**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of

Miriam Heller z"l

whose yahrzeit falls on the seventh of Shvat,

by her niece, Vivian Singer.

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**In memory of Albert W. and Evelyn G. Bloom,**

**who creatively fulfilled the mitzva of "והגדת לבנך"**

**Shanen Bloom Werber, Dov Bloom, Elana Bloom, Michael Bloom**

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**Taking the Pesach Offering on the Tenth of Nisan**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

And the Lord spoke to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt, saying: This month shall be to you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you. Speak you to all the congregation of Israel, saying: In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household; and if the household be too small for a lamb, then shall he and his neighbor next to his house take one according to the number of the souls; according to every man's eating you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year; you shall take it from the sheep or from the goats; and you shall keep it to the fourteenth day of the same month; and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at dusk. (*Shemot* 12:1-6)

The *mishna* in *Pesachim* (9:5) lists the differences between the Pesach offering that was brought immediately prior to Israel's exodus from Egypt and the Pesach offering about which Israel was commanded to offer in future generations. One of the differences relates to the time at which the offering was set aside. In Egypt, the Israelites set aside the sheep on the tenth of Nisan, whereas the Pesach offering brought in later generations was taken on the day that it would be sacrificed – on the fourteenth of Nisan.

The *mitzva* to slaughter the Pesach offering applies on the fourteenth of the month. Why, then, were the Israelites in Egypt commanded to take the offering already on the tenth? The *gemara* (*Pesachim* 96a and elsewhere) learns from this that every offering must be examined for blemishes four days before it is to be sacrificed. However, the law of examining offerings for blemishes is a technical matter that does not require a special *mitzva* of taking the animal on the tenth of the month. Indeed, the commentators (see *Tosafot Yom Tov*, *Pesachim* 9:3, and others) note that the Pesach offering brought in later generations also requires an examination for blemishes, and yet there is no special *mitzva* to take it on the tenth. What, then, was the reason that in Egypt, they were to take the Pesach offering on the tenth of Nisan?

### Removing oneself from idol worship

The *Rishonim* explain the special commandment applying to the Pesach offering brought in Egypt in a different way:

The Shabbat before Pesach is called *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*, the Great Shabbat. The reason is that a great miracle was performed on that day. For the Pesach offering brought in Egypt was to be taken on the tenth of Nisan, as it is written: "In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household." And the Pesach on which Israel left Egypt fell out on Thursday, as it is stated in *Seder Olam.* Thus, it turns out that the tenth of the month fell out on Shabbat, and every person took a lamb for his Pesach offering and tied it to the legs of his bed. The Egyptians asked them, “What is this?” And they answered, “To slaughter it for the sake of the Pesach offering at the command of God.” And their [the Egyptians’] teeth were blunted, because they were slaughtering their gods and they were not permitted to say anything to them. Because of this miracle, it is called *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*. (*Tur, Orach Chayim* 430)

According to the *Tur*, in the context of the Pesach offering in Egypt, it was a *mitzva* to take the lamb on Shabbat (*Ha-Gadol*) and keep it alive for four days, tied to the legs of one's bed, in order to provoke the Egyptians, the lamb being one of their gods. After the Exodus from Egypt and the distancing from the religious struggle between Israel and Egypt, the reason for this *mitzva* no longer applied. The Torah therefore did not command a similar *mitzva* for future generations, and so the Pesach lamb is taken in close proximity to its being offered as a sacrifice.

Another story can be added to the *Tur*'sexplanation.

During the years of their bondage in Egypt, the people of Israel became defiled by the impurity of Egypt,[[1]](#footnote-1) the essence of which was idolatry. We do not necessarily judge them negatively for this, as God had not yet appeared to them and the force of their ancestral traditions was not strong enough to stand up against the culture of their Egyptian masters, which they saw fit to imitate either willingly or against their will.

God certainly would not reveal Himself to a nation of idolaters, lest they bring Him into their pantheon as another god, in addition to those that already exist there. What is unique about God is that He is only one! Therefore, God's revelation required the precondition that Israel abandon its idol worship. For this reason, Israel was commanded first and foremost to forsake its idolatry as a condition for accepting the other *mitzvot* – the first one being the *mitzva* of the Pesach offering brought in Egypt.

Then Moshe called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, “**Draw out,** and take you lambs according to your families, and slaughter the Pesach lamb.” (*Shemot* 12:21)

The Targum Yerushalmi (known as Targum Yonatan) reads:

Then Moshe called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, “**Draw out your hands from the idolatry of Egypt,** and take you lambs according to your families, and slaughter the Pesach lamb.”

