

THREE ASPECTS OF THE KORBAN PESSACH

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I

SH'MOT 12:1-13:16 - A CONFUSING TEXT

Along with the three final plagues (locusts, darkness, firstborn), our Parashah includes a description of the first stage of the Exodus of the B'nei Yisra'el from Egypt. A central feature in that stage is the Korban Pessach (Pessach offering) and its various attendant commands. These Halakhot (laws) are presented throughout Chapter 12 (and, in a tangential manner, in the first 16 verses of Chapter 13) of Sh'mot (Exodus). The narrative of the smiting of the firstborn and the first steps of actual departure are intertwined with these Halakhot - along with two separate "concluding" statements announcing the climactic end to our slavery.

This entire section (12:1-13:16) seems to lack unity and flow. I hope to provide an explanation of the basic components in this section which will not only "restore" the unity, but will also shed some light on the central feature in the Pessach celebration - the Korban Pessach.

II

OUTLINE AND QUESTIONS

It will be helpful to preface our discussion by outlining the various segments of the text in question:

1. 12:1-20 - *Parashat haChodesh (God speaks to Mosheh and Aharon)
The New Moon, some Mitzvot of the Korban Pessach and the Mitzvot of Matza, Maror (bitter herbs) and avoiding & destroying Hametz.*
2. 12:21-28 (Mosheh speaks to the elders of the B'nei Yisra'el)
Mosheh's charge to the elders regarding some details of the Korban and how to respond to future generations who ask about it.
3. 12:29-36 (narrative)
The plague of the first-born, Pharaoh's midnight call to Mosheh to take the B'nei Yisra'el out; the B'nei Yisra'el "borrow" the gold, silver and clothing of the Egyptians.
4. 12:37-42 (narrative)

B'nei Yisra'el travel from Ra'mses to Sukkot, including

At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all YHVH's divisions left Egypt (v. 41)

- 5. 12:43-50 (God speaks to Mosheh and Aharon)
More laws of the Korban Pessach, including who may partake of it.
- 6. 12:51 (narrative)

And on that very day YHVH brought the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt by their divisions.(v. 51)

- 7. 13:1-2 (God speaks to Mosheh)
The Mitzvah of sanctification of the firstborn
- 8. 13:3-16 (Mosheh speaks to the B'nei Yisra'el)
Mitzvot of remembering the Exodus, avoiding Hametz, not owning Hametz, teaching children about it, T'fillin, sanctification of the firstborn and, again, T'fillin.

As can be easily seen from this all-too-brief outline (I strongly encourage keeping a Humash open to follow the rest of the shiur), there are a number of anomalies - both in sequence and in substance - in this text:

- 1: *Why are the details of the Korban Pessach given in two different sections (12:1-20 and 43-50)?*
- 2: *Why does Mosheh present a series of Mitzvot (Hametz, telling the children about the Exodus, T'fillin) before informing the B'nei Yisra'el about the sanctification of the firstborn - when that was the only command that God gave him at that time (13:2)?*
- 3: *Why is the Mitzvah of T'fillin given twice (13:9,16)?*
- 4: *Why is the Exodus declared twice (12:41,51)?*

III

LOOKING THROUGH THE EYES OF THE B'NEI YISRA'EL IN EGYPT

An introductory and methodological note:

As I have implied several times in these Divrei Torah, we have - from one perspective - a distinct advantage over the original recipients of the Torah. Whereas they only had the knowledge of the particular piece of divine teaching that they were receiving and everything which came before - we have the information of the ages. Over three thousand years have passed since the events of that fateful evening in Egypt - and much information has been revealed and inferred about those events and their impact on Jewish history in the intervening years. Not only do we have the entire Torah as a reference point for understanding any piece of text - we also have millenia of interpretation and commentary.

*This advantage can sometimes turn against us. In our attempt to understand the **p'shat** of the text - the simple, straightforward meaning of the verses - our "larger picture" sometimes makes it difficult to see and hear the verses through the eyes and ears of the original target audience.*

In our case, we have to look at each section of text and pay close attention to what was known - and what was not yet known - to Mosheh, Pharaoh and to the B'nei Yisra'el.

