

Thinking Torah

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Parashat Bo:

The Blood On The Doorposts

We don't like thinking about blood too much, but it would seem to figure rather prominently in the Torah's description of Yetziat Mitzrayim! Obviously, we have Moses' sign to the Israelites where he transformed water to blood. We return to the "water to blood" trick in the plague of blood when the mighty Nile turned into blood. (If you try to visualise it, the whole thing is exceptionally frightening and resembles something of a living nightmare!) In our parsha we return to the blood theme. The blood of the Paschal Lamb is painted onto the doorways of the Jewish homes in preparation for the auspicious and momentous night of the Exodus.

Let us examine this strange act. To what purpose were Bnei Yisrael required to perform this action? What did it do for us? Or was it for the Egyptians? Or God? Was this part of the ritual of the Paschal Lamb?

Chavruta:

1. See Shemot 12:3-29.

According to the pesukim, why did they have to put the blood on the doorposts?

Was the blood on the inside of the door or on the outside?

* See Rashi on 12:13,

* Ibn Ezra (Peirush Ha'aroch) on 12:7 ("verabim amru" to the end)

2. The blood of Pesach & the blood of Mila

* See Rashi 12:6. (D"H Vehaya)

What is he telling us here? In what way does this answer the question that he raises?

What is the connection with the pesukim in Yechezkel? Look them up!

* See Ezekiel 16:1 onwards) Yechezkel is telling a mashal (parable) here. What is the story that he tells? What is the lesson (nimshal) of the story?

* How does Rashi use the imagery of Yechezkel here in our context?

For pesukim relating to Brit Mila, see 12:44,48. Another interesting midrash about blood and a Brit Milah connection, see Rashi on 10:10 (D"H Ra'ah)

3. The Kli Yakar on 12:7 has a wonderful drash comparing the two different texts within the pesukim (7 and 22) here .

Shiur:

The events of the events of the night of Yetziat Mitzrayim, are known to us all, but yet remain somewhat vague and mysterious. It is bewildering just

to imagine how it all happened. What it was like to slaughter and roast the lamb in full glare of the Egyptians? And that night; the Jews restricted to their homes (12:22), with blood on the doorways; the family gathering, the waiting, the countdown to midnight. And then at midnight, the screams of the Egyptian families after the death of the firstborn, the hectic tumult of packing up, mobilization and the travel of an entire nation; all these events are difficult to picture. Other details are baffling: the decision to kill the firstborn in particular (and the firstborn of the animals?); the borrowing of silver and gold (12:35); the mysterious "Destroyer" (12:13,23); and the Erev Rav – the mixed multitude - who went out with B'nei Yisrael (12:38), a group who according to Chazal, cause so much trouble later on. Who were they?

We will make a start by attempting to look into some of the spiritual history of Am Yisrael. Where did Am Yisrael stand religiously, culturally, at this point?

PESACH AND MILAH

"A statement of Rav Matia ben Charash: 'And I passed over you, and saw you and you had reached the moment of maturation' (Yechezkel 16:8) - God said, 'The time has come to fulfill the promises that I made to Avraham, that I would redeem his sons'. But Am Yisrael had no mitzvot with which to occupy themselves - 'And you were naked and bare' (ibid). He gave them two mitzvot: The blood of Pesach and the blood of Milah..." (Rashi on 12:6)

Rashi brings a Midrash that is based upon verses from the prophecies of Yechezkel. Based on this text Rashi explains the demands made upon B'nei Yisrael on this special night. Yechezkel's description of the Israelites in their Egyptian Galut does not paint a particularly optimistic image. In fact, the position of Am Yisrael from Yechezkel's vantage point is worryingly fragile.

"As for your birth, when you were born, your umbilical cord was not cut, and you were not bathed in water ... nor were you swaddled. No one pitied you ... on the day you were born you were left lying, rejected, in the open field. When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: 'In your blood you shall live!'" (16:4-6)

Chapter 16 of Ezekiel, describes Am Yisrael's situation in Egypt as an abandoned newborn baby. The infant lies helpless, covered in the blood of childbirth. The baby's life is in the balance. Without some immediate assistance, the baby will not survive. This is the way that Yechezkel views Am Yisrael. They are helpless. At the birth of the nation they have no identity, no ability for independent action. They cannot act for themselves. They do not know who they are. If emergency aid is not given, Am Yisrael will not

survive.

