

## Paschal Sacrifice

When God instituted Passover, He stipulated strict guidelines governing the selection and manner of killing, cooking, and eating the Paschal Lamb. The lamb was to be chosen on the tenth day of the month of Nisan. There was to be one lamb per household with one household consisting of a familial patriarch and all his descendents.<sup>1</sup> If the household was too small to consume an entire lamb, then that household should join with its neighbor. As many households as necessary were to be joined so that the whole lamb could be eaten in one sitting.<sup>2</sup> The lamb was to be a male, one year old, without blemish.<sup>3</sup> Because the English rendering of *lamb* is in fact representative of a Hebrew word that may refer to a lamb or kid, one year old goats were also acceptable provided they also met the other requirements.

This lamb, or kid, was to be kept until the fourteenth day of the same month on which day the Israelites were instructed to kill it in the evening.<sup>4</sup> After killing the lamb, some of its blood was to be spread on the two doorposts and also on the lintel, or upper crossbeam of the doorway, of the house where that particular lamb would be eaten.<sup>5</sup> The lamb was to be roasted whole with fire, not boiled and it was to be completely consumed on that night.<sup>6</sup> If the household was unable to eat all the meat, the remainder was to be consumed by fire in morning.<sup>7</sup> It was absolutely essential that the consumption, either by eating or by burning, be complete. It was to be eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.<sup>8</sup> While it was important to consume the entire lamb, it was also essential that the meat be savored and not used to overstuff one's self or even to merely satisfy hunger. Nothing was to be eaten after the Paschal Lamb.<sup>9</sup> Today, the Afikomen has come to take the place of the Paschal Lamb in this last role.

There is speculation among some scholars that the lamb was chosen as the animal for sacrifice because the Egyptians worshipped the lamb. Through such an action, they believe that the Israelites, and more importantly, God, forcefully rejected the worship of animals.<sup>10</sup> This, of course, became a key issue through the course of Israelite history as they cycled through phases of idolatry and repentance.

Unlike many symbols of Passover whose meanings were later assigned in the Rabbinic Period, the Lord Himself gave the meaning of the Paschal sacrifice. In the words of Moses, "And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 12:3

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12:4

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 12:5

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 12:6. Because a Jewish day begins at sundown, this sacrifice would take place while it was still light at the closing of the fourteenth day. Then the festive Passover meal would begin at the start of the fifteenth day just a few hours later once the sun went down.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 12:7

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 12:8-9

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 12:10

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 12:8

<sup>9</sup> *Gemara*, Pesachim 119b – 120a

<sup>10</sup> Silverman, Rabbi Morris, ed. *Passover Haggadah: New Translation with explanatory notes and original readings* (Hartford: Prayer Book Press, 1959) 26

Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. And the people bowed the head and worshipped.”<sup>11</sup>

It is thus clear that from the very origins of Passover, the Paschal sacrifice was to be the central focus. During the Second Temple Period (516 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.), it remained so and was given even heightened significance as the tradition developed to perform the sacrifice at the Temple. In fact, the historian, Josephus, informs us that on at least one occasion, Roman rulers used the number of kidneys collected from the Temple sacrifices at Passover to estimate the number of Jews in Jerusalem for the festival.

Several characteristics distinguish the Paschal sacrifice from other Temple sacrifices. For example, all other sacrifices at the Temple were offered on behalf of an individual, the Paschal sacrifice was offered on behalf of the group of people who would later partake of it. Also making this sacrifice unique was that it was actually performed by the household representative rather than the Levites at the Temple, albeit, the Levites were always on hand to assist and ensure that the sacrifice was conducted properly.

Although in some respects the Paschal sacrifice was distinct from other Temple sacrifices, in one aspect it was strictly adherent. Like all other sacrifices, it was required that the one performing the sacrifice be ritually pure. If he was not, then he would have to wait for one month after which he would have the opportunity to perform the sacrifice and celebrate Passover with his household on the Second, or Minor Passover. The only exception to this was if the whole congregation of Israel were found to be ritually impure. In this case the sacrifice would not be postponed, but rather carried out as usual on the fourteenth day of Nisan.

Because of the large crowds that would inevitably gather in Jerusalem and at the Temple Mount during Passover, several measures were taken to accommodate all who wished to participate. First, the people were divided into three groups. The first group would enter the Temple grounds and form rows facing identical rows of Levites. The gates would be closed and the *shofar* sounded. The Israelites would then slaughter the lamb or kid-goat, and the Levites would catch the sacrificial blood in gold or silver bowls. They would quickly pass these bowls down a brigade-like line and the priest nearest the altar would sprinkle blood from each bowl onto the base of the altar. Throughout the ceremony, the Levites would chant the Hallel.<sup>12</sup> When the first group had completed their sacrifices, the process would be repeated for the second and third groups.<sup>13</sup>

These massive congregations for sacrificing the Paschal Lamb continued until the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E., after which the Jews were unable to perform this sacrifice. Therefore, the actual sacrifice is no longer part of the Passover festivities, yet its essence lives on in many ways. As mentioned earlier, the Afikomen has come to replace or represent the Paschal Lamb in the sense that it is the last thing eaten during

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<sup>11</sup> Exodus 12:26-27

<sup>12</sup> Psalms 113-118

<sup>13</sup> This paragraph has been adapted with slight modification from Klein, Mordell ed. *Passover* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973) 26-27

the Seder of Passover night. In addition, some rabbis teach that since it was required that the Paschal lamb be roasted, no meat should be roasted for the Passover meal out of respect and deference.<sup>14</sup>

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the Paschal sacrifice was discontinued. Over time it gradually lost its prominence in the Seder so that today it is represented by several items of the Seder. These items include the roasted shankbone, the egg, the Afikomen, and the Hillel sandwich.

However, for Orthodox Jews, the desire to once again offer the Paschal sacrifice at the Temple has not died. Many Orthodox Jews believe and hope that one day another temple will be built in Jerusalem and they will again sacrifice the Paschal lamb as in ancient times.

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<sup>14</sup> Silverman, Rabbi Morris, ed. *Passover Haggadah: New Translation with explanatory notes and original readings* (Hartford: Prayer Book Press, 1959) 26