

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**by Dr. Jonathan Grossman**

**The Korban Pesach - Sacrifice or Feast?**

One of the central features of this week's parasha is the discussion of the korban pesach, the paschal lamb slaughtered on the fourteenth of Nissan. In essence, this mitzva is the first detailed commandment received by the Jewish people, and, as we shall see, it directly relates to the founding of the Nation of Israel.(1)

One fundamental question arises as we study this commandment: are we dealing with a "korban" (sacrifice), or should this mitzva be viewed simply as a family meal of sorts?

When a sacrifice is offered in the Beit Ha-mikdash, God "receives," as it were, two parts of the animal.

A) The animal's blood is sprinkled or placed on the altar. The underlying principle behind this requirement relates to the blood's status as the body's critical life-source.

B) Certain limbs of the animal's body ("emurin") are burnt on the altar. Although only a small portion of the body must actually be placed on the altar (a fact which itself demonstrates the purely symbolic nature of this offering), the limbs selected by the Torah for this purpose are the choicest parts of the animal's meat.

The pesach offered by Benei Yisrael in Egypt featured neither of these two components. Thus, a cursory reading of the verses relating to the pesach gives no indication that it possesses any characteristics of a korban. Rather, the people are bidden to simply take a sheep, slaughter it and partake of the meat. As far as this mitzva is concerned, there is no altar, and, as such, it involves no "offering" to God whatsoever!

How can we call the pesach a "korban," an offering, when, in fact, nothing is offered? This question relates ONLY to the pesach offered by the Jewish people in Egypt; the pesach which is mandated thereafter in the Land of Israel requires that it be brought to the Beit Ha-mikdash (see Devarim 16). The animal's blood is sprinkled on the altar, thus affording "korban status" to the pesach. Regarding the pesach in Egypt, however, it seems quite difficult to categorize it as a "korban."

At first glance, one may contend that this observation poses no problem whatsoever - this mitzva constitutes not a "sacrifice" as we generally understand the term (based on the sacrifices we have encountered previously in Chumash, such as those of Kayin, Hevel and Noach), but rather a festive, family gathering. Upon further analysis, however, this suggestion becomes untenable. Three characteristics of the pesach unquestionably link this mitzva with the realm of korbanot:

1) "Your lamb shall be without blemish, a yearling male" (12:5). The specific requirement of a one-year-old sheep is characteristic of the world of sacrifices. Furthermore, this sheep must be unblemished, another characteristic of a korban. Clearly, no one would enter a restaurant and ask specifically for meat from an unblemished animal. Certainly, then, this requirement demands that we categorize the pesach in Egypt as a sacrifice.

2) "You shall not leave any of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it" (12:10). This prohibition of leaving meat over to the morning as well as the requirement to burn the leftovers are derived from the laws of sacrifices, and could not apply to a mitzva requiring simply a large feast bereft of any sacrificial quality.

3) The expression "roasted with its head on its entrails and legs" (12:9), appears in only one other place in the entire Chumash - in the laws relating to the "chatat" (sin-offering - see Vayikra 4:11). Even if this represents the quickest way of preparing the pesach (see 12:11), the linguistic parallel to the "chatat" still clearly indicates a relationship to korbanot.

How, then, are we to relate to this mitzva? On the one hand, it cannot possibly be viewed as an "offering," as nothing is "offered." Yet the Torah presents its laws as parallel to those of the korbanot!

In order to properly understand this dialectic of the pesach requirement, we must carefully examine a central component of this service - the laws relating to the sheep's blood. As noted, Benei Yisrael had no altars erected in Egypt and, as such, there was no requirement of "zerikat ha-dam," sprinkling the blood as was performed in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. The Torah does, however, mandate clear

guidelines with regard to the blood of the korban Pesach: "They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two door-posts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it" (12:7). Much to our surprise, the Torah requires a "blood service," only here the blood is to be placed on the door-posts rather than on the altar.

Can we regard the placement the pesach's blood on the door-frame as paralleling the sprinkling of a sacrifice's blood on the altar? At least one source in Chazal seems to point to such an association. The Gemara (Pesachim 96a) cites the view of Rav Yosef: "Rav Yosef taught: There were three altars there [in Egypt] - the lintel and the two door-posts." This statement clearly associates these two blood services. Furthermore, the verse in the context of the pesach - "And DIP into THE BLOOD that is in the basin and apply it to the lintel and to the two door posts" (12:22) - reminds us of the service conducted in the Tabernacle on the eighth day of its consecration: "He DIPPED his finger in THE BLOOD and put in on the horns of the altar" (Vayikra 9:9).

