

**How is this Passover different from all other Passovers?**

*Vayakhel-Pekudei- Shabbat HaChodesh*

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**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**

**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

There is a question that we should ask ourselves this year as we prepare to sit down at our seder tables and celebrate Passover:

“How is this Passover different from all other Passovers – or, to be more precise – most other Passovers?”

Let us look at the Torah portion that we read as our Maftir, or concluding reading, this morning. It is always the case that no matter where we are on our weekly cycle of Torah readings, on the Sabbath which is on or just before the new moon of Nisan, we conclude with this morning’s reading. It’s a reading designed to remind us of the upcoming holiday and of our responsibilities connected with it.

It’s a difficult reading to understand, because it focuses on two topics. On the one hand, it describes how the Israelites in Egypt were to prepare for and what they were supposed to do on that extraordinary night that marked their transition from slavery to freedom. On the other hand, it describes what all subsequent generations of Jews are supposed to do on the anniversary of that night.

[The eve of the departure of the Israelites from Egypt is known in Jewish tradition as “Pesach Mitzrayim” – the “Egyptian Passover,” whereas the subsequent observance of the holiday is called “Pesach L’Dorot.” Finally, there is a third Pesach discussed in Jewish tradition: “Pesach L’Atid Lavoh” – the Pesach that will mark our transition to a wholly redeemed and perfect world.]

The section begins with God telling Moses and Aaron to tell the people that on the tenth day of the month, each family should set aside a lamb. And the people should group themselves so that on the night of the fourteenth everyone will be able to eat. People should share. They should cluster themselves, not exclusively, by families, but by groups.



[We see here the beginnings of Jewish communal consciousness. Although this specific command seems to describe behavior only that first year, in fact that practice has persisted: Passover remains that holiday when it is traditional to expand our dining room tables to accommodate others.]

Then the Israelites are told to slaughter the lamb at twilight and take some its blood and smear it on the doorposts and the lintels of their houses. Then they're told to roast the lamb and to eat it that night with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. And they're further told to eat it with loins girded, their sandals on their feet, their staffs in their hands – to eat it in a hurry.

Why smear the blood on the doorposts? We all know the answer: to distinguish Israelite from non-Israelite homes, so that the Israelites will not suffer the fate of their Egyptian neighbors – so that their first-born sons will not be struck down.

Then, in the middle of our section (verse 14), the text shifts its focus. We're explicitly told that this day is to be observed throughout the generations and that, in addition to specific rites to be followed on the eve of the festival, it is to include the observance of a seven day festival during which we are to eat matzah – unleavened bread – and to refrain from eating leavened bread. The text goes further: we're to remove all leavened products from our homes: no leaven is to be seen within them throughout the festival.

From this passage alone, we wouldn't necessarily come to understand how Passover was to be observed in subsequent years. It seems from the part we read today that only the seven day Festival of Matzot was to be observed in the future. But from the verses just after the part we read today, it becomes clear that some of what the Israelites did that first evening we are to do as well. For example, for over a thousand years after the Exodus, Jews did set aside lambs, and slaughter them, and eat them in groups on the night of Passover. They no longer took the blood of the lamb and smeared it – that was understood to have been required only that first year – but they did eat the so-called Paschal lamb, and exactly the way we are told in this passage it is to be eaten – roasted, with bitter herbs and matzah, with loins girded, with staff in hand, in a hurry.

With the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70, animal sacrifice virtually came to an end. Although Jews may have continued slaughtering lambs

on Passover even afterwards, within a century or so, this was no longer done. And so the observance of the eve of Passover came to resemble a feast with the main course missing: Jews would gather around their tables to eat bitter herbs and matzah, but not the Paschal lamb. Instead, Jews developed the practice of talking about the Exodus in a highly ritualized way, over a variety of foods. Today, we hardly miss the Paschal lamb which is represented by a shank bone on the seder table.

One might have thought that the observance of the rituals of Passover Eve would have died out – after all, the Exodus already happened: Why do we need to sit around and remember it? There is, in fact, some evidence that, during the period of the monarchy, when Jews were firmly settled in the Land of Israel, the holiday was less seriously observed. (We'll read about that in the haftarah on the second day of Pesach.) But certainly following the destruction of the Second Temple and our subsequent exile from the Land of Israel, Passover became very important. Even in the absence of the central sacrificial symbol, it remained vital. The reason is obvious: For almost two thousand years, we were in such a vulnerable, uneasy state. Homeless, with little physical security. Without a sense that we were where we needed to be, the observance of Passover brought generation after generation of Jews much hope. As the Exodus had happened once before, it would happen again.

I began by suggesting that we should ask ourselves how this Passover is different. To me, a good way to illustrate it is to remind us that only two years ago, a large group of our members traveled to Israel on a congregational trip. It was delightful, and fun – and safe. Today, could we imagine taking such a trip? A solidarity mission, perhaps. But a vacation? In a war zone?

