Blood, Sweat, and Tears: Pesach, Milah, and the Total Demand of Avodat HaShem

by Rabbi Daniel Fridman

By any metric, Pesach is not an easy holiday. Whether it is the many hours we spend getting rid of our Chametz, preparing countless Kosher-for-Pesach meals, or acquiring all of the accessories that we will need for our Sedarim, Pesach certainly exacts its toll, physically, emotionally, and financially. Prima facie, it hardly seems to fit any reasonable description of Zeman Cheirrutaim, certainly not in the superficial sense of the term.

Chazal teach that the Jewish people merited redemption from Egypt on the basis of their performance of two mitzvot; offering the Korban Pesach and undertaking Brit Milah. Of course, the common denominator between these two institutions is the very graphic and central motif of blood, which was spread on the doorposts in the case of the Korban Pesach and is an essential element of Milah. What message is inherent in this teaching of Chazal?

On the eve of redemption, the Jew, weary to the bone from generations of brutal oppression, has suddenly been told that the Almighty is poised to liberate His very own chosen people. The primary human agent of the Exodus, Moshe Rabbeinu, had to internalize this message on his journey back from Midyan, and bechekhor Yisrael, his ‘firstborn child.’ The Jew has recently witnessed Hashem literally overturning His own Creation in bringing justice to the Egyptians and conferring unique status upon the Jewish people. In light of these miraculous events which were being wrought on their behalf, it would have been very easy, and highly tempting, for any member of the Jewish people to come to the mistaken conclusion that this new status of being chosen, selected, and exalted would demand absolutely nothing of them. Hard work and sacrifice, Irui and Avodat Pareah, are nothing more than relics of a slavish past.

Amidst the sheer joy of the moment, what would have been so easily lost is that our selection as Hashem’s firstborn was not about superiority for its own sake. On the contrary, the Jewish people was deposed of their status of possession, and is an essential element of Milah. What message is inherent in this teaching of Chazal?

As Moshe is saved only when the blood of Milah is extracted from his son, he is transformed into the ‘Chattan Damim’, (Shemot 4:24). The primary human agent of the Exodus, Moshe Rabbeinu, himself, had to internalize this message on his journey back from Midyan, when he encountered Hashem -- “VaYehi BaDerech BaMidyan, VaYifgishaihu Hashem VaYivasek M’, ‘when he was on the way, in an inn, that Hashem met him and sought to put him to death’ (Devarim 4:7) will always be totally contingent upon “Im Shamo’a Tishe’em BeKoli VaShamartem Et Briti HaGadol Asher Lo Elokim Kerovim Ailav, ‘if you obey Me and keep My covenant’ (Shemot 19:5) -- the Bnei Yisrael’s observance of their covenant with Hashem.

Often, the Jewish people would be asked for their sweat, on occasion, for their tears, and when necessary, even their blood. And, when asked, we must be prepared to comply, without hesitation of any kind. The primary human agent of the Exodus, Moshe Rabbeinu, had to internalize this message on his journey back from Midyan, when he encountered Hashem -- “VaYehi BaDerech BaMidyan, VaYifgishaihu Hashem VaYivasek M’, ‘now he was on the way, in an inn, that Hashem met him and sought to put him to death’ (Devarim 4:24). As Moshe is saved only when the blood of Milah is extracted from his son, he is transformed into the “Chattan Damim”, literally the “bridegroom of blood.” Committing oneself to Avodat Hashem, Moshe learned at this early phase through the Milah blood, demands the ultimate commitment. It was an early and sudden introduction into the ethos of "BeChal Nafschecha, Afli Hu Netol Et for all humankind of what it means for man to live a life in the shadow of, and with reverence for, his Creator. Thus, selection of the Jewish people was a mandate, and an enormously challenging one at that. As a matter of fact, within thirteen months of their departure from Egypt, the Jewish people would come to see their experience in Egypt as comparatively easy to the rigorous demands of a life of Shemirat HaMitzvot, “Zacharru Et HaDagah Asher Nochel BeMitzrayim Chinam”, “and we remembered the fish that we ate in Egypt at no cost” (BeMidbar 11:5)." 5

As the Mishnah in Avot teaches, compliance with Halachah may sometimes be achieved by bending our wills to that of our creator, “Aseh Retzono KeRitzoncha”, “make your will like His will” (Avot 2:4); at other times, when even this does not suffice, we have no choice but to simply nullify our wills in the face His demands, “Batel Retzona MiPenei Retzono”, “nullify your will to His will” (Ibid.). At the core of our religious experience is surrender.

