

The Birth of a Nation: Korban Pesach

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As we have our attention squarely focused on the Pesach holiday, and our national transformation from slavery to freedom, we once again read Parshat Ha-Chodesh, the first twenty verses of the twelfth chapter of Exodus. Typically, we focus on the fact that the Almighty was conferring mastery over time to a nation that had been subjected to the whims of the slavemaster for over two centuries through the mitzvah of sanctifying the new month. Unquestionably, reasserting control over time was an indispensable element of the transformation from slavery to freedom.

Yet, there is another aspect of Parshat Ha-Chodesh, which is perhaps as fundamental in our national transformation from slavery to freedom: the transition from being a band of individuals to a cohesive nation. The existence of a slave, by very definition, is a self-interested existence. The slave, in perpetual terror and fear for his life, can hardly be concerned for his neighbor. He can only worry about the arbitrary whims of the taskmaster, and his next meager meal¹.

Indeed, the very first image we have of the enslaved Jews is that of a discordant and fractured people. Young Moshe, brimming with idealism, eschewing the comforts of his palace home, commits himself to deliver his oppressed brethren; instead, he finds two Jews, bickering amongst themselves², disinterested, to put it mildly, in his assistance.

It is perhaps in this light that we can best understand the mitzvah which the Almighty selected to be the vehicle of transformation between slavery and freedom: the Korban Pesach. This unique sacrifice, intended to be eaten in a group (*chaburah*) formed in advance of the actual slaughtering of the animal. The actual slaughtering of the animal is described by the Torah in terms never before used in the Torah,^{3 4} ויקח אתו כל קהל עדת ישראל בין הערבים. The use of the terms קהל and עדה are the terms which connote community, something slaves could never truly have. Second, the restriction against leaving any meat from the lamb over to the morning further dissociated the nascent Jewish people from their enslaved past, as it is always the wont of the slave to save food. After all, he never knows the source of his next meal. Third, the fact that the Talmud derives the principle of halakhic agency, *shelichut*, enabling one

¹ דרכו של עני בפרוסה, מדרש תנאים, דברים טז.

² שמות ב:יג

³ This very same term appears in the initial sequence in our double portion: ויקח משה את כל עדת בני ישראל: ויאמר אליהם אלה הדברים אשר צוה ה' לעשות אותם. ששת ימים תעשה מלאכה. Though beyond the scope of this limited space, the fact that Jewish community expresses itself in the observance of Shabbat is well established. See Sanhedrin 58b for the restriction against universal observance of Shabbat. See also the prohibition of תחום שבת, leaving the community on Shabbat, which is the very first law of Shabbat recorded in the Torah.

⁴ שמות יב:ו

member of our faith to perform a mitzvah of behalf of his co-religionist, from this particular offering, illustrates the national element of this sacrifice⁵. Fourth, the restriction against allowing someone who rejects the basic tenets of the Jewish faith⁶ from participation further underscores that the function of the korban pesach is to create and foster a sense of shared destiny and national cohesion. Fifth, the fact that the penalty for failing to participate in the offering is excision⁷, in other words, excommunication from the Jewish people, is perhaps the greatest indication that this is no ordinary commandment, but the fundamental mode of identifying as a member of the Jewish faith. Small wonder, then, that our Sages contemplated the possibility that upon conversion⁸, every single convert would actually bring the Pesach sacrifice right away, irrespective of time of year.

To participate in the Korban Pesach, in the ultimate sense, is to identify as member of the Jewish people. To identify as a member of the Jewish people, in turn, is the clearest evidence that centuries of brutal slavery had finally come to an end. If the slave can worry only about his next meal, a member of a cohesive nation, elevated by an exalted and singular mission, can set his sights far higher.

⁵ מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בא - מסכתא דפסחא פרשה ה, שלוחו של אדם כמותו.

⁶ מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בא - מסכתא דפסחא פרשה טו אחד ישראל משומד ואחד גוי במשמע

⁷ במדבר ט:יג.

⁸ מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בא - מסכתא דפסחא פרשה טו, וכי יגור אתך גר ועשה פסח לה', שומע אני כיון שנתגייר יעשה פסח מיד ת"ל והיה כאזרח הארץ מהאזרח בי"ד אף גר בי"ד