

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

This weekly sheet is brought to you by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman of the New West End United Synagogue in conjunction with Shapell's/Darché Noam

PARSHAT BO

DVAR TORAH: DVAR TORAH THINK BIG, ASK BIG

On Rosh Chodesh Nisan Moshe gave over G-d's command to the People of Israel; they were to take an animal on the tenth of the month and four days later offer it as a Pesach sacrifice to be eaten on the night of the Exodus. The Torah then tells us: "וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' ... " – "The Children of Israel went and did as Hashem had commanded ... " (Shemot 12:28).

Classic commentators were bothered by the timing of this sentence – it seems to say they did G-d's command immediately after they heard it, on the first of Nisan. But how could they have offered the Pesach sacrifice, or even taken their animals on that day? Those acts were supposed to be done on the tenth and fourteenth. And it is difficult (though some commentators do say this) to contend that this verse took place on the tenth of the month; because the word **וַיֵּלְכוּ** followed by **וַיַּעֲשׂוּ** implies immediacy.

Rashi on that verse quotes the Mechilta: "When they accepted it upon themselves the Torah considers it as if they did it."

The expression "The Torah considers it as if they did it" is sometimes used when a person is not able to perform a mitzvah because of circumstances beyond his control (for instance, Berachot 6a) and the Torah considers either intent or some replacement action like the action itself. But here that can't be the case, for they eventually did exactly what G-d commanded them. Harav Aharon Kotlar, זצ"ל, (1891-1962, Rosh Yeshiva of Beth Medrash Govoha, in Lakewood, NJ, **משנת רבי אהרן** on our Parshah) contends that even though the Jewish People had only accepted to do the Pesach sacrifice on the first of the month, Hashem already elevated them to the spiritual level of a nation that had actually done it.

This, he says, was not only a one-time instance, but is an important principle of our Avodat Hashem: true acceptance of greatness brings greatness.

Rav Aharon Kotlar, in his essay, calls us to greatness, and cautions against having limited and constricted ambitions and aspirations. Hashem wants us to think big about our spiritual and religious lives. It is totally legitimate to ask Hashem for great things.

The Gemara (Berachot 50a), in a discussion of the text of Birkat Hamazon, quotes a verse incorporated into Pesukei Dezimra: "אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמַּעֲלֶה מִצְרָיִם מִצְרָיִם הַרְחֵב פִּיךָ וַאֲמַלְאֶהוּ" – "I am Hashem your G-d who brought you up from the land of Egypt – open up your mouth wide and I will fill it" (Tehillim 81:11). I can do anything, says Hashem. Even though when it comes to our material needs we pray like a poor person requesting a donation; when we ask Him for spiritual things we can aim high. Do not hesitate, says Hashem, to open your mouths wide, to ask for high spiritual levels, greatness in Torah, and the ability to do great things with your lives.

And if we do, says Rav Aharon Kotlar, true acceptance might elevate us just as it did for the People of Israel.

SOURCE GUIDE: NIGHT OF WATCHING RABBI BY AVRAHAM FISCHER

This source guide, based on material prepared by Rabbi Avraham Fischer, explores many angles of the verse in the Torah that refers to the Seder Night as ליל שמרים, the night of watching.

The long-anticipated day of the Exodus has arrived. At night, Hashem strikes down the Egyptian firstborn and spares the Israelites, while the latter partake of the Pesach sacrifice:

<p>1. Shemot 12:41-42 (41) And it was, at the end of thirty years and four hundred years, and it was on that very day, that all the hosts of Hashem went out from the land of Egypt. (42) A night of watching it was for Hashem, to take them out from the land of Egypt; it is this night for Hashem, watching for all the children of Israel for their generations</p>	<p>שמות יב: מא-מב (מא) וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וָאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה וַיְהִי בַעֲצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יֵצְאוּ כָּל צְבָאוֹת ה' מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. (מב) לַיִל שְׁמָרִים הוּא לַה' לְהוֹצִיאֵם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם הוּא הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה לַה' שְׁמָרִים לְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְדֹרֹתָם.</p>
---	---

This night – when we celebrate the Seder to this day – is called the **night of watching** (ליל שמרים). This expression, which seems to describe the essence of this night in a way that transcends history, raises several questions.

A. Why is the word for watching (שמרים) in the plural form?

- Rav Saadiah Gaon (882-942), whose commentary translates difficult terms into Arabic, renders this word in the singular form for “watching,” suggesting that ליל שמרים is a construction similar to יום כפרים (Day of Atonement): the plural is really an abstract noun that describes the noun before it.

But the midrash Yalkut Shimoni (210) adds that שמרים refers to a double redemption, both for the nation of Israel and for Hashem!

