



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 15 Bo – Forever Liberating

Text

שמות יב

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאַל-אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר. ב הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֻדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה. ג דַּבְּרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עַדְתֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בַּעֲשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם אִישׁ שֶׁה לְבֵית-אָבִית שֶׁה לְבֵיתוֹ. ד וְאִם-יִמְעַט הַבַּיִת מֵהֵיוֹת מִשֶּׁה וְלָקַח הוּא וּשְׁכֵנוֹ הַקָּרִיב אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ בְּמִכְסַת נֶפֶשׁ אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוּ תֹכֶסוֹ עַל-הַשֶּׁה. ה שֶׁה תַּמִּים זָכָר בֶּן-שָׁנָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם מִן-הַקְּבָשִׁים וּמִן-הַעֲזִים תִּקְחוּ. ו וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְמִשְׁמַרְתָּ עַד אַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה וּשְׁחֹטוּ אֹתוֹ כֹּל קְהַל עַדְתֵּי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בֵּין הָעֲרֵבִים. ז וְלָקַחוּ מִן-הַדָּם וְנָתְנוּ עַל-שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוֹזוֹת וְעַל-הַמִּשְׁקוֹף עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר-יֵאָכְלוּ אֹתוֹ בָּהֶם. ח וְאָכְלוּ אֶת-הַבָּשָׂר בְּלִילָה הַזֶּה צְלִי-אֵשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עַל-מַרְרִים יֵאָכְלוּ. ט אֶל-תֵּאָכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ נָא וּבָשָׂל מִבָּשָׂל בְּמַיִם כִּי אִם-צְלִי-אֵשׁ רֹאשׁוֹ עַל-כַּרְעֵיו וְעַל-קַרְבּוֹ. י וְלֹא-תוֹתִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר וְהִנֵּה תֵר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר בְּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרֹפוּ. יא וְכִכַּה תֵּאָכְלוּ אֹתוֹ מִתְנִיכֶם חֲגָרִים וְעֲלִיכֶם בְּרַגְלֵיכֶם וּמְקַלְכֶם בְּיַדְכֶם וְאֲכַלְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בַּחֲפֹזוֹן פֶּסַח הוּא לֵיהוֹה. יב וְעִבְרַתִּי בְּאֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם בְּלִילָה הַזֶּה וְהַפִּיתִי כָל-בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵאָדָם וְעַד-בְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-אֶל הֵי מִצְרַיִם אֲעַשֶׂה שְׁפָטִים אֲנִי יְהוָה. יג וְהָיָה הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאֹת עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם שֹׂם וְרֵאִיתִי אֶת-הַדָּם וּפְסַחְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם וְלֹא-יְהִי בְכֶם נֶגֶף לְמִשְׁחִית בְּהַכֹּתִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. יד וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזָכְרוֹן וְחַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג לֵיהוֹה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגְּלוּ. טו שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִצּוֹת תֵּאָכְלוּ אַךְ בַּיּוֹם הַרִאשׁוֹן תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ שְׂאֵר מִבְּתִיכֶם כִּי כָל-אֶחָד חֲמִץ וְנִכְרַתָּה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל מִיּוֹם הַרִאשׁוֹן עַד-יּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי. טז וּבַיּוֹם הַרִאשׁוֹן מִקְרֵא-קֹדֶשׁ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִקְרֵא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל-מְלֹאכָה לֹא-יַעֲשֶׂה בָהֶם אַךְ אֲשֶׁר יֵאָכֵל לְכָל-נֶפֶשׁ הוּא לְבַדּוֹ יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם. יז וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַמִּצְוֹת כִּי בְעֵצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הוֹצֵאתִי אֶת-צְבָאוֹתֵיכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם. יח בְּרִאשׁוֹן בְּאֶרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעֶרְבֵת אֲכָלוּ מִצַּת עַד יוֹם הָאֶחָד וְעֹשְׂרִים לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעֶרְבֵת. יט שִׁבְעַת יָמִים שְׂאֵר לֹא יִמָּצָא בְּבִתְיֹכֶם כִּי כָל-אֶחָד מִחֻמְצַת וְנִכְרַתָּה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַדְתֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגֵר וּבְאֶזְרַח הָאָרֶץ. כ כָּל-מִחְמַצַּת לֹא תֵאָכְלוּ בְּכָל מוֹשְׁבֵי תִיכֶם תֵּאָכְלוּ מִצּוֹת. כא וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְכָל-זַקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מִשְׁכוּ וּקְחוּ לָכֶם צֹאֵן לְמִשְׁפַּחַתֵיכֶם וּשְׁחֹטוּ הַפֶּסֶח. כב וְלָקַחְתֶּם אֶגְדַּת אַזּוֹב וּטְבַלְתֶּם בָּדָם אֲשֶׁר-בִּסֹּף וְהַגַּעְתֶּם אֶל-הַמִּשְׁקוֹף וְאֶל-שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוֹזוֹת מִן-הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר בִּסֹּף וְאֵת לֶיֶשׁ תִּצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח-בֵּיתוֹ עַד-בֹּקֶר. כג וְעִבְרַתִּי יְהוֹה לְנֹגֵף אֶת-מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת-הַדָּם עַל-הַמִּשְׁקוֹף וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוֹזוֹת וּפְסַח יְהוֹה עַל-הַפֶּתַח וְלֹא יִתֵּן הַמִּשְׁחִית לְבֹא אֶל-בְּתִיכֶם לְנֹגֵף. כד וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְחֻק־לֶךְ וּלְבִנְיָךְ עַד-עוֹלָם. כה וְהָיָה כִּי-תָבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן יְהוָה לָכֶם כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּר וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הָעֵבֶדֶה הַזֶּה אֵת. כו וְהָיָה כִּי-יֵאָמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מַה הָעֵבֶדֶה הַזֶּה לָכֶם. כז וְאָמַרְתֶּם זִבְחַת-פֶּסַח הוּא לֵיהוֹה אֲשֶׁר פֶּסַח עַל-בְּתִי בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת-מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-בְּתִינוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקַּד הָעַם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ. כח וַיִּלְכוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן כִּן עָשׂוּ.

