

Animal Sacrifice and other Troubling Issues of the Korban Pesach

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Animal sacrifice is something to which we find it increasingly difficult to relate. Since the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, the Jewish people have served God without sacrificing the lives of His creatures, and we have become so resolved to this approach, that when confronted with the words of the Rambam¹ stating that when Moshiach arrives we will again sacrifice animals in the Temple, it engenders an uncomfortable feeling in response. For this reason alone, I believe it to be incumbent upon us to attempt to understand the purpose and meaning underlying animal sacrifice. For now, I would like to limit our discussion to the *korban pesach*. Why are we commanded to annually slaughter a sheep?

Aside from this general issue, the *korban pesach*, perhaps more than any other sacrifice, has troubling details and presentation. Below are but a few.

We are told (*Exodus 12:48-49*), “And when a convert will convert and bring a *pesach* for God, he shall have all his males circumcised, and then he may come close to bring it; and he shall be like a citizen of the land, and every uncircumcised male shall not eat from it. There shall be one *Torah* for the citizen and the convert that comes to dwell within you.”

What is being added by the phrase, “and he shall be like a citizen of the land”? Furthermore, isn’t it obvious that Jews and converts have to follow the same *Torah*?

Rashi in two different places² quotes the *Midrash* suggesting that we might have thought that every convert, subsequent to his conversion, immediately brings a *korban pesach*. Therefore, we are told, that he is just like any other citizen, and there is one *Torah*, teaching us that just like a born Jew only brings the *korban pesach* on the 14th of *Nissan*, so too the convert.

What a fantastic thought! Why would we even consider the possibility of a convert bringing a *korban pesach* in December, or a random day in July? After all, it’s the paschal lamb, which is the sacrifice for *Pesach*. Why would such a thought ever occur to us?

The very same verse also tells us that an uncircumcised male may not partake of the sacrifice. Obviously, that includes a non-Jew, who is defined as uncircumcised. Yet, the *Torah* also instructs us not to allow a *Ben-Neichar* to eat from the *korban pesach*³. What exactly is a *Ben Neichar*? The literal translation is “an estranged son”. To whom does this refer? It cannot mean a non-Jew, because we told elsewhere that the uncircumcised may not eat from it. So it must mean a circumcised male that is nonetheless estranged. For this reason, Onkelus translates the phrase to mean a Jew who has rejected God. Rashi explains it this way as well.

At first glance this *halachah* is very difficult to understand. Firstly, we are told to reproach a fellow Jew for violating the laws of the *Torah*, in the verse, “You shall surely rebuke your fellow (*Lev. 19:17*).” It is clear from this law that we do not desire to ostracize even one who is a sinner. Secondly, even if we would excommunicate an individual for

1. Laws of Kings chapter 11 Halachah 1.

2. *Exodus 12:48* and *Numbers 9:14*.

3. *Exodus 12:43*.

his rejection of the *Torah*, that does not exempt him from *mitzvos*! In several places in the *Talmud*⁴, Rav Huna is quoted as saying that if a person sinned and repeated the sin, it becomes permitted. The *Talmud* immediately asks, “Is it possible that a sin should become permitted?” Rather, in his mind it becomes as if it were permitted. Our evil inclination enjoys this attitude. The story is told of a certain irreligious Jew who found himself at the table of the Vilna Gaon. The fellow took an apple from the table and was about to eat from it without first reciting a blessing. When the Gaon saw this, he immediately reminded him to recite the blessing. The fellow apparently responded that he does so many sins, this one won’t even matter. The Gaon pointed out to him that he will be held accountable for the other sins he mentioned, as well as this one. Just because a person is a sinner, does not change his responsibilities to his creator! Every moment of our lives is a unique opportunity to foster our relationship with the Master of the Universe. So why is the estranged Jew not allowed to partake of the *korban pesach*?

Another striking *halachah* is the *mitzvah* of *Pesach Sheini*. We are told in Numbers 9:11 that if an individual was prevented from bringing the *korban pesach*, he should bring it one month later. Since when does one get a second chance to perform a *mitzvah*?

It certainly is fortunate that one gets a second chance for this *mitzvah*, however, because the consequence of failing to bring the paschal lamb is *kares*. While there are various explanations as to what exactly this entails (losing one’s share in the next world, his children dying in his lifetime, etc.), none of them are insignificant to say the least! What is remarkable is that there are only two positive commandments that if one fails to perform them, the consequence is *kareis*. Circumcision and *korban pesach*. Apparently, this *mitzvah* is really important. If so, what is its significance?

In fact, there are two times a year that all of the Jewish People formally recite, “*Leshanah habaah beYerushalayim* – next year in Jerusalem.” One is *Yom Kippur* and the other is at the end of the *Haggadah*, on the night of the *seder*. Why these two nights? My Rebbi, Rav Aharon Kahn שליט”א, likes to explain that on these two nights of the year, the basic service of God is missing. On *Yom Kippur* we have no *Kohen Gadol* and no *seirim*, the essential sacrifices of the day. On *Pesach* we have no *korban pesach*.

But what’s the big deal?