In what manner is the situation of the Israelites so tenuous? Why are they in such dire peril? After all, they are a massive nation! Even Egypt feared their power! In another prophecy, Yechezkel explains that the danger to the existence of the nation is not the worry of physical survival. It is the concern for Israel's spirit. Yechezkel describes B'nei Yisrael's absorption into the Egyptian cultural mindset.

"When I made myself known to them in the Land of Egypt ... I said to them, 'Cast away, every one of you the detestable things that you are drawn to, do not defile yourselves with the gods of Egypt.' But they defied me and refused to listen." (Ez. 20:4-8)

The children of Israel have lived in Egypt for hundreds of years. (According to the pesukim, 430 years. According to Chazal, it is 210.) Despite their horrific slavery, and maybe because of it, they lack a substantial Jewish identity. They are fully attached to an Egyptian mindset. They wear the Egyptian fashions and live in mixed neighbourhoods (see Rashi D"H upasachti on 12:13). They worship the Egyptian gods. The Israelite people have no Jewish culture; they lack a distinct spiritual identity with a religion of their own. In this state, should God save them? Are these really the children of Abraham? In the words of Rashi (see above):

"...they had no mitzvot with which to occupy themselves."

This is simply a metaphor. There is nothing Jewish about them. They know that they are Jewish, but they do not know how to ACT Jewish!

What did God do? The Midrash informs us that God gave them the blood of Pesach, and the blood of Milah.

But what is this solution? How does it help?

Before this, let us just note something about the Midrashic reading of Yechezkel. Pay attention to the way in which the Midrash beautifully reverses the imagery of Yechezkel. In the Yechezkel story, God tells the child: "In your blood you will live!" The thrust of this comment is: Despite your bloodied state, and your abandonment, you shall live and be healthy. But the Midrash skilfully re-reads and reverses the verse directing it in a new direction. The Midrash states: "BeDamayich Chayee!" – Through the blood (of Pesach and Mila) you will live – i.e. you shall merit life! The blood is not the pathetic outcome of helplessness and tragic neglect, but rather, the key to a meaningful and optimistic future. The blood is the source of continued life.

But let us return to our original train of thought. Why is the blood of the Paschal Lamb such a critical commodity? What is this blood rite?

THE TEST OF THE BLOOD

" We know that the Egyptian Kevatim would worship the Zodiac sign of the sheep (Aries). To this end, they banned the slaughter of sheep and despised sheep traders and shepherds (Ex.8:22,Bereshit 46:34) It was for this very reason that we were commanded to slaughter the Paschal lamb, daubing its blood - in Egypt - on the doorways, in full view. This was to cleanse ourselves of those (idolatrous) views and to publicise the very opposite; in order to internalise the notion that the very act that they (Egypt) expect to bring our destruction (ie. the slaughter of the gods) will save us from destruction; 'And the Lord will pass over the door and not let the destroyer enter and smite your home.'(12:23)" [Moreh Nevuchim 3:46]

For the Rambam. the blood on the doorposts is a test of faith for the Jews in Egypt. By giving Am Yisrael the ritual of the Pesach lamb. God has entered the picture and has presented them with an ultimatum. This is how it works. The Egyptians claim that if the Israelites slaughter the sheep, they will bring ruin upon themselves. The gods will be angered and Israel will suffer. Hashem is telling Am Yisrael that the only way they will survive this night will be if they do slaughter the lamb, barbecuing it and daubing its blood on their doorways.

What does an assimilated Egyptian Jew do in such a situation? This must have been quite a dilemma. According to the Rambam that was the precise objective of the exercise! The night of Pesach was the night of choice. Here is the choice: Do you want to be a Jew or an Egyptian? Do you follow the God of the Israelites or the gods of Egypt? Tonight is the showdown. If you do not take the lamb, you will be an Egyptian. Whoever does take the lamb will be a Jew.

