

The Defining Moment: Once and Again

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In preparation for their triumphant departure from Egypt, the Jewish people were given one mitzvah, one charge, to seal their destiny as a freed people: the Pesach (paschal lamb). This historic event marked the end of centuries-old servitude and the beginning of nationhood for the descendents of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Those who participated in the Pesach merited Divine protection from the tenth plague and left Egypt, while those who did not remained outside the covenantal community. This night of the fifteenth of Nissan was the defining moment for the Jews of Egypt and we recapture its suspense, excitement and spirituality every year at our exalted seder table. There was one simple prerequisite for participation in the Pesach in Egypt: a *brit milah* (circumcision). As the Torah describes in no uncertain terms:

And should a proselyte reside with you, he shall make a Passover sacrifice to the Lord. All his males shall be circumcised, and then he may approach to make it, and he will be like the native of the land, but no uncircumcised male may partake of it.

Shemot 12:48

וכי יגור אִתְּךָ גֵר וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לֵה'
הַמּוֹל לֹא כָל זָכָר וְאִזּוּ יִקְרַב לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ
וְהָיָה כְּאֶזְרַח הָאָרֶץ וְכָל עֶרְל לֹא
יֹאכַל בּוֹ.

שמות יב:מח

Several mitzvot had been known since the time of Adam, Noach, Avraham and Yaakov, yet the mitzvah of *milah* was the sole determinant of who could partake of a Pesach. This is not surprising as we know that there is a strong correlation between the mitzvot of *milah* and Pesach, as we will explore.

In the Haggadah, we reflect on the beginning of our relationship with Hashem and our undeserving state of spiritual poverty in Egypt. We invoke a prophetic description:

And I passed by you and saw you downtrodden with your blood, and I said to you, 'With your blood, live,' and I said to you, 'With your blood, live.'

Yechezkel 16:6

וְאָעָבַר עֲלֶיךָ וְאָרְאֶךָ מִתְבוֹסֶסֶת
בְּדַמֶּיךָ וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי
וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי.

יחזקאל טז:ו

The Midrash suggests that this verse actually alludes to the two experiences of Pesach and *milah*:

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What did the Holy One blessed be He see to protect them with blood? In order to remind them of the blood of the circumcision of Avraham. The Jewish people were saved from Egypt with two bloods: with the blood of the paschal lamb and the blood of circumcision as it states "and I said to you, 'With your blood, live,' and I said to you, 'With your blood, live.'"

Shemot Rabbah, Bo, no. 17

מה ראה הקב"ה להגן עליהם בדם כדי לזכור להם דם מילת אברהם, ובב' דמים ניצולו ישראל ממצרים בדם פסח ובדם מילה, שנא' ואומר לך בדמיך חיי ואומר לך בדמיך חיי בדם פסח ובדם מילה. שמות רבה, פרשת בא פרשה יז

Another common feature of these two mitzvot is their unique Halachic category. The Talmud (*Makkot* 13b) notes that these are the only two cases that carry the punishment of *karet* (spiritual excision) without a negative commandment; they also lack a korban offering in case of error. Simply put, the mere failure to perform either of these two mitzvot invokes the harsh penalty of *karet*, which is otherwise reserved for a specific number of severe transgressions of Torah prohibitions.

Finally, it cannot be considered a coincidence of tradition that we celebrate the presence of Eliyahu the prophet at only two Jewish life cycle events: the seder commemoration of the Pesach and the *brit milah* of a newborn child. To appreciate the connection between these two mitzvot, let us take a closer look at the mitzvah of Pesach.

The Pesach was a *sui generis* event, just as our exodus from Egypt was a one-time, historic occurrence. The laws and practices of this sacrifice reflect its singular character and distinguish it from all other korbanot. First, the Pesach in Egypt was not really an offering at all, as there was no *mizbeach* (altar) on which to offer the sacrifice. Hence, the Torah never refers to the Pesach in Egypt as a korban. The Mishna in *Masechet Pesachim* (9:5) enumerates several other characteristics that were unique to the original Pesach of Mitzrayim:

What is the difference between the Passover in Egypt and Passover in future generations? The Pesach in Egypt had to be taken from the tenth, required sprinkling with a bundle of hyssop on the lintel and the two doorposts and was eaten in haste in one night. Passover for future generations is observed for seven days.

