

# Powerball and the Lessons of Unity

Category: Bo, Shemos

*Why is there so much focus on blood and family in the Passover Seder, and what does it have to do with the Powerball?*

## The Odds of Winning

Good Shabbos!

Every once in a while, a world record is made with “the largest Powerball lottery in history.”

It’s an interesting phenomenon. I recall one occasion when close to 300 million tickets were sold—which means the odds of winning were virtually non-existent. Despite that, the Powerball was the talk of the town anywhere that people normally got together, whether at workplaces or on vacation, or even at shul (of course, not during actual services).

Some people buy in groups—for example, employees of the same company, or members of the same club, bought large amounts of tickets together so as to raise their odds of winning. But experts say that doing so is not worth it, because the odds of winning in a group are not greater than buying alone in any meaningful way—and not only that, if any one member of the group wins, he or she must split any winnings with all other members of the group while a single buyer who wins can keep everything. Nevertheless, for the experience of being “in,” a lot of people prefer to join such groups.

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

## The Mixed Book

The Five Books of the Torah are comprised of law and stories—meaning, actual commandments, and history. But in general, the Torah’s laws and stories are divided into separate books.

For example, the Book of Bereishis is all stories, while the Book of Vayikra is all laws and mitzvos. Bamidbar is all stories again, and Devarim is Moshe Rabbeinu's farewell address to the Jewish Nation before his passing.

But the Book of Shmos, however, is unique.

The first half is the story of the Exodus from Egypt, while the second half consists of mitzvos and chukim (rational and super-rational rules) primarily connected to the building of the Mishkan.

But in our Parshah of Bo, in the middle of the saga of the Exodus, after nine Plagues and right before the recounting of the tenth Plague and the final Exodus, there appears the mitzvah of the Korbon Pesach (the Passover Sacrifice), and not briefly! Out of nowhere, we get a lengthy and detailed breakdown of the entire Korbon Pesach process—and the Torah doesn't just state it once but also repeats it! The first time is G-d laying it out to Moshe, and then, when Moshe passes it on to the Jewish Nation, he says it again. Only after that does the Torah return to the subject of the Plague of the Firstborn.

What that tells us is that the Korbon Pesach must be a critical part of the Exodus saga.

## **Why the Blood**

When we look at the mitzvah of the Korbon Pesach, the strangest part of it all is the part about the blood: "And you shall take of the blood and you shall place it on the two doorposts and on the lintel" (Shmos 12:7). And again, when Moshe repeats that mitzvah of Korbon Pesach to the Jewish Nation, practically the first thing he says is, "And you shall take a bundle of hyssop and dip it in the blood which is in the bucket, and you shall apply to the lintel and the two mezuzos of the blood which is in the bucket" (Shmos 12:22).

But, wait a minute! What's going on here?! Jews and blood?! Now, there are two things that don't mix! And besides, how would you feel sitting down at your Seder table when you have fresh animal blood on the doorpost?

Not only that, but of all the instructions that are part of the Korbon Pesach, the one thing that did not continue for all generations after the Exodus was that very

thing—the smearing of the blood on the doorpost. That was only done in Egypt itself. So what’s hidden behind this strange instruction?

## The Answer

In the first part of the instruction to sacrifice the Passover Lamb, the Torah tells us, “Let each one take a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household”—meaning, each family and household had to take a sheep and slaughter it.

Then, the Torah right away explains what it means: “You shall have a perfect male lamb... you may take it either from the sheep or from the goats” (Shmos 12:3-5). And Rashi says, “Either this or that, for even a goat is called a lamb”—the Torah emphasizes that it’s possible to use a goat for the Korbon Pesach.

When we try to understand what we are being reminded of by this mitzvah of taking a goat and painting the lintel and doorposts with its blood, we need to ask ourselves: where in the Torah did something similar happen?

We don’t need to use much imagination to remember the story of Yosef: “And they took Yosef’s coat and they slaughtered a goat and dipped the coat in the blood” (Bereishis 37:31).

What really lies beneath this command?

The Rebbe said many times that golus and geulah (exile and redemption) is cause and effect— and so the way to go out of exile, the effect, is to correct the cause of exile. Since the cause of exile was *sinas chinam*, baseless hatred, therefore, in order to get out of exile, we need to engage in *ahavas chinam*, baseless love (Matos-Masei 5736, Sichos Kodesh 5736, Vol. II, pg. 508 et al).

In like manner, we can say the same thing regarding the Egyptian Exile.

What was the cause of the Egyptian Exile? The answer is straightforward: the sale of Yosef. As the Sages put it, “Because of the two coins that Yaakov gave Yosef more than his brothers, the matter evolved and our ancestors went down to Egypt” (Talmud, Tractate Megillah 16b).