Exodus 12

¹ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ² This month shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. ³ Speak to the whole 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. ⁴ But if the household is too small for a lamb, let her/him share one



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with a neighbor who dwells nearby, in proportion to the number of persons: you shall contribute for the lamb according to what each household will eat. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a yearling male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw, or cooked in any way with water, but roasted — head, legs, and entrails — over the fire. ¹⁰ You shall not leave any of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it. ¹¹ This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly: it is a passover offering to the Lord. ¹² For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord. ¹³ And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴ This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time. ¹⁵ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶ You shall celebrate a sacred occasion on the first day, and a sacred occasion on the seventh day; no work at all shall be done on them; only what every person is to eat, that alone may be prepared for you. ¹⁷ You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time. ¹⁸ In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. ¹⁹ No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether s/he is a stranger or a citizen of the country. ²⁰ You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.

²¹ Moses then summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover offering. 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 her/his house until morning. ²³ For when the Lord goes through to smite the Egyptians, S/He will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and the Lord will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home. ²⁴ "You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants. ²⁵ And when you enter the land that the Lord will give you, as S/He has promised, you shall observe this rite. ²⁶ And when



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your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' ²⁷ you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because S/He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when S/He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses.'" The people then bowed low in homage. ²⁸ And the Israelites went and did so; just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.

Context

Their leaders' hearts hardened by God, the Egyptians suffer the remaining three of the ten plagues in Parshat Bo: locusts who devour any remaining nourishment on the plants and trees of their fields, darkness, and the death of the firstborn. In advance of the final plague, the Israelites prepare themselves for their exodus from slavery according to precise instructions that involve an animal sacrifice, marking their homes to protect their firstborn, and a ritual meal. Reminders of these acts are to be repeated throughout the generations of the Jewish People. In the end, the Egyptian people send the Israelites away with expensive gifts, anxious to avoid any further losses. Vigilant observance of the night of liberation is binding on every Jew as a reminder of divine intervention, and of the fulfillment of the promise to take us to the promised land. Eating *matzot*, unleavened bread and refraining from eating leaven are the sign of participating in the exodus experience and the method of passing on the liberation tradition to our children.

