

Don't Take On Too Much, Too Soon

PARSHA INSIGHTS - VAYAKHEL PIKUDAI - PARSHAS HACHODESH (5759)

TAKE IT GRADUALLY, PLEASE

Rosh Chodesh [the new moon/beginning of the Hebrew month] *Nissan* is almost upon us. Today we read twenty *psukim* [verses] of *Parshas Bo* dealing with the laws of *Pesach* [Passover]. The Torah commanded *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel] in Egypt to set aside a sheep or goat for the *korban Pesach* [Passover sacrifice]. It would be slaughtered on Nissan 14 and eaten the night following the fourteenth, at the first national “*Pesach seder* [Passover meal with symbolic foods].” *Bnai Yisroel* left Egypt the next day, *Nissan* 15 in daylight. How long before *Pesach* was the sheep to be selected? In 12:3, it says that Hashem assigned us to take our animals on Nissan 10, even though they were not needed for the offering until Nissan 14. Four days of some type of preparation were required. In 12:6, *Bnai Yisroel* were commanded: “It shall be unto you **for safekeeping** until the fourteenth day of this month; the entire congregation of the assembly of Israel shall slaughter it in the afternoon.” This “*mishmeres*” [safekeeping] denotes examination from blemishes, the *Gemara Pesachim* 96A remarks.

Rashi cites the *Mechilta*: Why did Hashem require that the first *korban Pesach* be set aside four days before its slaughtering, which was not so with the sacrifice brought in future generations? Rabbi Masya Ben Charash explained as follows. When the time for the Exodus came, *Bnai Yisroel* did not possess any *mitzvos* [commandments] with which to be occupied so that they should be deserving of redemption. As a result, Hashem gave us two commandments - the blood of *korban Pesach*, and the blood of *bris mila* [covenant of circumcision]-so we would be worthy of deliverance. (Blood of *mitzvos* often symbolizes self-sacrifice - the energy, time, and dedication for doing Hashem’s bidding.) And since the Jews became steeped in idolatry in Egypt, Moshe told them to “Draw and take” for themselves lambs and goats for the *korban Pesach* (12:21). This indicated the need to draw their hands away from idols and to instead take sheep for the *mitzvah* [commandment].

This shows that there was a need to start the *mitzvah* of *korban Pesach* a bit earlier than absolutely necessary. It only applied to this very first *korban Pesach*, as the above mentioned *Chazal* [our Sages] informed us. In doing so, *Bnai Yisroel* became more deserving of redemption. They were already busy with *bris mila* and the *Pesach* sacrifice four days before its slaughter and its intense preparation. This would help them merit *ge’ula* [redemption].

Another insight into this is mentioned by Rav Zalman Sorotzkin in *Oznaim L’Torah*. Why not introduce the *mitzvos* of *korban Pesach* and *bris mila* immediately before they were done, on *erev* [the eve of] *Pesach*, *Nissan* 14 itself? He answers that many of *Bnai Yisroel* had neglected the performance of *bris mila* during our stay in *Mitzraim* [Egypt], in order to find favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Plus, circumcision is a difficult ordeal for adults. Thus, Hashem did not wish to “thrust the entire responsibility” of doing this *mitzvah* on us so suddenly. Remember, *mila* [circumcision] is a prerequisite for *korban Pesach*. It would have been quite overwhelming had we been informed of these obligations on the exact day they were necessary. Instead, Hashem presented them to us so they could be fulfilled GRADUALLY. This will be explained shortly.

Furthermore, the Jews must have feared Egyptian resistance and retaliation for slaughtering sheep and goats, animals worshipped by them. This was another reason for trepidation on the part of *Bnai Yisroel*. It is also possible that some Jews ascribed divinity to these false gods of Egypt, says Rav Sorotzkin. They would therefore be hesitant to kill them for sacrificial purposes. This can be supported by the fact that *Bnai Yisroel* succumbed to the temptation to serve idols in Egypt, as our sages state many times. In addition, the *Mechilta* cited before is clear evidence that Moshe needed to urge *Bnai Yisroel* to “pull their hands away” from idolatry. All this demonstrates that the *mitzvah* to slaughter the *korban Pesach* was no easy task for at least some of *Bnai Yisroel*.

