were within the bounds of the altar. By means of the special halakhot which have been mentioned, the house attains a special status of holiness and becomes an entity on a par with the altar. For this reason, the HOUSE is at the center of the commandments pertaining to this sacrifice:

"They shall take for themselves each man a lamb, according to the HOUSE of their fathers, a lamb for each HOUSE. And if the HOUSEHOLD is too small to consume a lamb, then he and the neighbor closest to his HOUSE will take it according to the number of souls... upon the HOUSES in which they will eat it... And the blood will be a sign for you upon the HOUSES."

It is interesting to note that when the Torah narrates the story of the angels visiting Lot's house, a similar dimension finds expression. There, too, we find a house protected by God from external harm:

"And the men who were at the entrance to the house were struck with blindness, from the

youngest one to the oldest, and they tried in vain to find the opening." (Bereishit 19:11)

And there, too, we find that there were "baked matzot" (19:3), concerning which Rashi comments (quoting the Midrash), "It was Pesach." It seems obvious enough that the Midrash is implying a thematic connection between the parasha of Lot and that of the pesach, by making use of the principle discussed above.

e. Two Basic Types of Sacrifice

Let us now turn our attention to the essof the sacrifice itself. This requires that we first briefly review the structure of the free-will offerings at the beginning of Sefer Vayikra. There exist three types of free-will offerings: the ola (chapter 1), the mincha (chapter 2) and the shelamim (chapter 3). However, as we shall see, these may be categorized as to main types: the ola and mincha on the one hand, and the shelamim on the other.

The basic difference between the ola and the shelamim is, as we know, that the ola is burnt in its entirety as an offering to God, while in the case of the shelamim the person who brings the offering also eats of his sacrifice. This fact gives expression to the idea that the ola symbolizes man's distance from the Holy One: he has no part in the gift, which is offered in its entirety to God. The shelamim, in contrast, is "the food of the offering" (Vayikra 3:16): man eats from the table of the Divine, as it were, symbolizing the closeness between the giver and the Receiver.

The ola and the shelamim therefore represent two opposite aspects of Divine worship: awe on the one hand, and love on the other. The ola is a universal sacrifice; it appears already in the time of Noach (Bereishit 8:20). The shelamim is an innovation associated with Israel. (It should be noted that in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia we find no instance of a person eating of the sacrifice which he brings – see the Biblical Encyclopedia, s.v. "korban.") And it is indeed proper that awe of God should precede the love of Him, just as the commandment to fear God – which appears several times throughout Sefer Vayikra – precedes the mitzva to love God, which appears only in Sefer Devarim.

The mincha does not represent an independent sacrifice; rather, it is treated as a sub-section of the ola, with one difference: the mincha is brought from the vegetable kingdom. The thematic connection between the mincha and the korban pesach is noted by Rav David Zvi Hoffmann in his commentary on Vayikra, inter alia in terms of the structure of chapters 1-3 of Vayikra: the parasha of the ola opens with the words, "If his sacrifice is a burnt offering" (1:3), while the parasha of the shelamim begins, "If his sacrifice is a peace-offering" (3:1). In contrast, the opening of the parasha concerning the mincha is formulated as follows: "And a person when he offers a meal offering..." (2:1). The word "ki" (here translated as "when he") usually denotes a subsection within a parasha that begins with the word "im" (if).

Therefore the fact that "the remains of the mincha are for Aharon and his sons; a holy of holies from God by fire" (2:3) takes on a significance that is different from the other gifts to the priests (mentioned only in chapters 6-7 of Vayikra, and not in chapters 1-5). When the kohanim eat the mincha, they eat it in the place where the offerings of the altar are consumed. The Torah accordingly emphasizes (6:9-10),

"And the remains of it Aharon and his sons will eat, it shall be eaten with matzot in the holy place... It shall not be baked with chametz; I have given it to them as their portion of My offerings made by fire."

The *ola* and the *mincha* represent two different expressions of absolute giving: either by means of burning entirely on the altar, or by means of consumption by the *kohanim* – which is considered on a par with being consumed by fire on the altar.