Now, let us not imagine that the choice was easy. They had to paint the blood on their doorposts. They had to mark themselves! How would the assimilated Jew feel in this situation? What would they say to their neighbours? According to the midrash (see Rashi 13:18), only one in five Jews passed this test of faith.

So the act of taking the Lamb and daubing its blood on ones front door, is in fact an act of identification. It is an act which marks oneself, separating the Jew from his Egyptian environment.

And now we can move a stage further. If the taking of the Pesach lamb is the symbol of rejection of Egyptian religious culture, and a commitment to God, Brit Milah

adds another dimension, an additional vital message. Milah is an indelible mark upon the flesh of the Jewish man. It is not a random operation. It is "Brito shel Avraham Avinu". It takes us back to the very roots of who we are and where we come from. Milah joins us not only to the God of Israel, but to the nation of Israel throughout its generations. It ties a Jew to the fate of the Jewish nation. (See Rav Soloveichik - Kol Dodi Dofek - about Mila and Tevilla - fate and destiny.)

The Pesach lamb proclaims a message; "I will not be an Egyptian. My destiny lies with the God of Israel." Milah proclaims, "I belong to the Jewish people. I share their fate."

(We should add the following point. Both Pesach and Mila are the only two mitzvot Asseh whose non-fulfilment bears a penalty of Karet - excommunication. This is because he who is unwilling to do these actions, by his very non-action, he demonstrated his lack of commitment. By inaction he inexorably divorces himself from the corpus of the Jewish nation as a religious-national entity. One cannot be part of a people if you are unwilling to stand up and be counted.

One more thing. Milah must precede Pesach (12:48). The association with the fate of the Jewish nation and with Jewish history precedes even the approach to the Jewish God. V'ein kaan makom leha'arich)

Maybe this is why the strange hybrid of Mila and Pesach can be found in other places in Tanach.

1. When B'nei Yisrael enter into the land of Israel, they perform a national Milah ceremony, followed by Pesach. (See Sefer Yehoshua Ch.5).
2. Likewise as we have claimed, Pesach is about getting rid of Avoda Zara and commitment to God. When the kings of Israel (the good ones) wanted to purge the idolatry from the nation and to reaffirm commitment to Hashem, they chose the festival of Pesach to enact their policy of teshuva and eradication of avoda Zara. See Divrei Hayamim II, ch. 30: **Chizkiyahu's** teshuva programme takes place on Pesach, and see Divrei Hayamim II, ch. 35: **King Yoshiyahu** conducts a public Pesach celebration as part of his own process of renewal.

THE HOUSE AS A MIZBEACH

In Egypt the lamb that we slaughtered was known as the "Pesach" (see passuk 21). But is it the "Korban Pesach"? Let me explain what I mean. A korban - a sacrifice - has certain technical rules. The first and primary requirement is a mizbeach, an altar. It is upon the altar that the blood of the animal is spilled and this action is the central focus in the "offering" of a korban. A second act usually involves the burning of parts of the animal upon the altar.

Every Korban requires an altar. The Avot built altars wherever they went, so that they could worship God. Noah came out of the ark and built an altar. Even when we talk about the pagan idolaters of Canaan, we talk of their altars. The altar is THE prime requirement for a korban.

Now in Egypt, there was no altar. So it would appear that the element of the korban is absent. That is fine. So it is not a Korban! After all, have we not suggested that the entire act was a symbolic recognition of God and a rejection of Avoda Zara? This is an act of identification; not a ritual sacrifice.

But a few niggling details would seem to point our attention towards the fact that this act has distinct Korban-like properties. These facts shall demand an explanation:

1) "Your lamb shall be **without blemish**, a yearling male" (12:5). The specific requirement of a one-year-old sheep is characteristic of the world of sacrifices. Furthermore, this sheep must be unblemished; another characteristic of a korban. Clearly, no one would enter a restaurant and check specifically for meat that conforms to the complex ritual definitions of sacrificial blemishes. This insistence on a blemish-free animal indicates to us that this is more than simply a festive repast.