<p>2. Yalkut Shimoni Shemot 210 Rabbi Akiva says, “If it were not written it would have been impossible to say: It is as if it were possible for Israel to say before the All Present One, ‘You have redeemed Yourself.’ Similarly you find that wherever Israel went into exile the Divine Presence, so to speak, went into exile with them. They were exiled to Egypt – the Divine Presence was with them, as it says, “I revealed Myself to the house of your father ...” (Shmuel I 2:27).</p>	<p>ילקוט שמעוני שמות רמז ר"י רבי עקיבא אומר אילולי הדבר כתוב אי אפשר לאמרו. כביכול אמרו ישראל לפני המקום "עצמך פדית." וכן אתה מוצא שכל מקום שגלו ישראל כביכול שכינה גלתה עמהם. גלו למצרים שכינה עמהם שנאמר "הנגלה נגליתי אל בית אביך ..." (שמואל א' ב:כז).</p>
---	--

As Hashem had told Yaakov – as long as they were in Exile, Hashem, as it were, was in Exile as well:

<p>3. Bereshit 46:4 I will descend with you to Egypt and I will also surely bring you up ...</p>	<p>בראשית מו:ד אֲנֹכִי אֶרֶד עִמָּךְ מִצְרַיִם וְאֶנְכִי אֵעֱלֶךָ גַם עִלּוּהָ ...</p>
--	--

B. What is the meaning of the verb שמר, which is the basis of שמרים?

Three general directions appear in the commentators:

- a. **Rashi and Rashbam** explain that שמר here has the connotation of “wait, anticipate, expect,” similar to its use in Bereshit 37:11, “וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת הַדָּבָר” – “But his father waited for the thing”:

<p>4. Rashi on Shemot 12:42 The Holy One, blessed be He, was waiting for and anticipating this night to fulfill His promise, which was “to take them out from the land of Egypt.”</p>	<p>רש"י על שמות יב:מב לַיִל שְׁמָרִים - שֶׁהִיָּה הַקֶּב"ה שׁוֹמֵר וּמְצַפֶּה לוֹ לְקִיָּים הַבְּטַחְתּוֹ לְהוֹצִיאֵם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.</p>
---	--

- And, as soon as this day arrived, Hashem did not delay, even for an instant.
- **Sforno** (Harav Ovadiah ben Yaakov Sforno, ל' זצ"ל, c. 1470-c.1550)'s explanation is slightly different: שמר means “to await”; Hashem awaited the moment that the people would be ready to be redeemed.

- **Ramban** takes this idea a daring step further: Hashem looked forward to fulfilling the promise He made at the ברית בין הבתרים, the Covenant between the Pieces, that the exile would last 400 years. However, this period had to be extended because of the People of Israel's sins (see Yechezkel 20:8; Yehoshua 24:14; and Sanhedrin 92b). Only when they cried out to Hashem (Shemot 2:23-3:9) was the extension limited to 30 years. Finally came the night when they deserved the realization of Hashem's decree.
- **b. Rashi** offers a second explanation, that שמר means "to reserve." He quotes the Mechilta:

<p>5. Rashi on Shemot 12:41 "It was at the end of thirty years [and four-hundred] ... And it was on that day itself" – (Mechilta) This teaches that when the end came the All-Present One did not hold them back even the blink of an eye. On the 15th of Nisan the ministering angels came to Avraham to inform him, on the 15th of Nisan Yitzchak was born, and on the 15th of Nisan the decree was made [at the Covenant] between the Pieces.</p>	<p>רש"י על שמות פרק יב פסוק מא "ויהי מקץ שלשים שנה וגו' ויהי בעצם היום הזה" - (מכילתא) מגיד שכיון שהגיע הקץ לא עכבן המקום כהרף עין. בט"ו בניסן באו מלאכי השרת אצל אברהם לבשרו, בט"ו בניסן נולד יצחק, ובט"ו בניסן נגזרה גזירת בין הבתרים.</p>
--	--

- **c. Ibn Ezra:** "to protect." Hashem protected the people from the destroyer during the plague of the first-born.
Rashi extends the idea of protection (from Pesachim 109b): on this night, the people of Israel are always protected from harmful agents.