*Although Mosheh (and Pharaoh) knew about the impending **Makkat B'khorot** (smiting of the firstborn) (see Sh'mot 11:1-5; see also 4:22-23), it is unclear as to whether the B'nei Yisra'el knew about it at all. In addition, no one (up until this point) knew what night the Makkat B'khorot would take place (see Ramban 11:4).*

Besides this background of lack-of-information (against which the text in Chapter 12 must be seen), a simple reading of the text indicates that the B'nei Yisra'el had little knowledge of Korbanot (animal offerings). Therefore, to comprehend the perspective of the B'nei Yisra'el at the time - and whatever symbolism is being conveyed through these commandments - we must look at the verses through these "new eyes" - the eyes of the B'nei Yisra'el in Egypt at that time.

IV

ASPECT #1: THE KORBAN "IN LIEU" A CELEBRATION OF SALVATION

In his explanation of the meaning behind animal offerings, Ramban (commentary to Vayyikra 1:9) suggests that the person bringing the offering should view himself as if he were on the altar. The catharsis of a Korban is achieved when the owner experiences his own sacrifice vicariously through the offering.

Although, as pointed out above, this was not something that the B'nei Yisra'el would know from the yet-unrevealed Hilkhos Ma'aseh haKorbanot (the Laws of Offerings) - they would

know it from their own history. The first and earliest Korban in national memory was the ram that was brought by Avraham on Mount Moriah in lieu of his son, Yitzchak (B'resheet [Genesis] 22:13). This occurred when Yitzchak - who was (sort of) supposed to be offered up to God - was spared.

It is reasonable to assume that when the B'nei Yisra'el were commanded to offer up a lamb or goat on the afternoon of the fourteenth day of the first month - that they made the obvious and immediate association with Yitzchak's ram and understood this upcoming Korban to be some sort of a "substitution" offering.

[This association has roots in our Midrashic literature - see Sefer haYovlim 17:16, where the date of the binding of Yitzchak is given as the first day of Pesach. See also Mekhilta Bo #7, where the phrase "I will see the blood" (12:13) is interpreted as "I will see the blood of the binding of Yitzchak"]

When they were informed (12:12) about the imminent slaying of the firstborn throughout Egypt (note - not just "Egyptians" but throughout "the land of Egypt"), they must have understood that the offering would be used to stand in place of their own firstborn children, who stood in mortal danger of dying on that night. This explains why the Torah specifically commands each family to take one animal (12:3 - representing the b'khor of that household) and why the blood of the offering was to be daubed on the doorposts and top-jamb of each house - as if to "mark" the house, indicating that the b'khor of this family (=his animal substitute) has already been slaughtered.

(We might entertain a more radical understanding of the identity of the Israelite target group: In 4:22, the B'nei Yisra'el are identified as God's "b'khor"; that being the case, every member of the B'nei Yisra'el was under threat of death with the upcoming Makkat B'khorot - and the animal and its blood stood as a representative for that person and his household. This would explain the odd phrasing: "...the entire congregation of Yisr'ael shall slaughter it..." [12:6]. The use of a member of the flock [v. 5] is particularly powerful in its symbolic association; not only is their leader, Mosheh, a shepherd by profession (3:1), but he himself compares the B'nei Yisra'el to a flock in need of a shepherd after his death [Bamidbar (Numbers) 27:17]. Either approach to understanding the endangered people for whom the offering "stands in" - the actual firstborn or the entire B'nei Yisra'el - works with the rest of this shiur.)