*Mekhilta de-Rashbi* (12) presents a similar idea in a passage that deals with this verse:

R. Eliezer said: He said to them: Draw out your hands from idolatry.

This is also explicitly stated in *Yechezkel*:

In that day I lifted up My hand to them, to bring them forth out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had sought out for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the beauty of all lands. And I said to them: Cast you away every man the detestable things of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. (*Yechezkel* 20:6-7)

The combination of these sources with the explanation offered by the *Tur* indicates that in order to separate Israel from idolatry, it was not enough to forbid them to worship the gods of Egypt. They had to abolish it in actual practice, parallel to the law of a non-Jew who wishes to nullify an idol. They had to tie the lamb to the legs of their beds and for four days contemplate its limitations and the fact that it is not a god, while internalizing its imminent death. Only in the wake of this process did the lamb become fit to serve as an offering to God; only then did the people of Israel become fit to be God's people who offer sacrifices to Him.

The words of the *Tur* allude to another matter – the fulfillment of God's words to Moshe when He commanded him about the Pesach offering:

For I will go through the land of Egypt in that night… and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments; I am the Lord. (*Shemot* 12:12)

The execution of judgments against the gods of Egypt began on the tenth of the month, with the tying of the lamb to the legs of the bed on *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*, four days before the bringing of the Pesach offering. The tying of the lambs marked the beginning of the execution of judgments against the gods of Egypt.

### The Freedom that preceded the exodus from Egypt

The *Tur* notes yet another matter in this context: Israel's provocation of the Egyptians. What need was there for such provocation?

Perhaps we can say that this is the true meaning of freedom. The Exodus from Egypt was essentially a material matter; Israel left the land of Egypt and ceased to be enslaved to the Egyptians. But these changes do not reflect freedom in and of themselves. Freedom is a deep internal process of liberation from the feeling of "as the eyes of servants to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maiden to the hand of her mistress" (*Tehillim* 123:2). The people of Israel were accustomed to viewing the Egyptians as their superiors, and they were habituated to seeing themselves as slaves who obey their masters. Freedom is first and foremost spiritual liberation from one's master, his culture, and his gods. The people of Israel reached this state before they left Egypt, in the four days between *Shabbat Ha-Gadol* and the day of Pesach, by infuriating the Egyptians, who could do nothing but grit their teeth in response.

According to what we have suggested, the request for freedom had to begin with the people of Israel, in their own souls, before God revealed Himself to them and redeemed them. This may be the meaning of the first reported action during the period of Israel's bondage in Egypt:

And the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the one was Shifra and the name of the other Puah. And he said, “When you do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, you shall look upon the birth-stool. If it be a son, then you shall kill him; but if it be a daughter, then she shall live.” But the midwives feared God and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the [male] children. (*Shemot* 1:15-17)

The story of the midwives is immersed in the account of the slavery before and after it, and its primary significance is therefore not evident. Beyond the depiction of the devotion to saving the lives of the children of Israel, the essence of the midwives’ action was a display of freedom. The midwives refused to yield to the king of Egypt; in trying times, they saw themselves as subject to the fear of God and their own consciences, and not to Pharaoh’s orders. The midwives are the righteous women by virtue of whom Israel was redeemed from Egypt,[[2]](#footnote-2) for it was they who first waved the flag of resistance to slavery, the flag of freedom.

The flag of freedom waved by the midwives was re-hoisted by all the people of Israel when they tied their lambs to the legs of their beds.

Let us now go back to Moshe's demand from Pharaoh during the entire length of the negotiations: to leave Egypt, to go on a three-day journey, and only then to offer their sacrifices. This demand took into account both the sensitivity of the Egyptians and their own fears regarding their reactions to the slaughtering of the Egyptian gods:

And Pharaoh called for Moshe and for Aharon and said, “Go you, sacrifice to your God in the land.” And he said, “It is not meet so to do; for we shall sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians to the Lord our God; lo, if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? We will go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God, as He shall command us.” (*Shemot* 8:21-23)

When Pharaoh repeatedly refused this request, the people of Israel went out to freedom with the taking of the Pesach lamb on the tenth of the month, waiting three days without actually leaving Egypt, and in the end sacrificing the Pesach offering in the presence of the Egyptians – despite their rage and infuriation, and without fear.