In light of this comparison, perhaps we should view the home in which the pesach was eaten as a substitute, of sorts, for the altar on which sacrifices were generally offered. Then we could legitimately classify the pesach as a korban, as the home has assumed the status of the one heretofore missing ingredient - the altar.

Based on this identification of the houses in Egypt as "altars," several other details of the korban pesach become clear:

1) The Torah strictly forbids one from removing the meat of the pesach from the house: "It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the meat outside the house..." (12:46). If we view the house as the Egyptian pesach's counterpart to the altar, then, understandably, one may not remove the meat from the altar before its consumption has been completed.

2) Throughout the festival of Pesach, not only is it forbidden to eat "chametz" (leaven), but it is even forbidden to possess chametz in one's home: "On the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses... No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days" (12:15-9). This prohibition likely relates to the general proscription against placing "chametz" upon the altar ("No meal-offering that you offer to God shall be made with leaven, for no leaven or honey may be turned into smoke as an offering by fire to God... but they shall not be offered up on the altar for a pleasant scent" - Vayikra 2:11-2). Just as one may not offer any "chametz" upon the altar in the Beit Ha-mikdash, so does God forbid the presence of "chametz" in the home, the representative "altar" in Egypt.(2)

3) The requirement of eating matza with the meat of the pesach ("roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs" - 12:8) may also relate to this principle, as many korbanot were offered together with matzot (most notably the "korban toda," the thanksgiving sacrifice).

4) The strong emphasis on roasting as the method of preparing the pesach ("They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire... Do not eat any of it raw, or cooked in any way with water, but roasted..." - 12:8-9) can also be understood based on the identification of the Jewish homes in Egypt with the altar. Sacrifices in the Temple were consumed over a flame on the altar; thus, the Jews were to roast the pesach in their homes - the altars of Egypt.

It seems to me that we can understand the significance of this transformation of the Jews' homes into altars in two ways:

1) Firstly, the altar, throughout Tanakh, signifies a haven securely protected from harm. A fugitive who fears unjustified capital punishment may grab hold of the horns of the altar in the Beit Ha-mikdash, thereby expressing his demand that he be judged by divine law alone, rather than by the human justice system. The Torah therefore emphasizes that this privilege is withheld from the perpetrator of premeditated murder: "...you shall take him from My very altar to be put to death" (Shemot 21:14). Even the altar cannot protect against retribution for premeditated murder. In less stringent cases, however, the altar does offer asylum for the criminal. (See, for example, the incident of Adoniyahu's grabbing onto the altar - Melakhim I, ch. 1, and that of Yoav - Melakhim I, ch. 2). Herein may lie the significance of the Jews' homes being associated with the altar, as the home protected its inhabitants from the plague which ravaged the Egyptian nation: "...and He will not let the destroyer enter and smite your home" (12:23).

However, in order to more fully understand this protective quality of the altar and, by extension, the Jewish homes in Egypt, we need to more sharply develop the connection between the homes of Benei Yisrael and the altar:

2) The moment the Jewish home becomes defined as an altar, it is transformed into "divine territory," as it were. The house/altar is no longer merely human property; rather, it becomes an isolated island belonging to the Almighty. In this sense, the destroying angel cannot possibly penetrate these walls - this home lies outside the angel's domain. The house has become an altar, and the residents simulate the altar's consumption of the sacrificial meat through their partaking of the korban pesach. This ceremony affords a unique status of sanctity to the home, elevating it beyond the concrete world in which we live. Moshe therefore stresses to his constituents their assured protection so long as they remain inside their homes: "None of you shall go

outside the door of his house until morning. For when God goes through to smite the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the lintel and the two door-posts, and God will pass over the door..." (12:22-3). Only those located upon the altar of God, in His exclusive domain, will be spared the devastation of the plague. Those who leave this sublime territory of sanctity, who leave their homes, expose themselves to the perils of destruction.

This approach helps explain the emphasis placed on the home throughout the Torah's discussion of the korban pesach: "On the tenth of this month each of them should take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a HOUSEHOLD. But if the HOUSEHOLD is too small for a lamb, let him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby, in proportion to the number of persons: you shall contribute for the lamb according to what each HOUSEHOLD will eat... of the HOUSES in which they are to eat it... And the blood on the HOUSES where you are staying shall be a sign for you" (12:3-13). Given the paramount importance of the house (and, naturally, the family unit) within the process of the nation's designation as God's special people, it appears again and again in the context of the night of the Exodus. The Torah thus stresses that each household was to conduct the pesach service.