Explorations

The Exodus is a tremendous legacy of the Jewish People to humanity; it creates an eternal model of redemption from enslavement. Along with Creation, the Exodus is one of the two pillars of Jewish consciousness, constantly referenced in the sanctifications of Shabbat and festivals. In this respect, the Exodus is matched with Creation—revealing divine power through the medium of the natural world. However, the plagues subvert the Creation of heaven and earth, (re)turning the world to near-chaos, wreaking havoc with the sea (blood), bringing destruction from the sea, sky, and earth (frogs, lice, boils, hail), and causing some creatures to destroy sustenance and other creatures (locusts, wild beasts). The very materials that God created in Genesis give evidence of divine displeasure with the abuses of slavery.

Commenting on the first verse in the Torah that tells of the Creation of the world (Bereishit 1:1), Rashi asks whether the Torah ought not to have begun with the verse from Exodus quoted above, “[This month shall be for you the beginning of the months](#) (Ex. 12:2). Rashi understands that this very first commandment to the Jewish People is even more significant to us than Creation itself. Exodus is a core narrative of our national origin—the birth of the Jewish People. From within the narrow confines of Egypt, laboring through the contractions of plagues, the People are propelled into the birth canal of the Red Sea, and eventually out onto the dry desert land.

The Torah instructs us to keep alive the experience of liberation from the hands of oppressors. Interspersed within the account of the events in the narrative, the Torah reflects



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about the future observance of what becomes the Passover festival, particularly the *seder* rituals. We are all obliged to continue to re-enact the story forever. "You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants" (Ex. 12:24). The emphasis is on the children, and how to involve them in the story as the generations pass on. The text anticipates that children will ask questions, interrogate our rituals, hold us responsible to account meaningfully for our behavior.

And it will be when your child will ask you in the future saying, “What is this?” And you will say to your child, “With a strong hand God took us out of Egypt out of slavery (Exodus 13:14).

When instructing the Israelites, Moses makes the connection between the commandment to redeem and sanctify the firstborn and the plague of the death of the firstborn. The following passage conjoins these two themes of our parasha,

¹ The Lord spoke further to Moses, saying, ²"Consecrate to Me every first-born; man and beast, the first issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine."

¹² you shall set apart for the Lord every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be the Lord's. ... ¹⁴ And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage. ¹⁵ When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my children.' (Shmot 13:1-2; 12-15)

Enslavement at the hands of the Egyptians leads to the plague of death of the firstborn, which in turn leads to the commandment to sanctify every firstborn among the Israelites. If an animal, it is sacrificed; if a child, s/he is redeemed. The idea of the primacy of the firstborn is not new to the Torah in our parasha. The book of Genesis presumes the custom that the firstborn child inherits the spiritual and material wealth of the family. We learn of the custom by the behavior of the matriarchs and patriarchs who struggle against the norm, choosing instead to give the special blessing reserved for the firstborn to the child they feel worthy. The early families invert the cultural tradition by selecting to pass the covenant to the younger child rather than the older—Yitzchak over Yishmael, Yakov over Esav, Yosef over Reuven and brothers, Efraim over Menashe. The killing of the firstborn Egyptians refocuses our attention on the oldest child. The instruction to place blood on the doorposts of Israelite homes to avoid the plague indicates that the Israelites are also in mortal danger if they do not distinguish themselves. On that night, every mother, Israelite and Egyptian, stands to lose the child who opened her womb. In order to prevent the death of the child at the hands of the Destroyer, every Israelite family sacrifices a lamb, dips hyssop into the blood, and smears the posts and lintels of the doorway with the blood of the animal. Each doorway becomes a symbol of the opening of the womb to life—a passageway through



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which death ought not to venture. This is the root of the Pesach offering, and by extension, an inspiration for the ritual *mezuzah*, the parchment scroll that we affix to our doorposts that mark our homes as Jewish.

The commandment to sanctify the firstborn explicitly focuses on the act of opening the womb, *petter rechem*, prompting the sages to determine that a child born after a miscarriage or by means of caesarian section does not need to be redeemed (codified in the [Shulchan Arukh](#), *Yoreh Deah 305, 24*). The redemption of the firstborn child is still practiced today in Jewish communities that guide their lives by halakha. The simple ritual--involving a symbolic payment to a priest in exchange for the infant--reminds us in every generation of the mortal loss the Egyptians suffered during the final plague, the precariousness of the survival of the Israelites, and the ultimate liberation of the Children of Israel. The symbolic birth from slavery and subsequent sanctification of the Israelite people is an antidote to the cosmic chaos indicated by the plagues.