Thus, the slaughter of the Pesach lambs was a continuation of the provocation of the Egyptians described by the *Tur*. At the outset, Moshe proposed a plan that would not hurt the feelings of the Egyptians. Pharaoh's refusal to accept it dictated the policy of provocation, which included three days in Egypt, parallel to the "three days' journey," during which time instead of Israel going to a faraway place, they tied the lambs in plain sight of the Egyptians, notwithstanding their anger.

What remains puzzling in the words of the *Tur* is his noting that the teeth of the Egyptians were blunted because the Israelites were slaughtering the Egyptian gods and the Egyptians were not permitted to say anything to them. The *Tur* does not explain why, in fact, the Egyptians did not object.

The explanation may lie in a point that we have explained elsewhere – that the three days of darkness were between the tenth of the month and the day of the bringing of the Pesach offering. Accordingly, even though the Egyptians heard the bleating of the sheep that were tied to the beds, they could not do anything, for no one moved for three days.

### Why was the offering of the Pesach Lamb delayed?

So far, we have explained the events based on the words of the *Tur.* In this section, we will propose a different explanation as to why the taking of the Pesach lamb was pushed up to the tenth of the month.

Until this point, our question has been: Since the Pesach lamb was meant to be sacrificed only on the fourteenth of Nisan, why was taking the animal pushed up four days to the tenth of the month? But there is an interpretive possibility to reverse the question: Since the lamb was taken at God's command on the tenth of Nisan, why was it not immediately sacrificed? Why was its offering pushed off until the fourteenth of the month?

We wish to propose the following: There was indeed room to sacrifice the Pesach offering already on the tenth of Nisan, on the day that it was taken, but God determined that it should not be offered now, but rather only on the fourteenth, because the people were uncircumcised and could not eat the Pesach offering: "But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it" (*Shemot* 12:48). For this reason, the circumcision of the people of Israel was part of the process of offering the sacrifice, which began with the taking of the Pesach lamb. Once they took the animal for offering, the people of Israel were already in the framework of its sacrifice, and as part of that sacrifice, they all stopped, circumcised themselves on the eleventh of Nisan, recuperated for three days (which are days of physical pain and weakness following the cutting of the foreskin[[3]](#footnote-3)), and got up on the fourteen to offer the sacrifice.

There is a similarity between our proposal and what took place at the Pesach celebrated by Yehoshua when the people of Israel first entered the Promised Land. On the tenth of Nisan, Israel crossed the Jordan River:

And the people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month and encamped in Gilgal, on the east border of Jericho. (*Yehoshua* 4:19)

In other words, they came up out of the Jordan on the tenth of Nisan – the date on which in Egypt they took the lamb, *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*. Immediately afterwards, they underwent circumcision:

At that time, the Lord said to Yehoshua, “Make you knives of flint and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time.” And Yehoshua made him knives of flint, and circumcised the children of Israel at Givat-Ha-Aralot… but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, had not been circumcised… And He raised up their children in their stead; them did Yehoshua circumcise; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised by the way. (*Yehoshua* 5:2-7)

After their circumcision, they rested for three days:

And it came to pass, when all the nation were circumcised, every one of them, that they abode in their places in the camp until they were whole. (*Yehoshua* 5:8)

Immediately afterwards, they brought the Pesach offering:

And the children of Israel encamped in Gilgal; and they kept the Pesach on the fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Jericho. (*Yehoshua* 5:10)

### Regarding the Pesach offering and circumcision

Understanding circumcision as part of the process of bringing the Pesach offering requires us to explain the connection between the two *mitzvot*. What is the reason for the condition that the Torah establishes that without circumcision, the people of Israel cannot bring the Pesach offering?

Circumcision expresses the covenant of the Patriarchs. The covenant of circumcision was made between God and Avraham, and from that point on every appearance of God by the name of *El Shadai* is connected to it. That is the name through which God revealed Himself to the Patriarchs. Circumcision distinguished the people of Israel from the nations that surrounded them and prevented assimilation among the peoples of the land. The Patriarchs built their families as a separate unit that would eventually develop into a unique nation, but the people of Israel in Egypt desecrated the covenant of circumcision and forgot the covenant of their forefathers.

