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“No Place for the Destroyer”
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ABSTRACT. The events surrounding the Exodus from Egypt, especially the smearing of the blood on the doors of the Israelite homes, serve as important lessons for domestic safety and integrity.

KEYWORDS. Domestic violence, abuse, Passover, Exodus, Altar, Blood, Sanctuary, Paschal Lamb, Jewish

It was an odd thing to do on the night before the Exodus. As the Israelites prepared to take their first steps toward freedom following 210 years of Egyptian bondage, we might have expected a buzz of frenzied activities: last minute plans and preparations, hurried scurrying between houses and tribes with eleventh-hour directives, rushed packing and repacking of clothes and food and provisions. We can envision secret meetings between national leaders and among tribal heads confirming and reconfirming how millions of slaves, young and old, would march into their new future and grasp their new destiny.

Instead, they were instructed:

Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and said to them, Draw out and take a lamb according to your families, and kill the Passover lamb. And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go
out from the door of his house until the morning. For God will pass through to strike the Egyptians; and when God sees the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, God will pass over the door, and will not let the destroyer come into your houses to strike you. (Exodus 12:21-23)

On the eve of the Exodus, there was no political plotting and there was no mass preparation. Instead, families were brought together for a meal of roasted sacrificial lamb. They were not allowed out of their houses. And they were instructed to splash blood on the doorposts and lintel of their homes. What an odd way to launch their future as free people!

It appears, however, that these instructions were meant to set the foundation of their liberated lives, more important than any last minute preparations or plans. They were meant to teach fundamental and essential lessons of how life was to be lived in an era of personal freedom and responsibility. The three commands—bring the family together, remain in the house and sprinkle the blood—taught three elemental lessons.

First, a lamb for each family to teach the priority of family. Despite the urgencies of the national agenda—establishing law and order; developing an economy; providing food, water and shelter; navigating through a hot, arid desert; and dealing with the myriad problems and challenges involved in establishing a nation and in settling a land—family comes first. Freedom was not to be only a political and national objective, it was too be, first and foremost, a personal and familial aspiration. One’s own wife or husband, son or daughter, were to be the first priority and deserved one’s primary attention and their needs were not to be sacrificed on the altars of politics or national agendas. Rather, all of the sacrifice (symbolized by the offering of the paschal lamb) was to forge bonds of household closeness, domestic affection and mutual responsibility.

Second, stay at home in order to ensure the prevention of anarchy and lawlessness. As the chains of slavery were broken and the structure of society, as oppressive as it was, was not yet replaced with a higher, more humane, even divine, order it was important that unbridled chaos and rampant selfishness did not rule the night. The Exodus promised freedom, not a free-for-all. The Exodus was to bring not freedom from responsibility and accountability, but freedom to become people of conscience and fidelity.

And third, the most puzzling, the sprinkling of the blood on the doorposts. The reason? Ostensibly, because “God will pass through to
strike the Egyptians; and when God sees the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, God will pass over the door, and will not let the destroyer come into your houses to strike you” (12:23). But is this really necessary? Many Jewish biblical commentators question whether God or God’s “destroyer” needed this sign altogether. Would they really have been unable without it to distinguish between the Israelite and the Egyptian houses? Isn’t divine knowledge such that God would know independently who lived where? Many answers are offered. One, for example, suggests that the sign was not a benefit for God, but a need for the Israelites. In order to merit redemption, they needed to identify with the impending exodus. They needed, in this small but significant way, to demonstrate defiance against their Egyptian oppressors, as well as active and positive identification as members of the fledgling nation.

Why blood? Why sprinkled? Why on the doorposts? Permit me to suggest a reason, one that fits with our proposition that these instructions served as fundamental and essential lessons of how life was to be lived in the new era of personal freedom and responsibility.

By way of background, we need to remember that the sprinkling of the blood of a sacrifice was not an unusual event. In the days of the Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple, it was one of the ways in which the blood of a sacrifice was placed on the altar, an essential part of the sacrificial service.

The Korban Pesach, the paschal sacrifice, was offered in Egypt without a Tabernacle and without a Temple and without an altar. But that night their very homes became their altars! Their new commitment to God, their observance of God’s commandments to offer the lamb and to eat it with matzah and bitter herbs introduced a godliness and a sanctity to the very homes in which they ate and talked, in which their children were born and raised, and in which they lived with each other from day to day. And it was upon this new altar and this new Temple that the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled.

So the lesson of the home as a holy place was taught to them the night before the Exodus. On the eve of liberation, the Israelites were taught that a home is not merely a place to hang one’s hat, to eat and sleep and to store one’s things, but it is a place in which God is present. It is a place in which a person, partnered with all those who share the same roof and the same walls, can discover the divine presence in their lives and in their interaction with each other. This may mean that they share the observance of the Sabbath or the maintenance of a kosher kitchen. This may mean that they take time to pray and sing and study holy texts. But
it also means that they value and cherish the image of God in which each one was created and treat each other with dignity and respect.

