

The Meaning of the *Pesach* Ritual by Rav Amnon Bazak

We just read in פרשת החודש God's command to *Bnei Yisrael* to take a sheep, slaughter it and eat it according to certain laws, with *marror* and *matzot*. This command raises a basic question: is this a demand to conduct a festive meal, or should we perhaps view this eating as a type of sacrifice? On the one hand, the main features that characterize the world of *korbanot* are absent from this ritual: the animal is not placed upon the altar, no blood is sprinkled and no *kohanim* are involved. The central idea in *korbanot* is that of *netina*, giving parts of the animal's flesh or part of the blood. It seems that the absence of these features indicates that we are not dealing here with a sacrifice, but rather with a command to conduct a special celebration.

On the other hand, however, we do find a number of aspects of the Pesach ritual that remind us of sacrifices:

First of all, the Torah describes the following qualifications for the animal chosen for this purpose:

"שֶׁה תָּמִים זָכָר בֶּן שָׁנָה יְהִיֶּה לָכֶם מִן הַכֹּבָשִׁים וּמִן הָעִזִּים תִּקְחוּ"

"It shall be for you an **unblemished**, a one year old male sheep; you shall take from among the **sheep or goats**" (12:5).

These qualifications – the age, the gender etc. - are similar to the conditions that are demanded for sacrifices. For example, the Torah says, regarding *korban ola*:

"וְאִם מִן הַצֹּאן קָרְבָנוֹ מִן הַכֹּשְׁבִים אוֹ מִן הָעִזִּים לַעֲלֹה זָכָר תָּמִים יִקְרִיבֶנּוּ"

"it shall be taken from **the sheep or goats**, and he shall offer an **unblemished male**" (*Vayikra* 1:10).

In addition, the Torah forbids leaving over some of the animal's meat –

"וְלֹא תוֹתִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד בֹּקֶר וְהֵנִיתֶם מִמֶּנּוּ עַד בֹּקֶר בְּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרֹפוּ"

"Do not **leave over any of it until morning**; and that which is left over from it by morning you **shall burn in fire**" (*Shemot* 12:10).

This demand brings to mind the familiar prohibition from *korban shlamim*, the only sacrifice that is eaten by its owners:

– "וּבֶשֶׁר זֶבַח תְּזַבַּח שְׁלָמִים בְּיוֹם קָרְבָּנוֹ יֹאכְלֵה ל' אִינִיחַ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד בֶּקֶר... (יז) וְהַנּוֹתֵר מִבֶּשֶׁר הַזֶּבֶח בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּאֵשׁ יִשָּׂרֶף" (ויקרא ז', טו-יז).

"The meat of his thanksgiving peace offering shall be eaten on the day of its offering – **he shall not leave any of it until morning**... That which is left over from the meat of the offering on the third day **shall be burnt in fire**" (*Vayikra* 7:15-17).

Moreover, *Bnei Yisrael* were told to eat the sheep: "צְלִי אֶשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עַל מְרִירִים" "roasted on the fire, with **matzot** and bitter herbs" (12:8). Why did God command them to eat *matzot*? One would have thought that the answer lies in the well known fact, that *Bnei Yisrael* didn't have enough time for the dough to rise on their way out of Egypt; therefore they ended up with *matzot*. However, this cannot be the reason, as exodus occurred only later, at verse 39, while the command to eat *matzot* was given in the beginning of the chapter, at verse 8. Therefore we see that the reason for this command is not as one would naturally think, but rather the reason lies somewhere else. I would like to suggest, that eating the *matzot* was part of the pesach sacrifice, just as *מצות* is part of the offering of the *korban toda* (thanksgiving offering), as the Torah says:

"וְהִקְרִיב עַל זֶבַח הַתּוֹדָה חֲלוֹת מִצּוֹת בְּלוּלֹת בְּשֶׁמֶן"

"He shall offer together with the thanksgiving sacrifice *חלות מצות* (unleavened loaves) mixed with oil" (*Vayikra* 7:12).

According to this approach, the *mitzva* to eat *matza* comes primarily from the laws of the *korban*, and the aspect of reminding us the hasty departure from Egypt was added only later.

These aspects of the pesach ritual reinforce our original question as to the basic nature of the pesach ritual that was conducted by בני ישראל that night,

before they left Egypt. How might we explain the fact that it is like sacrifices in some aspects, and different from sacrifices in several other, important aspects?

The key to understanding the nature of the *pesach* lies in another unique feature of this ritual. God commanded Moshe:

"וְלָקַחוּ מִן הַדָּם וְנָתְנוּ עַל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וְעַל הַמַּשְׁקוּף עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר יֹאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ בַּהֶם :

"They shall take some of the blood and place [it] upon the two doorposts and the lintel, on the homes in which they will partake of it" (12:7). We can learn from this verse that the *Pesach* ritual **does** have an aspect of *netina*, the "giving" of sacrificial blood, like sacrifices. The demand to put the blood on the doorposts and the lintel, is similar to the demand to put the blood of the sacrifice on the corners of the altar.