God appeared to Moshe in the burning bush on Mount Chorev in a new way and with a new name. Moshe was commanded to take the people of Israel with him and bring them to Mount Sinai to receive a new Torah and to enter into a new covenant with "God who brought them forth from Egypt" (*Bamidbar* 23:22). That covenant began with the Pesach offering, which heralded the new beginning with the command: "This month shall be to you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you" (*Shemot* 12:2). The beginning of the counting of time and the change in the way of counting it express a disavowal of the previous world, the world of servitude, and an embarking on a new path – the path of freedom, the establishment of the chosen people, and the receiving of the Torah.

But the Torah conditions the Pesach offering on circumcision, on the covenant of the Patriarchs. This is a continuation of the tradition established by the Patriarchs when they charted the course of their descendants after them. The covenant of the Pesach offering is not a revolution that is intended to abolish the old covenant, the covenant of the Patriarchs, the covenant of circumcision. The two together – the mixing of the blood of the Pesach offering and the blood of circumcision – will lead God's people to the expanses of history.

And for the kindness that You performed for our forefathers in Egypt, who had only two *mitzvot* – the blood of the Pesach offering and the blood of circumcision. This is the meaning of what is written: "And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood [lit., in your bloods], I said to you: In your blood live; yea, I said to you: In your blood, live" – this is the blood of the Pesach offering and the blood of circumcision. (*Pesikta Rabbati* 17)

### The Pesach offering, the house, and the Temple[[4]](#footnote-4)

Regarding the Pesach sacrifice, the Torah emphasizes "house" ten times:

And if the **household** be too little for a lamb, then shall he and his neighbor next to his **house** take one according to the number of the souls. (*Shemot* 12:4)

And they shall take of the blood and put it on the two side-posts and on the lintel, upon the **houses** wherein they shall eat it. (*Shemot* 12:7)

And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the **houses** where you are. (*Shemot* 12:13)

And none of you shall go out of the door of his **house** until the morning. (*Shemot* 12:22)

And He will not suffer the destroyer to come in to your **houses** to smite you. (*Shemot* 12:23)

And it shall come to pass, when you be come to the land which the Lord will give you, according as He has promised, that you shall keep this service. And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say to you: What mean you by this service? that you shall say: It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Pesach, for that He passed over the **houses** of the children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians and delivered our **houses**. (*Shemot* 12:25-27)

And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a **house** where there was not one dead. (*Shemot* 12:30)

It should be noted that the emphasis placed on the house is found also in connection with the Pesach offering brought in future generations, for verses 25-27, which present the description of the events that must be conveyed to the future generation, open with the words: "And it shall come to pass, when you be come to the land which the Lord will give you."

So it would also appear in the command regarding the Pesach offering brought in the second year of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness:

Speak to the children of Israel, saying: If any man of you or of your generations shall be unclean by reason of a dead body or be **in a journey afar off**, yet he shall keep the Pesach to the Lord. (*Bamidbar* 9:10)

But the man that is clean **and is not on a journey,** and forbears to keep the Pesach – that soul shall be cut off from his people. (*Bamidbar* 9:13)

A simple reading of the verses shows that the "far-off journey" mentioned here refers to distance from one's house; the verses are dealing with a person who is away from his house on the day of Pesach. According to the simple reading, the verses are not dealing with a person who is far away from the Temple, as they are understood by the Halakha. Someone who is far away from the Temple is not defined as one who is on a journey, but rather in terms such as: "If the place be too far from you" (*Devarim* 12:21; 14:24), or the like. According to this understanding, the far-off journey points to one's house as the critical place regarding the Pesach offering. On the face of it, according to this, even with the Pesach offerings of future generations, we should place blood on the lintels and side-posts of our houses, and not on the altar of God in the place that He will choose.

The verses in the book of *Devarim*, which deal at length with matters pertaining to the place that God will choose, understand the Pesach offering as it was understood by the Halakha: The Pesach offering must be brought to the place that God will choose, in His Temple and on His altar, and not in your gates and in your tents:

You may not sacrifice the Pesach offering within any of your gates, which the Lord your God gives you; but at the place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell in, there you shall sacrifice the Pesach offering at even, at the going down of the sun, at the season that you came forth out of Egypt. And you shall roast and eat it in the place that the Lord your God shall choose; and you shall turn in the morning and go to your tents. (*Devarim* 16:5-7)

What is the meaning of the contradiction between the different passages?