Questions for Discussion

- How do you understand the focus on the death of the firstborn as the ultimate plague expressing God's power?
- Why were the survival of the Israelite firstborn and the redemption of the Israelites dependent on their acts of sacrifice and displaying blood at the openings of their homes? What are the gender and other implications of linking destruction and sanctification so closely to a woman's biological creation process—to the first opening of the womb?
- What do the connections between the final plague, death of the firstborn, and liberation teach us about the relationship between destruction, redemption, and sanctification? How can we respond better to contemporary destruction through redemption and sanctification?
- Are you acquainted with the ceremony of redeeming the firstborn (*pidyon ha-ben*)? What do you think is – or should be -- the significance of this ceremony, today?

Study Links

Heifer International is an organization that provides a new model of sanctifying firstborn animals. Heifer works to alleviate world hunger by giving livestock, which serve as sources of food and income, to impoverished families around the world. Recipients are trained in animal care and environmentally sound agricultural practices so that they can raise themselves out of poverty and become self-reliant. Each family that receives an animal pledges to donate their animal's firstborn female to another family, thereby perpetuating the project of sustenance. Learn more about this



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By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

sanctification of the firstborn as an act of life-giving and how you can participate here.

Though the commandment focuses on the opening of the womb, not on the child, the ritual of redeeming a firstborn (pidyon ha-ben) has traditionally been performed for Jewish sons. Here is a video of a traditional ceremony; this site explains the ritual. Explore some thoughts and a ritual for redeeming daughters (pidyon ha-bat).

Summary of Issues

The blood sacrifice ritual of the Passover is the final stage of the chaotic plagues that wreak havoc in Creation and death of the Egyptian firstborn. Family rituals of sanctification and redemption help to generate the symbolic birth of the Jewish People from oppression.

Methods & Observations

Reading the body in the text is one of the methods and innovations of feminist interpretation—addressing the Torah and seeing rituals from the point of view of human life functions. In this parasha, the doorway of the house and the womb overlap as symbolic gateways to life and continuity, to liberation. These meanings are as relevant to men and to women; they are as universal and significant to humanity as male imagery and metaphors.

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Session 15 Bo – Forever Liberating