We can now easily understand the prohibition of the *pesach* being baked with *chametz*, for, as we have seen, just as it is forbidden to offer *chametz* on the altar, so the *kohanim* are also forbidden to eat *chametz*.

f. A Unique Hybrid

The *korban pesach*, therefore, represents the ideal combination of the two aspects – the *ola* and the *shelamim*. This combination finds expression in the juxtaposition of the different *halakhot*, as well as in the order of the sacrifice's consumption. First it is to be roasted entirely with fire – "Its head with its legs and with its innards" (Shemot 12:9), similarly to the *ola*, whose limbs are all burnt – "the head and the fat... but its innards and its legs he shall wash with water, and the kohen shall burn all of it on the altar" (Vayikra 1:8-9). But further on we see that, unlike the *ola*, it is *Bnei Yisrael* themselves who eat the sacrifice. This eating is somehow equivalent to the *kohanim* eating the *mincha*, for the entire house is considered as an altar. And just as the eating of the *mincha* by those who perform the service upon the altar is considered equal to consumption by fire upon the altar, likewise the eating of the *korban pesach* is considered equal, where "those who perform the service of the altar" are in fact the inhabitants of the house - a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

This combination of *ola* and *shelamim*, of awe and love, appears several times in *Tanakh*, and always as preparation for the presence of the *Shekhina*:

1. Shemot 20:21 – "You shall make me an altar of earth, and you shall offer upon it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings... in every place where I cause My Name to be mentioned I will come to you and I will bless you."
2. Shemot 24:5 – "And they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to God" – in the second description of the events at Mt. Sinai.
3. On the eighth day of the dedication of the *Mishkan*, in addition to the *chatat*, which purifies the altar, we are told (Vayikra 9:22-23) – "And he (Aharon) came down from performing the sin offering and the *ola* and the *shelamim*. And Moshe and Aharon came... and God's glory appeared to all the nation."

Likewise the *korban pesach*, combining the different forms of sacrifice – the *ola* and the *shelamim* – represents the background to the appearance of the *Shekhina*: "And I will pass over the land of Egypt on that night" (12:12) - "I, and not an angel; I, and not a seraph, I – and no other."

g. Explanation of Halakhot

So far, we have shown how the laws detailed in the Torah concerning the *korban pesach* reflect its dual nature. These foundations also find expression in a number of *halakhot* in the Oral Law:

1. There is a positive *mitzva* to eat the *korban pesach*, as codified by the Rambam (Hilkhot *Korban Pesach* 8:1): "The eating of the meat of the *korban pesach* on the night of the fifteenth is a positive *mitzva*, as it is written,

'And they shall eat of the meat on that night...' A positive *mitzva* likewise exists, in the Rambam's view, concerning the eating of the sacrifices by the *kohanim* (Hilkhot *Ma'aseh Ha-korbanot* 10:1-2). In contrast, the Rambam does not include among the *mitzvot* the eating of parts of the sacrifices by *Bnei Yisrael*, and there is some doubt as to whether he regards this action on the part of a *Yisrael* as the fulfillment of a biblical requirement. (See the discussion of the *Tzlach*, *Beitza* 18b; however, the Rambam, in his Notes on *Sefer HaMitzvot*, positive *mitzva* 1, maintains that "just as there is a positive command for the *kohanim* to eat of the *chatat* and *asham* offerings, likewise it is a positive command for the owners of the sacrifice to eat their part of it.")

2. It is a well-known *halakha* with regard to the *korban pesach* that "The best way to fulfill the *mitzva* is to eat the meat of the *pesach* when one is already satiated; therefore, if one offered the *chagiga* peace-offering on the fourteenth, he should eat of that first and only thereafter eat of the meat of the *pesach*, in order to be satiated by it" (Hilkhot *Korban Pesach* 8:3). Indeed, this is the Rambam's ruling concerning the eating of any sacrifice: "If they have only a little (of the sacrifice) to eat, they should eat it together with unsanctified food or *terumot* in order that it not be eaten out of hunger... and likewise the remains of the *mincha* offerings" (Hilkhot *Ma'aseh Ha-korbanot* 10:11).

3. As to the consumption of the meat of the *pesach* together with bitter herbs, Rav Breuer ("Pirkei *Mo'adot*") quotes the *Ohr Ha-chaim* (Shemot 12:8), maintaining that the basis of the *mitzva* is that "God wishes them to demonstrate greatness and freedom, and that they are subject to no one else... for such is the custom when eating roasted food, that it is eaten with something sharp, for then it (the roasted food) is made tastier and eats as much as he wants to..." It is interesting that a similar point is made by the Rambam with regard to the gift to the kohen comprising the shankbone, the cheeks and the stomach: "And the *kohanim* only eat this gift roasted with mustard, as it is written, 'to anoint it' – in the manner of kings" (Hilkhot *Bikkurim* 9:22).

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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