It seems that the *Pesach* offering transformed the entire house into an altar. The altar is a place that is entirely consecrated to God and under His protection, and no one is allowed to harm somebody at that site. We can learn this idea from the fact that the Torah had to specifically allow seizing a murderer from the altar to execute him, as it is written in Parashat Mishpatim:

– "וְכִי יִזְדֶּ אִישׁ עַל רֵעֵהוּ לְהַרְגוֹ בְּעִרְמָה מֵעַם מִזְבְּחֵי תִקְחוּהוּ לְמוֹת

["If a person plots against his neighbor to kill him intentionally, you shall take him even from My altar to put him to death" (*Shemot* 21:14)]. We indeed find two occasions in Tanakh where somebody attempted to save himself from execution by clinging to the corners of the altar. These occasions are described in the beginning of sefer *Melakhim* א, when Adoniyahu, the son of David, and Yoav ben Tzruia, דוד's minister of the army, ran away from King Shlomo and tried to save themselves this way. Had the Torah not issued this special provision in parashat Mishpatim, it would have been forbidden to seize a murderer from the altar, as the altar is considered as extraterritorial space that protects the people at the site. Transforming the house into an altar gives protection to *Bnei Yisrael* who, in essence, become like the *kohanim* as they eat the meat of the *Pesach*. This ritual indeed is a sacrifice, in the sense that it features the aspect of *netina*, but

this is a unique type of *korban* that transforms the home into an altar and the people eating the sacrifice into קדוש וגוי קדושים, "ממלכת כוהנים וגוי קדוש", a kingdom of priests and a sacred nation."

According to what we have said, we can now understand the deep meaning of the verse: "וְעָבַר ה' לְגַגְיָךְ אֶת מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת הַדָּם עַל הַמַּשְׁקוּף וְעַל שְׁתֵי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וַפָּסַח ה' עַל הַפֶּתַח וְלֹא יִתֵּן הַמַּשְׁחִית לְבֹא אֶל בְּתֵיכֶם לְגַגְיָךְ" (שם, כג)
"The Lord shall pass through to smite Egypt, and He will see the blood on the lintel and upon the two doorposts, and the Lord shall pass over the entrance and not allow the destroyer to enter and smite your homes". By transforming the house into an altar, Bnei Israel saved themselves from "the destroyer", who was not allowed to enter the sacred place.

Viewing the home as an altar also helps us understand several other *halakhot* mentioned in the context of the *Pesach*:

First, God told Moshe, "בְּבֵית אֶחָד יֵאָכַל לֹא תוֹצִיא מִן הַבַּיִת מִן הַבֶּשֶׂר חוּצָה" –
"It shall be eaten in one house; do not remove any of the meat from the house outside" (verse 46). Just as the *korbanot* are limited to the altar so too the *korban pesach* should be limited to one's house. This prohibition is easily understood once we look at the house as an altar.

Moreover, from the obligation to eat *matza* comes the prohibition against eating leaven, which appears later:

"כִּי כָל אֲשֶׁר יֵאָכַל חֶמֶץ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל"
"Whoever eats leaven will have his soul cut off from Israel". As we mentioned before with regard to the obligation of eating *matza*, here, too, it seems unlikely that the reason for this prohibition is what the Torah tells later – "The nation carried its dough before it leavened" (verse 34), because this event occurred only later. It is reasonable to assume that the prohibition against eating *chametz* also relates to the status of the home as an altar. The Torah instructs in Parashat *ויקרא*, regarding *korban מנחה*:

"(יא) כָּל הַמִּנְחָה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרִיבוּ לַיהוָה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה חֲמֵץ... וְאֵל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא יַעֲלוּ לְרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ."

"Any meal offering that you offer to the Lord shall not be prepared as leaven... they shall not be placed upon the altar as a pleasing fragrance" (*Vayikra* 2:11-12).

חֲמֵץ is not allowed to be upon the altar, and that was the first reason why it was not allowed to be left in the house that became an altar for one night.

In this vein we might also explain the prohibition against boiling the meat of the *pesach*, and the obligation to roast it: "אֵל תֹּאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ נָא וּבִשָּׁל מְבֻשָּׁל בַּמַּיִם כִּי אִם צָלִי אֵשׁ..."

"They shall eat the meat on this night; they shall eat it roasted on the fire... You shall not eat it raw or boiled in water, but rather roasted over the fire..." (verses 8-9). On the altar, too, of course, the meat is roasted over a fire and not boiled.

On this basis we can also explain why as a result of this extraordinary night, the בכורות, the firstborn of *Bnei Yisrael* were consecrated for the ritual service, as the Torah says in chapter 13. The firstborn earned unique divine protection on this night, when the entire Nation of Israel served as "a kingdom of priests." Naturally, then, the firstborn were consecrated on this night for the service in the *Mikdash*, until the tribe of Levi replaced them.

The idea of transforming the house into an altar has great meaning and significance. The night of the Exodus is one of the most important events in the history of *Am Yisrael*. We usually focus on its significance for the nation generally, rather than looking at it from the perspective of the individual. Yet, specifically on this night, *Am Yisrael* did not gather as a single entity, as they did at *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, for example, but rather remained in their homes, with each household standing alone and independent.

It would seem that the idea behind this phenomenon is the need to maintain the proper balance between the individual family unit and the nation as a whole. Emphasizing the national perspective too much could obscure the fact that the nation consists of families, and that *Am Yisrael* is based upon, first and foremost, the family units. On this historic night, a one time phenomenon occurred in that each family transformed its house into an altar. Conceptually, however, this event did not occur only once. *Am Yisrael's* existence has continued to be based upon the perspective of the house as a sacred site, which does not allow for the presence of "*chametz*" and all that it symbolizes. Preserving the holiness of the home, together with the perspective of the nation as a whole, remains for all generations as a central theme of *נסח אה*.