Perhaps the contradiction alludes to the fact that the people of Israel were in two different situations on the day of the sacrifice of the Pesach offering. After the plague of the firstborn, all of the people of Israel – six hundred thousand people (*Shemot* 12:37) – left Raamses and went to Sukkot, even though many members of Israel did not live in that area. Unless we want to rely on miracles, we must say that they were all in Raamses for the day of Pesach, and that they had all gathered there before Pesach in anticipation of the Exodus. Perhaps they did this during the three days of darkness, which according to our understanding were the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth of Nisan.

If what we are saying is correct, Raamses on the day of Pesach was full of Israelites who had come there in anticipation of the Exodus, and they spent the night of Pesach there without a house. They all had to bring the Pesach offering, and it is possible that for this purpose they all took the lamb that had been taken on the tenth of the month, and over the course of the next three days went with it to Raamses in order to sacrifice it on the eve of their departure. The Torah does not explain how all these homeless people brought the Pesach offering in Raamses, for they did not have lintels or door-posts on which to put the blood of the Pesach lamb. In what way, then, did the fact that the lamb that they were eating was a sacrifice find expression? It is possible that they had to build an altar and sprinkle the blood on it, as was the case with all sacrifices in later generations, but the Torah focuses on what was done by the Israelites who lived in Raamses, who put the blood on the side-posts of their houses.

The city of Raamses looked like Jerusalem in the days of the pilgrimage festivals. The residents of Jerusalem ate the Pesach offering in their houses, while the pilgrims ate in in the streets of the city. Only in *Devarim* does the Torah relate to the pilgrims who come from far away to the place that God will choose, stating the law applying to them. The Halakha established, based on the uniform nature of the Pesach offering that was brought in future generations, that everybody, including the residents of Jerusalem, was to offer their sacrifices in the place chosen by God, in the Temple, and not as it would appear from the verses in the book of *Shemot* and the book of *Bamidbar.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Once again, if what we say is correct, we have another explanation of the three day gap between the tenth of Nisan, on which the people were told of the redemption and each person took his lamb, and the fourteenth of the month, on which the animal was sacrificed. During those three days, they all "made a pilgrimage" to Raamses, in preparation for the Exodus from Egypt, and for this purpose the Torah commanded that the lamb be taken already on the tenth.

For what reason did Raamses merit to be for a short time like Jerusalem? We suggested elsewhere that Yosef selected the land of Goshen specifically for his brothers so that they would be able to conduct their lives in accordance with their ancestral traditions and not intermingle with the Egyptians and their economy on the banks of the Nile. In the land of Goshen there was Raamses (*Bereishit* 47:1, 11). In Raamses continued to live those Israelites who preserved the tradition of their forefathers, and especially the tribe of Levi; the rest of the Israelites ignored Yosef's instructions and moved to the land of the Nile and became assimilated in Egypt. It is possible that the land of Raamses was not stricken by the plagues of Egypt, because that was where the Israelites originally settled, and it was primarily the land of the Nile that the plagues struck. But the plague of the firstborn did not pass over any part of Egypt or any Egyptian. It did not distinguish between cities or between houses; it was only the people of Israel who were saved from it because of the blood of their Pesach offerings.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. See primarily *Yechezkel* 20 and 23, and *Chazal* in many places. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Compare *Sota* (11b) for a different interpretation of their righteousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Shabbat* 9:3, and also *Bereishit* 34:25 – a verse that deals with the third day following circumcision, "when they were in pain." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I studied the material included in this section together with R. Aharon Friedman, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh, and I present here our joint conclusions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Our proposed understanding is by no means simple; it follows from what appears to us as a contradiction between the verses. To clarify: We find in Scripture and in the general approach of the Halakha – which is also rooted in the Written Law – three principles: 1) Bringing the Pesach offering in one's house, with blood on the door-posts and lintel – in Raamses at the time of the Exodus from Egypt and in Jerusalem when the Temple stood; 2) Bringing the Pesach offering as an ordinary sacrifice on the altar in the place that God will choose by one who comes from far off; 3) All of Israel are obligated to bring the Pesach offering in a uniform matter and based on the same Halakha.

   It is impossible to waive the third principle – the uniform Halakha for all of Israel. Therefore, in the end even the residents of Jerusalem brought the Pesach offering as did the other pilgrims in the place that God will choose on His altar in His Temple. But even the first principle, which was set aside by the final Halakha, was written in the Torah in the book of *Shemot* and in the book of *Bamidbar*. We emphasize that our proposal is merely an attempt to reconcile the contradiction; it need not be accepted. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)