V

ASPECT #2: THE KORBAN OF FIRE A CELEBRATION OF THE END OF SLAVERY

There are additional Halakhot of the Korban Pessach as detailed in Parashat haChodesh

(12:8-11) which reflect a different aspect of the Korban. Whereas the first group of commands (taking the animal into the house, slaughtering on the afternoon of the fourteenth, daubing the blood etc.) reflect the "substitution" or "redemptive" aspect of the Korban (as explained above), the next group seem to have one thing in common - they represent and celebrate the end of the slavery experience. Let's look at the details:

a) The Korban must be roasted (v. 8) - symbolic of the "fiery furnace" of Egypt which was our oppressed life there (see Devarim [Deuteronomy] 4:20, I Melakhim [Kings] 8:51, Yirmiyah [Jeremiah] 11:4)

b) The Korban must be eaten with matzot and maror (bitter herbs) (v. 8) - both symbols of oppression and poverty. Eating these is symbolic of mastery over the experience.

c) The Korban must be eaten entire and not broken up (v. 9) - symbolizing that the B'nei Yisra'el (represented by the animal as explained above) have come through the experience complete.

d) None of the Korban's meat may be left over (v. 10) - symbolizing that the entire experience is to be completed tonight and that every member of the nation will be redeemed and taken out of the oppression. (Also - any leftover meat must be burned - again the theme of fire)

e) The people are to eat the Korban "sitting on their suitcases" - implying that the experience is complete and that their station is about to change.

Subsequent to the presentation of these specific Halakhot, God tells Mosheh the reason behind them:

I will pass through Mitzrayim on this night...and the blood will be an **ot** (sign) for you on the houses...(vv. 12-13).

After this, God instructs Mosheh that there should be an eternal commemoration of this day:

And this day will be for you a **zikkaron** (commemoration), celebrating it as a festival for YHVH... (v. 14).

The last 6 verses of Parashat haChodesh outline the basic Halakhot of eating Matzah, destroying Hametz, avoiding the eating of Hametz, the "holiday" nature of the first and seven days of this future festival - and the reason for this festival (which does not at all include the Korban Pessach):

...for on this very day I (will) have taken all of your divisions out of the land of Egypt... (v. 17).

We are then given additional dimensions of the prohibitions of Hametz.

SUMMARY OF PARASHAT HACHODESH (12:1-20)

Note that the Korban Pessach in no way is associated with the imminent Exodus. It inheres two celebrations only - the salvation from the plague of the firstborn and end of slavery. This day will be the first of a seven day festival, celebrating the Exodus - but that festival, at this point, only includes the Hametz/Matzah component and does not include the Korban Pessach.

VI

MOSHEH'S INSTRUCTIONS TO THE ELDERS (12:21-28)

*In the next Parashah (12:21-28), Mosheh relates part of God's command to the elders of the B'nei Yisra'el (and, from the context, this information is passed on to all of the people - see vv. 27-28). Note that he only tells them about the Korban Pessach (with the addition of the bundle of **ezov** - more on that below) and that that celebration should be perpetuated for generations. He only instructs them that this will be a celebration of salvation, as we can see from the response he commands we give to our children when they ask us as to the meaning of this offering:*

You shall declare, it is a Pessach offering to God, Who passed over the houses of the B'nei Yisra'el when he attacked Egypt and saved our houses... (v. 27)

In other words, the only perspective that Mosheh gave to the people before the actual event took place was the salvation. He did not inform them that they were leaving - just that, at some future time, they would be in the Land and would have to explain this celebration to their children.

As noted above, there is one additional aspect to the Korban Pessach presented in this instruction.

*Take a bundle of **ezov** (some type of grass or herb - the Rishonim debate its meaning) and dip it into the blood [of the offering] which is in the vessel, and daub it on the upper-door-jamb and the doorposts... (v. 22).*

This is an additional symbol of the end of slavery (as above) - that the B'nei Yisra'el, who were lowly like the grass of the field, would now be gathered together (remember that they must spend the whole night indoors with the whole family together) and elevated to God's worship - thus culminating their servitude to Pharaoh. Again, note that there is no mention of leaving Egypt - just being liberated from slavery.

VII

NARRATIVE #1: MAKKAT B'KHOROT (12:29-36)

As the text moves from instruction to narrative, we are told about the terrible fate of the first-borns throughout Egypt (note v. 29 - non-Egyptians also died!). Pharaoh comes to Mosheh and Aharon and throws them out of Egypt.