And so, in order to leave Egypt, the Jewish Nation had to correct the cause that

brought them there in the first place—*sinas chinam*, the baseless hatred that drove brothers to actually sell their own brother into slavery. The way to correct that was through brotherly love, unity within families.

## The Seder Family Tradition

The mitzvah of Korbon Pesach brings about family unity in a practical way like nothing else. Even to this day, few things in Jewishness are more associated with families coming together than the Passover Seder.

With the Korbon Pesach, the Torah instructs us to slaughter a lamb and eat it in its entirety on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nissan—“You shall not leave of it over until morning” (Shmos 12:10). If you’ve got a small family that couldn’t possibly eat an entire sheep’s (or goat’s) worth of meat in one sitting, the Torah tells us, “And if [look this up and come back]...” (Shmos 12:4)—in other words, invite the neighbors and friends over and make a precise list of how many participants will be “registered” for that one sheep. This way, you know you have enough eaters to finish it all.

It was that phenomenon that created the age-old Jewish custom, passed down from generation to generation, of families and clans getting together to celebrate the Seder—it all started in Egypt, and it’s all about fostering unity in the family, the Jewish family.

So the Torah adds the instruction, “As for you, no man shall depart his home’s door until morning” (Shmos 12:22)—it is incumbent upon everyone to stay together for one full night under one roof.

And just as “they slaughtered a kid goat and dipped the coat in blood” at the sale of Yosef (Shmos 37:31), we are instructed, “Draw forth and take for yourselves sheep for your families and slaughter the Passover [Sacrifice]”; “...and you shall take a bundle of hyssop and dip it in blood...” (Shmos 12:21)—a symbolic correction of the original outrage.

Regarding the words *agudas aizov*, or bundle of hyssop, the Rebbe points out that *agudas* derives from the root word *agudah*, which means conglomeration, bond or otherwise a bunch of things or people coming together to form one entity. *Agudas eizov* hints at unity. (Sichos Kodesh 5741, Vol. III, pg. 202.) So the bundle of

hyssop was there to remind the Jews of why they were in the Egyptian Exile, and how they were to merit getting out of Egypt.

That explains Rashi's precisely-worded comment on the verse, "And the blood shall be for you as a sign"—on which Rashi comments, "For you and not for others; this verse teaches us that they only put the blood on the inside" (Rashi, Shmos 12:13). The reason for that was so that it would face inwards, so that the Jewish Nation would be reminded of the sin of the selling of Yosef and the need to correct it.

## More Connections

As a matter of fact, when we look at the expressions that the Torah uses regarding the Korbon Pesach, we find quite a few reminders and hints of the sale of Yosef—beginning with the expression, "With a tally of souls shall you tally the sheep."

*Michsas nefashos*, "a tally of souls," is not a common expression at all—but it hints at the words spoken by Yehudah to his brothers when they first suggested murdering Yosef: "*Mah betza ki naharog es achinu v'chisinu es damo?*" "What gain is there if we kill our brother and we cover his blood?"

Another hint comes in this verse: "And you shall eat the meat on this night, roasted by fire; and with matzos upon *merorim* [bitter herbs] shall you eat it." This verse reminds us of the verse about Yosef in the Parshah of Vayechi: "**Vayi'moreruhu** vo'rovu, va'yistimuhu ba'alei chitzim"—"and they embittered him and fought with him, and masters of arrows disdained him."

An additional hint comes in the verse, "*Al tochlu mi'menu na*"—"Don't eat of it raw." That is yet another completely unconventional phrase for cooking—but it relates to the verse regarding Yosef: "*Zos matzanu; haker na ha'kisoness bin'cha?*"—"We found this; please identify it: is it your son's coat?"

And finally, two other hints at the sale of Yosef in the Korbon Pesach come from this:

"*Uba'sheil mivushal bamayim...*", "and cooked thoroughly in water," which refers to the verse about Yosef, "*v'habor raik, ain bo mayim*"—"and the pit was empty;

in it was no *water*”; and when Moshe instructs the Jewish Nation about the Korbon Pesach, he says, “**Mish’chu** u’kechu lachem,” or “draw forth and take for yourselves,” when he could have just said, “take for yourselves”—the extra phrase refers to “**Vayimshichu** vaya’alu es Yosef min ha’bor,” “and they drew forth and lifted Yosef from the pit.”

## In Conclusion

The lesson, my friends, is clear: it is specifically unity that makes it possible to get out of exile.

And if there is any related moral lesson from Powerball, it is that actually promoted quite a bit of unity—with dozens of groups of people getting together, “He and the neighbor close to him... in a tally of souls,” to borrow from the verse. They all united to buy tickets together.

And while we wish the best to every big lottery winner, when it comes to the Powerball—and to this week’s Parshah—we all win when it comes to unity.

Good Shabbos!