



Parashat Bo: “In Your Blood You Shall Live”

Dear Friends,

This week Bnei Yisrael are told to smear blood on the doorposts of their houses so that God will skip over them when the angel of death comes to kill the firstborn Egyptians.

It is a distressing description, but I would like to suggest that this account is actually deep, rich, full of meaning, and most importantly, full of life!

Bnei Yisrael were shepherds. The Egyptians were farmers. Farmers hated shepherds. But in Egypt it was sanctioned by the local religious code: shepherds were considered lowly and were even thought of as impure. This is why Yoseph had his brothers settle in Goshen, far from other Egyptian settlements. It was the first “Jewish” ghetto.

This may explain why Moshe - shockingly - never actually demanded that Pharaoh free the Hebrew slaves, contrary to what we've been taught. His only request was to grant the Israelites a few days' vacation, so that they could go into the desert - far from Egyptian habitation - in order to sacrifice their offerings of sheep and cattle to the God of Israel. Animal sacrifice was considered an abomination in the eyes of the Egyptians. Indeed, this is what all of the haggling was about! It is hard to believe, but it was this seemingly-simple request that was the impetus for the Ten Plagues!

Now we understand that the blood of the sheep symbolized the entire difference between Bnei Yisrael and the Egyptians!

In the Torah, blood symbolizes life.

I know that to us today, it seems the reverse! Blood stains on the walls and on the doorposts indicate a place where a murder has been committed. The blood signifies the presence of death.

But this is not the case, as we learn here. Blood flowing through our veins is the energy of life which enables us to exist. This is why we donate blood.

In the story of Creation Adam was still a vegetarian. Only in Parashat Noah, after the waters had receded, permission was granted to eat the flesh of an animal. However, this permission had a very important caveat: **“God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth. The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky—everything with which the earth is astir—and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand. Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it.”** (Bereishit 9: 1-4)

This is followed immediately by a significant addition: **“But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man! Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; For in His image Did God make man.”** (1:5-6)

So, blood is the life force within any animal, and human blood is somehow connected to the image of God!

In D’varim this prohibition is repeated, this time as part of the laws of kashrut: **“But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh.”** (D’varim 12: 23)

And again in Vayikra, in the context of sacrifices: **“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making atonement for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects atonement.”** (Vayikra 17: 11)

Vitality - the life force - flows within our bloodstream. In Hebrew this life-force is called Nefesh, i.e., soul. The blood carries our life force, our soul, and it is what gives life to the flesh.

On Shabbat morning in the Kiddush we read a section from Bereishit which says that on the seventh day God ceased creating and “vayinafash”, from the root “nefesh”, soul. In other words, He ceased the work of creation but continued to breathe life into His creations, for without the Divine life-force, all would die.

Hence, in Jewish law it is permitted to eat meat itself, but not the life-blood that flows through it and gives it life.

What is the connection between blood and the image of God?

One of the infinite definitions of God is that He is life itself. He is the life that flows through everything and enables everything to exist.

How accurate it is, therefore, to connect blood, the soul (nefesh), and the image of God! The blood is not in itself God, it is “only” in His image; it carries the Divine vitality within living creatures, bringing life to each and every cell in the body.

Ancient Egypt was a culture which sanctified the dead. The pyramids were built with great effort to be the eternal resting place of the deceased pharaohs. The point of the grand Egyptian architecture which stands to this day was to sanctify the dead! They were an integral part of the Egyptian death rites.

Bnei Yisrael were called to sanctify life. They were called to leave the culture which sanctified death and to spread the new vision of life in the world.

So when, in our parasha, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to smear blood - the symbol of life - on their doorposts, it was to mark their home as one that desired life, as if to declare: we chose life!

And the angel of death? He will see the mark and skip over the homes of those who have chosen life.

We are not talking about actual death, nor about an actual angel. We are talking about powers and qualities. Death is a quality just as life is. The angel (not the kind with wings) is a power in the world. The forces that deaden us are defeated when they are confronted with our commitment to life. This is not to say we will never die, but rather that as long as we are alive, we will live life to the fullest.

This is such a Jewish idea!

The uniqueness of the Jewish culture is in its commitment to life and the way in which it sanctifies life. Perhaps this is the reason that a favorite Jewish blessing is “Lechayim!”

The prophet Ezekiel, who prophesied during the Babylonian exile following the destruction (death) of the kingdom of Judah, dealt at length with the theme of resurrection and return to life. One famous expression of this is his metaphor of the Dry Bones which take on sinew and skin and are filled with new life which God breathes into them. Ezekiel relates the story of Jerusalem lying in ruins like an abandoned baby girl in the field. God promises her: **“And I will pass over you and I**

***will see you wallowing in your blood and I will tell you 'In your blood you shall live' and I will tell you 'In your blood you shall live.'"***

There are always forces which negate the force of vitality. There are days when the forces of death pull us downwards: It is hard to get up in the morning! It is hard to pull ourselves together, hard to live. Our vitality has been sapped. It seems as if our life-blood has abandoned us.

But then we read Parashat Bo, and are reminded of the innate life force within us. And we remember Ezekiel, who prophesied, "In your blood you shall live, In your blood you shall live." In other words, reconnect to the strength of life which flows within you. Don't let death pull you down.

And remember - it is not our body which is the source of life, contains life, neither is it the blood cells themselves. Rather, it is the wondrous vitality which flows through it, giving it life in every moment anew.

And this is so Divine.

So, L'Chayim! To a Shabbat of renewal and vitality,

Elisha