מה בין פסח מצרים לפסח דורות פסח מצרים מקחו מבעשור וטעון הזאה באגודת אזוב על המשקוף ועל שתי מזוזות ונאכל בחפזון בלילה אחד ופסח דורות נוהג כל שבעה.

In addition to these anomalies of Pesach Mitzrayim, even the Pesach that was offered for generations as a korban in the Beit Hamikdash has several unusual laws. Most notably, the korban Pesach must be eaten as part of a predetermined group, which is not the case with any other offering (*Mishna, Zevachim* 5:8). This is a two-fold requirement. First, it mandates that in order for one to partake of a korban Pesach, he or she must be a designated participant before the korban is slaughtered, as the Mishna describes:

One is designated on it and removed from it until [The sacrifice] is slaughtered.

Mishna, Pesachim 9:3

נמנין ומושכין את ידיהם ממנו עד שישחט. משנה פסחים ט:ג

Additionally, the actual eating of the korban must take place in a group. No portion of the Pesach may be eaten outside one's designated group, as the Rambam rules:

The Passover sacrifice can only be eaten with one group and one may not remove any of it from the group in which one is eating. One who removes an olive's-worth from one group to another on the night of the fifteenth receives lashes as it states "You shall not take any of the meat out of the house to the outside."

Rambam, Hilchot Korban Pesach 9:1

כל האוכל מן הפסח אינו אוכל אלא בחבורה אחת ואין מוציאין ממנו מן החבורה שיאכל בה. והמוציא ממנו כזית בשר מחבורה לחבורה בליל חמשה עשר לוקה שנאמר לא תוציא מן הבית מן הבשר חוצה. רמב"ם הלכות קרבן פסח ט:א

Further, even if one was able to actually consume an entire korban Pesach alone, according to one opinion in the Mishna, this is not allowed; one must eat the Pesach as part of a group.

What is the message of these Halachot that are unique to Pesach?

Perhaps all of these practices can be understood in light of the context of the Pesach in Egypt. The Midrash describes:

"Draw forth or buy yourselves sheep," This is what it states in the verse (Tehillim 97:7.) "All worshippers of graven images will be ashamed." When G-d told Moshe to slaughter the Passover sacrifice, Moshe said "Master of the Universe, how can I do such a thing? Don't You know that sheep are the gods of Egypt" as it states (Shemot 8:22 "Will we sacrifice the deity of the Egyptians before their eyes, and they will not stone us?" G-d said "For your life, the Jewish people will not leave here until they slaughter the gods of Egypt in front of their eyes so that I can teach them that their gods are nothing." And we find that this is what happened, for on that night the first born Egyptians were smitten and on the same night, the Jewish people slaughtered their Passover offerings and ate them. The Egyptians watched their first born die and their gods slaughtered and couldn't do anything as it states (Bamidbar 33:4.) "And the Egyptians were busy burying because the Lord had struck down their firstborn and had wrought vengeance against their deities."

Shemot Rabbah, Bo, no. 17

משכו וקחו לכם צאן הה"ד (תהלים צז) יבושו כל עובדי פסל, בשעה שאמר הקב"ה למשה לשחוט הפסח, אמר לו משה רבון העולם הדבר הזה היאך אני יכול לעשות אי אתה יודע שהצאן אלהיהן של מצרים הן, שנאמר (שמות ח) הן נזבחה את תועבת מצרים לעיניהם ולא יסקלוננו, אמר לו הקב"ה חייך אין ישראל יוצאין מכאן עד שישחטו את אלהי מצרים לעיניהם שאודיע להם שאין אלהיהם כלום, וכן מצינו שעשה, שבאותו הלילה הכה בכוריהם של מצרים ובו בלילה שחטו ישראל פסחיהן ואכלו והיו המצרים רואים בכוריהם הרוגים ואלהיהן שחוטין ולא היו יכולין לעשות כלום, שנאמר (במדבר לג) ומצרים מקברים את אשר הכה ה' בהם כל בכור ובאלהיהם עשה ה' שפטים, הוי יבושו כל עובדי פסל.

