

# Ritual of the Paschal Lamb in Egypt

RB By Rabbi Amy Bernstein

Exodus 12:7-8

(7) They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it. (8) They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs.

שמות י"ב:ז-ח'

(ז) וְלָקְחוּ מִן־הַדָּם וַיָּנִתּוּ עַל־שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזֹת  
וְעַל־הַמַּשְׁקוּף עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר־יֹאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ  
בָּהֶם: (ח) וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־הַבָּשָׂר בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה צֹלִי  
אֵשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עַל־מֵרָרִים יֹאכְלֶהוּ:

Exodus 12:11-14

(11) This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly: it is a passover offering to יהוה. (12) For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt, both human and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I יהוה. (13) And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. (14) This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to יהוה throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time.

שמות י"ב:יא-יד

(יא) וְכָכָה תֹאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ מְתַנִּיכִם חֲגָרִים  
נִעְלִיכֶם בְּרַגְלֵיכֶם וּמַקְלֵכֶם בְּיָדְכֶם וְאָכַלְתֶּם  
אֹתוֹ בַּחֲפָזוֹן פָּסַח הוּא לַיהוָה: (יב) וְעִבְרַתִּי  
בְּאֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה וְהִפֵּיתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר  
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵאָדָם וְעַד־בְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־אֱלֹהֵי  
מִצְרַיִם אֶעֱשֶׂה שְׁפָטִים אֲנִי יְהוָה: (יג) וְהָיָה  
הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאֹת עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם שָׁם  
וְרֹאִיתִי אֶת־הַדָּם וּפָסַחְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם וְלֹא־יָהֳרִי  
בָּכֶם נִגָּף לְמִשְׁחִית בְּהַכֹּתִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:  
(יד) וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזִכָּרוֹן וְחֻגָּתֶם אֹתוֹ  
תִּגְ לַיהוָה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגַּלֶּהוּ:

Rashi on Exodus 12:13:1

וְהָיָה הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאוֹת AND THE BLOOD SHALL BE UNTO YOU FOR A SIGN — it shall be to you for a sign, and not to others for a sign (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:13:1). From this we may learn that they put the blood only inside their houses.

רש"י על שמות י"ב:י"ג:א'

וְהָיָה הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאוֹת. לָכֶם לְאוֹת וְלֹא לְאַחֵרִים לְאוֹת (שם). מִכָּאן שֶׁלֹּא נָתְנוּ הַדָּם אֶלָּא מִבְּפָנִים:

Rashi on Exodus 12:13:2

וּרְאִיתִי אֶת הַדָּם AND WHEN I SEE THE BLOOD — But surely everything is manifest to Him and He therefore did not need to look whether the blood had been put on the door-posts? But the meaning is: God says, I will set My eye (my attention) to take notice of the fact that you are engaged in the performance of My commands — then will I pass over you (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:13:1).

רש"י על שמות י"ב:י"ג:ב'

וּרְאִיתִי אֶת הַדָּם. הַכֹּל גָּלוּי לְפָנָיו, אֶלָּא אָמַר הַקֹּב"ה, נֹתֵן אֲנִי אֶת עֵינִי לְרְאוֹת שְׂאֵתָם עֲסוּקִים בְּמִצְוֹתַי, וּפּוֹסֵחַ אֲנִי עֲלֵיכֶם (שם):

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 12:13:1

AND THE BLOOD SHALL BE TO YOU FOR A TOKEN. This shall be for you a token so that your hearts will be strong and will not weaken as you hear the cries of the Egyptians when their first-born die via the destroyer. [AND WHEN I SEE THE BLOOD.] I will pass over you and there will be no plague among you because I will see the blood. The blood will be a sign to the

אבן עזרא על שמות י"ב:י"ג:א'

וְזֶה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם לְאוֹת שִׁיחֹזֵק לִבְבְּכֶם וְלֹא יֵרֶךְ בְּשִׁמְעֵכֶם צַעֲקַת הַמִּצְרִיִּים בְּמוֹת בְּכוֹרֵיהֶם בַּעֲבוּר הַמִּשְׁחִית בַּעֲבוּר הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רוֹאֶה אֶפְסַח עֲלֵיכֶם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה בְכֶם נֶגֶף. כִּי זֶה הַדָּם יִהְיֶה לְאוֹת עַל הַמִּשְׁחִית:

destroyer.

