The Jewish-Israeli Trauma Archetype –

(and on the Possibility of Jewish Archetypes in General)

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A.

A review of the principal findings of the in-depth studies conducted by the Guttman Institute in 2000 and 2009 reveals an interesting point. According to the findings, two rituals are especially popular among Israelis: holding a Passover Seder and fasting on Yom Kippur. According to a Guttman Institute survey conducted in 2002, another ritual—circumcision—together with *shivah*, the seven-day mourning period, stands at the head of the list of Jewish life-cycle rituals concerning which a broad social consensus exists. The findings remained valid in 2009. The question underlying this essay is this: Why, precisely, have these rituals survived throughout the generations? What preserved them, and what continues to preserve them, among Israelis who define themselves as traditional, and even among some who define themselves as entirely secular?

The matter of the Passover Seder might be dismissed as requiring no explanation at all. It is a family gathering situated within a cultural context in which such gatherings are important and the nuclear family is given precedence. After all, we live in a traditional society, and the Seder provides an organizing social foundation. It affirms our existence as a nation and the contradictory values of our identity: freedom, the covenant with God, our distinctiveness, and our victimhood. Circumcision and fasting on Yom Kippur are more surprising, however. Fasting is an act requiring considerably greater effort and self-persuasion, while circumcision is an act that deliberately inflicts injury upon the newborn. Both require a considerable degree of determination, and both are invasive and physical acts. Their popularity therefore cannot simply be dismissed as a consequence of the traditional character of Israeli society—as though it required no explanation. Yet even the Seder is not as simple as it initially appears. It is not merely a family event that is broader, longer, and more demanding than a Friday-night meal. To its popularity among the Jewish-Israeli public must be added the no less astonishing finding, revealed by the 2009 survey, that 67 percent of Jews in Israel do not eat leavened food during Passover. This, too, is a demanding decision, with profound consequences for the body and everyday life. It is a decision with far-reaching economic consequences, and yet many men and women observe it.

B.

A close reading of these three popular rituals in their mythic source, the Bible, reveals two surprising points of connection. The first is that the Bible explicitly states concerning all three—circumcision, the Passover sacrifice, and the Temple service on Yom Kippur—that they are not to be performed only at the time when they were commanded, but are to be observed "throughout your generations" or as "a statute for ever." In Genesis 17, in the commandment of circumcision, the Bible explicitly states that the commandment applies not only to Abraham but also to future generations:

> And God said unto Abraham: "And as for thee, thou shalt keep My covenant, thou, and thy seed after thee throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of a covenant betwixt Me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any foreigner, that is not of thy seed."[1]

The Passover Seder, as is well known, is not mentioned in the Bible. According to the biblical text, however, the sacrifice is eaten as part of a meal. The Passover sacrifice is to be eaten within the family and household: "Speak ye unto all the congregation of Israel, saying: In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their fathers' houses [ancestral households], a lamb for a household."[2] It is to be eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, so that "The obligation to eat the Passover sacrifice, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs should be regarded as establishing the menu of an actual meal—the sacrificial meal—and not as merely symbolic eating."[3] After the destruction of the Temple, when it was no longer possible to offer the Passover sacrifice, the eating of unleavened bread and bitter herbs remained primary commandments. The family gathering around the meal on the night beginning the fifteenth of Nisan nevertheless remained intact.[4] The Torah explicitly states that Passover and its obligations—including the prohibition against eating leavened food—were not intended only for those who left Egypt, but that Passover is a festival for all generations: "And this day shall be unto you for a memorial, and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever."[5] The same applies to the prohibition against eating leavened food and to the designation of the night beginning the fifteenth of Nisan as a night of vigil: "It was a night of watching unto the LORD for bringing them

out from the land of Egypt; this same night is a night of watching unto the LORD for all the children of Israel throughout their generations."[6]

The Yom Kippur fast, which so many Israeli Jews take care to observe, is also a biblical commandment. Here, too, the commandment is explicitly stated to apply throughout the generations. The Torah provides: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins shall ye be clean before the LORD. It is a sabbath of solemn rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls; it is a statute for ever."[7]

The first connection among the three rituals, then, is that all three were commandments given at a particular time—to Abraham, to Aaron and his sons, and to the children of Israel. Yet the commandment is not confined to its temporary historical context. It is intended for all generations.