Perhaps it was precisely this message that Hashem sought to impart to the Jewish people on the cusp of their redemption, through the dual imagery of the blood. The Jewish people’s experience as ‘His firstborn’ would not be characterized by self-indulgence, through lazily awaiting our proverbial reward of “Pi Shenayim” but by the considerable effort required to implement the Divine will. The enormous privilege of being Segulah MiChol Ha’Amim (chosen from all the nations) and the intimacy that comes with being with the “Goy Gadol Asher La Elokim Kerevim Ailav”, “a great nation to which Hashem is near” (Devarim 4:7) will always be totally contingent upon “Im Shamo’a Tishe’em BeKoli VeShamartem Et Briti HaGadol Asher Lo Elokim Kerovim Ailav, ‘if you obey Me and keep My covenant’ (Shemot 19:5) -- the Bnei Yisrael’s observance of their covenant with Hashem.

This week’s issue of Kol Torah has been generously sponsored by Rabbi Daniel Fridman.

1 Shemot Rabbah (Vilna) Parashat Bo 17 -- “Bnei Yisrael were saved from the Egyptians with two bloods, with the blood of the Pesach, and the blood of the Milah, as Yechezkel 16:6 states ‘I said to you, with your blood, live, and I said to you, with your blood, live’ -- with the blood of the Pesach and the blood of the Milah.”

2 These are the only two positive commandments associated with Kareit, underscoring their pairing. Kareit in conjunction with failure to perform a positive commandment may be more a natural result than a punishment, as it is in the context of violating a prohibition. This approach is consistent with the motif, central to both Milah and Korban Pesach, of entering the covenantal community.

3 See Yoma 75a, which elaborates on what exactly this statement refers to. Either it refers to the literal consumption of fish, or Arayot (forbidden sexual relations). The basis for the latter opinion is the “Chinam” component of the Pasuk. Certainly, they did not eat fish for free.

4 Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilchot Milah 3:9 -- “Come and see how stringent Milah is, that Moshe Rabbeinu was not granted even a temporary rest from it, even while he was travelling.”

5 The textual emphasis on blood itself is pronounced in this brief but critical incident. The Torah does not merely reference the Milah which was performed by Tziporah, but twice highlights the blood which extracted, “Ki Chattan Damim Atah Li”, “for you are the bridegroom of blood for me”, and then, “Chattan Damim LaMolot”, “a bridegroom of blood for the circumcision.”
**Shabbat HaGadol: What’s in the Name? Greatness and Redemption**

*by Ezra Seplowitz (’20)*

The Shabbat before every Pesach is known as “Shabbat HaGadol,” or “The Great Sabbath.” The term originates from the time of the Rishonim. While it is not exactly clear as to why Shabbat HaGadol was given this name, some claim that it relates to the custom of the Rabbi to give a long or great speech to his congregants on the Shabbat preceding Pesach.

Others claim that the name is a reference to the great miracle that Hashem performed on the 10th of Nissan prior to the Bnei Yisrael’s exodus from Egypt. On the 10th of Nissan, all of the Bnei Yisrael gathered the sheep which were to be slaughtered four days later as Korbanot. Throughout three Parashiyot, the Torah provides a perspective on the Egyptian’s relationship with sheep. In Parashat Vayigash, the Torah describes how shepherds were “‘Eivat Mitzrayim’” an “abhorrence to the Egyptians” (BeReishit 46:34); in Parashat Va’Eira, Moshe describes sheep as “‘Eivat Mitzrayim’” (Shemot 8:22); and in Parashat Mikeitz the Torah relates how the Egyptians could not eat together with the Jews, as it was a “‘Eivah’” for the Egyptians (Bereishit 43:32). Rashi famously takes the approach that the abhorrence, ‘Eivat, to which the Torah refers is a direct outgrowth of the Egyptians’ deification of the sheep (BeReishit 46:34 s.v. Ki To’eivat Hu). The Bnei Yisrael’s slaughter and consumption of the Egyptian deity would be regarded to as an abomination by the Egyptians. When the Bnei Yisrael began preparing for the slaughter of the sheep, there was an Egyptian backlash. The Egyptian people became infuriated when they saw the Bnei Yisrael tying down the sheep. Yet, a miracle occurred, and they did not attack us. The “Gadol” in Shabbat HaGadol refers to this great miracle.

