

Date: 3 Shevat 5786 (January 21, 2026)

Torah Portion: Bo

Topic: Who May Eat Redemption?

At the very moment Yisrael steps out of slavery, the Torah introduces a boundary. Freedom has barely arrived, yet Elohim speaks not of movement but of limits, not of escape but of identity:

“And YHWH said to Mosheh and Aharon, ‘This is the law of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it.’”¹

At first glance, this verse feels jarring. Why introduce restriction at the hour of liberation? Why speak of exclusion at the birth of freedom? The Rabbinical tradition answers with a profound insight: **redemption without covenant dissolves, but covenant shapes redemption into a people.** Shemot 12:43 is not a narrowing of grace; it is the discipline that preserves it.

Passover (פסח – *Pesach*) is not merely a memory meal. In the Torah’s original frame, it is a **covenantal act**, bound to sacrifice, obedience, and divine kingship (מלכות יי-דוה – *malchut YHWH*). To “eat” the Passover is not to observe history but to **enter it**. This is why the verse speaks of the *foreigner*—נקרי / נקר (nekhar / nokhri)—not in ethnic terms, but covenantal ones. A *nokhri* is one who remains outside the obligations, disciplines, and commitments of Yisrael’s covenantal life.²

The Torah immediately clarifies this point. The same chapter opens the door to inclusion: a servant may eat after circumcision; a *sojourner*—גר (ger)—who desires to keep Passover may do so fully; and then the Torah declares, “**One Torah shall be for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.**”³ The logic is unmistakable. **Covenant is open—but never casual.** Pesach is not denied to the outsider; it is protected from being reduced to symbolism without surrender.

This pattern echoes B’resheet 17, where circumcision (ברית מילה – *brit milah*) is introduced as the sign of covenant (ברית – *brit*). Covenant, in the Torah, is never abstract belief. It is **marked belonging**. Shemot 12 extends that logic into redemption (גאולה – *ge’ulah*): the life that has been freed must now be formed. Freedom is not self-definition; it is realignment.⁴

The Talmud sharpens this insight. In *Pesachim*, the rabbis insist that only those **registered** into a Passover group may eat the sacrifice. The concern is not exclusion, but integrity. The Passover offering is not common food; it is a holy act (קדוש – *kadosh*) that binds participants into a single covenantal body. To eat without belonging would fracture meaning. This is why the uncircumcised male—ערל (arel)—is excluded—not as punishment, but because the body itself has not yet borne the covenant sign. **The table reflects the covenant inscribed on the body.**⁵

The Torah repeatedly reinforces this principle. In Bemidbar 9, a “Second Passover” (פסח שני – *Pesach Sheni*) is established for those who were unable to participate due to impurity or distance—revealing that Torah boundaries are not meant to crush the willing but to protect holiness while making space for sincere alignment.⁶ Ezekiel later warns against allowing those “uncircumcised in heart and flesh”—ערלי לב ונקער (arele-lev u-basar)—into sacred service, underscoring that holiness requires internal and external coherence.⁷ At the same time, Yishayahu proclaims that foreigners who “join themselves to YHWH” (הגלים עלי-דוה – *ha-nilvim al-YHWH*) will be welcomed into His house of prayer.⁸ Scripture holds both truths together: **holiness is guarded, and holiness is open to those who truly enter.**

The Zohar deepens this teaching by shifting the lens from law to spiritual reality. In its reading, Egypt—מצרים (Mitzrayim)—is not only a land but a state of **constriction**, sharing its root with מצר (meitzar). The Exodus is therefore not merely geographical escape but a **cosmic transition** from domination into divine kingship (מלכות – *malchut*). From this perspective, Shemot 12:43 is almost inevitable: **one cannot consume redemption while still serving the system redemption breaks.** Holiness is not elitism; it is alignment. A vessel (כלי – *keli*) must be fitted to what it claims to receive.⁹

Tanya brings this insight into the inner life. It teaches that love of Elohim (אהבת ה' – *ahavat Hashem*) is real only when it becomes **commitment and discipline**, not emotion alone. Redemption, in this frame, is not inspiration but transformation. To eat the Pesach while remaining “foreign” to Elohim’s kingship—to resist קבלת עול (*kabbalat ol*), the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven—is to seek the benefits of freedom without consenting to its demands.¹⁰ *Tanya* presses the uncomfortable but necessary question: *In what part of me am I still foreign—still negotiating, still holding Egypt alive?*

Seen this way, Shemot 12:43 is not about “who is kept out,” but about **what kind of self may enter**. The Torah is forming a people whose freedom will survive time, power, and temptation. A table becomes the place where identity is enacted—where belonging is defined, memory (זכרון – *zikaron*) is renewed, and covenant is lived.

This verse also turns inward. The “foreigner” is not only outside the house; it can live within the heart—the לב (*lev*), the seat of will and direction. A person may stand inside the story while clinging to Mitzrayim’s logic—control, fear, partial obedience. Shemot 12:43 confronts that inner foreignness. It asks whether we seek redemption as comfort or covenant as belonging.

In the end, the Torah teaches a paradox that sustains freedom across generations: **the redeemed are not defined by what they escaped, but by what they now belong to**. Boundaries do not diminish redemption; they give it form. Without covenant, freedom dissolves into memory. With covenant, memory becomes a life.

Shemot 12:43 stands at the threshold of history to remind us that liberation is only the beginning. What endures is the disciplined, willing, covenantal act of belonging—to God, to a people, and to a way of life that refuses to let redemption become merely a story of the past.

Shalom.

Footnotes

1. Exodus 12:43.
2. See Ibn Ezra on Exodus 12:43; cf. Deut 14:21 on *nokhri* usage.
3. Exodus 12:44–49.
4. Genesis 17:9–14; Ramban on Gen 17; cf. Exod 6:6–7.
5. Mishnah Pesachim 8; Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 83b–84a.

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6. Numbers 9:6–13.
7. Ezekiel 44:7–9.
8. Isaiah 56:6–7.
9. Zohar II, 36b; II, 170a (Pesach and redemption motifs).
10. Tanya, Likutei Amarim, chs. 4, 41 (kabbalat ol and embodied avodah).