

Pesach: The Offering Beyond Space and Time



*Editor's Note: This essay by **Rabbi Mark Asher Goodman** discusses a previously untranslated teaching by Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), often referred to as the Sfat Emet, a Polish Hasidic teacher. The original teaching, along with Rabbi Goodman's English translation, can be found below the essay. If you would like to share your own Torah through Gashmius, please email us at gashmiusmag@gmail.com*

The push-pull of the life of a person who thinks about the divine and the eternal and the greater universe is the juxtaposition of the desire to transcend the physical world of *gashmius* - physicality, corporeality - and the reality that we actually live in the physical world. Sure, you might want to spend every waking moment meditating and studying and escaping the earthly bonds of that which is material. But, also, a dude's gotta eat. The kids need to be picked up from school. Someone must unclog the toilet.

(Note: this essay was literally interrupted at this point so that I could cook gnocchi for my 12-year old before I leave for evening minyan.)

That spiritual world, *ruchanius* in the parlance of the Hasidim, intersects with the physical at many times and in many ways in the attempt to bring holiness - *kedusha* - to the mundane. And there are two *mitzvot* - commandments (some Hasidim call them 'connectors') - which meld the physical and spiritual. They also cross over and contain connections and parallels one to another. Those *mitzvot* are the *korban pesach*, the Passover offering brought at the Temple in Jerusalem, and *brit milah*, the commandment of circumcision.

The first thing our commentator, the Sfat Emet ("Language of Truth"), Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, the third Gerrer rebbe, notes is that these two *mitzvot* both carry the punishment of *karet* - being excluded from the community (or, some rabbis say, the world to come) for the failure to perform them. Also, they are two of the first *mitzvot* in the Torah, in chronological order - *milah* is the second commandment and the *pesach* is the fifth commandment. Additionally, the two commandments overlap at some point, as there is an obligation to be circumcised in order to eat the *pesach*, according to Exodus 12:48.

I might also add that *brit milah* and the *korban pesach* are all past tense, inaccessible *mitzvot*. We can't even do the *korban pesach* today because there is no Temple. And *brit milah* is almost equally inaccessible. It applies only to those born with penises, and it technically isn't even our *mitzvah* - it is an obligation of parents upon their infants. And

it happens at a time before any adult could possibly remember that it occurred. The mark on our flesh reminds us, just as the Western Wall reminds us there was a Temple, of a *mitzvah* that once was, but which we had no knowledge of at all. All that remains of each of these *mitzvot* is a scar where a thing once was.

But for the Sfat Emet, these are all just neat technical details that will allow him to explore his grander ideas.

For one, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Lieb seems to understand that both commandments go against what otherwise would have been the natural order of the physical universe. People born with penises are born with a foreskin. This is, to the Jewish way of thinking, imperfect. It requires correction - a *tikkun*. Nature makes us one way, but in order to align with God's ideal spiritual state, we modify that which God gave us. As the Gerrer teaches, **"Thus the body is improved, to be a vessel to accept *kedusha* - holiness - departing from the confines of nature."**

The *pesach* is also like this: the origin of the sacrifice is in the paschal lamb that was slaughtered in order to paint its blood on the two lintels of the houses of the Israelites, so that the angel of death would not kill the firstborn Israelites alongside the firstborn of the Egyptians. In other words, if the Hebrews had not taken an action to defy the normally proceeding manner of things, they would have died. Again, a correction was required. In both cases, in order to sanctify something, a physical alteration to the normal state of affairs was necessary.

Just as we begin to think everything in this text makes total sense, the Gerrer rebbe adds (almost literally) a third dimension to this text: he throws out the concept of time versus space. The commandment to bring the *pesach* starts a few lines earlier in the Torah with the very invention of the Hebrew calendar - Nissan is the first month, and the *pesach* is only brought on the 14th of the month. And if you aren't physically capable of bringing the offering - if you are uncircumcised, or as the Torah teaches in Numbers 9:9-13, if you are ritually impure, or if you simply didn't get there on time - too bad. Time waits for no one. No *korban pesach* for you.