A major question is raised as to why we celebrate this miracle on the Shabbat preceding Pesach as opposed to the 10th of Nissan. A common answer that is given is that Miriam died on the 10th of Nissan. Therefore, instead of celebrating on the day of the month in which the miracle took place, we celebrate on the day of the week in which the miracle took place -- Shabbat.

Others see the reason to the name Shabbat HaGadol as a reference to a Pasuk at the end of its associated Haftarah. At the end of the Haftarah (Sefer Malachi 4:4), the coming of Mashiach is referred to as ‘Gadol’: ‘Hinei Anochi Shote’i Acham Et Eiluy HuNavi Lefnei Bo Yom Hashem HaGadol VeHanorah’, “Behold, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the great, and terrible day of the Lord” (3:23).

In this Perek, Mal’achi addresses the Jewish people who had previously committed a variety of egregious acts, including: sorcery, adultery, lying, the cheating of laborers, abandoning the tithe and contributions to the Levites, and treating the widows, orphans, and stranger poorly. Mal’achi views the people as standing before God, and he wonders how they will ever face Him again. Hashem reminds them that if they turn back towards Him, He will turn back towards them, giving them bountiful rewards (3:7).

Furthermore, Mal’achi notices that the people have become skeptical of the concept of reward and punishment, Sechar Ve’Onesh. However, Mal’achi adamantly points out that a day will come when God will mete out appropriate punishments and rewards for everyone. That day is described with language of heat and fire, as Mal’achi portrays those who are evil being consumed: “Ki Hinei HaYom Ba Bo’er KaTumur, VeHeYu Chol Zeidim VeChol Oseih Rishah Kashe”, “For behold, that day is at hand, burning like an oven; all the arrogant and evildoers shall be straw” (3:19). Meanwhile, those people who have feared Hashem will be rewarded with all that they celebrate Pesach, marking the unique bond forged between Hashem and His firstborn at the Exodus, we must remind ourselves that being chosen demands of us great sacrifice and persistent effort.

Chag Kasher VeSameach.

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6 Tur O.C. 430 -- “and the Egyptians asked Bnei Yisrael what they had it [the animal] for, and they [Bnei Yisrael] responded that it was for slaughter for the Korban Pesach, a commandment of Hashem. And they [the Egyptians] became infuriated, as we intended to slaughter their gods.”

7 See Rabban HiliHot Milah 2:6, along with Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 268:1

8 Mechila DeRebbe Yishmael Parashat Bo, Masechta DePischa 15a -- “and when he converts, he should offer the Korban Pesach immediately” (e.g. if he converts on the 8th of Elul, then he would bring the Korban Pesach on the 8th of Elul)

9 Ibid. -- “The Pasuk of “KeEzrach HaAretz” (Shemot 12:48) comes to teach that he should be like any other resident of the land, and therefore bring the Korban Pesach on the 14th of Nissan.”

10 Yevamos 47a -- “The Sages taught in a Baraita: With regard to a potential convert who comes to a court in order to convert, at the present time, when the Jews are in exile, the judges of the court say to him: What did you see that motivated you to come to convert? Don’t you know that the Jewish people at the present time are anguish, suppressed, despised, and harassed, and hardships are frequently visited upon them? If he says: I know, and although I am unworthy of joining the Jewish people and sharing in their sorrow, I nevertheless desire to do so, then the court accepts him immediately to begin the conversion process.” (Translation courtesy of Sefaria.org)
Fathers, Sons, and the Relationship between Shabbat HaGadol and Pesach
by Aryeh Brusowankin (‘18)