Let’s begin with *Shabbos HaGadol*. The *Shabbos* immediately prior to *Pesach* is referred to as *Shabbos HaGadol*, the “great Sabbath”. What is so great about it? The Tur⁵ explains that the Egyptians worshipped the sheep, or, perhaps more accurately, the constellation Aries. On the tenth of *Nissan*, which was a *Shabbos* the year of the exodus, the Jews were commanded to set aside a sheep, and bind it to their beds, to ensure that it would not incur a blemish. Imagine the scene, all the Jews carrying, or leading sheep around to their homes, and tying them to their bedposts. Upon seeing this bizarre scene, the Egyptian’s ask the Jews what they are doing.

“Hey, Jew, what are you doing with those sheep?”

“Who me? Oh, nothing, we’re just binding them to our bedposts so that it won’t get a blemish, because in four days were gonna kill it, *shmeat* it’s blood all over our doorposts and eat it up. I really love lamb chops. Why do you ask?”

We can only imagine the anger and hatred that the Egyptians must have experienced when they discovered that their god was about to be publicly defiled by the Jews. Nonetheless, God prevented them from even responding. It is

4. Yuma 86b, 87a, Moed Katan 27b, Sota 22a, Kiddushin 20a, 40a, Erchin 30b.

5. Orach Chaim 430.

because of this great miracle that the *Shabbos* before *Pesach* is called *Shabbos HaGadol*.

One wonders why God was interested in such *chutzpah*. Did the Master of the Universe want the Jews to have a stiffer neck then they had already? Is brazenness a desirable trait?

The Rambam explains this at length in his *Moreh Nevuchim*⁶. The holy *Zohar* testifies to the fact that when the Jews left Egypt they were still idolaters⁷. They maintained the superficial aspects of their tradition⁸, but internally, they were indistinguishable from the idolatrous Egyptians. The Jews firmly believed in the power of Aries as well. Since the sun is in Aries during *Nissan*, it was at the peak of its might. Specifically for this reason, God commanded the Jews to perform an act that they surely thought would result in certain death, and yet through that act, their lives would be spared. Upon slaughtering the sheep, the Jews were to sprinkle the blood on their doorposts. Every Jewish door with this blood on it was spared from the Angel of Death. According to the Rambam, the *korban pesach* was a sacrifice that expressed a total rejection of this form of idolatry, and a commitment to the one true God.

Imagine what it must have been like, what conflicts must have occurred in their minds and hearts when they decided to go through with an act of suicide to commit themselves to *HaShem*. They truly feared the power of the sheep, and yet they were willing to defile it, in an act of dedication and commitment to the one true Creator. It's actually rather inspiring.

With this, the *Sefer HaChinuch*⁹ explains why a non-believer is prohibited from eating the *korban pesach*. The purpose of the paschal lamb is to serve as a sign and a remembrance that at that point in history we committed ourselves to *HaShem*, and entered into the covenant of *Torah* and trust. It is therefore inappropriate for an individual to partake who represents the opposite of that, one who denies the *Torah* and trusts not in God.

If we understand the *korban pesach* this way, I think that we can answer all of our questions.

Why should we annually slaughter a sheep? On the most basic level, every year, we renew our commitment to *HaShem* through exactly the same vehicle, at exactly the same time, as our ancestors. We again make the statement that we do not believe in the power of the stars. In the month of *Nissan*, when Aries is in power, we take a sheep and we sacrifice it to the true Almighty, again forging a covenant of belief and trust in God. Coupled with the *mitzvah* on the *seder* night¹⁰ to view ourselves as personally leaving Egypt, this is a powerful message indeed.

Why would it ever occur to us to suggest that a convert should immediately bring the paschal lamb, even if he converts in October? The answer is because the *korban pesach* is the sacrifice of rejection of idolatry and commitment to the one true God. It therefore makes a lot of sense¹¹.

We already explained why a non-believer would be prohibited from partaking based on this approach.

Why is *korban pesach* so significant that the consequence is *kares* and one even gets a second chance if he was unable to bring it? I think that the answer is clear. If one refrains from sacrificing the *korban pesach*, he appears to be

6. Vol. 3 chap. 46.

7. See *Zohar* II 170b.

8. See *Mechilta* D'Rabbi Yishmael Bo Parshah 5 and *Psikta Zutresa* Devarim Parshas Ki Savo 46a.

9. *Mitzvah* 13.

10. *Pesachim* 116b.

11. For a striking application of this idea in Halachah, see the *Meshech Chochmah* to *Bamidbar* 9:7.

denying everything that it represents. Since that which it represents is so critical to our identity as Jews¹², the punishment for failing to sacrifice it is *kareis*, but on the other hand, its message is so critical that one who was unable to bring it, receives a second chance.

This is also why we say *leshanah habaah beYerushalayim* at the end of the *seder*. Even though, hopefully, after we have relived the story of the exodus, the feeling that we personally left Egypt is so potent that we burst out into the singing of *hallel*, nonetheless, the most vivid expression of the resulting commitment is absent.

There are also two times a year when we eat an egg. One is at the meal immediately prior to *Tishah B'Av*, when we mourn the destruction of the Temple, and the second is on the *seder* night. An egg is the food of a mourner¹³, and there is a sense of mourning in our *seder*, because we are unable to fully express our dedication to *HaShem* without the Temple.

May the Temple be rebuilt soon in our days so that we may once again be able to fully express our dedication and love for the one true God.

LeShanah Habaah BeYerushalayim

12. As it says in Meggilah 13a, one who rejects idolatry is called "Yehudi".

13. See Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 378:9.