The more surprising feature shared by these three rituals, however, is the direct connection between each of them and the danger of death, particularly a danger hovering over a firstborn son. During the Exodus from Egypt, it was the firstborn who were in danger of death at the hands of the angel of the Lord. The children of Israel were instructed to smear blood upon the lintel and doorposts of their houses so that the angel of the Lord would pass over their homes. This is the meaning of the night of vigil. The Passover sacrifice, the manner in which it was eaten, and the smearing of blood upon the lintels clearly possessed an apotropaic element—a mystical element protecting those who performed the ritual properly:

> We have therefore reached the conclusion that the meaning of the name *Pesach* concerns protection from the destroyer who, on that night, endangered the lives of the children of Israel. In light of this conclusion, one may reasonably hypothesize that the apotropaic tendency will also be recognizable in the other laws of Passover, or at least in some of them. […] The prohibition against breaking a bone also appears to fit within this general picture. […] The entire Passover rite is expressly intended to preserve the lives and physical integrity of its participants. [8]

The commandment concerning the Temple service on Yom Kippur also appears in the Bible "after the death of the two sons of Aaron" and in the aftermath of their tragic deaths during the celebrations inaugurating the Tabernacle. According to the biblical story, Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, offered strange fire and died. The Bible explicitly connects the Temple service on Yom Kippur with their sudden deaths:

> And the LORD spoke unto Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD, and died; and the LORD said unto Moses: “Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the ark-cover which is upon the ark; that he die not; for I appear in the cloud upon the ark-cover. Herewith shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bullock for a sin-offering, and a ram for a burnt-offering.”[9]

The logic guiding the biblical author is therefore that Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire and lost their lives because they did not approach the service of the Tabernacle in the proper manner. The correct way to serve in the Tabernacle—and consequently the safe way—will now be presented to Aaron and to future generations.

The commandment of circumcision given to Abraham also contains a connection between fear for the life of a firstborn son and the commandment itself, although the connection is less explicit. The biblical author places the promise of offspring to Abraham and the commandment of circumcision immediately after the narrative of Hagar’s expulsion and return. When God promises Abraham that Sarah will indeed give birth, Abraham expresses his disbelief in a sentence that reveals what is hidden within his heart:

> Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart: “Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?” And Abraham said unto God: “Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!” And God said: “Nay, but Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son; and thou shalt call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him.”[10]

Abraham turns to God with four Hebrew words: “Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!” Abraham thereby reveals not only his difficulty in believing that a child will indeed be born to him in his old age. He also reveals his fear that the child already born to him might die—a child whose very survival had been placed in doubt following Hagar’s expulsion.

C.

We are therefore confronted with three rituals connected at their very core to a traumatic condition. A traumatic condition is created by helplessness in the face of an extreme threat to one’s own life or the lives of one’s loved ones, in the absence of internal or external resources with which to cope. This condition, which has been extensively studied since the horrors of the Second World War, produces

