



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > First Day

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April 4, 2015

Pesach

**Why Elijah? Pesach and *Brit*:
Is There a Connection?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

What is the common denominator between the Passover and a *Brit*? Elijah of course.

Did Elijah come to your Passover Seder? Did Elijah come to your *Brit*, or to any *Brit* you attended?

Well, even if you didn't see him, rest assured he was there. Because he *must* be there. Have you ever wondered why? And why specifically at those two events - the *Brit Milah* and the Pesach Seder?

We read in the Haggadah that while still in Egypt and before they received the Torah, the Jews were *naked and bare* - that is they were bare of mitzvot, disconnected from God. So, to re-establish the connection, God commanded them to do two things: to circumcise all males and to offer the Pascal lamb as a sacrifice.

Why these two mitzvot?

Both involve the blood of life and, within them, lies the secret to our intrinsic connection to our Creator.

And here is where Elijah comes in - his presence at every single *Brit* and every single Pesach Seder testifies to us and to the world that our bond with God is eternal.

This sermon also includes a story about Elijah's presence at one unusual *Brit Milah*, an explanation to the mystery of the missing Seders - why we did not celebrate 40 Seders in our history, and a lesson relevant to modern-day life.

WHY ELIJAH?

PESACH AND BRIT: IS THERE A CONNECTION?

1. Kosher and Honest (Joke)

Shlomo Levy is an honest person, but he is also always looking for ways to save himself some money. After spending a week with his son and family in London, he returns to Israel with seven dishwashers. As soon as he arrives at the customs desk, he's met by the Customs Officer, who tells him: "Mr. Levy, you can only import items duty free so long as they're for your own personal use. There is absolutely no way seven dishwashers could be claimed for personal use. You must pay duty on six of them."

"But, my good sir" says Shlomo, "you don't understand. They all are for my personal use. I'm a religious Jew. So one of them is for *milchig*, one for *fleishig*, and one for *parve*."

"Okay, Mr. Levy," says the Customs Officer. "I can accept that. But what about the other four dishwashers?"

Shlomo replies, "I need three additional for Passover – one for *milchig kasher l'Pesach*, one for *fleishig kasher l'Pesach* and one for *parve kasher l'Pesach*."

"Okay, okay, Mr. Levy," says the Customs Officer. "That now makes six. But what about the seventh dishwasher – what's that for?"

"Look, let me be honest," replies Shlomo. "Every once in a while I do like to eat a little *treif*."

2. Connecting to God

This is certainly a joke. No Jew would ever eat *treif*. But it does bring out a very real and profound point, a point that we all can relate to on this first day of Passover:

We connect to God in a variety of ways. The word *mitzvah* means to “connect,” to “bond.” So the action of doing a *mitzvah* connects us to God.

There are 613 *mitzvot*, spanning the gamut of experience, by which and through which we connect to our Creator.

Passover itself contains many *mitzvot* by which to connect to God, and also to our families, to our community, and to our history. When we eat *matzah*, unleavened bread, we connect to humility. When we eat *marror*, bitter herb, we remember the bitterness of slavery and connect to empathy for those that are suffering today. And when we sit around the Seder table, telling the story of the Exodus, we connect to our loved ones and to our miraculous history as the Jewish nation.

But, there is one *mitzvah* that embodies and personifies the Festival of Passover, *Chag HaPesach*, more than any other, and that is the *mitzvah* of the Paschal lamb offering – the *Korban Pesach*, which was brought in the Holy Temple.

The *Korban Pesach* is the *mitzvah* after which this holiday is named, and it is all about bonds.

Today, in times of exile after the Temple was destroyed, we are prohibited from bringing the *Korban Pesach*, but we memorialize it by placing the *zeroah*, the shank bone, on the Seder plate.

3. The Mystery of the Missing Seders

Since the Seder and accompanying *mitzvot* are so important, it might surprise you to learn that there were times in Jewish history when the Jews skipped the observance of Pesach.

Yes, it’s true. Last night, we celebrated the 3,287th Seder night since the Exodus from Egypt. But, if you do the math, there is a historical discrepancy. The Jews left Egypt 3,327 years ago. If last night was only the 3,287th Seder since the Exodus, it means that 40 Seders are missing.

What happened to those 40 Seders?

Well, we can all guess where one went.

A month ago, we celebrated Purim. Everybody knows that Esther requested that the Jews fast for three days before she approached her husband, King Ahasuerus, without permission.

Our holy sages teach that this fast actually fell on Passover.¹ Thus, at least in one year of Jewish history there was no Seder. So this is what happened to one of them.

But what about the other 39 missing Seders? What happened to those?

4. The Torah and Haftorah

The special Torah portion² for Passover that we just read describes the first Pesach offering while the Jews were still in Egypt. Therefore, we know that the first Passover in history was not one of the missing ones.