NARRATIVE #2: FIRST STEPS OUT OF EGYPT (12:37-42)

*Now we are told that the B'nei Yisra'el marched from Ra'mses (their working town - see 1:11) to Sukkot - which is still in Egypt. At this point, we are given a sense of conclusion - how many years the B'nei Yisra'el were in Egypt and that exactly on that day, they left. Note that in v. 41, we are told that the B'nei Yisra'el left Egypt - not that God took them out! In the next verse, we are told that the night (before) was a **leil shimurim** (anticipated or guarded night) of God - but their actual first steps happened of their own accord. Pharaoh threw them out and they left.*

Let's summarize what information the B'nei Yisra'el have as they finish the first leg of their march and arrive at Sukkot on the morning after the plague.

- 1) They have been told that the salvation (from being killed) which they just experienced must be commemorated, via the Korban Pessach in the future.*
- 2) Their slavery is over and they have left their slave-town (Ra'mses) **but***
- 3) They haven't been told that they are going back to the Land (or, indeed, even leaving Egypt at all) **and***
- 4) They don't know about any special relationship which they are destined to have with God.*

Keep in mind that the promise presented earlier (6:6-8) that God would take them out of the bonds of Egypt, save them from their work, redeem them with an outstretched arm and great wonders and would take them to be His nation - this entire promise was not "heard" by the

B'nei Yisra'el (6:9) due to their overwhelming sense of servitude.

VIII

HUKKAT HAPESSACH (12:43-50)

At this point, we are given a second set of details regarding the Korban Pessach, coming under the heading of "Hukkat haPessach" (the eternal statute of the Korban Pessach). Following our chronological sequencing of the text, these Halakhot were given to Moshe and Aharon at Sukkot, the morning after the plague. These include the definition of who may partake of the Korban (only Israelites), that anyone joining the community must undergo B'rit Milah (the covenant of circumcision) and two Halakhot which correspond to details we saw earlier:

- a) The Korban must stay inside the house in which it is eaten;*
- b) No bone may be broken in the Korban Pessach.*

What is the significance of these "new" details and why were they given in a separate Parashah from Parashat haChodesh - and after the B'nei Yisra'el were partway out of Egypt?

IX

ASPECT #3: THE KORBAN OF COMPLETION: A CELEBRATION OF FULFILLMENT OF THE B'RIT BEIN HAB'TARIM

Even a cursory glance at verses 43-50 brings an immediate association: The new demand that only a member of the B'rit who has been circumcised may partake in the Korban Pessach reminds us of Avraham - the original member of that B'rit (see B'resheet 17). What does Avraham have to do with the Exodus?

In B'resheet 15, we are told about an earlier B'rit which God made with Avram (not yet Avraham) regarding his descendants:

...know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.(vv. 13-14).

*This promise - which points directly to the enslavement and Exodus from Egypt - was confirmed through a ceremony in which Avram took animals (including a goat and a ram) and divided them in half. When darkness fell, Avram (who was already outside - see v. 5) saw a fire pass between the halves, consummating the **B'rit bein haB'tarim** (covenant between the pieces), as it is commonly known.*

*Now we understand the Avraham-Exodus connection - and can look back at the original presentation (12:1-20) and understand some of the details in a new light. The fire which appears in three consecutive verses (12:8-10) reminds us of the fire which consummated the B'rit bein haB'tarim. In addition, this is the only Korban which had to be completely devoured at night - which again reminds us of the B'rit bein haB'tarim. Once we have that association, we immediately notice the contrasts (the Torah often compares events in order to demonstrate their differences). Unlike the B'rit-promise, this one must take place indoors; and, unlike the B'rit-promise, the animal here must be complete. These Halakhot are re-presented in our section (**Hukkat haPessach**) - in verse 46. What has happened? The B'rit bein haB'tarim has now been fulfilled. The broken animal is now whole and the "outsiders" are now indoors.*

Suddenly, our entire perspective on the process has changed. Instead of having been saved from a terrible plague and having the yoke of slavery lifted (which is all we know up until this point), we now understand that the ancient promise of God has finally been fulfilled. The celebration of the Korban Pessach takes on a whole new light. Instead of us leaving as a result of Pharaoh's order, we are now being taken out by God, with our destiny to be His people lying immediately ahead of us.