Text

שמות יב

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאַל-אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶרְצְךָ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר. ב הַחֲדֹשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֹאשׁ חֹדְשִׁים רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה. ג דַּבְּרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עַדְתֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בְּעֵשֶׂר לַחֲדָשׁ הַזֶּה יִקְחוּ לָהֶם אִישׁ שֵׁה לְבֵית-אָבִית שֵׁה לְבֵיתוֹ. ד וְאִם-יִמְעַט הַבֵּית מִהְיֹת מִשֵּׁה וְלָקַח הוּא וְשִׁכְנוֹ הִקְרִיב אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ בְּמִכְסֹת נֹפֶשׁוֹת אִישׁ לְפִי אֹכְלוֹ תִכְסֹּו עַל-הַשֵּׁה. ה שֵׁה תָמִים זָכָר בְּיוֹם-שָׁנָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם מִן-הַכֹּבָשִׁים וּמִן-הָעֹזִים תִּקְחוּ. ו יִהְיֶה לָכֶם לְמִשְׁמַרְתָּ עַד אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֲדָשׁ הַזֶּה וְשָׁחֻוּ אֹתוֹ כֹּל קֹהֵל עַדְתֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בֵּין הָעֹרְבִים. ז וְלָקַחוּ מִן-הַדָּם וְנָתְנוּ עַל-שְׁתֵי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וְעַל-הַמַּשְׁקוֹף עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר-יֹאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ בָּהֶם. ח וְאֹכְלוּ אֶת-הַבָּשָׂר בְּלִילָה הַזֶּה צְלִי-אֵשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עַל-מֶרְרִים יֹאכְלֶהוּ. ט אֶל-תֹּאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ נָא וּבָשָׂל מִבָּשָׂל בְּמַיִם כִּי אִם-צְלִי-אֵשׁ רֹאשׁוֹ עַל-כַּרְעֵיו וְעַל-קַרְבּוֹ. י וְלֹא-תוֹתִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר וְהַגִּיתֶם מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר בָּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרֹפוּ. יא וְכַכֵּה תֹאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ מִתְּנִיכֶם חֲגָרִים גְּעֻלֵיכֶם בְּרִגְלֵיכֶם וּמְקַלְכֶם בְּיָדְכֶם וְאֶלְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בְּחַפְזוֹן פֶּסַח הוּא לִיהוָה. יב וְעִבְרַתִי בְּאֶרְצְךָ-מִצְרַיִם בְּלִילָה הַזֶּה וְהִפִּיתִי כָל-בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרְצְךָ מִצְרַיִם מֵאֲדָם וְעַד-בְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-אֶלֹהֵי מִצְרַיִם אֲעֲשֶׂה שְׁפָטִים אֲנִי יְהוָה. יג וְהָיָה הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאֹת עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר אֲתֶם שִׂם וְרֵאִיתִי אֶת-הַדָּם וּפִסַּחְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה בְכֶם נֶגֶף לְמַשְׁחִית בְּהַכֹּתִי בְּאֶרְצְךָ מִצְרַיִם. יד וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזָכְרוֹן וְחַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חַג לִיהוָה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגַּהוּ. טו שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מִצּוֹת תֹּאכְלוּ אֶת בְּיּוֹם הַרִאשׁוֹן תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ שְׂאֵר מִבְּתֵיכֶם כִּי כָל-אֶלֹהֵי כָל-חַמֵּץ וְנִכְרְתָה הַחַמֵּץ הַזֶּה מִיּוֹם הַרִאשׁוֹן עַד-יּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי. טז וּבִיּוֹם הַרִאשׁוֹן מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ וּבִיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל-מְלֶאכֶה לֹא-יַעֲשֶׂה בָהֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר יֵאָכַל לְכָל-נֶפֶשׁ הוּא לְבָדוּ יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם. יז וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַמִּצּוֹת כִּי בְעֵצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הוֹצֵאתִי אֶת-צְבָאוֹתֵיכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם. יח בְּרִאשׁוֹן בְּאֶרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֲדָשׁ בְּעֶרְבֹת אֹכְלוּ מִצֹּאת עַד יוֹם הָאֶחָד וְעֹשְׂרִים לַחֲדָשׁ בְּעֶרְבֹת. יט שְׁבַעַת יָמִים שְׂאֵר לֹא יִמְצָא בְּבֵתֵיכֶם כִּי כָל-אֶלֹהֵי כָל-חַמֵּץ תִּמְחַמְצֹת וְנִכְרְתָה הַחַמֵּץ הַזֶּה מֵעַדְתֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגֵר וּבְאֹזְרָח הָאֶרֶץ. כ כָּל-מִחְמָצָת לֹא תֹאכְלוּ בְכֹל מוֹשְׁבֵי תֵיכֶם תֹּאכְלוּ מִצּוֹת. כא וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְכָל-זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מִשְׁכּוֹ וְקַחוּ לָכֶם צֹאֵן לְמִשְׁפַּח תֵּיכֶם וְשָׁחֻוּוּ הַפֶּסַח. כב וּלְמִחְתֶּם אֲגַדְתֶּם אֹזֹב וּטְבַלְתֶּם בְּדָם אֲשֶׁר-בַּסֶּף וְהַגַּעְתֶּם אֶל-הַמַּשְׁקוֹף וְאַל-שְׁתִּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת מִן-הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר בַּסֶּף וְאֲתֶם לֹא תִצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח-בֵּיתוֹ עַד-בֹּקֶר. כג וְעִבְרֵי יְהוָה לָנֶגֶף אֶת-מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת-הַדָּם עַל-הַמַּשְׁקוֹף וְעַל שְׁתֵי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וּפִסַּח יְהוָה עַל-הַפֶּתַח וְלֹא יָתַן הַמַּשְׁחִית לְבֹא אֶל-בְּתֵיכֶם לָנֶגֶף. כד וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְחֻק-לֶךְ וּלְבְנֵיךָ עַד-עוֹלָם. כה וְהָיָה כִּי-תָבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן יְהוָה לָכֶם כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת. כו וְהָיָה כִּי-יֹאמְרוּ אֵלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם. כז וְאָמַרְתֶּם זִבְחַת-פֶּסַח הוּא לִיהוָה אֲשֶׁר פִּסַּח עַל-בְּתֵי בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת-מִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת-מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-בְּתֵינֵנוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקַּד הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ. כח וְלָכֶם וְנִעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן בְּיוֹם הַזֶּה.

