

PASSOVER: A JEWISH SPIRITUALITY

THE TORAH PORTION FOR PASSOVER: Ex. 12:21-51

HAFTARAH: Josh. 3:5-7; 5:2-6:1, 27

“On every Pesach a Jew becomes like a new person, like a newborn child each of us as we came forth from Egypt.” The *Sefat Emet* speaks of our innermost point, the divine spark, as being renewed. That point is called *lehem ‘oni* (poor man’s bread) because like *matzah* it is like unfermented dough. Our task is to expand that point “as we come forth from Egypt”.

...Suddenly, in the annual cycle of Torah readings, our Torah narrative is interrupted to tell of the *Pesach* [Passover]—that Israel might be prepared for God’s final action. The people are, themselves, called to decisive action. In the Torah account Moses instructs the people “Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover offering” (12:21). The Hebrew text tells of a double, decisive action “draw out and pick yourselves”.

Why the unusual double combination of verbs? The Israelites are called by God to commit themselves to positive participation in their redemption. While some commentators see the double instruction as simply an emphasis on the *immediate* nature of the directive others see an instruction to perform two separate actions. Rashi suggests that those who have lambs should draw them out, and those that have none should procure one for themselves. Another suggestion reflects a metaphoric sense to the instruction. The Israelites should ‘draw out’ their hands from idolatry and ‘take to’ *mitzvot* [the commandments.]

This interpretation of God’s instruction challenges the people to action as a sign of their commitment to God. To take a symbol that is ‘of the gods’ for the Egyptians and prepare it as a sacrifice, splattering its life blood upon the doorposts of their houses, was both an act of defiance to the Egyptians, and an act of faith and commitment to Israel’s God – a conscious act of separation from the culture of their surroundings.

Said the Holy One, blessed be He to Moses: As long as the Israelites worship the Egyptian gods, they shall not be redeemed. Go tell them to forsake their evil ways and repudiate idolatry – as it is written: “Draw out and take you” – that is to say: Withdraw your hands from idolatry and take you a lamb, and slaughter thereby the gods of Egypt and make the Passover. (Shemot Rabbah 16,2)

Israel was called upon to perform an action that would symbolize both their physical release from bondage and their release from a cultural and religious enslavement. The people were called upon to demonstrate to their oppressors, to themselves and to God their acceptance of the true God. Linked to the taking of the lamb is the puzzling instruction that this should be done four days in advance of the lamb’s slaughter (12:2-6). This instruction is unique to *Pesach Mizrayim* but not *Pesach Dorot* (the Passover of the Ages). The *Mekilta* suggests that God gave the people two precepts by which they would merit their redemption: The Blood of the Passover, and the Blood of Circumcision. Keeping these precepts linked the redemption with the pledge of God to Abraham and his sons [and daughters]. Rashi suggests that the extra days were needed (1) to pick out the lamb (2) to circumcise themselves and allow three days to recover and (3) to slaughter the paschal lamb.

A further rite is linked to *Pesach Mizrayim* that is unique to this night only. You shall “take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts” (12:22). This verse is linked to v.13 “And the blood on the houses in which you dwell shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you...”. It shall be a sign *for you*. The blood on the doorposts was not to be taken as a sign for God but for the people. Rambam suggests that the act of killing a lamb (which was idolized and worshiped by the Egyptians) was an action of cleansing on the part of the Israelites —a public rejection of the cult of the Egyptians. Risking the wrath of the Egyptians the Israelites declare their commitment to God. As *Ha-ketav Veha-kabbalah* puts it:

The Israelites themselves were responsible in part for deferring their own redemption. First they had to be purified and show by some outstanding act of self sacrifice that they had repented of their ways. If they were willing to place their lives in danger in order to carry out the wishes of the almighty, that would be a token of their love of God. Consequently, God commanded them to slay the Egyptian god under conditions of widest publicity. First they had to procure the lamb, lead it through the streets without fear of Egyptian reaction; second, to slaughter it family by family, in groups, and finally they had to sprinkle its blood on the doorposts for every Egyptian to see, braving the vengeance of their former persecutors. The fulfillment of every detail would be proof of their complete faith in God. Therefore the blood would be a token “to you” and not to others.