**L.S. Baker Jr.** (from "Covered with blood: A better understanding of Exodus 12:7")

The Egyptians believed in an eternal afterlife, and their building practices (that the Israelites adopted) reflected this belief. Egyptians built their dwellings—from the lowly slave houses to the luxurious palaces—with the same building material, mud brick. Because this present life was temporary, they used temporary building materials for their homes; in contrast, they built their temples and tombs out of stone, reflective of an eternal afterlife.

The only exception to this architectural rule was the doorposts and lintels of their mud-brick homes. These were made out of stone. This construction reflected their belief in what constituted a human being. We must not underestimate the importance of names. To the ancient Egyptian, the name was a very real part of a person....royalty and nobility built great stone monuments with their names etched in as many places as possible. The less wealthy, of course, could not afford to do this. Instead, their houses, although primarily mudbrick, were constructed with stone doorposts and lintels. On these were inscribed the name of who lived there.

When God requires the Israelites to paint the blood they collected from the Passover lamb on the doorposts and lintels. God was asking them to cover their names with the blood of the lamb...at least one member of their family would not survive the night without it.

We, of course, have to learn the same lesson...The Israelites began their Exodus out of Egypt by putting the blood of the Passover lamb over their names, and began their journey following God. It is the same for us.

**Rabbi Marc Margolius** (from Mindful Torah for Our time; IJS weekly commentary)

Maimonides explains the ritual of the lamb and its blood as connected to Egyptian worship of the lamb, whose zodiac symbol corresponded to the early spring, representing the maturation of vegetation; he cites a tradition that many of the Israelites, too, had adopted the Egyptians' idolatrous worship of the lamb, and that the paschal sacrifice and the smearing of its blood therefore served as a public and private repudiation of such idolatry, both for the Israelites as well as the Egyptians."

The medieval Spanish commentator Rabbeinu Bachya explains that God therefore ordered the Israelites to slaughter the lamb and display its blood outside the door, to demonstrate to the Egyptians

*that this animal that they considered their symbol of success could not even protect itself. much less those who worshipped it. Moreover, the death of the lambs proved that the Exodus of the Jewish people did not occur thanks to any magical power of the lamb (whom the Israelites had served also) but that it had been orchestrated by a higher power. by the Holy One.*

In contrast to Bachya's emphasis on the intended impact of the blood on the Egyptians," another medieval Spanish commentator, Don Isaac Abarbanel, stresses its placement inside the threshold as a sign for the Israelites:

*He commanded that they take some of the lamb's blood and put it on the lintel and the two doorposts, since those places behind the door and the doorpost are where they used to put the reminder of the pagan worship in which they used to partake; therefore, now they were to put the blood they had spilled in order to show their contempt and make him angry...And the blood shall be for you - for the sign was for them, as testimony to themselves that they would no longer worship sheep-gods as they had previously, and that they were leaving Egypt because the hand of the Holy One backed them, doing away with the power of the sheep-god.*

We can thus posit that the blood was daubed *both* on the inside of the doorposts and lintel, for the benefit of the Israelites (to remind them of their commitment to their own authentic identity and opposition to idolatry) as well as on the outside, for the benefit of the Egyptians (to expose the fallacy of their idolatry, and to reveal a deeper or higher truth by which the Israelites were to be freed).

The rabbinic traditions regarding the blood on the doorposts collectively teach us about the need to align our "inside with our outside," to cultivate authenticity and faithfulness to our own truth. even when we may experience our distinctiveness as in tension with the larger cultural context. The mezuzot placed on our doorposts, symbolizing in part the daubed blood of the original Pesach offering, invite us to be mindful of the ways in which we may have adopted others' views of what is true at the expense of our own loved experience. They remind us to cultivate bitachon, trust in

ourselves, "knowing our own mind," as well as ometz lev, the courage to be true to our own views and principles. The freedom we seek at Pesach requires that we pay attention to that which is revealed to us through our own unique experience of the world, and not be enslaved to others' outlooks and opinions.