Like in all non-leap years, Parashat Tzav is the last Shabbat before Pesach. The last Shabbat before Pesach is known as Shabbat HaGadol, and when it comes time to read the Haftarah, congregations all across the world will replace the regular Haftarah for Parashat Tzav with an excerpt from the third chapter in Sefer Mal’achi. In these Pesukim, Hashem, through the prophet Mal’achi, relates to the Bnei Yisrael the process of Teshuva and the potential consequences of not performing it. The Sefer ends with Hashem telling the people that He will send Eliyahu HaNavi to them and that he will “VeHeisheiv Lev Avot al Banim VeLev Banim al Avotam Pen Avo VeHekeiti Et Ha’aretz Cherem” (Mal’achi 3:24). This pasuk is a bit strange, as it literally translates as “and he will return the hearts of the father on the children and the hearts of the children on their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with utter destruction.” What does returning the hearts of the father on the children, or vice versa, mean?

Rashi (Ibid. s.v. Al Banim) adds in the word “Yedei” to the pasuk. It therefore reads: “Al Yedei Banim”, that “the fathers will return to Hashem through their children” (and vice versa). With this translation in hand, the Pasuk suddenly becomes grammatically and syntactically understandable. However, a few questions still remain. What does it mean that the fathers will return to God via the hands of their children, and the children through the hands of the father? How will that happen? Rashi (Ibid.) explains that Eliyahu HaNav'i will go to the children and tell them to “Go and speak to your fathers, and tell them to adopt the ways of Hashem.” Eliyahu will do the same for the fathers. Radak (Ibid.) explains it slightly differently, replacing the word “Al” with “Im” (with). The fathers will return to Hashem with their children — they will both return together.

A fundamental question emerges from the calendar context of the Haftarah: What does this story have to do at all with Pesach and the Bnei Yisrael’s exodus from Egypt? To understand the connection, it is necessary go look at the story of Pesach in Parashat Bo. Tucked in at the very end of the Parashah (Shemot 13), a connection can be found. After the sacrifice of the Korban Pesach and the exodus, the Torah relates the Mitzvah of Pidyon Haben — redeeming the firstborn male. Moshe explains that once in Eretz Yisrael, every firstborn son belongs to Hashem and must be redeemed. Then he adds something very important — “VeHaqaa Ki Yishalchu Bincha Machan Leimor Mach Zot, Ve’Amarta Elian BeChozek Yad Hotzi’anu Hashem MeMitzrayim MeB’et Avadim”, “And it shall be when your son will ask you at some future time, ‘What is this?’ and you shall say to him, ‘with a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt from the house of bondage.’” (Shemot 13:14)

On its face, this Pasuk is fairly straightforward. The son asks his father about Pidyon HaBen, and the father responds by telling him about Yetziat Mitzrayim. However, this Pasuk also relates a linguistic and geographic subtext. Unlike a few Pesukim earlier (Shemot 13:8), where the commandment of VeHigadetah, to tell your children about Yetziat Mitzrayim, is brought up, the content of this Pasuk applies only in Israel. It is also more of a prediction about a conversation between father and son than a direct commandment. In the future, in Eretz Yisrael, the son will ask his father about the Pidyon Haben, and the father will respond by telling him about Yetziat Mitzrayim. Both the son and the father are active participants — the father’s answer is a direct response to the son’s query.

When looked at in isolation, these differences may seem of ancillary interest. Yet when looked at with a wide lens, I think it can help us understand why the last twenty pesukim of Mal’achi are chosen as the Haftarah for Shabbat HaGadol, and how they relate to Pesach. Once the Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael, and the Mitzvah of Pidyon HaBen set in, the Bnei Yisrael had a means to connect back to Yetziat Mitzrayim; a need necessitated by the nation’s relative youth and inexperience. The Pidyon HaBen acts as a constant reminder of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Whenever the son asks about Pidyon HaBen, the father must respond by relating the Mitzvah’s historical origin: Hashem saving us and taking us out of Egypt. The Bnei Yisrael had a means to link back to Yetziat Mitzrayim.

