

A Potpourri of Passover Pedagogy
Rabbi Eliot Malomet April 16, 2022 1st Day of Passover 15 Nisan 5782

שמות י"ב:כ"ב ולקחתם אגדת אזוב וטבלתם בדם אֲשֶׁר-בַּסֶּף והגעתם אל-המשקוף ואל-שתי המזוזות מן-הדם אֲשֶׁר בַּסֶּף ואתם לא תצאו איש מפתח-ביתו עד-בקר:

Exodus 12:22 *Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning.* Why?

The obvious reason is that it was dangerous to go outside. The "destroyer" was loose. This was the night of the slaying of the firstborn, if you went outside, you could be killed. Also, there was something going on in the home. The home had been consecrated by the blood on the doorposts. Leaving the home ruin that. Or perhaps it was because the Exodus was a "birthing", therefore, staying at home was a kind of "incubation" to differentiate between enslavement and servitude to Pharaoh, and to create a new order based on the family unit. Here, Camp Ramah is instructive. On special evenings throughout the summer, most notably, the first night and the night before Visitor's Day, no-one was allowed to go out. It was called an "in-night." That meant that everyone had to stay in. Why? To prevent mishaps and accidents, ie. to protect the campers. But, as a consequence, it was an opportunity for everyone in the bunk to build their relationships especially with staff. The analogy here is apt. The night before your birth as a nation, is an "in-night." It's for your protection and to enable you to build your family with a common bonding experience, a sacrificial meal. Freedom is signified by the strengthening of the family unit.

י"ב:כ"ו-כ"ז כי-כ"ז וְהָיָה כִּי-יִאֲמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעִבְדָּה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם: וְאָמַרְתֶּם וְבַח-פֶּסַח הוּא לָהּ אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל-בְּתֵי בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת-מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-בְּתֵינוּ הִצִּיל...

12:26-27 *And when your children ask you, 'What is this rite to you?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to ה', who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when smiting the Egyptians but saved our houses'....* We recognize this as the wicked son's question, but here we have a different answer than the one in the Haggadah. The Haggadah quotes Exodus 13:8 as a caustic rebuttal. בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים: *this is for what the Lord did for me when I went forth from Egypt.* But let us have empathy for the

the questioner. How strange it is for him to witness his father performing this strange rite in his new land? Why are you doing this? He asks. Why are you smearing blood on the doorposts? In our new land? The answer is an invitation into the national story. The answer builds the relationship between parent and child. How is cultural memory transmitted? Questions and answers. Questions validate the curiosity of the children. Answers empower the children to become transmitters of the story themselves.

י"ב:ל"ט ויאפו את-הבצק אֲשֶׁר הוציאו ממצרים עגת מצות כי לא חמץ כִּי-גֵרְשׁוּ ממצרים ולא יכלו להתמהמה וגם-צדקה לא-עשו להם:

12:39 *And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.* Reconstructing the evening: they slaughtered the lamb at dusk, then they roasted it. They were supposed to eat it with the unleavened bread and bitter herbs. But in the middle of the night, Pharaoh ordered them out. Did they eat the sacrifice? Debatable. They certainly did not eat the matzah that night because they did not bake the dough until they arrived at their first stop. The night was filled with miracles. But the one key overlooked miracle was that the raw dough from the previous evening's meal had not yet risen and thus, they were still able to use it to fulfil the mitzvah of matzah. Why is matzah so significant? It was the first mitzvah that the Israelites observed as a free people.

From The Haftarah

יהושע ה':ט"ז-י' ויאמר ה' אלי-יהושע היום גלתי את-הרפת מצרים מעליכם ויקרא שם המקום ההוא גלגל עד היום הנה: ויחנו בני-ישראל בגלגל ויעשו את-הפסח בארבעה עשר יום לחודש בערב בערב ירחו:

Joshua 5:9-10 *And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." So that place was called Gilgal, as it still is. Encamped at Gilgal, in the steppes of Jericho, the Israelites offered the Passover sacrifice on the fourteenth day of the month, toward evening.* It is amazing how a successive generation of Israel re-imagines the formative experience of its ancestors. God validates their feeling of disgrace. Now they are about to fulfil

the divine promise. In just one generation, Passover now has several layers of new meaning. This is the holiday whose meaning is constantly evolving.