And the Haftorah we just read,³ takes place after the passing of Moses. Moses passed away one month and one week before Passover. Then the people set out to capture the city of Jericho and fulfill God's promise of entering the Promised Land. Before doing this, our Haftorah tells us, Joshua circumcised all of the adult, warrior-age males, for all the ones born in the desert had not been circumcised.⁴ Then the Israelites proceeded with the *Korban Pesach*. They ate the Paschal lamb and *matzah* (for the manna had ceased with Moses' passing).⁵

Thus, we know that the Jews celebrated the Pesach on the first Passover after leaving Egypt, 3,327 years ago and, again, forty years later as they were entering Israel and preparing to capture Jericho.

So far so good.

¹ Abudraham, *Hilchos Taaniyos*; *Sheiltos* (loc. cit.), *Rabbeinu Asher* (loc. cit.) citing *Rabbeinu Tam*, and others. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 6 pp. 371-372 for more sources.

² Exodus 12:21-51.

³ Joshua 3:5-7; 5:2:15; 6:1; 6:27.

⁴ See Rashi to Joshua 5:2.

⁵ *Mechilta*, Beshalach 5 (Vayisa).

5. Manna and the Wilderness

In the Book of Leviticus,⁶ the Torah describes how God commanded the people to offer the *Korban Pesach* and celebrate the Exodus from Egypt in the right time – that is, on the 14th of Nisan, which is the Seder night. Thus, in the second year after the Exodus, the people did indeed have a Seder.

The classical legal exegesis known as the Sifrei⁷ states that, when the Torah describes this second Passover, it is doing so to shame the Children of Israel. Why? Because throughout the 40 years they were in the wilderness, they brought only this one Passover sacrifice.

This means that, for the remaining thirty-nine years, there were no Paschal offerings (indeed, there were no offerings *at all* during the time they wandered in the wilderness),⁸ and thus no Seders!

This, my friends, is why – even though the Exodus occurred 3,327 years ago – in actuality we have only celebrated 3,287 Seders. The 39 years in the wilderness plus the year of Esther's fast equals a deficiency of 40 Seders.

Why was the *Korban Pesach* not offered in the desert? The simple answer is that, until Moses' passing, there was manna from heaven throughout all of those years and, therefore, there was no obligation to bring *any* offerings, nor to have a Seder.⁹

Another reason is that the generation of Jewish males born in the desert after the Exodus was not initially circumcised.¹⁰ And, as the Torah clearly states, *no uncircumcised male may partake of it [the Paschal lamb]*.¹¹ Therefore, in the desert, with so many uncircumcised Jews, there was no *Korban Pesach*.

⁶ Leviticus 9:1 and commentaries there extensively.

⁷ In commenting on Numbers 1:5. Cited by Rashi in his commentary to Leviticus 9:1.

⁸ See Amos 5:25. Chagigah 6b.

⁹ See Tosafot, Kidushin 37b, s.v. Ho'il, explaining that the Paschal Lamb was only obligatory in Israel.

¹⁰ See Yevamot 71a-72a and Bartenura commentary. See also Likkutei Sichot vol. 23, p. 62ff.

¹¹ Exodus 12:48.

This is also why our Haftorah tells us that, upon coming into the Land, Joshua circumcised the males, allowed them to heal, and then they all offered the Paschal lamb as a sacrifice and celebrated the Passover Seder.

So now we arrive at a crucial question:

What's the connection between the *Korban Pesach* and *Brit Milah*, between the Paschal lamb offering and circumcision?

As we are about to learn, within this connection lies a very beautiful, soulful, and fundamental lesson about our souls and our intrinsic connection to God.

6. *Brit* and Pesach, a Blood Pact

The Talmud teaches that there are 36 mitzvot for which *karet* is the consequence. What is *karet*?

Karet literally means "severed" or "cutoff." While a mitzvah means "connection," *karet* means the opposite. It is a severing, a disconnection of the soul from its divine source.

Most of the 36 instances of *karet* mentioned in the Torah are the consequence of the violation of negative commandments. That is, if one does something one is *not supposed* to do (if, for instance, one consumes leavened bread on Passover) then one is severed from God and the Jewish people.

Two of the 36 instances of *karet* are the consequence of one not doing what one is *supposed* to do. What are these two things? They are: 1) bringing the Paschal offering and 2) performing the *Brit Milah*. If a person does not do these two things, he is severed from God and the Jewish people.

Why is the failure to perform these two mitzvot punished so severely?

When God was about to take the Children of Israel out of Egypt, in order to establish them as a nation and fulfill His promise to Abraham, God saw that the people were completely disconnected from Him. After 210 years in Egypt, during which time they were enslaved, forced to watch Pharaoh bathe in the blood of their children and the innocent bodies of the Jewish young used as filler for the vast Egyptian construction projects (after all, Jewish flesh is cheaper than sheetrock), they were completely dejected and demoralized. Is it then any wonder that, as a result, they become disconnected from God and their divine purpose?