The Sfat Emet slips that little bit of mindblowing profundity - **"The physical nature (*gashmius*) of the universe is subordinate to time"** - and then just moves right along. It doesn't matter if the brisket is perfect, and you studied the Haggadah, and you said the four questions with perfect *kavannah* - spiritual intention. If you missed doing it on the night that begins the 15th of Nissan, it doesn't matter. (Well, actually, you can do it on the 16th at the second seder, and you get a mulligan to do it the 14th of Iyyar on *Pesach Sheni*, but still. There's only so many do-overs in the cosmos.)

So, time transcends space. But the Israelites transcend both - by way of a wild midrash that Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 12th c.) happens to bring on the very first verse of the Torah. The word *reshit* means first. What is in the *reshit* - what was there at the beginning? Using clever word play linking the word *reshit* to elsewhere in the Tanakh, Rashi tells us that before creation, in *reshit*, "The Before", was both Torah and Israel.

God transcends time and space. Torah transcends time and space. And the Israelites transcend time and space.¹

Rav Yehuda Leib concludes² by drawing the additional element of ‘removal in the act of correction,’ and that is the cleaning of leaven from our homes. That which is natural and normal becomes, for a time, unacceptable. We must intervene in space, at a given time, to remove a thing in order to align ourselves to holiness. Remove the foreskin. Remove the leaven. Remove (ok, sacrifice) the lamb. The correction creates elevation.

The elevation returns us to the primordial state before creation and before time. It returns Israel to *bereshit* - before the beginning, when we were alone with God and Torah. Beyond time and space. Before we were bogged down by things like a calendar that began on such and such a date; and before we had physical obligations like making the kids dinner.

Reflection Questions:

1. How do you relate to the idea that God creates the world imperfect, and that we need to take action to perfect it?
2. In addition to chametz (leaven), are there other things you have removed from your life or your spaces as part of a spiritual practice?
3. How do you connect to rituals - like the Pesach offering - that we have never actually experienced? How does reading about these rituals, or re-enacting them through our seders, serve as moments of spiritual elevation?
4. Do you agree with the Sfat Emet regarding the idea that time precedes space - that the day of Passover is over and above the rituals themselves?

¹ I'm understanding the Hebrew phrase 'זמן וטבע' - *zman v'teva* - literally 'time and nature', as 'time and space' because for us English speakers, the two words pair naturally, and in the context of this idea of *gashmius*, physical existence, the Sfat Emet probably means *teva* as the physical. So, 'space.'

² He doesn't really conclude. I conclude for him. The Sfat Emet was epically voluminous and, uh, rambly. His master work often has ten or twelve texts on a Torah portion, and six will start with the same midrash, only he spins it differently each time. My dude dropped bars. This drash goes on for sometime more, but I like where I chose to end it.

Exodus 12:2

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רֵאשִׁוֹן הוּא לְכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה:

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.

Sfat Emet, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Lieb Alter of Ger (d. 1905)

Regarding the mitzvah of the Pesach sacrifice, it is preceded by “And this month shall be for you” (Exodus 12:2). For circumcision and the Pesach are the two most important commandments, that (transgressing them) they has the punishment of *karet* [being ‘cut off’].

These are the first mitzvot in the Torah.

Milah is a sign on one’s body that the foreskin was removed. **Thus the body is improved, to be a vessel to accept kedusha - holiness, departing from the confines of nature.** As it is written “who ascends from us to heaven” - *Mi Ya’aleh Lanu Hashamaimah - M.Y.L.H.*

So too, one bringing the Pesach offering must be circumcised - **that the physical nature (gashmius) of the universe is subordinate to time.** In the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites left their obligations to stars and the skies, according to the Zohar. Thus we learn ‘there are no signs for Israel.’ (Shabbat 156a)

[תרנ"ב]

בענין מצות קרבן פסח שהקדים הכתוב החודש הזה לכם (שמות יב, ב). כי מילה ופסח הם ב' מצות עשה החמורים שחייבין עליהם כרת. והם מצות הראשונות שהקדימו לכל התורה והמצות. ומילה היא אות בגוף להסיר הערלה. ובוזה ניתקן הגוף להיות כלי לקבל הקדושה לצאת ממאסר הטבע. כמו שכתוב¹ "מי יעלה לנו" "השמימה (דברים ל, יב) ראשי תיבות מיל"ה כו'. וכמו בן על ידי הקרבת הפסח הוסר הערלה וגשמיות בכלל העולם שהוא תחת הזמן. וביציאת מצרים יצאו בני ישראל מחיובא דכוכבי ומזלי כדאיתא בזוהר הקדוש². וזכו למה שאמרו³ אין מזל לישראל. והטעם כי בני ישראל קודמין

מנח תפילין פושעי אומות העולם בגופן אמר רב בעבירה ושנתנו חיתיתם בארץ חיים" (ר"ה יז ע"א).