We are all too aware of the reality of domestic violence in Jewish homes. Despite the denials and the stereotypes and the wishful thinking otherwise, there are too many Jewish social service agencies and too many Jewish women’s groups and too many Jewish women’s shelters and too many Jewish books and too many Jewish women that my colleagues and I have counseled to allow anyone to assert any more that we do not suffer from this plague. It should go without saying—but sometimes these things need to be said over and over again—that any assault on another is an attack on that divine image in which each of us was created. And any assault on another—physical, verbal, emotional, sexual—desecrates the sanctity of that home which is to be an altar dedicated to the service of God. We should not have to wait until the fulfillment of Isaiah’s messianic promise, “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (11:9). Hurt and destruction and violence and assault never have a place on God’s holy mountain. Hurt and destruction and violence and assault divest the mountain of its godliness. And hurt and destruction and violence and assault desecrate our homes as well.

There is yet another lesson to be learned from this transformation of our homes into altars. The Temple’s altar served a function other than that of sacrifice; it offered asylum. The altar was a refuge for those fleeing from unjust punishment or harm (see Ex. 21:14). The altar was a place of protection, safety and security. This is the source of the term “to provide sanctuary” for someone who seeks shelter. And so, if the sprinkling of the blood on the night before the Exodus transformed our homes into altars, then they were transformed into sanctuaries of safety and protection. No one—no woman, child or man—should feel threatened or endangered or belittled in their own home. No one should feel that they are any less a human being or are undeserving of love or respect or dignity because of how they are treated by a spouse or partner or parent.

It is because of that blood on our doors in ancient Egypt that God passed over and did “not let the destroyer come into your houses to strike you.” That destroyer is not God. That destroyer is not some Angel of Death or Deliverer of Devastation. That destroyer is us—those of us who raise our hands or our voices, those of us who control our spouse’s comings and goings, those of us who belittle or demean, those of us who treat those with whom we live without the decency, respect, encourage-
ment and dignity they deserve. Those destroyers of our homes and our
altars are among us in every part of our Jewish community.

We spend much time and expend a great deal of effort preparing our
homes for the Passover holiday. In our day we have no Paschal lamb
and we do not smear any blood on the doorposts of our homes, but we
do clean and cook and bake. We sweep our floors and scour our kitchens
and search our homes in order to rid them of every crumb of chametz
(bread, leavened products). But in order to transform our homes into the
safe shelters they were on the night of the first Passover, we must focus
our attention and efforts on ridding ourselves of the real chametz, the
kind that creates a welcome refuge for the Angels of Destruction:

• In addition to purging our homes of chametz, we must purge our
language of its chametz, ridding it of words of scorn and criticism
and belittling. Instead, we should speak with kindness and com-
passion. If you are quick to criticize or yell, if your anger seems to
get the best of you, if you can’t disagree without fighting, then be-
come conscious of what you are saying and how you are saying it.
Control yourself, if you can. And if you can’t, speak to someone
who can help you find better ways to communicate and disagree.

• In addition to recounting the tyranny of the Egyptians and their op-
pression of the Israelite slaves, we must recognize our own tyran-
nies: if you try to assert control over others, your spouse or
children or friends, or if you use means of intimidation, emotional
or physical, to get your own way—control yourself, if you can. And
if you can’t, speak to someone who can help you find better ways
to treat those with whom you share your life and you claim to love.

• In addition to retelling how the Israelites of old broke off the
chains of slavery and escaped from the House of Bondage, if you
are yourself in an abusive relationship, begin to consider your own
exodus as well. It is not easy and should not be done hastily. After
all, it took the Israelites 210 years until they left Egypt. If you are
abused, you do not have to wait that long. There are social service
agencies and battered women’s counseling services that can help
you find ways to be safe and make decisions, your own decisions,
about your future. Speak to your rabbi or a trusted friend, you
don’t have to bear this burden alone.

• In addition to expressing your care and affection for friends and
family by inviting them to share the Seder with you, show them you
care by taking an interest in their physical and emotional safety and
well-being. If you suspect that things are not as they should be at
home or in their relationships, talk with your sister or aunt or cousin. Listen to her, to what she says and to what she doesn’t say. Let her know you are there for her. Let her know you care. Let her know you are ready to help or that there are others who can help her.

If we, like the Israelites of old, are to prepare for a future of freedom and liberation—freedom for all to live in dignity and worth, and liberation from violence and threat—then we need, like the Israelites of old, to make our families a priority, to create homes committed to decency and good citizenship and, most importantly, to transform our homes into altars, holy sanctuaries of refuge and safety and protection in which none of us is “the destroyer” and in which each of us “will not let the destroyer come into your houses to strike you.”

And of each and every one of our homes may it be said, “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”

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