

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Beha'alozecha

A Pesach Offering in the Wilderness

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַפֶּסַח בְּמוֹעֲדוֹ

The Bnei Yisrael shall perform the Pesach offering in its appointed time (9:2)

AN EXCEPTIONAL DIRECTIVE

The Korban Pesach is discussed in our Parshas was the only one offered throughout the forty years in the wilderness. Indeed, according to the view of R' Yishmael,¹ there was no general obligation to bring the Korban Pesach until after the Land of Israel was conquered and apportioned – fourteen years after we entered the land. This means that the Pesach offered in the days of Yehoshua immediately upon crossing the Jordan River² was also an exception to the rule. Commenting on these two exceptional situations, Tosafos³ explain that they were “על פי הדיבור – *A special Divine directive.*”

The Meshech Chochmah suggests an explanation as to the background to these two exceptional Pesach offerings.

KORBAN PESACH AND AVODAH ZARAH

One of the primary themes within the Korban Pesach is a repudiation of avodah zarah. Indeed, Chazal⁴ expound Moshe's opening words to Bnei Yisrael when instructing them regarding this korban⁵ – “מִשְׁכּוֹ וּקְחוּ לָכֶם צֹאן – *Draw and take for yourselves [from the] flock*” – as saying: “מִשְׁכּוֹ יָדֵיכֶם מֵעֲבוּדָה זָרָה – *Withdraw your hands from avodah zarah.*” Moreover, the events which the korban commemorates, as well as its specific halachos, address this basic theme from numerous aspects:

- ▶ **Divine Supervision** – The Pesach commemorates the smiting of the Egyptian firstborn. This is a refutation of the premise which initially led many to avodah zarah, namely, that Hashem has no interest on the world, but rather, has left it to the supervision of the celestial bodies and spiritual forces.

1 See *Kiddushin 37b*.

2 As related in *Sefer Yehoshua perek 5*.

3 *Ibid.* s.v. *ho'il*.

4 *Mechilta, Parshas Bo*.

5 *Shemos 12:21*.

By singling out the firstborn among the Egyptians specifically (many of whose status could only be known to Hashem due to the promiscuity which prevailed among the Egyptians), Hashem demonstrated that He is indeed interested in the events and affairs of this world.

- ▶ **Divine Interaction** – The smiting of the firstborn was moreover performed by Hashem directly which further demonstrates that not only is Hashem aware of the goings-on in the world, but is prepared to interact with them personally.
- ▶ **Value of Human Life** – the Torah commands that the korban Pesach should be eaten together in groups. By emphasizing the social aspect of how the korban is to be consumed, the Torah is reinforcing an awareness of the value of human life in Hashem's eyes. This is a repudiation of the pagan belief that Hashem desired that humans offer themselves as sacrifices.⁶
- ▶ **Importance of the Individual** – Each and every member of Bnei Yisrael is worthy and deserving of a direct connection with Hashem, with no need for an intermediary. This is expressed in the halachos of the korban, specifically by something that is missing. The Pesach belongs to the category of *korban Shelamim*, which generally requires that the owner of the korban give certain portions therefrom (known as חזה ושוק – the breast and right foreleg) to the Kohen. With the Pesach there is no such requirement, thereby de-emphasizing any essential difference in status between the kohanim and the rest of the Jewish people.
- ▶ **No Subsistence Other than to Hashem** – The Pesach commemorates our Exodus from Egypt, whereby our subservience to anyone other than Hashem was removed, allowing us to become “His servants”⁷ alone. This indicates that ultimately, no man is meant to be under the dominion of any force other than Hashem. This includes the dominion of other human beings, spiritual forces or forces of nature. Rather, all of these are themselves under the dominion of Hashem. Indeed, it is for this reason the festival of Pesach is timed specifically to occur during springtime,⁸ where the forces of nature – having lain dormant during the winter months – awaken to resume their function with full potency. It is specifically at this time we need the korban Pesach to remind us that Hashem alone controls and guides all forces – including the forces of nature.

Appreciating this element within the Korban Pesach of rejecting avodah zarah will give us further insight into those places in Tanach which follow a description of a widespread purification of the Jewish People from avodah zarah by stating that the People subsequently offered the Korban Pesach, such as in the days of Chizkiyahu⁹ and

6 In this vein, the Meshech Chochmah explains the comment of the Midrash (Devarim Rabbah 2:33) on the pasuk (Mishlei 24:21) “יִרְאָ אֶת ה' בְּנֵי וְמֶלֶךְ” – Fear Hashem, my son, and the king,” which it expounds as saying “ולא למולך” – and not to Molech.” What is behind the association of the word melech with molech? The pasuk is saying that one should fear Hashem as he would a king, who is interested in the welfare of his subjects, for without them he is not a king. The corollary of that understanding is that Hashem likewise desires life for His subjects and abhors the approach of Molech which sees value in the sacrificial offering of human beings.

7 Vayikra 25:55.

8 Moreover, in this regard, the halachah states (see Rosh Hashanah 21a) that the timing of Pesach during the spring season is one of the primary factors to be taken into account when determining whether a second month of Adar should be added to the calendar that year.

9 See Divrei Hayamim II, 29:5-30:1.

of Yoshiyahu.¹⁰ In light of our discussion we can understand that the bringing of the Pesach essentially constituted *an integral part* of their rejection of avodah zarah.

All of this brings us back to our Parsha. Bnei Yisrael were commanded to being the Pesach even though they had not yet entered the land and were thus not “formally” commanded in the mitzvah as initially stated; rather, due to a Divine directive. The background to this exceptional command was the fact that the people had recently lapsed in the area of avodah zarah by making the Golden Calf! This traumatic fall – and their recovery therefrom – necessitated that they bring a Korban Pesach that year, even though they were still in the wilderness.