שמות רבה בא פר' יז

Here, the Midrash describes the context of the Pesach and sheds light on its significance as a defining moment. Let us consider the implication of this Midrash. According to this tradition, the sheep was an Egyptian deity, which the Jews were about to slaughter. Imagine the predicament of a Jew living in Egypt, having experienced the previous nine plagues but still living under the watchful eye of the Egyptians, his oppressive masters for centuries. G-d calls upon him to take the deity of his rulers on the tenth of Nissan in preparation for slaughter, with the promise of the impending Exodus. The presence of thousands of sheep in the Jewish environs

for four days obviously drew the attention of the Egyptians, who quickly learned that the Jews were about to commit the ultimate offense of decide. Only those individuals who were firmly convinced that they would leave Egypt as free people on the fifteenth of Nissan would have the temerity and courage to participate. This heroic demonstration of faith, this defining moment, would determine the destiny of each individual Jew.

We can now understand how the unique *halachot* of Pesach sharpened and amplified its role as a defining moment. The particulars that Hashem legislated made it impossible to equivocate about this decision. The Pesach had to be taken in advance and participants were required to register beforehand as well. Once one was included in the Pesach, it would be impossible to avoid detection by the Egyptians because the Pesach was eaten in groups, as families and neighborhoods. One was not allowed to snatch a piece of meat and eat it in hiding.

The Jews added insult to injury by splashing the blood of the Pesach, the Egyptian god, on the doorposts, marking the Jewish home, literally, marked for revenge at the hands of the Egyptians if the salvation would not arrive. Additionally, the manner in which the Pesach was eaten expressed this demonstration of faith in G-d and repudiation of the Egyptians. The Torah mandates:

You shall not eat it rare or boiled in water, except roasted over the fire its head with its legs and with its innards.

Shemot 12:9

אל תאכלו ממנו נא ובשר מבשרל במים כי אם
צלי אש ראשו על כרעיו ועל קרבו.
שמות יב:ט

The meat must be roasted on an open fire, which would obviously be done outdoors. The aroma of a barbecue is known to waft through the spring air and certainly permeated the homes of the Egyptians, who were surely furious at the spectacle. Meanwhile, the Jews sat eating their Pesach hastily, dressed in their travel clothes with their walking sticks at the ready, faithfully anticipating the imminent redemption, as the Torah describes:

And this is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste it is a Passover sacrifice to the Lord.

Shemot 12:11

וככה תאכלו אתו מתניכם הגרים נעליכם
ברגליכם ומקלכם בידכם ואכלתם אתו
בהפזון פסח הוא לה!
שמות יב:יא

We now have a greater appreciation of the significance of the Mitzvah of Pesach. The fundamental character of the redemption from Egypt was one-sided; we were unworthy, passive beneficiaries and G-d was the sole redeemer. It still was necessary for each Jew to make one decision- one expression of faith- to earn this salvation. The Pesach offering was this defining moment. In the Temple era, we reenacted this commitment annually with the offering of the korban Pesach, while today we do so at our seder table.

Perhaps in this light, we can appreciate the correlation between this mitzvah and the mitzvah of *milah*. *Milah* too represents a defining moment for a Jewish child. The act of circumcision is an irrevocable commitment to the covenantal community, one which also carries with it a measure of sacrifice beyond the actual pain of the procedure. There is a history of *mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice) for the performance of the mitzvah of *milah* dating back to Talmudic times (see

Shabbat 130a). Beyond this, the ongoing presence of the circumcision on one's body is itself a dramatic, undeniable symbol of Jewish identity. There are many known Holocaust anecdotes that describe how people who otherwise looked "Aryan" were exposed to be Jews by their Nazi tormentors by the presence of their circumcision. This is the ultimate commitment to G-d, similar to the one expressed by the Jews in Egypt.

