

THE THREE-DAY PLAN

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When God first recruits Moses to lead the Exodus from Egypt, He tells him: *'Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them . . . I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites . . . to a land flowing with milk and honey'* (Ex. 3:16-17). Strangely, however, God continues by instructing Moses to relay a very different message to Pharaoh: *'Then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him: The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. Now, therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God'* (Ex. 3:18).

While God wants the Israelites to know that their redemption is nigh, Pharaoh is meant to be duped into thinking that they will merely travel three days into the wilderness, make their sacrifices and, apparently, return to Egypt. We later read that Moses actually does, on two separate occasions (Ex. 5:3 and Ex. 8:23), make the same minimal demand that Pharaoh allow the Israelites to travel three days' journey into the wilderness in order to observe a religious festival (I shall call this the *Three-Day Plan*). He never drops a hint that, instead of returning, the people will go on to conquer Canaan and take up life there as a free nation. Pharaoh must surely have thought that Moses was merely asking him to be the first in a long line of gentile employers who have had to put up with Jewish holidays!

Why Moses left Pharaoh with that false impression is not the real concern of this paper, but I would venture to say that God instructed him to do so in order to highlight Pharaoh's obstinacy.¹ Not only did the Egyptian king refuse to free the Israelites; he would not even let them take a week off! Be that as it may, the present article will address a different question: Is all this talk of three days a complete fabrication, or does it really foreshadow some future event? In other words, was the Three-Day Plan ever executed?²

The first question to ask in our investigation concerns the place the Israelites actually reached after three days' journey into the wilderness. The Torah

appears to supply a straightforward answer. Following the biblical account of the crossing of the Red Sea, we read:

Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was called Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test (Ex. 15:22-25).

This story bears no resemblance to the worship and celebration which Moses said was to take place three days' journey out of Egypt. At best, the only link between the two accounts is an ironic contrast: Moses spoke of feasting and worshipping God, while in fact, three days out of Egypt, the Israelites were thirsty and grumbling.

In their classic commentaries, Ibn Ezra³ and Nahmanides⁴ point to a more successful realization of the Three-Day Plan. They identify its goal with the theophany at Sinai. There is certainly some logic in their proposal. When first encountering God at the burning bush, Moses is told, *When you take the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain* (Ex. 3:12), *this mountain* being Horeb (Ex. 3:1), which is identified with Mount Sinai (Ex. 33:6). Thus, when Moses tells Pharaoh about the Israelites having to worship God in the wilderness, he is referring to a genuine event that is central to God's plans for the nation. Furthermore, the Israelites do, in fact, offer sacrifices at Sinai: *Early in the morning, he [Moses] set up an altar at the foot of the mountain, with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. He designated some young men among the Israelites, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed bulls as offerings of well-being to the Lord* (Ex. 24:4-5).

So far, so good, but one obvious problem with the theory of Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides is that the theophany at Sinai took place in the third *month* after the departure from Egypt (Ex. 19:1) rather than after the third *day* of the Israelites' sojourn in the wilderness. Ibn Ezra⁵ cleverly replies that, by the usual route, Mount Sinai is in fact a three-day journey from Egypt. He further explains that the Israelites did not march directly to Sinai; rather, they set up

camps along the way and followed a circuitous route through the wilderness, as is plainly stated in Scripture: *Now when Pharaoh sent out the people, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, 'The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt'* (Ex. 13:17). Thus, the Israelites took months to travel a distance that could be covered in three days.

That being said, there are further difficulties with the reading proposed by Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides; but in order to appreciate them, we must delve deeper into particulars of the Three-Day Plan. During the plague of *arov* (traditionally understood in rabbinic sources as referring to wild beasts, whereas the Septuagint and others regard it as a swarm of flies), Pharaoh calls a meeting at which Moses explains that the Israelites' journey into the desert is necessary because they must sacrifice animals (presumably flock animals, i.e., sheep and goats⁶) considered taboo by the Egyptians. Such an affront would make the festival's celebration prohibitively dangerous, if held in Egypt:

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'Go and sacrifice to your God within the land.' But Moses replied, 'It would not be right to do this, for what we sacrifice to the Lord our God is untouchable to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice that which is untouchable to the Egyptians before their very eyes, will they not stone us! So we must go a distance of three days into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as he may command us.' Pharaoh said, 'I will let you go to sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness, but do not go very far. Plead then for me [that God should end the plague – BDL]' (Ex. 8:21-24).

Later, during the plague of locusts, Pharaoh agrees in principle to allow the Israelites their excursion into the wilderness, but he bickers with Moses over exactly which sections of the Israelite population will be allowed to participate:

So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, 'Go, worship the Lord your God! Who are the ones to go?' Moses replied, 'We will all go, young and old; we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and our herds; for we must observe the Lord's festival.' But he said to them, 'The Lord be with you the same as I mean to let your children go with you! Clearly, you are

bent on mischief. No! You menfolk go and worship the Lord, since that is what you want' (Ex. 10:8-11).