changes in personality. Their principal feature is an undermining of trust in the order governing the world and in the self, accompanied by a constant sense of arbitrariness and an expectation of catastrophe. In a person who has experienced trauma, this alteration of personality becomes permanent in the post-traumatic condition. The continuing response involves a constriction of psychological capacities and functioning and a recurrent need, on the one hand, to reenact the traumatic event and, on the other, to detach oneself from it. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman observes that the trauma survivors whom she studied and treated experienced similar feelings of lost control, fear, helplessness, and intrusive, uncontrollable thoughts about the traumatic event, although the sources of their trauma were entirely different. Herman treated survivors of rape, soldiers who had experienced warfare or torture, and children who had suffered abuse. She identified similar behavioral characteristics among trauma survivors: chronic depression, suicidality, entry into extreme states, and emotional detachment. According to Herman, the path toward healing requires the restoration of control and of the feeling that a person possesses the ability to influence their own fate. The traumatic condition expresses precisely the reverse: standing powerless and helpless in the face of a terrible danger to the individual or to those they love. For Herman, remembrance and mourning form a stage of recovery in which reconstructing the traumatic experience helps restore control. As she writes: "It has become a part of the survivor's experience, but only one part of it."[11] The purpose of reconstructing the trauma is therefore a controlled return to the place in which a person experienced an extreme loss of control over their life, so that the traumatic experience can be reshaped as an experience over which the person possesses some measure of control.

D.

As I shall now demonstrate, all three rituals—circumcision, the Passover Seder, and the Temple service on Yom Kippur—embody a healing response to trauma. They are rituals founded upon the principle of restoring control:[12] the controlled ritual reenactment of the traumatic event in a particular variation over which control can be exercised, so that the effects of the traumatic event and the intrusive thoughts associated with it may be diminished.

Consider the biblical story upon which the rituals of the Passover sacrifice during the period of the Temple, the contemporary Passover Seder, and the prohibition against eating leavened food are based. According to the biblical story, the children of Israel sat inside their homes while the angel of the Lord moved about outside. They embraced their firstborn sons and prayed that the blood upon the lintel would indeed cause the angel to pass over the house. They heard the cries of their Egyptian

neighbors and huddled around the Passover sacrifice, which they ate with the family—a lamb for each household. This was, by definition, a traumatic event. They feared for the lives of their firstborn and lacked the resources with which to confront the threat. They were therefore compelled to rely upon their faith in God, the smearing of blood upon the lintel, and the eating of the sacrifice. The Passover Seder is, to a considerable extent, a ritual reenactment of that traumatic night. The issue is not merely the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, but the elements that transform the account into a living story. The commandments to eat the Passover sacrifice, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs—commandments applying throughout the generations—are commandments intended to shape consciousness and collective memory. Yet the means used during the Seder to shape this collective memory are not merely didactic. As noted, they reenact the night of the Exodus, when the children of Israel sat together in family groups and ate the Passover sacrifice. This is a controlled reenactment, in which the unfolding of events is determined not by an uncontrollable external force threatening the lives of the firstborn, but by the people reenacting the event. Despite the Sages' attempts to organize the eating of the Passover sacrifice around the *havurah*, the association of participants, rather than around the family,[13] in Israel the Seder is unmistakably a family occasion. As such, it reenacts the traumatic night of vigil more authentically and therefore more effectively. What is at issue here is not merely a ritual act through which "all the events to which the rituals under discussion refer are reenacted. In our case, this is a transformative axis permitting movement from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to the wilderness and from there to the land of Canaan, from destruction to redemption, and from exile to the ingathering of the exiles."[14] The ritual reenactment of the myth has a particular significance: its healing response to trauma and its connection to the principle of restoring control. This is how we should understand the statement: "In every generation, a person must regard themselves as though they personally left Egypt."

The commandment of circumcision, which follows the account of Hagar's return, contains, as noted, Abraham's profound anguish in the face of the mortal danger that had hovered over the fetus she carried. Hagar was carrying his firstborn and only child. Her expulsion raised the axe over Abraham's hope for a son. Sending her into the wilderness effectively meant the killing of his only son. This was a trauma in every respect. In the biblical story, it is expressed in a single but highly powerful statement: "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!"[15] When God tells Abraham that a son will be born to him, Abraham would be content with Ishmael, his only son. He demonstrates how deeply attached he is to Ishmael and how much fulfillment Ishmael gives him. Viewing circumcision and its close connection to the threat to the life of a firstborn son from a traumatic and post-traumatic

