"*Bo*: The symbolism of the Paschal Lamb"

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

(Abridged from the author's book, Let My People go: Insights into Passover and the Haggadah *(NY: Jason Aronson, 2002), pp. 45-86.)*

The keynote of the festival of Passover was the offering of the *Korban Pesach*, the Paschal lamb. Until the destruction of the second Temple it was the selection, sacrifice and barbecue of that lamb in family groups which inaugurated the festival and, at the same time, generated the excitement and atmosphere which permeated the whole festive period. Today, only the Samaritans observe the full ritual of the *Korban Pesach.* We merely commemorate it by the roasted shank-bone on our Seder plate.

The predominant influence of the *Korban Pesach* is attested to by the significant fact that the name of that first evening's ritual - *Pesach* (Ex. 12: 11) - became the more common nomenclature for the whole festival, notwithstanding the fact that the other biblical term, *Chag ha-matzot*, is much more comprehensive, focusing upon a ritual (the eating of *matzah)* which extends over the full seven (Diaspora: eight) days of the festival. It might be instructive, therefore, to inquire more closely into the symbolic meaning of the Paschal lamb ceremonial.

An axiom of our approach is that it is inconceivable that the Israelites were commanded to go through all the paraphernalia of the taking of the lamb on 10th of Nissan - keeping it for four days of slaughtering it and dipping hyssop branches into its blood to facilitate the daubing over the door-posts - merely that the All-seeing, omniscient God might be

enabled to pinpoint the Israelite homes. We might point out that such a rationale is nowhere stated, however much that simple reading of the Torah's narrative (Ex.12: 12, 23) is popularly inferred.

We find difficulty also with the popular interpretation of the *Korban Pesach* ritual which views it as a supreme test of Israelites' faith, to ascertain whether they could summon sufficient courage to seize that symbol of the Egyptian deity and risk any violent repercussions on the part of the offended Egyptians.

Even a cursory reading of Exodus chapter 12 makes it quite clear that the ritual of the *Korban Pesach* is not introduced in the spirit of a test or challenge. The possible or probable reaction of the Egyptians to the taking of their lamb is nowhere even hinted at. It was an act of significance for Israel alone. And had it been simply a test of Israelite defiance of their overlords, then the mere taking and sacrificing of the lamb would have served that purpose without any of the attendant subsidiary rituals and regulations (12:4-11; 21-22; 43-49). Furthermore, whenever the Torah sets out to administer a test, whether at the individual or national level, it makes that objective abundantly clear, consistently employing the verb *n-s-h* 'to test' (See Gen. 22:1; Ex. 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut. 13:4). Significantly, this is missing from the account of the *Korban Pesach* to the extent that we are constrained to find an alternative explanation as underlying its symbolism.

* * *

The Golden Calf episode underscored the fact that the Israelites were unable to rid themselves of their addiction to idolatry. The Midrashic sage, R. Eliezer Ha-Kappar (Mid. *Mechilta, Pischa Bo*, 5) offers that as the rationale for why the Israelites were told to take the lamb four days before the exodus, namely to give the Israelites a 'cooling-off period', a chance to allow the process of rejection of idolatry to take root, to enable the nation to reflect upon the new monotheistic commitment that it was being called upon to embrace. It does not explain, however, why *four days* were required, unlike, for example, the three days of mental and spiritual preparation that were prescribed before receiving the Torah at Sinai.

The explanation we offer has the benefit of simplicity, and is indicated by the prescription that no uncircumcised person was permitted to eat the *Korban Pesach* (Ex. 12:48). In practice this constituted a directive for the Israelites to perform circumcision.

The divine purpose was clearly that the fulfillment of both *mitzvot* - circumcision and the slaughtering of the lamb - should follow each other in the closest proximity. Now, although God communicated the laws of the Passover on the *first* day of the month of Nisan (See Ex. 12:2, and *Rashi ad loc.*) the ritual was not to commence until ten days later. Circumcision was thus an essential element in the regulations governing participation in this first Passover, so it may be presumed that it would have had to be observed during the period of ritual activity, namely between the 10th and 14th of the month. This desirability of achieving proximity between the performance of both rituals is also apparent from the fact that Joshua waited to circumcise the new generation, born in the desert, until just before the celebration of Passover (see Josh. 5:7-10).

Now, it was generally acknowledged that at least three full days were required to recuperate after the circumcision operation (See Tal. *Bava.Metzi'ah 86b; Rashi* on Gen. 18:1.) The Israelites could not therefore have been expected to undertake the physically demanding process of selection (that is, finding a lamb of the requisite size for the precise number of participants) and examination (to ensure that it was without any blemish) while they were still weak from the circumcision. It follows, therefore, that, to have the lamb ready for roasting on the 14th of Nisan - immediately after their recovery from the three days of their indisposition - it would have had to have been selected and made ready on the day before the circumcision took place, that is on the 10th day of the month.

It will now be obvious why this law requiring the lamb to be selected on the 10th of Nisan only applied to the very first Passover in Egypt and was not carried over as part of the subsequent years' commemorative ritual by subsequent circumcised generations.