**Avivah Zornberg** (from The Particulars of Rapture; p 172)

...in Egypt the people sacrifice the lamb before God leaps over their houses; only since Egypt is the sacrifice rationally named after God's *pesicha*. The father in future will explain the ritual of sacrifice by naming it, and tracing the name back to God's redemptive "leap." This sacrifice then becomes the definable meaning of the festival and its central ritual. But in "real time," in Egypt, that night of God's syncopated motion had centered on the fulfillments of God's Commandments, the sacrifice of the nameless lamb, the daubing of the door, the consumption of the roast meat, described in great legal detail. The night had been an enactment of a narrative pretold to Moses—a legal narrative, whose nodal points are Commandments, laws prescribed to become a structural network of meaning. These nodal points, Lacan's points de capiton,<sup>80</sup> will fix, like the nodal points of a quilt, the sliding meanings of the narrator. Only after they eat of the paschal lamb is it given a name ("It is a paschal offering to God"); and only then does He respond to the "quilting" work of the Israelites by leaping over them, saving them from the general havoc. After this narrative fore-shadowing of the night of the Exodus, God tells of its institutionalization as a "festival for God throughout the generations."

In other words, the actual events of the night are essentially not narrated. What we have is God's foretelling, in a legal framework, of the narrative of the night; in this version, the people will sacrifice a lamb—later to be called *pesach* and God will respond by leaping over their houses. In Moses' words to the people, on the other hand, he tells of the future narratives—the questions and answers—about that night. Here, the causality goes the other way: God leaps over the houses and, in token of His leap, the sacrifice is offered. In future narrative, ritual commemorates God's leap; in Egypt God leapt only in response to a human act, generated only by words, the pre-narrative, the nodal points of law, the creation of a quilt of meaning,

**Rabbi Lawrence Kushner** ( from The River of Light, p.125-126)

On the tenth day of the month, the people are told to take to each one of their homes a lamb (Exod. 12 ff.). The spring lamb. The paschal offering. But, above all, a lamb that is also an Egyptian god. In every household of slaves (who have so nearly assimilated the culture of the oppressor that they cannot even believe Moses when he comes to them), there is now even the god of Egypt itself. They must wonder as to the purpose of Moses and their ancient imageless god...And then on the eve of the fourteenth day of the lunar month of spring (a full moon)-Aviv-Nisan, Moses tells them to slaughter the lamb-god... Does God not know whose house belongs to whom!? No. It is not a sign for the One of Being, it is a sign for the slaves. It is a choice for them. An existential crisis. An unequivocal deed that may not be ignored, reconsidered, or postponed. The Egyptians know we own the god. They have seen it.

Come tomorrow and its blood is on our door, we leave with Moses, or they will surely kill us. A slave who can kill the master's god is no longer a slave. And if we are afraid to kill the lamb, then we may not leave with Moses. We may pretend we are still one of the people of Israel, but it will only be pretending. And this then is the first part of the transformation of consciousness. One must irrevocably choose to destroy the god of the oppressor, which you have taken into your home. It cannot be done in secret or postponed for even a day. You must stake your very life upon it. "You must not go outside your door until morning" (Exod. 12:22). Now it is in the hands of the One of Being. "I shall go through Egypt and execute judgment on all the gods of Egypt" (Exod. 12:12).

This is the second stage. That the One of Being would settle the score. "I personally and not an angel." For once the alien god is destroyed, the forces of transformation are set into motion throughout the entire land. All during the night. You must remain in your hut. While other powers do their work. Layers of consciousness both within and beyond our psyche are now also freed to continue the work.