Moreover, the very same concern was what was behind the second “exceptional Pesach,” offered by Yehoshua soon after they entered Eretz Yisrael, even though the land had not yet been conquered and settled. That Pesach, too, had been preceded by a national disaster in the area of avodah zarah – the episode of Baal Pe’or, and hence a Korban Pesach was required as part of the People’s recovery.

IMPLICATIONS: KORBAN PESACH AND THE CONVERT

Pasuk 14 of our perek states:

וְכִי יִגֹּר אֶתְכֶם גֵּר וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לֵה' בְּחֻקַּת הַפֶּסַח וּבְמִשְׁפָּטוֹ בֵּן יַעֲשֶׂה

When a convert shall dwell with you and he shall make a Pesach offering to Hashem, according to the decree of the Pesach offering and its law, so shall he do.

The simple understanding of the pasuk is that, since we might think the convert is completely exempt from the Pesach offering (as his ancestors were not in Egypt), therefore, the pasuk informs us that he also is included. The Sifrei,¹¹ however, explains that, actually, we might have thought that a convert is obligated to bring a korban Pesach *immediately upon his conversion* – even if it is not Pesach! To that end, the pasuk states that in fact he waits until Pesach to bring it together with everyone else.

This is a most unusual notion! Why would we think that anyone would – or could – bring a korban Pesach when it is not even Pesach? However, the Meshech Chochmah explains that since the convert has himself just now rejected his idolatrous upbringing, we may have thought that it is indeed incumbent upon him to offer the korban Pesach – which represents that very rejection – even if it is not Pesach. Hence, it was necessary for the pasuk to state that, notwithstanding its association with the rejection of idol-worship, the korban Pesach can only be offered on Pesach itself.

Having said that, the Meshech Chochmah proceeds to suggest that this element of the korban Pesach could, in fact, have ramifications in the laws of a convert.

10 See Melachim II, 23:4-20. With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the pasuk which states concerning Yoshiyahu’s Pesach (ibid. pasuk 22), “כִּי לֹא נַעֲשֶׂה כַּפֶּסַח הַזֶּה מִיָּמֵי הַשִּׁפְטִים” – *For a Pesach offering such as this had not been performed since the days of the Judges.*” The pasuk is saying that that in terms of this key aspect of the Pesach, namely, purifying the nation from avodah zarah, there had not been such a widespread offering of the korban since the days of the Shoftim.

11 Sec. 71.

The halacha states that a convert is not allowed to partake of the meat of korbanos until he himself has brought a special korban as part of his conversion process.¹² The Meshech Chochmah suggests that if someone converted just before Pesach, it would not be necessary for him to bring a separate korban, for his korban Pesach could satisfy his requirement to bring a “conversion korban.” Indeed, he adds that although this is not explicitly anywhere in Chazal, it is, in fact, the simple reading of the Mishnah¹³ which states that “One who converted on erev Pesach... may immerse in the mikveh and then partake of the Pesach offering in the evening.” The Mishnah makes no mention of any separate requirement to bring a korban in order to enable him to partake of the Pesach, for the Pesach serves also as his “conversion korban”!

Further Implications: Korban Pesach and the Tribe of Levi

Understanding the background to the Pesach offering brought in the wilderness may also have implications for another group within the Jewish People – the Tribe of Levi. If this korban was necessitated as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf, then Levi, who were not involved in that sin, seemingly would not be included! In fact, however, they *were* included. Moreover, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the Torah “goes out of its way” to phrase its instructions in a way which specifically includes them:

Pasuk 2 of our perek reads: “וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַפֶּסַח בְּמוֹעֲדוֹ – The Bnei Yisrael shall make the Pesach offering in its appointed time.” This pasuk refers to the Jewish People in the third person, which is understandable, since Hashem is talking to Moshe about them. However, the conclusion of the very next pasuk shifts to the second person, “תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתוֹ – you shall make it.” Why?

With this shift in phraseology, Hashem is emphasizing to Moshe that the korban is not just for “them” – the Jewish People generally, but also for “you” – referring to Moshe and his tribe, Levi, even though they were not involved in the Golden Calf. The reason for this inclusion is that even though, as a tribe, Levi had no part in that sin, nonetheless, they are part of the Jewish People and are thus included in all the mitzvos addressed to the people as a whole.

Indeed, with this idea in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the way those individuals who were unable to bring the korban Pesach at the appointed time,¹⁴ expressed their claim:¹⁵ “לָמָּה נִגְרַע לְבַלְתִּי הַקָּרֵב אֶת קָרְבְּנוֹ ה' בְּמוֹעֲדוֹ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל” – *Why should we lose out by not offering Hashem's offering in its appointed time among the Bnei Yisrael?* Why do they make specific reference to the fact that the Pesach is being offered “among the Bnei Yisrael”?

The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is that these people were themselves Leviim! One opinion in the Gemara¹⁶ identifies them as Mishael and Eltzafan – both Leviim – who removed their cousins, Nadav and Avihu, from the Holy of Holies, while another opinion identifies them as those who bore and guarded Yosef's coffin, which resided in the camp of Levi.¹⁷ Hence, were it not for the fact that they were “among the Bnei Yisrael” and included in their obligations, they would not have needed to offer the Pesach that year at all! However, as part of the people, they were not prepared to lose out by being unable to participate in the korban.

12 See Kerisos 8b.

13 Pesachim 92a.

14 On account of having become *tamei* through contact with the deceased.

15 Pasuk 7.

16 Succah 25b.

17 See Gemara Succah there for a third opinion.