

KORBAN PESACH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

We read in the Mechilta that Rabbi Matia ben Charash taught that when the time came for the G-d to fulfil His promise to Avraham Avinu, Israel had no mitzvot to justify their redemption, G-d then gave them the mitzvot of the Brit Milah and the Korban Pesach. How then are we to understand the words of Rabbi Elazar Hakappar, that it was in the merit of the four mitzvot that they had, that they were redeemed? After all, they had four mitzvot on which the World stood. There was no suspicion that they were guilty of sexual immorality and of loshan harah, and they did not change their names and their language. We could say that these four are negative mitzvot and there is not a reward for negative mitzvot as the Maharal teaches. That would explain Rabbi Matai's statement.

However, in Kiddushin (39a) we learnt that there is reward for one who was able to overcome the temptation to do an averah. Therefore, Israel in Egypt where they were constantly faced with the possibility to sin but did not, surely didn't need the extra two mitzvot?

The four negative mitzvot that they already observed by being able to withstand them, were concerned with sexual immorality, murder, idolatry and needless hatred. Since the First Temple was destroyed because of the first three and the Second Temple because of lashon hara and needless hatred, we see that lashon harah is equal to the other three combined. However, they are all 3 punishable by karet or by the death penalty of the bet din, while needless hatred is not; it is only a transgression of the negative mitzvah of, 'thou shall not hate thy brother in thy heart' (Vayikrah, 19:17). How then can it be considered equal to the other three? Its equality lies in the fact that needless hatred, in all its various forms, is actually the cause of the other three, while not actually being part of them. A person can, through his efforts prevent this happening and do teshuvah for the lashon harah and needless hatred before committing the other sins. That is why there is no karet or mitat bet din. Israel in Egypt was able to overcome all the powers that tried to bring them to commit these four sins.

Furthermore, the four negatives which they avoided correspond to the perversion of body, mind and nefesh, with that of lashon harah and sinat chinam to the Tzelem Elokim which should bind the other three together. Since lashon harah causes the disintegration of society and of social ties, it weakens the unifying power of the Tzelem Elokim. Sexual immorality perverts the body; that they did not change their names prevented the perversion of their minds; since the name of something is its essence and the essence of man is his mind. That they did not change their language prevented the perversion of the nefesh; the Targum translates 'And man became a living nefesh' as a speaking

spirit. By keeping apart from these four things, Israel preserved the purity of body, mind, and nefesh integrated by the Tzelem Elokim.

However keeping away from these sins was not sufficient, as there still remained the choice of actually sinning, as we see in the saying of the Avnei Nezer with regard to the Metzora. After the signs of the Metzora had departed, a sacrifice was still necessary in order for the tsuvah to be complete. So what was required of Israel in Egypt was, in addition, the complete eradication of the sin. For that they required the Milah and the Korban Pesach.

The Brit Milah has three mitzvot: the actual milah, the priah, and hatafat dam. The actual milah brings completion to the body, like the Midrash says 'When a fig ripens, the only waste is the little stem connecting it to the tree, in the same way that the wound of the brit is all that remains.' The priah brings about the completion of the mind, as the word mean 'to uncover': in the same way as the mind uncovers the unknown. The hatafat dam is the completion of the nefesh, 'For the blood is the nefesh'.

The Korban Pesach, as the Tzelem Elokim, unites nefesh, body, and mind. That is why the mitzvah of Pesach is fulfilled by taking a lamb for each family, and it is as though the whole of Israel fulfilled it with one lamb. All the commentators saw in the fact that the lamb had to be whole- head, body and feet intact- a sign of the unity of all Israel.

Together, with their avoidance of sin, as shown by the four merits which Israel had, they now two mitzvot, to complete their rejection of the sins.

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