While Rambam’s [Maimonides] explanation stresses the liberation of their minds from superstition (a spiritual cleansing) the latter explanation stresses their liberation from physical fear. They were ready to sacrifice their lives for service of God.

Even so, the Torah relates that the people found themselves somewhat unprepared to the horrific events of that night. Such is the impact of that awesome night on which the Lord “passed over” and the people unexpectedly found themselves “driven” from slavery to freedom, that it is reported that they took their dough before it was leavened and fled— “their kneading bowls wrapped in cloaks upon their shoulders” (12:34).

The insertion of the first Passover ritual at this strategic stage of the biblical story [of the plagues] effectively removes the event from the mists of time and situates it in the experience of present time. An event that had all the signs of a mythical story is brought into context as *the decisive event* – the great watershed in Israelite history. This is Israel’s ‘creation story’ around which all other events are interpreted. So it is that...

“You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendents. And when you enter the land which the Lord will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this rite. And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite/service?’ you shall say ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses’” (Ex. 12: 24-26).

This rite of Passover is remembered (12:26) as a time of passing over from bondage to human oppressors to freedom – to a willing ‘servitude’ to a new (divine) master. The new service, or rite (*ha’avodah*), marks their transition from serfs to divine servants (Fox). This is a night that is remembered for the participatory experience of Israel - the night on which their free act of submission - they “bowed low in homage” (12:27) - became the decisive point when the covenant promises of land v.25 and children v.23 became once more attainable.

This night, “That was for the Lord a night of vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (Ex. 12:42a), has become in the course of history “that same night [that] is the Lord’s, one of vigil for all the children of Israel through out the ages.” (Ex. 12:42b). The word vigil *shamor* (12:42) may be translated in the sense of ‘keeping watch’ as a shepherd keeps watch (Fox). This night was a night of vigil, of keeping watch, not only for God but for the children of Israel, *for all time*.

The power of this Passover night is remarkable. In all ages a personal and communal re-enactment of Passover has become the revealing event by which a people, Israel, understands its history, its vocation and its destiny. This redemptive experience of history, this redemption from oppression and slavery, this great and awesome action of God on behalf of God’s people, is experienced in all its historical perspective, as a reality in the present, and as promise for the future. It is a journey from servitude and ignominy to freedom and glory that is remembered in a self-conscious way. The contemporary Haggadah suggests how each person should remember the event “...In every generation one must see oneself as though having personally come forth from Egypt” (Mishnah, Pesachim 10:5).

This Passover story forms a paradigm of deliverance for the generations. The story is repeated again and again throughout Israel’s experience – earlier happenings and subsequent history are seen in relation to it. Israel’s codes of conduct are centred upon the reference point “...remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” (e.g. Deut 24:18, 22; Lev 19:34). The Exodus theme is revisited in the haftarah reading as Joshua crosses the Jordan in a re-enactment of Moses’ crossing of the Red Sea. Second Isaiah, writing in the context of the Babylonian exile, saw the return to Zion as a new Exodus (43:2, 19-21; 52:4-5). Amos reminds the Israelites that they are bound together as a family by God’s act of deliverance (Amos 2:9-11), Hosea attributes Israel’s knowledge of God as saviour to the Exodus event (Hosea 13:4) and Ezekiel emphasises God’s covenant with Israel (Ezek 20: 5-6).

HAFTARAH: All those permitted to partake of the Passover offering must be circumcised (Ex. 12:44). The haftarah (Josh. 5:2-12) brings together the “two bloods” of covenant. The blood of circumcision and the blood of the substitute lamb. The occasion of the fulfillment of the promise of the land is marked with the covenant sign of ritual circumcision (*brit milah*) and the celebration of the Passover (*korban Pesach*), signs that set aside God’s covenant people for all generations.

FOR REFLECTION: [1] It is said that what we celebrate at Passover is a “freedom in depth” that underlies our “surface” redemption. What are our deep bonds that enslave us today? [2] Those of us who are Christians are called to explore the depth of meaning that is contained within the Passover tradition and liturgy as relevant to our own redemptive story. Only then can we approach the Christological interpretations of our own faith. Comment.

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