C. Laws and Customs

A number of laws and customs are connected to relating to the Seder night as ליל שמרים:

- The Sages decreed the drinking of four cups, despite the harm that might come about through consuming even numbers (זוגות) of foods (Pesachim 109b).
- We minimize the amount of protective prayers we say before going to sleep on the Seder night. We recite only שמע and המפיל before sleep, but none of the other protective prayers (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 481:2).
- We do not drink wine after the fourth cup, so we can remain awake (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 482:2).
- We open the door for the prophet Eliyahu, who will proclaim the coming of Mashiach; in reward for our faith and eagerness, he will come. In some communities, people leave their doors unlocked (unless it is particularly dangerous, because we do not rely on miracles) (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 480:1).
- If it is Friday night, many do not recite the abridged repetition of the 'Amidah (מעין שבע), which is meant to protect worshipers who are returning from the synagogue after dark (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 487:1).
- Harav Yisrael Isserlein, זצ"ל (1390-1460), did not put salt on the matzah at the Seder. In a midrash cited by Tosafot on Berachot 40a, we learn that, while people wait for each other to wash their hands, they sit without mitzvot, so Satan accuses. During the rest of the year, the salt of the covenant (Vayikra 2:13) placed on the bread is needed to protect them. But at the Seder this protection is not necessary.
- There is a custom quoted in the name of Ramban (Orchot Chayyim, laws of Pesach, 27) to eat fennel (שומר in Hebrew) at the Seder, because its name suggests שמרים.

D. The Second Part of the Verse

<p>6. Shemot 12:42 A night of watching it was for Hashem, to take them out from the land of Egypt; it is this night for Hashem, watching for all the children of Israel for their generations.</p>	<p>שמות יב:מב ליל שמרים הוא לה' להוציאם מארץ מצרים הוא הלילה הזה לה' שמרים לכל בני ישראל לדרתם.</p>
---	---

Rav Saadiah Gaon continues: **just as** this was a night for Hashem, **so will it be** watching for all the children of Israel for their generations.

Other commentaries give the latter part of this verse additional implications:

- **Rashbam** and **Ibn Ezra**: Therefore, every year the children of Israel look forward to celebrating Pesach.
- **Ibn Ezra**, in another comment, notes that שמר can mean “to stay awake,” as in Shir Hashirim 5:7. Thus, we continue speaking about the Exodus “until we are overcome by sleep,” as in the incident of Rabbi Eliezer and his colleagues found in the Haggadah.
- **Chizzekuni** (R. Chizkiya ben Manoach, mid 13th Century): Therefore, be careful to observe the Pesach sacrifice.
- **Ramban**: Therefore the night is dedicated to Hashem for Hallel and the other mitzvot of the Seder, as follows in Shemot 13:10 – “וְשָׁמַרְתָּ אֵת הַחֻקִּים הַזֵּאת לְמוֹעֵדָה מִיָּמִים יְמִמָּה” – “You should keep this law in its time from year to year.”

<p>7. Sforno on Shemot 12:42 It is an awaited night for Hashem to take them out. For He was looking forward to take them out. “For He does not willingly cause them pain” (Iyov 3:33, rather, their sins brought it about). But he did not find them ready and fitting for redemption until that night. And he was awaiting and looking forward to that night because He desires lovingkindness. As they, of blessed memory, said, that the Holy One, blessed be He, calculated the end date. This is Hashem’s awaited night. And just as he was waiting for and looking forward to Israel’s redemption, so He waits for and looks forward to Israel’s future redemption. As He said, “Therefore Hashem will wait for you to show you His favor” (Yishayah 30:18).</p>	<p>ספורנו על שמות יב:מב "ליל שמורים הוא לה' להוציאם." שהיה מצפה להוציאם, "כי לא ענה מלבו" (איוב ג:ג), אבל לא מצא את ישראל מוכנים וראויים לגאולה עד אותה הלילה, ואותה היה משמר ומצפה כי חפץ חסד הוא, כאמרם ז"ל שהקבה מחשב את הקץ: "הוא הלילה הזה לה' שמורים." וכמו שהיה משמר ומצפה לגאולת ישראל כל ימי גלותם במצרים, כן הוא משמר ומצפה לגאולת ישראל העתידה, כאמרו "ולכן יחכה ה' לחנכם" (ישעיה ל:יח).</p>
--	---

Along the same lines, Shemot Rabbah (18) notes that many other redemptions besides the Exodus from Egypt occurred on this night: Sannecheriv was defeated during the reign of Chizkiyah; Chananyah was saved from the fiery furnace; Daniel was saved from the lion’s den; and the turning point in the Purim story took place on Pesach night. The same will be true for the final redemption (speedily in our day), as the Sforno closes:

<p>6. Rosh Hashanah 11a In Nisan were they redeemed, in Nisan are they destined to be redeemed (Rosh Hashanah 11a).</p>	<p>ספורנו על שמות יב:מב לכל בני ישראל לדורותם – כאמרם "בניסן נגאלו, ובניסן עתידין להגאל" (ר"ה יא.).</p>
---	---

Dedicate the daf kesher in honor or in memory of a loved one.
 Please contact Emuna Diamond at emuna@darchenoam.org for details.

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v’Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples’ programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

To dedicate a Taste of Text, please email Rabbi Freedman at rabbi.dr.moshefreedman@gmail.com

For back issues and other articles by Rabbi Freedman please see www.moshefreedman.com