



# No Place Like Home

## PESACH, PARENTING AND THE PLAGUE

For over a year, the world has been forced to stay home.

People have probably spent more time at home than at any other time in their working lives. The most prestigious universities in the world have been devoid of students with all courses moving online. And the salient result of all this has meant that the home has become the locus of our primary interaction with society.

We have also experienced this focus on the home specifically on Pesach. Until last year, many people had not spent Pesach in their own home for years – and some for decades – enjoying the plethora of Pesach programs that had become an entire industry in and of themselves. Others had been used to large seders with extended family and relatives. All that changed and will remain so in many places this Pesach too.

More than any other holiday, Pesach, in every aspect, is about the home. In Shemot 12, the Torah introduces us to the many *mitzvot* of Pesach. Incredibly, the word בית – home – is mentioned in one form or another 15 times in this chapter, regarding the *Korban Pesach*, *chametz* and the very name and essence of the holiday itself.

The *Korban Pesach* has the unique distinction of being the only ‘family’

sacrifice. Sacrifices are normally divided into two major categories – communal offerings such as the daily *tamid* and *mussaf* offerings, or individual offerings for different occasions, whether mandated or voluntary. The only sacrifice defined as a home-based sacrifice, to be brought and eaten as a family, is the *Korban Pesach*. As the verse says regarding the original Pesach in Egypt, “On the tenth of the month they will take for themselves each person, a lamb for each father’s **house**, a lamb for each **household**.”<sup>1</sup>

In *Beit HaMikdash* times, the *Korban Pesach* was brought and eaten as a household, known as a *chabura* in *Massechet Pesachim*. Only people who joined together as a group could eat from that particular *korban*; no one else could partake of it.

Similarly, in the prohibition of not owning any form of *chametz*, the emphasis is placed on the home: “For seven days no leaven is to found in your **homes**...”<sup>2</sup>

The very name of the holiday, Pesach, is also directly related to the home, as the verse clearly states, “And you shall say ‘it is a Passover feast offering to Hashem who passed over the **houses** of the Children of Israel in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians, but he saved our **households**...’”<sup>3</sup>

The only safe place for the Israelites to avoid the worst of the 10 plagues, the death of the firstborn in every household, was for each family to batten down their hatches and remain within the security of their own homes. It was the home, and only the home, which afforded such protection. They smeared the lamb’s blood at the entrance to the home, on the doorposts, as a sign that this was a safe house and no plague should enter.

Remarkably relevant to our current reality, Pesach means creating an immunized home that any plague should pass over.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the way to avoid our modern-day plague has been through the safety of our homes. Avoiding contact with others, social distancing, no mass gatherings... while remaining at home as much as possible.

Perhaps the most profound experience of our Pesach today is *Leil HaSeder*, when we retell the story of the coming out of Egypt. Once again, the emphasis is on home and family. We sit in our home in our core family unit – parents and children, or just with ourselves – and recall the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and the meaning of Jewish history. In short, whichever way we look at Pesach – its name, essence, primary sacrifice, prohibitions and educational experience, it is all about the home.

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The lesson is clear.

At the very birth of the Jewish people, the Torah emphasizes the most essential foundation of any national enterprise – the home and the family.

Any successful society must be built on these core ideals. A society which undermines the integrity of home and family tampers with the very cement upon which it stands. It is no coincidence that *Sefer Shemot*, which deals with the birth of our nation, is preceded by *Sefer Bereishit*, which revolves around individual homes and families.

The first *parshiot* deal with the founding families of humanity – Adam and Chava and their progeny, followed by Noach, his wife and theirs. We are introduced to Avraham and Sarah and their extended family followed by the

travails of Yishmael and Yitzchak. The family saga continues with Yitzchak and Rivka and their family, Ya'akov, Rachel, Leah and theirs, and of course a special focus on Ya'akov's sons, the tribes of Israel.

The Torah is teaching us that a strong, sustainable and successful nation can only be built through secure homes and families. Life must be built from the inside out, from the inner family circle to the outer communal and national space. Rabbi Sacks, of blessed memory, articulates this so beautifully, as he always does:

“People who look to the state, politics and power, to deliver the good, the beautiful and the true – the Hellenistic tradition – tend to regard the family and all it presupposes in terms of fidelity

and responsibility as a distraction. But for people who understand not just the importance of politics but also its limitations and dangers, relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, grandparent and grandchildren, and siblings, are the most important basis of freedom...James Q. Wilson put it beautifully: ‘We learn to cope with the people of this world because we learn to cope with the members of our family. Those who flee the family flee the world; bereft of the former's affection, tutelage, and challenges, they are unprepared for the latter's tests, judgments, and demands.’<sup>5</sup>

We hope to soon be able to celebrate with our broader families and friends and once again engage fully in communal and public life. We hope to soon move outwards and return to shul and society. But just before that, as we sit together in our homes as a tight family unit on *Leil HaSeder*, conveying and discussing the essence of our story as a people, let us appreciate the quintessential role of home and family, in human history in general and in *Am Yisrael* in particular. Home sweet home!

*Chag Kasher VeSameach!*

1 Shemot 12:3.

2 Ibid. 12:19.

3 Ibid. 12:27.

4 The prevalent translation of Pesach as Passover, that G-d passed over or skipped over the houses, is based on Rashi (Ibid., verse 23), Rashbam (verse 27), and others. Rashi (also the Targum) mentions an alternative meaning as well – ‘had mercy on’ the houses.

5 Covenant & Conversation, Family, Faith and Freedom (Vayechi 5780). The Wilson quote is from “The Moral Sense” p. 163.

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