perspective reveals that it is a ritual intended to reenact, under controlled and manageable conditions, the danger that threatened the infant's life. Unlike the Passover Seder, which reenacts a national trauma that occurred in the past and left behind a post-traumatic trail repeatedly manifested throughout the life of the nation,[16] circumcision reenacts a trauma that remains present, contemporary, and immediate in the lives of parents throughout the generations. Even in the twenty-first century, childbirth is an event accompanied by uncertainty, arousing intense and even traumatic fears in parents. Circumcision is a controlled return to the place of anxiety concerning the life of the newborn—the child who embodies all their expectations and dreams. At the same time, because this return takes place under controlled conditions, it strengthens the feeling that the infant is strong, that he will survive, and that he is viable. The protective element in circumcision is at the heart of the familiar biblical story concerning Zipporah, the wife of Moses, and her son. She must cut off her son's foreskin, or the angel of the Lord will kill him. Cutting the foreskin saves her son.[17] The idea that circumcision can be justified through rational, legal, or medical arguments is problematic. Circumcision is by no means the wisest or healthiest action, nor the most justified or moral one. From a rational perspective, circumcising a child is an injurious, invasive, and violent act. Even if we philosophize about the limitations placed upon the child's rights, the status of the parents as the child's natural guardians, the argument that there is no such thing as "natural" rights and that they are principally a fiction, or the balance between the child's individual right and the collective right of the nation, we shall find the act very difficult to justify. Viewing this ritual in terms of its post-traumatic healing effect, however, can better explain why many nonreligious people—and even some who oppose the practice—nevertheless perform it.

The story of the deaths of Aaron's sons is also unmistakably traumatic. On the day of the inauguration of the Tabernacle, almost immediately after fire descended from heaven and consumed the people's sacrifice upon the altar—on the wondrous day when Aaron and his sons were supposed to enter into their roles as priests—two of Aaron's sons suddenly died, against the background of the great joy and euphoria surrounding the occasion. Their unexpected death was indeed traumatic: "Even a dream of a day can end in disaster."[18] Aaron's silence—"And Aaron held his peace"[19]—is a classic traumatic response. It may be assumed that the entire people experienced the event collectively as traumatic, since Nadab and Abihu were supposed to enter their roles as the people's representatives in the Tabernacle, and the entire day possessed a collective character. The entire Temple service on Yom Kippur is fashioned as a reenactment, in a different form, of the rituals inaugurating the

Tabernacle. The resemblance between the rituals of the days of consecration and the Temple service on Yom Kippur led Israel Knohl and Shlomo Naeh to the following conclusion:

> Yom Kippur is perceived not only as the initiation of the priest, but also as a renewed inauguration. Within this comprehensive conception, the comparison between the rituals of Yom Kippur and the days preceding it, on the one hand, and the rituals of the days of consecration and the eighth day [the day upon which Nadab and Abihu died], on the other, reaches its fullest realization: in both cases, both the Temple and the priests who serve in it are consecrated.[20]

The resemblance between the days of consecration and the Temple service on Yom Kippur, however, is connected not merely to inauguration but also to the treatment of the trauma involved in the inauguration of the Tabernacle. The principle of restoring control, which is also manifested here, reenacts the traumatic event in a variation and restores a feeling of control to the members of the community. Here, then, is the healing element contained in these rituals, which may also explain their popularity to this day. All three reenact a variation of a traumatic event in a manner that makes it possible to return to that event in a state of control and with an awareness that the individual possesses the capacity and resources required to confront the threat. The Passover Seder is therefore a reenactment of the night upon which the Israelites experienced a danger to themselves and to their firstborn sons. Circumcision is a reenactment of the danger to the infant's life experienced by the parents eight days earlier, during childbirth and the newborn's first days of life. The Temple service on Yom Kippur is a reenactment, in variation, of the accursed day of the inauguration of the Tabernacle, when two of Aaron's sons died unexpectedly in the midst of its inauguration, at the very height of the celebration.