This explains the "second" exodus verse (v. 51). In this verse, instead of stating that the B'nei Yisra'el left - it says that God took them out!

X

KIDDUSH B'KHOROT

At the beginning of Chapter 13, God gives Mosheh one Mitzvah - to sanctify the human and animal B'khorot to Him. Earlier, we asked why Mosheh doesn't just give this Mitzvah and why he prefaces it with other Mitzvot (including some he was given earlier), such as Hametz & Matzah, teaching the children about the Exodus and T'fillin.

As mentioned above (end of section VI), there was a four-tiered promise which God related to Mosheh before the onset of the plague-driven negotiations with Pharaoh. God promised that He would:

- 1) Take us out (**v'hotzeiti**) of the bondage of Egypt;
- 2) Save us (**v'hitzalti**) from their work;
- 3) Redeem us (**v'ga'alti**) and
- 4) Take us to Him (**v'lakachti..li**) as a nation.

As we have already seen, three of these promises were already fulfilled (out of order):

*#3 - We were redeemed when we were not killed on the night of the smiting of the firstborn;
(by the way, the term *g'ulah* can also mean a redemption of substitution - see Ruth 4:7)*

#2 - We were saved from their work when Pharaoh threw us out;

#1 - We were taken out when God turned our exit to Exodus with Hukkat haPessach (as above).

The one component that remains to be fulfilled is for the B'nei Yisra'el to become God's nation:

Kadesh LI (sanctify to me) every b'khor...**LI hu** (they are Mine).

LI, meaning "they are mine", which is used twice here, evokes the fourth promise:

*v'lakachti et'khem **LI** l'am- (and I will take you unto Me as a nation).*

Kiddush haB'khorot is (at least the first stage of) the fulfillment of this promise.

The B'nei Yisra'el already know that they must celebrate the "redemption" of the night of the plague and the "being saved" from slavery. Mosheh has to communicate the rest of the process to the people - that they must celebrate and commemorate being taken out of Egypt and becoming God's nation.

First, Mosheh presents them with the commemoration of being taken out-

- 1: Remember the day of the Exodus (13:3)
- 2: Hametz and Matzah (13:6-7) (which are Halakhot which remind us of the actual departure - remember, this had not been communicated yet)
- 3: Teaching the children about the Exodus (v. 8) - note that this time, the

information to be given by the parent to the child is not about the plague of the first-born, rather it is about the Exodus.

*4: T'fillin (v. 9) - a constant reminder of the Exodus. The hand T'fillin are to be an **ot l'kha** - a "sign for you", indicating a sign for you to see and which will remind us - and the head T'fillin are to be a **zikkaron**- again a commemoration for you to remember that God took us out. This wording is nearly identical to the two terms used to describe the blood on the doors (**ot lakhem**) and the celebration of that day (**zikkaron**).*

*5: Kiddush B'khorot (vv. 10-13). Now that the celebration of **v'hotzeiti** is complete, Mosheh informs them about Kiddush B'khorot - the fulfillment of the fourth step - **v'lakachti**.*

6: Informing the children (vv. 14-15). The son's question is not about the Exodus or about the Korban Pesach (or about Hametz & Matzah) - it is about Kiddush B'khorot.

*7: T'fillin (v. 16). Note what has changed - the **ot l'kha** (a sign for you) has become an **ot** (sign) - indicating that it is now (also) a sign for others. The **zikkaron** is now **totafot** - which is a type of jewelry not unlike a crown. (See Mishnah Shabbat 6:1, Radak's Michlol: "Haskel v'Yadoa' ").*

*The T'fillin, first presented as a commemorative device by which we remind ourselves of **v'hotzeiti** - now become a sign for the rest of the world and a crown - as we are now God's nation with the fulfillment of **v'lakachti** through the vehicle of Kiddush B'khorot.*

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