As a result, Hashem commanded us to get used to the idea of the *korban Pesach* **little by little**. The first step was a difficult one - they needed to take hold of these animals and... tie them to their bedposts! This could not have been so simple for them, based on all the factors mentioned above. It might have been viewed as degrading to this Egyptian deity, especially if the animal was not interested in being confined. The lesson for *Bnai Yisroel* was: this “god” is crying to be freed, and no one is rescuing it. A god screams for help? This thought process would help uproot idolatrous ideas from the minds of *Bnai Yisroel*. Even more surprising was the fact that the Egyptians did not attempt to deliver their gods, these animals, from the hands of the Jews. It is a well-known miracle

discussed by our sages. This caused *Bnai Yisroel* to have a new attitude regarding fear of Egyptian reprisal. There was no longer any reason for apprehension, since the worshippers were not even trying to free their gods from the hands of their captors. Rav Sorotzkin states that this apathy of the Egyptians, FOR A FULL THREE DAYS before the time of slaughtering, paved the way for us to slaughter the *korban Pesach* on the fourth day. It brought about a relatively smooth transition from an idolatrous attitude to the knowledge that Hashem's *mitzvos* reign supreme.

We have learned today that at times, a gradual approach to *mitzvos* is best. Of course, we are required to observe all commandments, whether mandated by Torah law or by the *Rabanan* [rabbis]. But when one is FIRST approaching *shmiras mitzvos* [observing commandments], there is the potential that he will overdo things or accept them too fast. I have heard this termed "spiritual indigestion", an expression used by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman and other *rabbonim* [rabbis] when referring to people starting off with *mitzvos*. For a lasting effect, many people need to take one step at a time, steadily building their *mitzvah* commitments. Too much at once may cause one to regress, resulting in loss instead of gain. This was true regarding *Bnai Yisroel* in *Mitzraim*. They needed to be "weaned off of idol worship". Four days of gradual preparation, besides giving them time to examine the animals for defects, helped the Jews turn their minds toward pure worship of Hashem.

Let us end with an astonishing remark of Rabainu Bachaya on *Shmos* [Exodus] 3:18. At the burning bush, Hashem instructed Moshe to deliver the Jews from Egyptian bondage. He was supposed to tell Paroh that we needed to go on "a three day journey" into the wilderness to serve Hashem. Didn't Moshe plan to take out the Jews PERMANENTLY? Was he supposed to deceive Paroh into thinking that the departure was merely temporary, just a three day trip? Rabaiyanu Bachaya states, "*Chas V'shalom* [G-d forbid] that this thing would be a trick in order to flee. Rather, it was in order to receive the *mitzvos*. **Hashem wished to bring them into *mitzvos* little by little.**" He goes on to explain how we got certain *mitzvos* such as *Shabbos* [the Sabbath](and honoring parents, *para aduma* [red cow for purification], and *dinim* [laws]) at the place called Marah, even before *Matan Torah* [the giving of the Torah]. Thus, it seems that the "three day trip" was meant literally, a short excursion to learn SOME of the *mitzvos*. (Much can be said to interpret and analyze this comment of Rabainu Bachaya, but we will not do it today.) It was similar when Avraham was commanded to sacrifice Yitzchok. Instead of immediately telling Avraham to bring Yitzchok as an offering, Hashem conveyed the message gradually. "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love - Yitzchok..." (*Vayaira* 22:1).

Again, we are reminded that step-by-step progress is often the most productive route toward *shmiras mitzvos*. For practical issues, though, we must always look to our holy *sefarim* [books] and competent *rabbonim* for guidance.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

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