E.

What remains of the traumatic element that appears so clearly in the biblical myth? Today, the Passover Seder is experienced as a family evening in every respect. The traumatic experience of the children of Israel sitting inside their homes and waiting until the wrath has passed is not present at the conscious level of most participants in the Seder. The traumatic experience of the participants in the inauguration of the Tabernacle—who saw Aaron's two sons die when they were entirely unprepared for such an event and, on the contrary, were experiencing joy and elation—is similarly absent from the conscious experience of Yom Kippur today. In the absence of the Temple, Yom Kippur has become entirely a day of atonement for sins. The trauma and fear for the infant's life and their

connection to circumcision likewise receive no concrete or conscious expression today. Circumcision is a mark of identification and an entrance ticket into the Jewish people. Discourse concerning the practice focuses upon these elements, rather than upon its traumatic foundations and the coping with trauma embodied in it, which remain within the collective unconscious. Yet, as I have attempted to argue, this level continues to exert an influence. It grants these rituals their depth and explains their popularity. Can one therefore argue for the existence of a Jewish post-traumatic archetype?

Were we to define such an archetype, these rituals would constitute an ancient psychic pattern for confronting trauma. Although this element remains within the collective unconscious, it contains the potential for coping with trauma. The personal unconscious—the parts of the personality that are not subject to the supervision of consciousness and that result from the repression of personal memories and desires—influences human behavior. It appears unconsciously in a person's outbursts, whispers, and slips of the tongue. Such behavior, however, is also influenced by the collective unconscious. According to Carl Gustav Jung, archetypes are real. They are not merely Platonic ideas, but "living organisms." They affect every dimension of human existence: thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Figures, objects, and ideas appear spontaneously among different people who possessed no previous knowledge of them. This suggests that there is something within the human psyche that corresponds to and evokes these same visions—a general human disposition causing these particular images, rather than others, to arise spontaneously. For Jung, the archetypes of the collective unconscious are forms not filled out by personal experience.[21] Unlike memories belonging to the personal unconscious, which are images that have been filled out because they have been experienced, the collective unconscious represents the pre-infantile period of the human being, "the residues of ancestral life." The collective unconscious is the driving force behind all human feelings, behaviors, and psychological states experienced by the individual. It is a kind of master plan for bringing the self into expression. Archetypal images—myths and preconscious images—are not images that once existed within consciousness and were then repressed. They are also distinct from the archetype itself, access to which, like access to the Platonic idea, is limited. The archetype produces images that reach the forefront of consciousness. These images, behind which the archetype stands, possess immense power. They direct human activity and instincts. Jung believed that mental health requires contact with the archetypes through confrontation or engagement, so that they will not move the individual in an uncontrolled manner and so that their powers may be channeled wisely. Men and women are therefore a fascinating amalgam of collective potential and individual realization. Their personal

experiences are written onto the "collective hard drive," even as that same drive channels those experiences.