2) "You shall not leave any of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it" (12:10). The prohibition of leaving meat over to the morning, as well as the requirement to burn the leftovers, are derived from the laws of sacrifices.

3) The expression "roasted with its head on its entrails and legs" (12:9), appears in only one other place in the entire Chumash - in the laws relating to the "chatat" (sin offering - see Vayikra 4:11). Even if this represents the quickest way of preparing the pesach (see 12:11), the linguistic parallel to the "chatat" still clearly indicates a relationship to korbanot.

So what do we do with these parallels? Either this animal is a korban - as these laws would reflect - or it is not - as the absence of the mizbeach would indicate.

THE HOUSE = AN ALTAR?

As we have mentioned, the problem with classifying the animal as a true "offering" relates to the absence of a mizbeach, an altar. But, after all, what actions are performed upon the altar?

The main action is the sprinkling of the blood, the "zrikat haDam". Here too, in Egypt, we have a service performed with the blood. It is the daubing of the blood

upon the doorposts and lintel. Could we suggest that the house, the home itself, takes on some sort of altar-like significance? At least one source in Chazal seems to point to such an association. The Gemara cites the view of Rav Yosef:

"Rav Yosef taught: There were three altars there [in Egypt] - the lintel and the two door-posts." (Pesachim 96a)

This statement clearly tells us that the blood ritual in Egypt parallels the dashing of blood against the altar in the Beit mikdash. Are we saying that the houses in Egypt had altar-like significance?

GOD'S PROPERTY

What does all this mean? First we should realise that within our parsha (perek 12) the Torah places special emphasis upon the notion of the house.

"On the tenth of the month, take a lamb to a family, a lamb for the HOUSE, and if the HOUSE (hold) is too small for a lamb take it with a neighbour near to your HOUSE ... take the blood and put it on the doorposts and lintel of the HOUSE which you will eat in.." (12:4-8)

The home is a vital component of the Paschal experience. The eating of the lamb is related to the house. Not only this, but God's protection is a protection of the entire house. See 12:13 and 23. The "Destroyer" will see the blood and will hop over the house. He will not be able "to enter the your houses to destroy." (12:23) What is this focus upon the home rather than the people inside it?

Secondly, let us note that two other details in the Pesach story remind us of korbanot and the mizbeach.:

1. First is the prohibition to leave the house the entire night (12:22). This law limits the eating of the Paschal Lamb to a specific location. This insistence is clearly reminiscent of the requirement to eat the Korban Pesach EXCLUSIVELY within the area prescribed by the walls of Jerusalem.
2. Likewise, the issue of Chametz is reflected in the laws of the mizbeach. Chametz was forbidden upon the altar (see Shemot 23:18, vayikra 2:11, 6:9-10).

All this heightens the sense that there is a powerful connection between the eating of the Pesach Lamb in Egypt and the notion of classic sacrificial rite. Furthermore, there are strong indications that the structure of the home adopted certain Altar like properties on this unique night.

Where is this leading?

I can only suggest theories at this point, but it would seem to me that two points should be made.

By placing the blood on our doorways, we are transforming our homes into a semi-altar. What is the significance of this house-altar?

The altar is God's place. It is where God's fire comes down from heaven (Vayikra 9:24; Melachim I 18:39) It is under God's protection. Maybe we are saying exactly that. We are placing our protection in Hashem, and maybe that is the reason that the strange "mashchit" - God's destroying angel - cannot touch us.

Additionally, we may suggest that the daubing of the blood is some sort of Kappara - atonement. It is as if our homes became a *mizbeach kappara* - an atoning altar, atoning for all the idolatry that we had performed, and letting the Jewish nation become reborn anew. Much like the sacrifices of Yom Kippur, this night would allow Am Yisrael to achieve some sense of reprieve, of renewal. Maybe this relates to the sense of commitment and religious upheaval and change that we noted earlier.

SUMMARY

We have seen two philosophies of the Pesach ritual. One sees this command as a religious action, an act of choosing God. The other perceives it as a metaphysical act that transform our homes into an altar of God.

Shabbat Shalom