The real tragedy, of course, is not that we didn't go to Israel this year; it is the dramatic loss of hope, the wave of despair that has swept over the region. And that is what is different. I don't know if you saw it, but there was a photograph in yesterday's New York Times. It showed a picture of a woman in her living room. She was sitting on her couch which was surrounded by rubble. Debris covered the scene. The coffee table – formerly glass-topped – was in shambles. The place was a mess, and the woman looked absolutely devastated.

The woman happened to be Palestinian, her home was in Bethlehem, and the damage happened to be caused by Israeli bombs. The bombs had been aimed at, and struck, a Palestinian police headquarters across the street, a building that has been repeatedly bombed during the conflict, ostensibly to encourage the Palestinian Authority to take action against terrorism. But when a building is bombed, the next door neighbors also suffer, and in this case, the sheer percussive force of the explosions damaged the adjacent properties.

Now let's put this into perspective. No one intended to damage this woman's property. And the fact is that no one was injured during the attack, much less killed. Compare this with the other story in yesterday's paper: an account of a man who walked into a café on Emek Refaim Street in southern Jerusalem yesterday – a fairly warm day – wearing a denim jacket. He was sweating profusely and kept his hands in his pockets. He asked for a glass of water, and finally aroused enough suspicion that the owner and a waiter hustled him out of the restaurant. They opened his jacket and found wires running over his shoulders into his backpack which held a large bomb. A detonator switch was in his hand. In a courageous move the waiter ripped out the wires, took off the man's backpack and jacket, and held him down until the police arrived.

We all know what that scene would have looked like had the would-be bomber succeeded in detonating his bomb. Innocent civilians – men, women and children – would have been the targets of this bomber. They would have been killed and maimed. Our focus wouldn't have been on the furniture in that café; it would have been on the devastating loss of life.

There is real despair on Emek Refaim Street: it is the awareness that a casual customer may turn out to be a murderous diabolical terrorist with contempt for human life. [Incidentally, Emek Refaim Street is not very far from Bethlehem. Interestingly, refaim are the spirits of the dead who dwell in the other world. "R'faim sham, b'imkei sh'ol krueha." (Proverbs 9:18) (See also Isaiah 14:9; B'reishit Rabba 26:9.)]

Those two scenes are very different, and yet from the perspective of Israel they share something in common. First of all, they're within a few miles of each other. More important, though it is true that Israel will certainly not be at peace unless

and until Israelis can once again go to cafes without fearing for their safety, it is also true that unless Palestinians can sit on their couches in peace, Israel will never know peace.

As we prepare to celebrate Passover this year, our prayers, our thoughts, our concerns, cannot but be focused on the deteriorating situation in Israel. For the Children of Israel in Egypt, there was a way out. There was a way to visualize their redemption. And it happened. For many Israelis, it isn't so easy to visualize redemption. As difficult as it was for the Children of Israel to be freed from Egyptian bondage (and, according to Jewish tradition, that's about the most difficult task imaginable), it seems more difficult to imagine a way out of the current crisis.

On the night of the Exodus, it was easy to distinguish the Israelite homes from other homes: it was the blood on the doorposts. It isn't so easy today. There's too much blood on too many doorposts. There's too much suffering. Too much hatred. And the houses are very, very close together.

On the night of the Exodus, the Israelites' hope was that they would be permitted to flee to safety. But in Israel today, people are not asking themselves where they can flee – they are home! They're instead struggling with the realization that they and their sworn enemies live in the same house.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was interviewed the other day. He was asked: "Has it ever been this bad?" He said, "No." But then he continued: "And that is why I am optimistic."

The climax of the Exodus story took place at midnight. The darkest, most fearful and frightening time of day. It only got lighter after that.

Our task this Pesach, as we sit down at our seder tables is not all that different from what it was last year, yet it may seem more challenging than ever. It is to care. To care about what is happening in Israel. To care about the fate of our Israeli brothers and sisters and cousins and friends. To care about the loss of innocent life and the destruction that innocent people – on both sides of Emek Refaim – are enduring. To remain committed to the basic values that have sustained us and that we have believed in. And most of all, to hope.

I have a suspicion that this will not be the Passover on which we will witness the final redemption of humanity. History is not about to come to an end, the lion is not about to lie down with the lamb.

But, that doesn't mean that we should stop hoping that that next year won't be the time when all this will happen. Maybe next year Israel and her neighbors will be closer than they are this year to achieving the kind of reconciliation that is necessary.

This year, let us say with full Kavanah (intentionality) at the end of our seder feasts: Next Year in Jerusalem. And let's mean it in the fullest sense of those words. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.