The hell of the Nazi Holocaust lasted six years, but the Egyptian enslavement and slaughter lasted more than two centuries. So how could the Jews not be disconnected?

Therefore, to reconnect them to their divine purpose, to remind them of who they really were, God gave the Israelites two specific mitzvot – one was circumcision, and the other was the *Korban Pesach*.¹²

Why these two mitzvot specifically?¹³

7. Book of Ezekiel

A passage from the Book of Ezekiel, which we read last night in the Haggadah, supplies the answer:

“And I [God] passed by you and saw you downtrodden with your blood, and I said to you, ‘With your blood, live,’ and I said to you, ‘With your blood, live.’ Myriads, like the plants of the field I have made you, and you have increased and grown, and you have come with perfect beauty ... but you were naked and bare. And I passed by you ... and I spread My robe over you, and I covered your nakedness, and I swore to you and came into a covenant with you ... and you were Mine.”¹⁴

¹² See Exodus 12:6 and Rashi ad loc quoting Mechilta 21.

¹³ For the following, see See Pirkei d’Rab Eliezer ch. 29 extensively. Shemot Rabba 17:3.

¹⁴ Ezekiel 16:6-8.

This is one of the more cryptic sections in the Haggadah. What does it mean?

One verse of this we also read at every *Brit Milah*:

“And I passed by you and saw you downtrodden with your blood, and I said to you, ‘With your blood, live,’ and I said to you, ‘With your blood, live.’”

Our sages teach¹⁵ that the repetition of *with your blood, live ... with your blood, live*, is meant to refer to the blood of the Paschal offering and to the blood of the *Brit*.

These two mitzvot are the life-blood of our connection with God. As with the human being, blood is essential, blood is not only our connection to life – blood *is* our life!

And this is why these mitzvot – *Korban Pesach* and *Brit Milah* – were the first two life-blood connections that God established for the Jews when they were downtrodden in the hell of Egypt.

Both these mitzvot which entail shedding blood are like a “blood pact” that is invoked when all else fails, demonstrating the absolute and immutable bond between God and the Jewish people. Like the blood we transfuse to save a child in distress, God gave the broken-spirited Jews in the darkness of Egypt the two mitzvot related to blood – “*with your blood, live, with your blood, live*”!

This is what the Book of Ezekiel is saying. And why we read this passage in the Haggadah and at the *Brit Milah*.

And I passed by you and saw you downtrodden... you were naked and bare. The Jews in Egypt were downtrodden and naked and bare – that is bare of mitzvot, bare of any connections to God. So God gave them (and us) access to the life-blood of the *Brit Milah* and *Korban Pesach*.

“And I passed by you ... and I spread My robe over you, and I covered your nakedness, and I swore to you and came into a covenant [brit] with you ... and you were Mine.”

¹⁵ See commentaries above. Targum Yonatan to Exodus 12:6 actually maintains that both the blood of circumcision and that of the Paschal Offering were mixed together and used on the doorposts.

8. Why Elijah Visits

This point is further illuminated by an interesting phenomenon.

Elijah the Prophet shows up famously at two events: the Passover Seder¹⁶ and the *Brit Milah*.¹⁷ We have a *Kisei Shel Eliyahu*, Elijah's Chair, at the *Brit*, and the *Kos Shel Eliyahu*, Elijah's Cup, at the Seder.

One of the reasons that Elijah shows up at every single *Brit*¹⁸ is that he is an eternal witness to the eternal covenant (*Brit*) of the Jewish people, and he is there to testify that the people are truly connected to God.

During the episode with the priests of Baal, Elijah questioned the Jews' eternal bond, saying, "*the Children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant [brit]*."¹⁹ And God responded: "You question My people's commitment to the circumcision? You will visit every single *Brit* and testify that My people maintain the eternal bond and fulfill the mitzvah of circumcision for all time."

When we pour Elijah's cup during the Seder,²⁰ opening our doors and welcoming him to our tables, it is also so that Elijah may testify to our eternal bond – *Brit Olam* – with God.

9. Lesson For Us

The message for us is clear. All mitzvot are connections, but two mitzvot are our life-blood.

Pesach represents our deepest connection with God, on the level of circumcision.

¹⁶ See Haggada Shel Pesach Im Likkutei Taamim u'Minhagim to shfoch chamoscha.

¹⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 265:11. See Malachi 3:1, using the term malach haBrit, the 'angel of the covenant.'

¹⁸ See Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer ibid.

¹⁹ I Kings 19:10, 14.