Given the home's sacred status within the framework of the korban pesach, and the sacred status of its participants as God's agents in the consumption of the sacrificial meat, we should not be surprised to find that throughout Tanakh the pesach ritual plays a central role in national renewal and reinforcement of the covenant. Through the pesach ceremony, the nation dedicates itself to the Almighty, and it thus becomes a critical component within any process of renewing the people's covenant with God.

This idea is manifest in the three places in Tanach where the Pesach celebration assumes a prominent role:

1) Yehoshua, ch. 5: Benei Yisrael observe Pesach immediately upon their arrival in the Land of Israel: "Encamped at Gilgal, the Israelites offered the pesach sacrifice on the fourteenth day of the month, toward evening." Immediately thereafter, the manna stops falling and, for the first time, the people eat from the grain of the Land of Israel. It seems that the emphasis on this transition from the manna to the natural grain of the land serves to formally close the chapter of Benei Yisrael's wandering through the wilderness and to introduce a new era, that of their residence in Eretz Yisrael. Throughout their years of nomad existence, they were sustained by the miracle of the manna; from this point on, they are to plow, sow and harvest. The Pesach observance appears in the text as a central component of this historic transition from desert nomads to occupants of an independent homeland. At this critical moment, when the nation assumes a new identity and faces a new national reality, the people underscore their primary identity, as a nation dedicated to the service of the Almighty.

2) Divrei Ha-yamim II, ch. 30: The Judean king, Chizkiyahu, initiates a major Pesach celebration in Jerusalem. As we know, Chizkiyahu successfully renews the service in the Temple and purifies it from its previous contamination. He himself sees latent in this process a renewal of the ancient covenant between Benei Yisrael and God: "Now I wish to make a covenant with Hashem, God of Israel" (Divrei Hayamim II 29:10). As part of this process of national, religious renewal, the king orders that the entire nation must come to the Beit Ha-mikdash for the pesach service: "Chizkiyahu sent word to all Israel and Judah; he also wrote letters to Efrayim and Menasheh to come to the House of God in Jerusalem to keep the Passover for Hashem, God of Israel" (Divrei Hayamim II, 30:1). In light of our understanding of the korban pesach as a process through which the nation becomes dedicated to the service of God, we understand why Chizkiyahu included this korban as an integral part of his program for religious renewal.

3) Divrei Hayamim II, ch. 35: Like his predecessor, Chizkiyahu, several generations earlier, King Yoshiyahu conducts a public Pesach celebration as part of his own process of renewal. Upon the discovery of the Torah scroll in the Temple, the king assembles the people and strikes a new national covenant with the Almighty:

"The king went up to the House of God with all the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites - all the people, young and old - and he read to them the entire text of the covenant scroll that was found in the House of God. The king stood in his place and solemnized the covenant before God: to follow God and observe His commandments, His injunctions and His laws with all his heart and soul, to fulfill all the terms of the covenant written in this scroll... and the inhabitants of Jerusalem acted in accord with the Covenant of God, God of their fathers." (Divrei Hayamim II 34:30-2)

Following his great-grandfather's lead, Yoshiyahu incorporates a public Pesach ritual into this process of renewing the nation's ancestral covenant with God:

"Yoshiyahu kept the Pesach for God in Jerusalem; the passover sacrifice was slaughtered on the fourteenth day of the first month... Since the time of the prophet Shemuel, no Passover like that one had ever been kept in Israel; none of the kings of Israel had kept a Passover like the one kept by Yoshiyahu and the priests and the Levites and all Judah and Israel there present and the inhabitants of Jerusalem." (Divrei Hayamim II 35:1, 35:18)

Once again, the paschal sacrifice receives added importance as a defining component of the covenant between God and His nation. Through the korban pesach, the nation declares its designation as God's people. They consume the meat of the offering in place of the altar, thereby transforming themselves into the abode of the Shekhina.

Endnotes:

(1) Although Chazal understand the verse "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months" (Shemot 12:2) as instituting the mitzva of declaring a new month at the sighting of the new moon, this mitzva can hardly be seen as an explicit or detailed directive. Korban pesach, on the other hand, is spelled out in the minutest detail.

(2) It should be emphasized that Chazal maintained a clear distinction between the prohibition of possessing chametz on the afternoon of the fourteenth of Nissan, and that which took effect on the night of the fifteenth and extended throughout the entire week of the festival. It seems reasonable to suggest that the first prohibition (of the fourteenth) relates to the status of the home as an altar, whereas the second involves the general distancing of oneself from chametz, required throughout the week-long festival.

[Translated by Rav David Silverberg]

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