Exodus 12

¹ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ² This month shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. ³ Speak to the whole 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. ⁴ But if the household is too small for a lamb, let her/him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby, in proportion to the number of persons: you shall contribute for the lamb according to what each household will eat. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a yearling male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep watch over it until



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the fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw, or cooked in any way with water, but roasted — head, legs, and entrails — over the fire. ¹⁰ You shall not leave any of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it. ¹¹ This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly: it is a passover offering to the Lord. ¹² For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord. ¹³ And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴ This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time. ¹⁵ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶ You shall celebrate a sacred occasion on the first day, and a sacred occasion on the seventh day; no work at all shall be done on them; only what every person is to eat, that alone may be prepared for you. ¹⁷ You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time. ¹⁸ In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. ¹⁹ No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether s/he is a stranger or a citizen of the country. ²⁰ You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.

²¹ Moses then summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover offering. 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 her/his house until morning. ²³ For when the Lord goes through to smite the Egyptians, S/He will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and the Lord will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home. ²⁴ "You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants. ²⁵ And when you enter the land that the Lord will give you, as S/He has promised, you shall observe this rite. ²⁶ And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' ²⁷ you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because S/He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when S/He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses.'" The people then bowed low in homage. ²⁸ And the Israelites went



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and did so; just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.

Context

Their leaders' hearts hardened by God, the Egyptians suffer the remaining three of the ten plagues in Parshat Bo: locusts who devour any remaining nourishment on the plants and trees of their fields, darkness, and the death of the firstborn. In advance of the final plague, the Israelites prepare themselves for their exodus from slavery according to precise instructions that involve an animal sacrifice, marking their homes to protect their firstborn, and a ritual meal. Reminders of these acts are to be repeated throughout the generations of the Jewish People. In the end, the Egyptian people send the Israelites away with expensive gifts, anxious to avoid any further losses. Vigilant observance of the night of liberation is binding on every Jew as a reminder of divine intervention, and of the fulfillment of the promise to take us to the promised land. Eating *matzot*, unleavened bread and refraining from eating leaven are the sign of participating in the exodus experience and the method of passing on the liberation tradition to our children.

Explorations

The Exodus is a tremendous legacy of the Jewish People to humanity; it creates an eternal model of redemption from enslavement. Along with Creation, the Exodus is one of the two pillars of Jewish consciousness, constantly referenced in the sanctifications of Shabbat and festivals. In this respect, the Exodus is matched with Creation—revealing divine power through the medium of the natural world. However, the plagues subvert the Creation of heaven and earth, (re)turning the world to near-chaos, wreaking havoc with the sea (blood), bringing destruction from the sea, sky, and earth (frogs, lice, boils, hail), and causing some creatures to destroy sustenance and other creatures (locusts, wild beasts). The very materials that God created in Genesis give evidence of divine displeasure with the abuses of slavery.

Commenting on the first verse in the Torah that tells of the Creation of the world (Bereishit 1:1), Rashi asks whether the Torah ought not to have begun with the verse from Exodus quoted above, “[This month shall be for you the beginning of the months](#) (Ex. 12:2). Rashi understands that this very first commandment to the Jewish People is even more significant to us than Creation itself. Exodus is a core narrative of our national origin—the birth of the Jewish People. From within the narrow confines of Egypt, laboring through the contractions of plagues, the People are propelled into the birth canal of the Red Sea, and eventually out onto the dry desert land.

The Torah instructs us to keep alive the experience of liberation from the hands of oppressors. Interspersed within the account of the events in the narrative, the Torah reflects about the future observance of what becomes the Passover festival, particularly the *seder* rituals. We are all obliged to continue to re-enact the story forever. “[You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants](#)” (Ex. 12:24). The emphasis is on the



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children, and how to involve them in the story as the generations pass on. The text anticipates that children will ask questions, interrogate our rituals, hold us responsible to account meaningfully for our behavior.

And it will be when your child will ask you in the future saying, “What is this?” And you will say to your child, “With a strong hand God took us out of Egypt out of slavery (Exodus 13:14).

When instructing the Israelites, Moses makes the connection between the commandment to redeem and sanctify the firstborn and the plague of the death of the firstborn. The following passage conjoins these two themes of our parasha,

¹ The Lord spoke further to Moses, saying, ²“Consecrate to Me every first-born; man and beast, the first issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine.”