²⁰ Chok Yaakov. Shulchan Aruch Harav, 480:5. See Haggada Shel Pesach Im Likkutei Taamim u'Minhagim.

Sometimes in life we feel so disconnected from our source, from God. We feel like we have been in Egypt for hundreds of years, our back broken from the depressing labor of the physical world, our bodies used for cheap filler by the forces of evil.

Says God: "I am taking you out of Egypt today! You feel like you are bare and naked of mitzvot, and disconnected from Me? Know that I will give you the blood of life itself, two intrinsic mitzvot that will demonstrate and concretize our eternal bond – the mitzvah of Pesach and the mitzvah of *Brit Milah*.

And anytime you think that the connection is lost, Elijah the Prophet will show up to testify that it really is not, that it is eternally alive.

10. Elijah and the Brit of the Ari (Optional Story)²¹

Legends about Elijah's appearances at Seders and circumcisions abound. Here is one that may not be so famous:

There was once a very pious scholar living in Israel named Rabbi Shlomo. One day in the year 1534, while he was studying Torah alone, Elijah the Prophet appeared to him and said, "I have been sent to you by the Almighty to bring you tidings that your wife shall conceive and bear a child, and that you must call him Yitzchak. He shall begin to deliver Israel from the forces of evil. Through him, numerous souls will experience their *tikkun* (rectification). He is also destined to reveal many hidden mysteries in the Torah and Kabbalah. His fame will spread throughout the world. Take care, therefore, that you not circumcise him before I come to be the *sandek* (the one who holds the child during the circumcision ceremony)."

²¹ Adapted from http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380758/jewish/The-Holy-Ari.htm

When Elijah finished speaking, he disappeared. Rabbi Shlomo went home, but he did not reveal this secret to anyone, even to his wife. But sure enough, shortly thereafter she became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. On the eighth day the child was brought to the synagogue to be circumcised. Rabbi Shlomo searched everywhere to see if Elijah had come as promised, but he did not see him. Everyone was urging the father to proceed, but he replied that not all the guests had yet arrived.

An hour went by, but Elijah still had not come. Rabbi Shlomo didn't know what to do. Fearing that his sins somehow prevented Elijah from fulfilling his promise, he burst into tears. But as he was crying, Elijah appeared and said, "Do not cry, servant of God. Come offer your son as a pure sacrifice dedicated entirely to Heaven. Sit on my chair, and I shall sit upon you."

Whereupon, invisible to everyone except Rabbi Shlomo, Elijah sat on his lap, received the child with both hands, and held him during the entire circumcision. Neither the mohel nor those assembled saw anything but the father holding his baby son. After the circumcision, Elijah again promised Rabbi Shlomo that the child would bring great light to the entire world, and then he disappeared.

Rabbi Shlomo passed away when little Yitzchak was still a child, and did not live to see what his son would become.

For his son, Yitzchak Luria, was destined to become the famed Ari, undisputedly the greatest practitioner and expounder of Kabbalah since the Rashbi, author of the *Zohar*.

Although he lived only 38 short years - and taught for a mere 2 years - he completely revolutionized the world of mystical Judaism. He is buried in the old cemetery of Tzfat/Safed, where tens of thousands make the pilgrimage to his gravesite every year.²²

²²The synagogue where the Ari's Brit Milah took place still stands in the Old City of Jerusalem. It is part of the Old Yishuv Court Museum and certainly worth a visit.

11. Transcending Time (Conclusion)

Some nations measure their history in years and decades. We Jews measure our existence in millennia. For truly, we [like the Ari] transcend time. We have been celebrating Pesach for 3,327 years now.

There are doubters, questioning our commitment. Even Elijah himself questioned it (as cited earlier²³).

But today, Elijah is our witness, both to the *Brit* and to Pesach. And he will be until the Final Redemption, as the Prophet Malachi states:

“Lo, I [God] will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord, that he may turn the heart of the fathers back through the children, and the heart of the children back through their fathers...”

There are no two mitzvot that better embody this prophecy – father inspiring son, son inspiring father – than the mitzvah of *Brit Milah* and the mitzvah of Pesach.

As we see every time a *Brit Milah* is performed, the intrinsic, intergenerational bond between God and Jew, passed down from parent to child, lives on and on and on. And as we just experienced last night at the Seder: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, parents and children bonding and connecting together and bonding and connecting with God.

It is nothing less than a miracle: thousands of years of an eternal bond played out today, while all other nations have risen and fallen.

May the words of the Prophet Malachi be fulfilled before we even begin Musaf and may we indeed merit to enter the Land of Israel with the Final Redemption and offer the physical *Korban Pesach* this very year!

²³ From Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer ch. 29.

Next year in Jerusalem! And may that next year begin right now.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Kasher v'Sameach*.

Gut Shabbos un a kosherin un frelichen Pesach!