

From Pesach to Pasach: The Sacrifice of Passover

You are to keep this word
as a law for you and for your children, into the ages!
Now it will be,
when you come to the land which YHWH will give to you, as he has
spoken,
you are to keep this service!
And it will be
when your children say to you: What does this service (mean) to
you?
then say:
It is the slaughter-meal of Passover to YHWH,
who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt,
when he dealt-the-blow to Egypt and our houses he rescued.
The people did homage and bowed low.
And the Children of Israel went and did
as YHWH had commanded Moshe and Aharon, thus they did (Exodus
12:24-28).¹

pasach. vb. pass or spring over

pesach. n.m. passover—1. sacrifice of passover, 2. the animal victim
of the passover, 3. the festival of the passover

pasach. vb. limp²

Starting next Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at sundown, and continuing for eight days until sundown, the following Wednesday, April 15, observant Jews the world over will celebrate the holiday of Passover. Religious festival meals, known as Seders, will take place on the first two nights of the holiday and the eating of leavened bread will be forbidden throughout the eight days (in accord with Exodus 12:15-20); *matzo*, a form of unleavened bread, will be eaten in its place. Participants in the festive meal will read aloud their *haggadot* or narrative accounts in which the "order" of the *seder* is explained, the stories of the Exodus are told, and in which participants are encouraged to consider the experience as if they were undergoing it themselves, as if they were in Egypt making this religious passage. Preparations for this celebration—with the ritual cleaning of one's house and the removal of any leavening or *hametz* that remains—are already underway in the households of observant Jews.

What is the meaning of the Passover? The Passover celebrates the exodus from Egypt, the exodus, that is to say, from the house of bondage. "I am the Lord, thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage," we read in the first commandment. And that revelation is followed immediately by the second commandment of the Hebrew Bible, which begins already to interpret it: "Thou shall have no other Gods before me." Moses will lead the people, as God requested of him in Exodus 3:8-12, out of Egypt and to the mountain of the Lord so that they may receive the commandments and accede to "a land flowing with milk and honey." The Jewish law is the law of "no other gods," which is to say, the law of anti-idolatry, and even that law of anti-idolatry is not to be taken idolatrously. In fact, the whole of the

Hebrew Bible (after the law is given) is the working out of how precisely to do that, how to not to take the law of anti-idolatry idolatrously. "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy in vain,"

The Passover, in other words, is the celebration of the passage from slavery to freedom. But the text, the Biblical passage or verse or *pasuk* in which this instruction is given, may have more to tell us about the nature of this anti-idolatry. For when we are asked by our children "what does this service mean?" we are instructed to say: "It is the slaughter-meal of Passover to YHWH, / who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt, / when he dealt-the-blow to Egypt and our houses he rescued (Ex. 12:27). / [zevach-pesach hu(a) la-YHWH / asher pasach al-bataiy b'neiy-yisrael bmitzrayim / bnagpo et-mitzrayim v'et-bteinyu hitzyl vayikod ha'am / vayishtachvu]"

In other words, we are instructed to tell our children that it is the sacrificial meal (*pesach*) of God's Passover (*pasach*), the *pesach* in order that there be a *pasach*, or a *pesach* in honor of the *pasach* (the passing over), that continues to occur all around us even as we eat, drink, and speak. What precisely does "pass over" mean here? The Hebrew word for the festival meal or sacrifice meal or slaughter-meal is *pesach*, which is also the name we attach to the holiday—the holiday of *pesach*—while the name for the action of God in not slaughtering the Israelites, in "passing over" the Israelites on the night when the tenth plague, the killing of the first-born males in Egypt, is executed, is *pasach*. Why is the festival meal called a slaughter meal or sacrifice meal in the first place? Because prior to the meal, in accordance with Exodus 12:7, a lamb, not inappropriately named the "pascal lamb", has been sacrificed, and the blood from the lamb has been smeared on the doorposts of the houses in which the Passover service is taking place.

In the Biblical context, strictly speaking, then, the *pesach* is a sacrifice in preparation for a festival meal that marks the separation of the Israelites from the Egyptians, which is to say, from those who continue to sacrifice and become sacrificial victims. It is a sacrifice that is understood as a move away from sacrifice, a sacrifice that in fact enables a passing over or giving up or relinquishing of sacrifice, and which may be read about in the Hebrew Bible (as on the doorpost of the house in which such reading takes place). It is a sacrifice, in other words, that, in so far as we read about it in a text, has become anti-sacrificial, a *pesach* (or sacrifice) that has become a *pasach* (or passover) that assumes the form of a *pasuk* (or textual passage or verse).

There is another significance to be drawn out of this narrative. In so far as the Torah tells us that Moses tells us these things, our very saying of the words is the doing of what it is that Torah tells us to do. Moses has said: `when your children say to you "What do you mean by this service?" then you are to say "It is the sacrifice of the LORD's passover" and that's exactly what we have done. Saying the words "It is the sacrifice of the LORD's passover" (*pesach hu(a) laYHVH asher pasach*) is, in part at least, a fulfillment of the commandment to say the words about the sacrifice (or passing over) on the festival of Passover. And if we fulfill the commandment in part by saying the words about the sacrifice, then that is one of the ways in

which we act as if we were there, as if we were in Egypt and in which the spirit of the Passover passes over to us.

Here, Everett Fox, who is one of the brilliant new translators of Torah in the Buber-Rosenzweig tradition, gives us the key.³ The "pass over" in 12:27, he tells us, may mean in effect "skip over" or "spare" as in verse 13 where we read that God says "when I see blood, I will pass over you" (I will spare you, I will protect you), a meaning which Martin Buber relates to the other meaning of the word *pasach* which is a verb meaning to limp: "when I see blood, I will pass over you, I will limp." I will act in other words as a sacrificial victim myself, as the sacrificial victims of the past have acted.

The *pasach* which is the goal of this *pesach* is then a sparing or protecting. And the shankbone which sits on the table of the festive meal and which reminds of the victim, the *pesach*, on the festival of Passover, is spoken about in order that a *pasach*, a sparing or abrogation of sacrifice, may occur, in order that a letting go of sacrifice take place. As God did with us in Egypt, limping where He might have sacrificed, giving up violence where He might have performed violence, so all who partake in the Passover service, the text seems to tell us, are commanded to do the same with each other.

Moving from the experience of violence (so intense that the first-born of our families are slaughtered), to a setting in which we recall the experience of violence through the reading of narrative accounts of it around a table with our families while it continues to occur outside our door, we perform the anti-sacrificial gestures that the experience, the holiday rituals, the textual accounts of it, and thus Judaism at large would command of us, a commandment, we are encouraged to believe, will hasten the arrival of the Messiah.

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¹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses. The Schocken Bible, Volume I* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 317-319. Others translate: "You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses'. And the people bowed down and worshiped. The Israelites went and did just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron." (NRSV)

² William Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 820.

³ Fox 1995,316.