However, generations later, during the time of Mal’achi, the Bnei Yisrael’s connection to Yetziat Mitzrayim wavered. The Bnei Yisrael had gotten to the point where if they didn’t return to Hashem, their time in Eretz Yisrael would be over. They and the land would be destroyed. If they wanted to survive, they would need to return to Hashem. But how could they return? Eliyahu HaNav'i would come back, the fathers would return through their sons, and their sons would return through their fathers. As the Radak explains, both father and son will return to Hashem BeYachad, together.

When the Bnei Yisrael came out of Egypt and entered Eretz Yisrael, the children were brought up by their fathers, who instilled in them the importance of Yetziat Mitzrayim and Hashem’s greatness whenever they asked. Yet, in Mal’achi, the Bnei Yisrael’s time was up. The lessons taught to the Bnei Yisrael were either lost forever, resulting in imminent destruction, or they were internalized somewhere deep down within their soul, where they were able to be accessed. This is the final test of Yetziat Mitzrayim: whether the lessons took root or not. And in the end, when it seemed as though the Bnei Yisrael were at their lowest point and had forgotten everything, they recovered. Fathers and sons together, each reinforcing the other, were able to remember the values of Yetziat Mitzrayim and find their way back to Hashem and their salvation.

Chametz Mixtures and Pet Food-A Bold and Controversial Approach-Part II
by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Last week we noted that the standard approach in the Orthodox community for decades has been that one should not serve one’s animals pet food that contain Chametz on Pesach. However, we set forth an argument permitting serving pet food containing Chametz, provided that the grain content of the pet food is less than fifty percent. Our motive for endeavoring to discover a lenient approach is the fact that many pets become seriously ill in response to a change in their diet, which in turn creates a significant disruption to a family.

We cited the rulings of Chacham Ben Zion Abbah Shaul and Chacham Ovadia Yosef who permitted feeding fish food containing Chametz on Pesach since the Chametz content is less than fifty percent and is unsuitable for human consumption. I argued, with support from Rav Dov Lior, that the same should be allowed for dog food.

Rav Schachter’s Response and a Possible Reply

I presented my approach to Rav Hershel Schachter and Rav Mordechai Willig for their review. Rav Schachter’s was surprised even by the ruling of Chacham Ovadia and Chacham Ben Zion regarding fish food; he stated that it was possible that
even fish food is Ra’ui LeAchilat Adam. He argued that it is possible that people would regard pet food as edible, if they did not know it was pet food. He cited Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach who suggests (Teshuvot Minchat Shlomo 1:17) that just because we moderns are “finicky” (Mifunakim is the Hebrew word that Rav Shlomo Zalman uses) and regard certain items to be disgusting, this does not necessarily give us the right to classify these items as unsuitable for human consumption. As evidence, Rav Shlomo Zalman cites the Rambam (Hilchot Tumat Ochlin 10:2) who writes that human ear and nose excretions, as well as human urine, are considered suitable for human consumption.

However, a possible response to Rav Schachter’s insight is the information posted at https://www.livescience.com/32515-will-eating-pet-food-kill-me.html. “Pet food is not made for human consumption. Most pet food is made from food humans won’t stomach, slaughterhouse leftovers such as organs, blood, and offal like the trim from hides (an indigestible but harmless filler)”. This appears to clarify and confirm the intuitive supposition that pet food is not Ra’ui LeAchilat Adam.

The Difficulty of Defining Ra’ui LeAchilat Adam

An example of the challenge of defining what is Eino Ra’ui LeAchilat Adam is the dispute between Poskim of the modern age regarding pure denatured alcohol. Rav Zvi Pesach Frank (Mikra’ei Kodesh 54) and Rav Moshe Feinstein (Teshuvot Igrot Moshe O.C. 3:62) rule that pure denatured alcohol is considered suitable for consumption. Rav Moshe explains that it is regarded as edible since “there are those [indigent alcoholics] who drink this with only slight additions and modifications.” On the other hand, Teshuvot Minchat Elazar (5:37 in the 5756 edition of Emet Publications) rules that essentially pure denatured alcohol is not considered suitable for consumption (though he notes that the common practice is to be strict about this matter). The Minchat Elazar does not believe that Ra’ui LeAchilat Kolev is determined for the entire community by the aberrant behavior of marginal members of society. The Halacha in general refers to such a situation as Batla Da’atan Eitzel Kol HaBeriyot (see, for example, Shulchan Aruch O.C. 168:6 and Yoreh De’ah 198:1). Rav Yosef Adler told me that Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik agrees with this approach, as we noted in last week’s article.