**Rabbi Toba Spitzer** (from Social Action Torah Teachings, [socialaction.com](http://socialaction.com))

Up to this point in the Exodus story, the Israelites have been essentially passive characters in the unfolding drama of their redemption. Marking their doors with lamb's blood is the first thing that the people of Israel are asked to do for themselves. This act thus becomes their first step towards freedom...

Rashi notes, verse 13 says that "the blood will be a sign for you"--that is, a sign for the Israelites, not for God. But why did the Israelites need this sign?

In order to take a step towards becoming a free people, the Israelites had to mark themselves. An essential first step on any journey towards liberation is a willingness to identify oneself: to step up, to speak out, to mark oneself simultaneously as oppressed and as ready to break the bonds of oppression. By painting their doorways, the Israelites were both claiming their identity and at the same time making public their rebellion. They willingly risked the possibility that nothing would happen that fateful night, that their Egyptian oppressors might not be killed and would rise the next morning to see the signs of a slave revolt, with the doors of each participant blatantly marked. They marked themselves as slaves, and they marked themselves as free.

This is the challenge that our ancestors leave for us. We may no longer be slaves, but the world is still far from redeemed, and these questions still echo for us: What are the steps that we need to take on our own journey of liberation? How do we mark ourselves as both oppressed and free? What is the risk that we each are willing to take, to signal the beginning of new possibilities? As the Israelite slaves were willing to mark themselves and take that first step, so too may each of us be willing to stand out, speak up, and make our mark on the road towards freedom.

**Daniel B. Fink** (from *Torat Chayim*; *Living Torah* vol. 10, no. 15)

Parashat Bo takes us into the heart of darkness. It opens with the eighth plague swarms of locusts that darkened the land. Then Egypt is engulfed in *choshech afeilah*, a "thick darkness" (Exodus 10:15) so palpable that it renders the Egyptians incapable of movement for three days. All of this dark terror builds up to the final plague when, at the stroke of midnight, God strikes down the firstborn in every Egyptian household. At last, as all of Egypt wails in the darkness, Pharaoh "summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, "Up, depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you!" (Exodus 12:31).

The darkness of Bo is inseparable from devastation and death. It is, therefore, a source of intense trepidation, not only for the Egyptians, but also for our Israelite ancestors-and for us. When, on the journeys of our lives, we find ourselves cast into dim places, we tend to reach desperately for light. The descent of darkness shatters our illusions of control and reminds us of our own mortality.

Yet Parashat Bo reminds us that darkness is also the incubator of hope, the place where redemption is born. In Egypt, the Jewish people become a nation. We are conceived in the darkness of bondage and delivered in the middle of God's eternal night of vigil.

It is natural to fear the dark... Still, if we, like our forebears, wish to grow from our experiences, we must learn to embrace the liberating power of darkness. In her book, *When the Heart Waits*, Sue Monk Kidd urges us to think of the divine dark that descends upon us all as a womb rather than a tomb. She asks: Could it be that seeking real light comes only by dwelling for a time in the dark? How sad when we don't incubate the new life pressing to birth inside us. How sad when we cut it short, forcing unformed answers and refusing to hold the tensions of pain. Everything incubates in darkness. Whenever new life grows, darkness is crucial to the process... So why have we made God into a rescuer rather than a midwife? (Sue Monk Kidd. *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990], chap. 7)

Parashat Bo challenges us to imagine God as a midwife, to embrace our night vision. The poet Theodore Roethke writes: "In a dark time, the eye begins to see. In their Egyptian midnight, our terrified ancestors caught their first glimpse of freedom. In our own midnights, we, too, begin to see-but only if we find the faith to hold our ground despite our fear, to wait patiently in the shadows rather than running prematurely for the light.

Three months after the Exodus described in Parashat Bo, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai. There, too, they encounter thick darkness, in the form of arafel, the "dense cloud" that falls upon the mountain (Exodus 19:16). Torah tells us that this is precisely where God is to be found. Moses bravely enters that divine darkness, twice. He returns bearing the tablets inscribed with God's black fire.

Out of the darkness-through the darkness-comes both liberation and law. Without the night and all of its terrors, there can be no Torah. This is the legacy of Parashat Bo.