²³ תוספות ר"ה יז ע"א ד"ה 'אמר'.

¹ תיקו"ז כב, סה ע"ב; ע, קלא ע"א.

² זוהר ח"ג, רטז ע"ב - רעיא מהימנא.

The reason is that the children of Israel precede the universe, as the Torah says "Bereshit" (Genesis 1:1) "B' - reshit" - Because of my first. As (Rashi, and Midrash cites) in Jeremiah 2:3 "Israel is the first - reshit - of my produce". And thus they transcend time and space.

And Pesach is the beginning of the year for the three festivals. And one brings the korban pesach - the Pascal sacrifice - on the 14th. And the removal of leaven (shabbatot hase'or) is a [kind of] removal of the foreskin so that we be at the time in which we are able to elevate higher. It is like a going out of Egypt of the soul. So too it is with time. And thus we begin with 'This month shall be for you.' It is Israel that sanctifies time.

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- **Sfat Emet, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Lieb Alter of Ger (d. 1905)**
Translation by Rabbi Mark Asher Goodman

לעולם כמו שכתוב⁴ בראשית (בראשית א, א) בשביל ישראל שנקראו ראשית. והם למעלה מן הזמן והטבע. ופסח הוא ראש השנה לרגלים⁵. והקרבת הפסח בי"ד. והשבת שאור הוא הסרת הערלה להיות הזמן יוכל להתעלות למעלה. שכמו שיש יציאת מצרים בנפש. כמו כן בזמן. ולכן הקדים החודש הזה לכם. ישראל דקדשינהו לזמנים⁶. כמו שכתוב (ויקרא כג, ב-ד) מקראי קודש. וזה בא על ידי יציאת מצרים והשבתת חמץ ושחיטת פסח בערב פסח. ורמזו חז"ל⁷ שי"ד נקרא ראשון דמעיקרא משמע שנאמר (איוב טו, ז) הראשון אדם תולד. פירוש כשנאמר כן לאיוב נראה שיש מי שנולד באמת קודם אדם הראשון. והוא בני ישראל שעלו במחשבה בראשון⁸. ובכח זה יכולין בני ישראל להעביר כל ממשלת הסטרא אחרא ולהעלות כל העולם למעלה מן הזמן. ועל ידי ב' תיקונים אלו מילה ופסח שהם העברת הערלה מוכנים אחר כך לתורה ומצות. ולכן כתיב בהם⁹ ונכרתו מי שעובר עליהם. והנסים שעשה לנו הקב"ה ביציאת מצרים היו רשימה בנפשות בני ישראל שנתעלו למעלה מן הטבע. ובמדרש¹⁰ ולקחתם אגודת אזור כו'. והגעתם כו' (שמות יב, כב). דורש מראש צורים (במדבר כג, ט) אלו האבות שהעולם עומד עליהם. הן עם לבדד כו' (שם) ע"ש. והענין הוא שנתעלו נפשות בני ישראל להיות להם אחיזה בדרכי אבות הראשונים על ידי שנתאספו ונבדלו מן האומות. והגעתם אל

⁴ רש"י בראשית א, א ד"ה 'בראשית ברא', ע"פ ויק"ר לו, ד.

⁵ ר"ה ד ע"א.

⁶ ברכות מט ע"א.

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Rabbi Mark Asher Goodman is a rabbi, writer, and devotee of Hasidic texts. He serves at two shuls in Western Pennsylvania. His forthcoming book, "Life Lessons from Recently Dead Rabbis: Hassidut is for the People", is due to be published by Bayit Publishing, and is a down-to-earth companion to 54 Hassidic texts, most of which have never before been translated into English. His ideal dinner guests would include Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, the RZA and Raekwon from Wu Tang Clan, and hip-hop genius Talib Kweli. We'd eat chicken strips and french fries.