



Parshat Bo d'var Torah - Jan. 19 2024

By Elie Lehmann

Shabbat Shalom. I'm Elie Lehmann.

Anya and I have had the great privilege of living in a few different parts of the world. For a number of months in 2013 we lived in Kajiado, Kenya, near-fully embedded with the Maasai tribe. The Maasai are a nomadic people who are extremely proud of their herds of cows and goats.

Keeping kosher in Kajiado meant that we were functionally vegetarians. Given the relative expensive nature of meat, most people ate it sparingly. But when they heard that we, Americans, were not eating meat, many locals were surprised.

We would explain to friends that our dietary choices were based on our Jewish religious obligations, and that we technically can eat goats and cows but it has to be slaughtered in a specific way.

Upon hearing this and truly wanting to share with us, each of our new friends had the same response: Great! We will give you the animal, you slaughter it however you're supposed to, and then we'll cook it and share the meal together.

If there was a sense of slight confusion when they first heard that we did not eat meat, there was outright bewilderment and laughter from disbelief when I told them that I, a grown man, did not know how to slaughter an animal.

In this week's parasha, Bo, just before the final plague and exodus from Egypt, our ancestors are told:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר:
הַחֲדָשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֲדָשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֲדָשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה:

דְּבַרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עַדְתֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בְּעֶשֶׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם אִישׁ שֶׁה לְבַיִת-אֲבֹתָהּ לְבַיִת:

“YHWH said to Moses and Aaron *in the land of Egypt*:

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.

Speak to the community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household.”

The Israelites are commanded to watch over the animal for 4 days and then slaughter it *at twilight*, put some of the blood on the doorposts and lintel of the house as a sign for God to pass over and not kill the firstborns within that house.

The meat of the animal is to be eaten בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה on that night,

וְלֹא-תֹתִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר וְהֵנַתֶּר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר בְּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרֹפוּ:

And none shall be left of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it.

These few verses have many fascinating, small peculiarities that are there to teach us big, foundational lessons.

A few examples:

- Why, for instance, does the text tell us that God is speaking to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt? Of course they are in Egypt.
- Why these specific rules around the Pesah sacrifice? The Israelites are to slaughter the animal at twilight, and eat it on that night. Anything that is left until the morning must be burnt.

Seforno, the 15th century Italian Biblical commentator, notices the peculiar specificity of slaughtering the lamb at twilight but explains it away on technical grounds, saying “since we have a rule that offerings must not be brought on the altar at night, it had to be brought before nightfall.”

There are, of course, deeper spiritual understandings to each of these details in the text. First we are told that God is speaking to Moses and Aaron “in the land of Egypt.” The Torah emphasizes this not to remind us of a geographical location, but rather a psychological-spiritual one.

The hasidic masters remind us that Mitzrayim is the place of narrow-mindedness. *Da’at* - awareness - moral consideration is in exile - not to be found there. In that place of *mitzrayim* - slavery can happen because people are solely concerned about *artsiyut* - physical matters, acquisition of stuff with no thought of moral considerations. This is also known as the great darkness of Egypt as the Or Ha-Me’ir teaches: “People did not consider the humanity of others or what they could learn from each other. On the contrary, they kept finding fault and lack in others, glorifying their own deeds.”

And who is the perfect example of this? Pharaoh! Pharaoh is the ultimate one who is stuck in *mitzrayim* - the narrow-minded place of darkness. As we read in last week's haftarah from Yehezkel 29, Pharaoh says " **לִי יְאֲרִי וְאֲנִי עָשִׂיתִנִּי** My Nile is my own; I made it for myself. The Tanhuma in a fabulous midrash suggests that what Pharaoh says is even more radical: **אמר אני הוא שבראתי את עצמי** (I am the one who created myself) - *Ani asitini*. For, Pharaoh, the completely self-made-man, what reason is there to think of others, offer gratitude or share anything?

This is the psychological context that surrounds the Israelites **בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם** "in the land of Egypt" This is what they must prepare to leave behind...Which is what all the specific rules around eating the Passover sacrifice are supposed to help accomplish - as we shall now see.

There are many different types of sacrifices with a variety of rules regarding where, when, by whom and how much of the sacrifice is to be eaten. But the Passover sacrifice is one of only two types of sacrifices that must all be eaten before the next morning. The other is the *todah* - the thanksgiving sacrifice.

By commanding that the sacrificial animal must be eaten in one night - or else the remainder must be burned - means that one person (or family) cannot hoard it for themselves and eat over time. It tremendously encourages sharing the gift (this animal) that we have been given by God with others. For the whole animal to be eaten and not wasted, one must bring an awareness of the humanity and needs of others around them, and share.

That is why this rule applies to the *todah* - thanksgiving sacrifice - as well. As my teacher, Rabbi Shai Held explains, "The simple requirement that there not be any leftovers from the thanksgiving offering thus teaches us a fundamental theological and spiritual lesson. We are not meant to rest content with being recipients of God's gifts but are asked to become givers ourselves. God's gifts are meant to flow *through* us and not merely *to* us."

In a similar vein, Christian theologian Miroslav Volf writes, "We are not just the intended recipients of God's gifts; we are also their channels.... As channels, we exist not just to enjoy things but [also] to pass them on. Our purpose is twofold: To flourish and to help others flourish."

This is a vital lesson that the Israelites must learn, and they need to hear it before they officially become free people, lest they believe that being free means being like Pharaoh and the Egyptians. That is a core reason why God instructs the Israelites to perform this sacrifice and perhaps the whole dramatic placing of the sacrificial blood on the doorposts. God doesn't actually need the sign to know which houses are Isrealite and which are Egyptian.

Through this whole ritual, the first lesson taught in the doorway to freedom is that gratitude is manifest through sharing with others.

What happens next in the Torah is also fascinating. No, I'm not referring to the Angel of Death scene. I mean before that. Moses right away instructs the Israelites to memorialize the event that is about to happen - every single year, forever. Furthermore, Moses says that their children in the distant future will ask about this obscure ritual and they are to say it all comes back to this moment and, implicitly, the lesson we just discussed.

וְהָיָה כִּי־יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם?
וְאָמַרְתֶּם זָבַח־פֶּסַח הוּא לַיהוָה, אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל־בְּתֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנֹגֵפוֹ אֶת־
מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־בְּתֵינוּ הִצִּיל, וַיִּקַּד הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ:

And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?'

you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to יהוה-יה', who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when smiting the Egyptians, but saved our houses.' Those assembled then bowed low in homage.

(Exodus 12:24-27)

Rabbi, Lord, Sir, Dr. Jonathan Sacks z"l remarks: "It is one of the most counterintuitive acts in the history of leadership. Moses does not speak about today or tomorrow. He speaks about the distant future and the duty of parents to educate their children."

And it's not just on Pesah that we recall the Exodus. The Torah in Devarim commands us to "remember the Exodus from Egypt all the days of our lives" (Deuteronomy 16:3). And the sages interpret 'all the days of your life,' to include also the nights," (Mishna Berakhot 1:5).

Perhaps it's especially the nights that we need to remember this essential lesson of freedom. As we have discussed, nighttime means those dark moments of small-mindedness when our shadowy side may come out. Our internal Pharaohs who believe that everything is owed to them and there is no need for gratitude or to act as a channel of God's gifts because "*ani asitini*" Pharaoh is fully self-made. Yes, it is precisely at these moments that we must remember that we are no longer enslaved to a *mitzrayim* mindset. We are free to recognize the great gifts of our lives, and be a channel to share them with others.

Shabbat Shalom!