יהושע ה'י"ב וישבת המן ממתורת באקלם מעבור הארץ ולא תהיה עוד לבגד ישראל מן ויאכלו מתבואת ארץ כנען בשנה הקיאה:

Joshua 5:12 *On that same day, when they ate of the produce of the land, **the manna ceased**. The Israelites got no more manna; that year they ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.* This is another stunning verse. It is not simply about the termination of the miracle of manna. It is the boundary between dependence and independence. For all these years, the Israelites were dependent on God for food. Now they would have to depend on their own work. For all these years, food was of divine provenance. From now on it would be a partnership between human activity and God's blessing of rain.

What Were They Talking About?

There were two streams of thinking in the Mishnaic period. One was primarily interested in matters of religious practice and life and was not overly concerned about life under the Roman Empire. It was only interested in one thing: freedom to practice religion. The main thing they were celebrating about being free was the freedom to remain "servants of God". (א) תללוה'ה' Hallelujah. **O servants of the LORD**, give praise; praise the name of the LORD. In other words, to be a free person is to no longer be subservient to a human despot, but to be free to be a servant of God. They were saying: *We are not interested in the political reality of the Exodus. We were already subjects of Assyria, Babylonia, Persia and Greece. Now we are subject of Rome. There will be others.* Their claim could be summed up as follows: *We are not a political nation. We are a people whose sole desire is to be "servants of God" and it doesn't matter who is in power.* For this faction, the critical part of the Exodus story is the memory of servitude in Egypt before the tenth plague and God's deliverance. For them, the message of Passover is: *Now we are free! We are able to serve our own God!* As such, even if we are subjects of another power, we are free because we are servants to God before and above everything.

The second stream of thinking in the Mishnaic period at Yavneh, can be described as an extremely activist stream whose leader was Rabbi Akiva. He was saying, ostensibly, *of course we are going to hold fast to the Torah but Judaism has no utility if it is not linked to the political dimension of our lives. We need to be a free people in our land. To live as Jews, we need to be a nation that lives under its own sovereignty.* To Rabbi Akiva, leaving Egypt is not only about singing Halleluyah as servants of God, it is a desire for a complete political redemption.

What did it mean that the five rabbis were talking about the Exodus all night long? What was the content of the discussion? Some of them were talking about the religious dimensions of the Passover sacrifice. They were imagining that, in their own way, as they sat at their feast, they, like those who celebrated the sacrifice in Jerusalem, were eating it at the table of God, that their home had turned into the Temple and that their table had turned into the altar. They were simulating the eating of the Passover sacrifice the same way that a priest would eat a sacrifice offered at the Temple. In other words, they were having a religious experience, but they weren't talking about the Exodus per se. They were talking about the religious experience of the Passover sacrifice. Rabbi Akiva however, was thinking within their political reality. He was saying, *I do not want to focus only on what happened in the evening, with the eating of the sacrifice, I want to get to the dawn when they ate the matzah!*

Why do we have the custom of eating the afikoman by midnight? Because the afikoman represents the Passover sacrifice, and the Passover sacrifice takes us back to the plague of the first born, and during the plague, at midnight, the evening was broken and the festival came to an abrupt conclusion. In this view, the morning is not tied to the evening. The evening focuses on the sacrifice, the morning focuses on the matzah. When Elazar ben Azraya says you have to finish the seder at midnight, he is focusing on the sacrifice. When Rabbi Akiva celebrates all night, he is making a statement about redemption.

Adapted from a lecture by Rabbi Benny Lau, *On the Seder of the Mishnaic Period*. Hag Sameah! חג שמחה!

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