And what of the Jewish experience? What of the interaction between personal experience and collective Jewish identity? This identity is directed toward the creation of a single collective possessing shared values and a shared collective memory. According to the collective's foundational myth, the members of the Jewish collective believed in a single, abstract God who cannot be represented through a statue or image. They believed that the human being was created in the image of God and sought to establish a society of social justice and a way of life that grants reality sense and meaning. Personal sorrow, joy, and memory were poured into this collectivity, in both its universal and particularistic aspects, until they could no longer be separated from one another. And what of the Jewish collective unconscious—the unconscious space of the Jewish collective? From here, it is only a single step toward an essentialist and racist understanding of Judaism. Jung identified several central archetypes: the Great Mother, the Great Father, the anima and animus, the shadow, the persona, and the self. Each is a kind of spiritual pattern. Each is a principle that guides the personality's behavior from behind the scenes. As noted, the archetypes possess reality, and their source is not personal experience but a kind of master plan imprinted upon us. Yet this reality is not biological in essence, but spiritual. A claim concerning the existence of a national archetype—as opposed to the Jungian archetypes, which are universal—therefore does not necessarily entail a biological distinction among nations. It is true that a claim concerning some form of national spiritual essentialism—in the Jewish case, in the formulation of Rabbi Judah Halevi, for example—is also racist. Yet, in contrast to the fixity represented by a racist position attributing particular characteristics to members of a particular nation, archetypes are not a fixed essence, but a developing one. They depend upon images that have, over time, become the collective's common inheritance, but they remain subject to changes, additions, and subtractions. Moreover, whereas a racist claim makes an assertion concerning the actual existence of particular characteristics among the members of a certain people, archetypes are merely a potential. Only their combination with the individual response produces human behavior. In addition, unlike universal archetypes, archetypes at the national level are more fragile because they are younger and, as a consequence, their power may also be weaker. It may be said that the more ancient a nation is, the stronger and more firmly established its archetypal foundation will be. Dreams, objects, and rituals served Jung in identifying archetypal images and can also be used to identify Jewish transconscious contents. Judaism possesses myths and images and, as

I have attempted to argue, rituals of great power. Despite their antiquity and their many transformations, many of these rituals continue to be observed today.

Notes

Biblical quotations follow The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text (Jewish Publication Society, 1917). The bracketed gloss in Exodus 12:3 clarifies “fathers’ houses.”

[1] Genesis 17:9–12.

[2] Exodus 12:3.

[3] Yosef Tabori, *The Passover of the Generations: Chapters in the History of the Seder* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996), p. 48 [Hebrew].

[4] Ibid.

[5] Exodus 12:14.

[6] Ibid., 12:42.

[7] Leviticus 16:30–31.

[8] Samuel E. Loewenstamm, *The Tradition of the Exodus in Its Development* (Jerusalem, 1965), pp. 87–88 [Hebrew].

[9] Leviticus 16:1–3.

[10] Genesis 17:17–19.

[11] Judith L. Herman, “Recovery from Psychological Trauma,” *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 52, suppl. 1 (1998), pp. S98–S103. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1819.1998.0520s5S145.x

[12] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (Am Oved, 2007), p. 193 [Hebrew edition].

[13] See Yitzhak Brand, “The Paschal Sacrifice: From Household to Association,” *Jewish Studies: An Internet Journal*, vol. 17 (2019), pp. 1–20 [Hebrew].

[14] Itamar Gruenwald, “Myth and Historical Truth—Can Myths Be Shattered?” in Moshe Idel and Itamar Gruenwald, eds., *Myth in Judaism: History, Thought, Literature* (Zalman Shazar Center, 2004), p. 42 [Hebrew].

[15] Genesis 17:18.

[16] In this interesting context, see Yosef Weiss’s description of the observance of the Passover Seder in the Bergen-Belsen labor camp: “Memories of the Passover Seder of 5705 in the Bergen-Belsen Camp,” *HaMa’ayan*, vol. 50 (2010), pp. 73–76 [Hebrew].

[17] See Exodus 4:24–26:

> And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said: "Surely a bridegroom of blood art thou to me." So He let him alone. Then she said: "A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision."
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> See also Yair Eldan, "The Covenant of Fear in Circumcision," *Ynet* [Hebrew].

[18] From an advertisement produced by Israel's National Road Safety Authority in 2008.

[19] Leviticus 10:3.

[20] Israel Knohl and Shlomo Naeh, "The Consecration and Yom Kippur," *Tarbiz*, vol. 62 (1993), pp. 17, 22 [Hebrew].

[21] Carl Gustav Jung, *On the Psychology of the Unconscious* (Dvir, 1987), p. 65 [Hebrew edition]. For the corresponding English passage, see "On the Psychology of the Unconscious," in *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Collected Works, vol. 7, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1966), para. 118.