Rav Shimon Eider (Halachot of Pesach p. 25 footnote 90) cites that he heard that Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer, Rav Aharon Kotler and Rav Yaakov Kaminitzky agree with Rav Moshe’s approach regarding denatured alcohol. Accordingly, Rav Daniell Neustadt (The Monthly Halachic Discussion p.187) concludes that the majority of Poskim rule strictly about this matter. However, Rav Yosef Rosenstein of Baltimore notes that the problem with oral reports such as these (that are not supported by a written responsum), is that it is difficult to determine whether these great authorities meant their rulings as “bottom line Halacha” (Ikar Hadin) or simply as a Chumra (stringency). In fact, Rav Yaakov Kaminitzky is cited in Emet LeYa’akov on the Shulchan Aruch (p.200) as being lenient on this matter in case of very great need.

Rav Willig’s Response

Rav Willig also questioned even Rav Ovadia and Rav Ben Zion Abba Shaul’s assessment that fish food is not Ra’ui LeAchilat Adam. He suggested that perhaps with a bit of cooking or adding some onions, the food would be marginally edible for humans. We may add that the Halacha indeed has such a concept of animal food which is marginally edible for humans and is considered fit for human consumption. I refer to “Karshinin” (a type of bean), an item frequently mentioned in the Mishna and Gemara. Halacha regards the item as edible for humans, and it can even become Terumah (Terumot 11:9).

Rav Gedalia Felder (Yesodei Yeshurun 6:227) adopts a similar approach. He cites the Gemara (Eruvin 28b) that states bitter almonds are considered edible since they can be rendered edible by roasting them. Raw spaghetti that can be rendered edible simply by cooking it appears to be a modern analogue to the Gemara’s bitter almonds. Accordingly, if something can be rendered edible by a simple process, it is considered edible even before this process occurs. Interestingly, Dayan Yitzchak Weisz, Teshuvot Minchat Yitzchak 9:42, seems to use this principle to permit using a frozen Challah for Lechem Mishneh.

On the other hand, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky (Teshuvot Achiezer 3:31: addressing the question of the permissibility of a medicine that contains an inedible non-Kosher ingredient) writes (based on the Chavot Daat 103:1) that we consider the potential of an inedible item to be reconstituted only if it “Omeid Likach,” that this is what normally occurs. Thus, raw spaghetti is considered to be edible since it is normally cooked. Similarly, the Torah forbids using yeast on Pesach even though it is inedible, since it normally facilitates baking bread. Thus, one could argue that pet food is not analogous to bitter almonds since very few people modify pet food for consumption purposes.

Conclusion – Rav Baruch Gigi of Yeshivat Har Etzion

I also presented my approach to Rav Baruch Gigi, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, who is a Talmid Chacham and Poseik of stature. Rav Gigi agreed with my assessment, supported by both common sense and the website cited above, that pet food does not meet the Shulchan Aruch’s definition (Orach Chaim 442:4) of “Ma’achal Kol Bnei Adam,” “food that everyone would eat.” Nonetheless, Rav Gigi cautioned not to rely on this leniency unless it is a case of considerable need. Considering this limitation and the skepticism of Rav Schachter and Rav Willig about the lenient approach, pet owners should strive to find an alternative to serving their animals pet food that contains Chametz. Such alternatives include selling the animal to a non-Jew and placing the animal in the non-Jew’s home for the duration of the holiday or feeding the pet Chametz free pet food year round. However, if a viable alternative cannot be found, one can argue that it is permitted to serve pet food that contains Chametz content of less than fifty percent, and is purchased before the time Chametz becomes forbidden to benefit from (the fifth Halachic hour of the thirteen day of Nissan). As we concluded last week, one should consult his Rabbi for a ruling about this challenging issue.