Given these two passages, we now know that Moses' proposed festival of worship was to take place after three days' travel into the wilderness, that it would involve the sacrifice of flock animals (sheep and goats), and that it was to be celebrated not just by men, but by entire families. We have already seen how Ibn Ezra struggled with the plain meaning of the text, to make Moses' mention of three days' travel jibe with the events at Sinai. How would he fare in explaining the other aspects of the festival?

The story of the theophany at Sinai contains no echo of Moses' claim that the Israelites would specifically need to sacrifice flock animals, which were *untouchable to the Egyptians*. Rather, we read that *they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed bulls as offerings of well-being to the Lord (Ex. 24:5)*. Only *bulls* – not sheep or goats – are explicitly mentioned.⁷ Moses' demand that all family members participate in the celebration also finds no echo in the events at Sinai. Sacrifices were made, but only *the leaders of the Israelites [atzilei Benei Yisra'el]* are stated to have eaten them (Ex. 24:11).

To summarize the present predicament: instead of plainly telling Pharaoh that the Israelites were leaving Egypt for good, Moses spoke of their undertaking a mere three-day journey into the wilderness in order to make festive offerings and worship God. To prevent Moses (and God!) being accused of outright deception, Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides claim that the Three-Day Plan found its realization in the theophany at Sinai. That interpretation invites a number of criticisms: 1) the theophany occurs months rather than days after the Exodus from Egypt; 2) Moses emphasizes that flock animals are to be sacrificed at the festival, and no mention is made of such offerings in the account of the theophany; 3) Moses insists that all members of Israelite families be involved in the celebration, a demand which also finds no echo at Sinai. Given these difficulties, I would like to offer an alternative explanation.

To put it simply, instead of first journeying three days into the desert, the Israelites celebrated their festival *in Egypt itself*; and that festival was actually *the first Passover*. Look for a moment at God's instructions to Moses concerning that first holiday: *Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month [Nisan] each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household . . . You shall keep watch over it until the*

fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight . . . They shall eat the flesh that same night . . . (Ex. 12:3-8).

Two of our problems are immediately solved. First of all, Scripture plainly tells us that the paschal sacrifice was a *lamb*, i.e., a flock animal abhorred by the Egyptians. Secondly, Scripture makes it clear that the paschal sacrifice was not an elitist affair, the exclusive privilege of adult males. Rather, it was a family celebration in which animals were sacrificed for entire households.⁸ Thus, according to *Halakhah*, women are obligated to partake of the paschal lamb.⁹

This does leave my interpretation with one seemingly unanswerable difficulty; Moses' festival was to take place three days' journey from Egypt, while the first Passover was observed in Egypt itself. One might think that, since the celebration in Egypt constitutes a deviation from the Three-Day Plan, my interpretation leaves us with the question as to where the festival would have taken place had the plan been executed in its entirety. I am not bothered by this question, since the plan never specifies a particular geographical venue, but a distance calculated in terms of three days' travel. This essentially temporal aspect of the plan is preserved in the original Passover celebration. God instructs the Israelites as follows: *On the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household . . . You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight* (Ex. 12:3, 6). In other words, the Israelites are to choose a sacrificial animal on the tenth of the month, *wait three days*, and then sacrifice it on the fourteenth. The three days of travel have been symbolically enacted via a three-day passage through time in preparation for the sacrifice.

Even if one were to insist that the celebration of the festival in Egypt (instead of the wilderness) constitutes a deviation from the Three-Day Plan, my interpretation would remain superior to that of Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides. The change of venue, from the wilderness to Egypt, required by my interpretation is necessitated by the general narrative logic of the Exodus story, while the change of animals sacrificed (bulls instead of lambs) and of those participating (select males instead of entire households) implied by Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides seems entirely arbitrary. After all, would anyone have raised an

eyebrow if the Torah had mentioned that sheep were slaughtered at Sinai, or that whole families partook of those sacrifices? On the other hand, if the Israelites had run off into the wilderness, apparently out of fear of the Egyptians, to offer sacrifices of flock animals – *that* would have severely undermined one of the central messages of the entire Exodus, i.e., divine omnipotence. Why would the Israelite God, who had repeatedly shattered the Egyptian state with mighty plagues, show Himself to be incapable of protecting His people from the wrath of their Egyptian neighbors? The Israelites had to celebrate their festival of taboo sacrifices *in Egypt* in order to manifest God's victory over Pharaoh.