¹² you shall set apart for the Lord every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be the Lord's. . . . ¹⁴ And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage. ¹⁵ When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my children.' (Shmot 13:1-2; 12-15)

Enslavement at the hands of the Egyptians leads to the plague of death of the firstborn, which in turn leads to the commandment to sanctify every firstborn among the Israelites. If an animal, it is sacrificed; if a child, s/he is redeemed. The idea of the primacy of the firstborn is not new to the Torah in our parasha. The book of Genesis presumes the custom that the firstborn child inherits the spiritual and material wealth of the family. We learn of the custom by the behavior of the matriarchs and patriarchs who struggle against the norm, choosing instead to give the special blessing reserved for the firstborn to the child they feel worthy. The early families invert the cultural tradition by selecting to pass the covenant to the younger child rather than the older—Yitzchak over Yishmael, Yakov over Esav, Yosef over Reuven and brothers, Efraim over Menashe. The killing of the firstborn Egyptians refocuses our attention on the oldest child. The instruction to place blood on the doorposts of Israelite homes to avoid the plague indicates that the Israelites are also in mortal danger if they do not distinguish themselves. On that night, every mother, Israelite and Egyptian, stands to lose the child who opened her womb. In order to prevent the death of the child at the hands of the Destroyer, every Israelite family sacrifices a lamb, dips hyssop into the blood, and smears the posts and lintels of the doorway with the blood of the animal. Each doorway becomes a symbol of the opening of the womb to life—a passageway through which death ought not to venture. This is the root of the Pesach offering, and by extension, an inspiration for the ritual *mezuza*, the parchment scroll that we affix to our doorposts that mark our homes as Jewish.



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The commandment to sanctify the firstborn explicitly focuses on the act of opening the womb, *peter rechem*, prompting the sages to determine that a child born after a miscarriage or by means of caesarian section does not need to be redeemed (codified in the [Shulchan Arukh](#), *Yoreh Deah 305, 24*). The redemption of the firstborn child is still practiced today in Jewish communities that guide their lives by halakha. The simple ritual--involving a symbolic payment to a priest in exchange for the infant--reminds us in every generation of the mortal loss the Egyptians suffered during the final plague, the precariousness of the survival of the Israelites, and the ultimate liberation of the Children of Israel. The symbolic birth from slavery and subsequent sanctification of the Israelite people is an antidote to the cosmic chaos indicated by the plagues.

Questions for Discussion

- How do you understand the focus on the death of the firstborn as the ultimate plague expressing God's power?
- Why were the survival of the Israelite firstborn and the redemption of the Israelites dependent on their acts of sacrifice and displaying blood at the openings of their homes? What are the gender and other implications of linking destruction and sanctification so closely to a woman's biological creation process—to the first opening of the womb?
- What do the connections between the final plague, death of the firstborn, and liberation teach us about the relationship between destruction, redemption, and sanctification? How can we respond better to contemporary destruction through redemption and sanctification?
- Are you acquainted with the ceremony of redeeming the firstborn (*pidyon ha-ben*)? What do you think is – or should be -- the significance of this ceremony, today?

Study Links

Heifer International is an organization that provides a new model of sanctifying firstborn animals. Heifer works to alleviate world hunger by giving livestock, which serve as sources of food and income, to impoverished families around the world. Recipients are trained in animal care and environmentally sound agricultural practices so that they can raise themselves out of poverty and become self-reliant. Each family that receives an animal pledges to donate their animal's firstborn female to another family, thereby perpetuating the project of sustenance. Learn more about this sanctification of the firstborn as an act of life-giving and how you can participate here.

Though the commandment focuses on the opening of the womb, not on the child, the ritual of



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redeeming a firstborn (pidyon ha-ben) has traditionally been performed for Jewish sons. [Here](#) is a video of a traditional ceremony; [this site](#) explains the ritual. Explore [some thoughts](#) and a [ritual](#) for redeeming daughters (pidyon ha-bat).

Summary of Issues

The blood sacrifice ritual of the Passover is the final stage of the chaotic plagues that wreak havoc in Creation and death of the Egyptian firstborn. Family rituals of sanctification and redemption help to generate the symbolic birth of the Jewish People from oppression.

Methods & Observations

Reading the body in the text is one of the methods and innovations of feminist interpretation—addressing the Torah and seeing rituals from the point of view of human life functions. In this parasha, the doorway of the house and the womb overlap as symbolic gateways to life and continuity, to liberation. These meanings are as relevant to men and to women; they are as universal and significant to humanity as male imagery and metaphors.

Contact

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