We now appreciate why these two mitzvot carry their unique halachic categorization and the punishment of *karet*. *Karet*, spiritual excision, is as much a natural consequence as it is a punishment. It is obvious that one who does not make an unequivocal, sacrificial commitment cannot be a part of the community nor share in its destiny. Hence, the failure to perform Pesach or *milah* results in spiritual exclusion. In addition, we understand that because these mitzvot express our fundamental commitment to Hashem through self sacrifice, we perform them at the beginning of our life's journey, which exists on two planes- the individual and the communal. We perform the *milah* just after the birth of a child, the individual, and we perform the *Pesach* at the time of the birth of our nation which took place at the exodus.

Finally, we now understand why the presence of our prophet Eliyahu is felt at these two events. The Midrash teaches:

The Jewish people continued to perform circumcision until they were divided into kingdoms. Ephraim didn't perform circumcision and Eliyahu, who should be remembered for good, stood up and was zealous for G-d and said (Melachim I 19:10) "I have been zealous for the Lord." G-d said "You were always zealous regarding incest and now you were zealous. For your life, the Jewish people will not perform circumcision unless you see it with your own eyes." From here, the rabbis instituted setting an honorable chair for the angel of circumcision who is called Eliyahu, the angel of circumcision as it states (Malachi 3:1) "The angel of the covenant, whom you desire."

Yalkut Shimoni Parshat Lech Lecha

וכך היו ישראל מלין עד שנחלקו
לשתי ממלכות אפרים מנעו מהם
ברית מילה ועמד אליהו זכור לטוב
וקנא קנאה גדולה ויאמר קנא קנאתי
א"ל הקב"ה לעולם אתה מקנא קנאת
בשטים על גלוי עריות וקנאת כאן
חייך שאין ישראל עושין ברית מילה
עד שאתה רואה בעיניך, מכאן
התקינו חכמים להיות עושין מושב
כבוד למלאך הברית שנקרא אליהו
ז"ל מלאך הברית שנאמר ומלאך
הברית אשר אתם חפצים.
ילקוט שמעוני פרשת לך לך

According to this tradition, Eliyahu participates at the *milah* of every child as a response to his criticism of the Jewish people and their lack of commitment. The context of the verse that the Midrash cites is telling. Eliyahu stakes out his claim of zealotry after his dramatic victory over the idol Baal at Mount Carmel, when the Jews returned to their previously wicked practices. Eliyahu raced to the desert in despair, turning his back on the people, exposing their ambivalence. G-d teaches Eliyahu that despite the shortcomings of the Jews, they would always maintain a covenant, an unbroken commitment. This is expressed and symbolized by the circumcision; hence, Eliyahu is divinely ordained to witness this defining moment for each and every Jewish male child in history.

Similarly, he visits our homes each year as we sit at the seder to recount the Pesach, for the centerpiece of our seder experience is the korban Pesach. It is an indispensable part of our Haggadah liturgy, as we learn:

Rabban Gamliel would say: Anyone who has not said these three things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation and they are: Pesach, matzah and maror. Pesach in commemoration of the fact that the Omnipresent skipped over the houses of our forefathers. Matzah in commemoration of the redemption that our forefathers experienced. Maror in commemoration of the fact that the Egyptians made the lives of our forefathers in Egypt bitter.

Mishna, Pesachim 10:5

רבן גמליאל היה אומר כל שלא
אמר שלשה דברים אלו בפסח לא
יצא ידי חובתו ואלו הן פסח מצה
ומרור פסח על שום שפסח המקום
על בתי אבותינו במצרים מצה על
שום שנגאלו אבותינו במצרים
מרור על שום שמררו המצריים את
חיי אבותינו במצרים.
משנה פסחים י:ה

The three central motifs of the seder were wrapped together in one sandwich on the night of the exodus and eaten by Jews as their expression of their faith and impending freedom. Today, we eat the sandwich of matzah and maror, without the savory roasted meat of the Pesach, but we are conscious of its meaning and significance.

We recall the Pesach in various ways at our table, not merely to reconsider a sacrifice of bygone days, but to relive and rededicate ourselves to Hashem. Each year, we enable ourselves and our children to experience G-d's loving hand in reliving the redemption. We also remember the commitment and sacrifice of generations of Jews dating back to the Exodus, whose devotion expresses the meaning and message of the Pesach. Each year, we experience this defining moment and strengthen our unbroken commitment to Hashem, anticipating the redemption in our own lives.



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