Finally, my interpretation suggests¹⁰ how an important turning point in the Exodus story can be explained. Immediately after God slays the Egyptian firstborn (and while the Israelites celebrate their first Passover), Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron to an emergency meeting. *'Get up,'* he tells them, *'depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you! Go, worship the Lord as you have said! Take also your flocks and your cattle, as you said, and begone! And may you bring a blessing upon me also!'* (Ex. 12: 31-32). Surprisingly, just a little later, Pharaoh changes his mind: *When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart about the people and said, 'What have we done, releasing Israel from our service?'* (Ex. 14:5). Why does Pharaoh make the disastrous decision to give chase after the Israelites?

Consider Pharaoh's earlier statement more carefully. He agrees to let the Israelites *go worship the Lord as you have said! Take also your flocks and your cattle, as you said, and begone!* In other words, Pharaoh and the Egyptians are still under the impression that the Three-Day Plan is in effect. Apparently, something happens to convince the Egyptians that the plan has been shelved and that the Israelites are escaping slavery for good. It is then that they ask themselves, *What have we done, releasing Israel from our service?* What evidence leads the Egyptians to the correct conclusion that the Israelites plan never to return to their servitude?

Rashi, following the *Mekhilta*,¹¹ claims that the Egyptians finally understood what was happening only after they saw that the Israelites had traveled for more than three days in the wilderness, giving no indication that they meant to return, thus making it clear that the whole Three-Day Plan was just

a ruse to help the Israelites escape from slavery altogether. This explanation is rather problematic, since the text offers no explicit account of how much time had passed before the Egyptians figured things out. My theory offers a different possibility. The Israelites leave in the middle of the night while the Egyptians are still reeling from the deaths of their firstborn. Eventually (probably in less than three days, not that it matters), the Egyptians realize that the Israelites have *already* celebrated their festival in the land of Egypt, making the Three-Day Plan redundant. Once the Israelites sacrifice their taboo flock animals in Egypt, the whole rationale for the Three-Day Plan collapses, and the Egyptians correctly deduce that the Israelites have not left to make sacrifices, but to escape from their enslavement. Faced with the imminent loss of the entire Israelite work force, Pharaoh undertakes the extreme and ultimately catastrophic task of pursuing them into the wilderness, a move that eventually leads to the complete annihilation of his army at the Red Sea.

NOTES

1. This interpretation is found in R. Joseph Baer Soloveichik's *Beit ha-Levi* (1884) on Exodus 14:31.
2. Strictly speaking, the fact that the Israelites never returned to Egypt does not prove that the Three-Day Plan was never executed. After all, neither God nor Moses ever explicitly mentions such a return.
3. See Ibn Ezra on Exodus 3:12.
4. See Nahmanides' commentary on Exodus 19:1.
5. *Idem*, loc. cit.
6. In Genesis 46:34, Joseph asks his brothers to introduce themselves to Pharaoh as men who work with *mikneh* (livestock) rather than *tzon* (sheep and goats – flock animals), since *all herders of tzon are abhorrent to Egyptians (to'avat Mitzrayim)*. The same Hebrew term, *to'evah*, is used by Joseph to describe shepherds and by Moses to refer to the taboo animals.
7. It might be suggested that the burnt offerings mentioned in the verse refer to the sacrifice of flock animals rather than bulls. However, Leviticus 1:3 clearly states that bulls may be sacrificed as burnt offerings (see also Num. 8:12 and 28:27).
8. It is important that the sacrifice takes place in a family setting, since it constitutes the archetype for the Passover *Seder* celebration in which parents tell their children about the Exodus from Egypt.
9. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Pesah* 1:1. The commentators who say that the Three-Day Plan refers to Sinai have a problem explaining Moses' insistence that the women be included, since women are usually exempted from sacrificing. Their usual answer is that the women had to come along in order to help the men observe *simhat ha-hag* (the joy of the festival) but not to partake of the sacrifices themselves (see, for instance, Keli Yakar on Ex. 10:8). Interestingly enough, Ibn Ezra on Exodus 10:9 simply states that *all* are commanded to sacrifice.

He may be thinking of the idea that the sacrifices at Sinai were made in the name of all the Israelites, both men and women, as part of their conversion to Judaism (see Maimonides, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 13:3). My interpretation avoids this problem, since women are in fact obligated to participate in the paschal sacrifice.

10. I am careful to write "suggests" because the behavior of the Egyptians could have been prompted by a mistaken understanding of the Three-Day Plan's realization.

11. Rashi on Exodus 14:5.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

April	Genesis	29 – 50
	Exodus	1 – 6
May	Exodus	7 – 34
June	Exodus	35 – 40
	Leviticus	1 – 22
July	Leviticus	23 – 27
	Numbers	1 – 23
August	Numbers	24 – 36
	Deuteronomy	1 – 15