* * *

Circumcision and the *Korban Pesach* ritual share a similar symbolic objective, namely, to serve as outward signs of a covenanted relationship shared by all their initiates. Just as circumcision is a rite of passage into the community and its fellowship, so is the *Korban Pesach* a symbol of – and an attempt to heighten - the sense of unity and shared kinship experienced by all participants in the ritual. Covenants were generally accompanied in the biblical period by a meal, shared by both parties; and the *Korban Pesach*, eaten by every family and those closest to them, served to convey the notion of a nationally shared

covenant. Hence the name *chavurah* (‘fellowship group’) given to each group in rabbinic literature. Interestingly, the English word 'companion' means, literally, 'those who eat bread [latin: *panis*) together.'

Since the exodus was intended exclusively as the fulfillment of the Israelites' destiny, as promised to the Patriarchs (Ex. 6 :3-4), and since the covenanted relationship applied to them alone and not their uncircumcised fellow travelers of the 'mixed multitude' (Ex. 12:38), such a ceremony of initiation was deemed necessary to help close ranks and confer fraternal status upon the Israelites. Our contention is, however, that, not only circumcision, but every one of the individual components of the *Korban Pesach* ritual served symbolically to promote that notion of 'fraternity' and 'unity.'

Thus, (i) no Israelite was permitted to eat alone - even if he could consume an entire lamb by himself. It had to be eaten in a *chavurah,* a social context, a microcosm of the nation as a cohesive unit.
(ii), all members of the community - even if their religious or social status was of a lesser degree, such as women (Tal. *Pes*. 91b), children (Tal. *Sukk*. 42b), circumcised slaves (12:44), and strangers (12:48) - were obliged to participate in the *Korban Pesach* ritual.
(iii), where members of one household could not manage to consume a whole lamb, they were to join with neighbors. A family home is the most compact symbol of

unity and fraternity, so such invited neighbors had to be those who qualified as '*shecheno ba-karov el beito* – ones who were (especially) close to one's household' (12:4), and were thus regarded as the extended family.

(iv), the prescription that those participating had to be invited in advance (Tal. *Pes*. 88a) - and the size of lamb determined by their number (12:4) - would also ensure harmony, peace, and unity. There would then be no squabbling over the size of portion each was to receive - or, worse, whether someone was or was not invited at all - for it had been well pre-arranged.

(v), to move from one *chavurah* to another was construed as disruptive and divisive, and was therefore forbidden (See Ex. 12:15, 46).

(vi), the preparation of the *Korban Pesacb* symbolized unity in that it was roasted on fire (12:8), so that it would remain whole; the meat would not disintegrate while cooking, and the animal would not require dismembering to remove the blood from its limbs.

(vii), care had to be taken not to break any of its bones (9:12; 12:15), an act that impairs its wholeness and symbolizes friction and division.

(viii), any meat left over from the *Korban Pesach* until the next day had to be burned in fire (Ex. 12:10). To eat it then – when almost everyone else had done so the previous day – was construed as a separatist act. *All* had to eat the *whole* lamb at *one* time, furthering thereby the ritual's symbolic message of unity and unanimity. This was further heightened by the prescription to eat the lamb 'in haste' (Ex. 12: 11) - providing a greater concentration of activity within the shortest period of time.

(ix), it had to be eaten with the people already fully dressed and ready for the journey: 'loins girded, shoes on feet and staff in hand' (12:11). This would also ensure concentration of *place,* so that none would slip away from the ritual celebration, or even

absent themselves altogether, to get ready for the impending Exodus. That would certainly have impaired the effect of this unique demonstration of unity.

(x), one who was unclean through contact with the dead could not participate, however (See Nu.9:6-6). It may be presumed that such a situation usually occurs in the case of one burying a near relative. The bereaved person could not possibly be expected to share in this super-social ritual, nor empathize with the notion of a unified community, since that would be the antithesis of his or her perspective at that time, namely the feeling of loss, of a family unit impaired, and an emotional dissociation from the celebratory atmosphere of the festival.

(xi), the *ben nekhar* apostate who had broken the ranks and impaired the *unity* of the faithful, must be excluded from participation in a ritual which sets out to promote the very ideal which he was callously undermining (See 12:43).

(xii), at the outset of this chapter we emphasized the problem of interpreting the daubing of the blood on the doorposts as a signal to God to help Him distinguish the Israelite homes. This problem is removed when we note that blood is *the* primary symbol of kinship, unity, and fraternity; and hence the phrase *dam berit,* 'the blood of the covenant' (Ex. 24:8; Zech. 9: 11), and the popular saying, ‘blood is thicker than water,’ both of which represent the central symbolic message of the entire *Korban Pesach* ritual, representing the unity of God and Israel, on the one hand, and of the people of Israel, on the other.

(xiii), and finally, the blood was daubed on the doorposts by means of a hyssop plant, an evergreen used in biblical purification rites. Highly relevant to the notion of a nation bound by fraternal cords, is the biblical phrase used here to describe this means of

spreading the blood, namely, *agudat eisov*, 'a bundle of hyssop.' The word *agudah* derives from the verb *a-g-d,* 'to bind together.' Hence, even the brush used in this ritual served to further the idea of unity and fraternity!

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey

Back numbers of Torah Thoughts may be found on www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk > Torah Thoughts