

INTERSESSION READER 2013

בא - בשלח



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Intersession Reader 2013

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For more information please contact:

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by email at info@tebah.org.

Please send your donations (tax-deductible) to:

Tebah Educational Services
34 West 33rd Street, 2nd Floor
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Compiled and Edited by
Ezra R. Barry and Jason Samstein

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Location	Sat Date	Candle Lighting*	Friday Sunset	Shabbat Sunrise	Shabbat Sunset	Shabbat Ends**
Jerusalem, Israel	1/19 1/26	4:21 4:27	5:01 5:07	6:39 6:36	5:02 5:08	5:37 5:43
Brooklyn, N.Y.	1/19 1/26	4:39 4:47	4:57 5:05	7:16 7:11	4:58 5:07	5:33 5:42
Turnberry, Florida	1/19 1/26	5:36 5:42	5:54 6:00	7:09 7:07	5:55 6:00	6:30 6:35
Orlando, Florida	1/19 1/26	5:36 5:42	5:54 6:00	7:18 7:16	5:55 6:00	6:30 6:35
San Juan, Puerto Rico	1/19 1/26	5:52 5:57	6:10 6:15	7:00 6:59	6:11 6:15	6:46 6:50
Palm Beach, Aruba	1/19 1/26	6:16 6:21	6:34 6:39	7:07 7:06	6:36 6:40	7:11 7:15
Acapulco, Mexico	1/19 1/26	6:10 6:14	6:28 6:32	7:12 7:12	6:29 6:33	7:04 7:08
Cancun, Mexico	1/19 1/26	5:11 5:15	5:29 5:33	6:27 6:26	5:30 5:34	6:05 6:09
Punta Cana, D. Republic	1/19 1/26	6:01 6:05	6:19 6:23	7:09 7:08	6:20 6:24	6:55 6:59

*** Candle Lighting is calculated based on 18 minutes before sunset (Jerusalem is 40 minutes before sunset).**

**** Shabbat end time calculated based on 35 minutes after sunset.**

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About the Authors

Rabbi Hayyim Angel teaches Tanakh to advanced undergraduates and rabbinical students at Yeshiva University, and lectures widely. He has published over 70 scholarly articles, primarily in Tanakh, and is author or editor of ten books. He previously served for seventeen years as Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel of New York. His newest book, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim*, is forthcoming by the Orthodox Union-Urim (2013).

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun is an Israeli educator and Rosh Yeshivah who has spearheaded the revolution in Tanakh-study in Israel, primarily at Yeshivat Har Etzion and the Herzog Teachers' College in Alon Shevut. He has written numerous articles and books on Tanakh, Jewish history, Jewish thought and halakhah. His shiurim can be found in english at vbm-torah.org, in hebrew at etzion.org.il, and in *Megadim* publications.

Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom attended Yeshivot Kerem b'Yavne, RIETS and Har Etzion before receiving his Semikhah from the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem. He has been a dynamic educator in the Los Angeles area since returning there in 1985 and has been teaching on the internet since 1994. His first book, *Between the Lines of the Bible* was published by Yashar Books in 2006; volume 2, where the essay in this publication appears, was published by Urim Press and the OU Press in 2012. He currently lives with his wife, Stefanie and their five children in Los Angeles. Email: rebyitz@gmail.com; Websites: www.etshalom.com & www.dafyomiyicc.org

Rabbi Alex Israel is a beloved Tanach lecturer and Rebbe, teaching at Jerusalem's finest Yeshivot and Midrashot. Educated at the London School of Economics and Yeshivat Har Etzion, he has published over 150 Tanach articles online. Rav Israel brings the Tanach to life in his popular Israel tours,

and volunteers for Tzohar Rabbinic organization, bridging the gap between the religious and secular in Israel. His forthcoming book, *I Kings: Torn in Two*, is expected out in 2013.

Nehama Leibowitz a"rh was a noted Israeli biblical scholar and commentator. A long-time professor of Bible at Tel Aviv University, she had an international following of thousands through her weekly parasha sheets. She received a doctorate from the University of Berlin in 1930.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has been Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom since 1991. From 1984-1990 he served as principal of Jews' College. He received a PhD from Oxford University in Philosophy. In 2005 he was knighted by the queen of England. He has authored many works, including *Covenant & Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (2009) and *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search For Meaning* (2011). Website: www.chiefrabbi.org

Rabbi Elchanan Samet has served as instructor/lecturer at Yeshivat Birkat Moshe (Ma'ale Adumim), Yeshivat Har Etzion and Machon Herzog Teachers' College. His books include *Iyyunim beParashot Hashavuah*, *Pirkei Eliyahu* and *Pirkei Elisha*'. Websites: www.vbm-torah.org & www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/samet/tohen-2.html

Rabbi Moshe Shamah founded the Sephardic Institute in 1968 and continues as its director. He also serves as head rabbi of Sephardic Synagogue in Brooklyn, NY. He is the author of *Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah* (2011). Website: www.judaic.org

Rabbi Ralph Tawil received degrees from Columbia University and Yeshiva University and is a Jerusalem Fellow. He was the principal of the Hillel High School in Deal, NJ. He currently lives and teaches in Israel. His publication, *Shabbat-Table Talks: Volume 1*, is expected to be published in 2013. Website: www.judaicseminar.org/tabletalk/1tabletalk.html

The Difference Between Signs and Wonders¹

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The ninth plague – darkness – comes shrouded in a darkness of its own.

What is this plague doing here? It seems out of sequence. Thus far there have been eight plagues, and they have become steadily, inexorably, more serious. The first two, the Nile turned blood-red and the infestation of frogs, seemed more like omens than anything else. The third and fourth, gnats and flies, caused discomfort, not crisis. The fifth, the plague that killed livestock, affected animals, not human beings.

The sixth, boils, was again a discomfort, but a serious one, no longer an external nuisance but a bodily affliction. (Remember that Job lost everything he had, but did not start cursing his fate until his body was covered with sores: Job 2). The seventh and eighth, hail and locusts, destroyed the Egyptian grain. Now there was no food. Still to come was the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, in retribution for Pharaoh's murder of Israelite children. It would be this that eventually broke Pharaoh's resolve.

So we would expect the ninth plague to be very serious indeed, something that threatened, even if it did not immediately take, human life. Instead we read what seems like an anticlimax:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over

¹ The following article was taken from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' weekly parasha studies *Covenant and Conversation* for Parashat Bo (5770), available online at www.chiefrabbi.org.

Egypt-darkness that can be felt.” So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived. (10:21-22)

Darkness is a nuisance, but no more. The phrase “darkness that can be felt” suggests what happened: a khamsin, a sandstorm of a kind not unfamiliar in Egypt, which can last for several days, producing sand and dust-filled air that obliterates the light of the sun. A khamsin is usually produced by a southern wind that blows into Egypt from the Sahara desert. The worst sandstorm is usually the first of the season, in March. This fits the dating of the plague, which happened shortly before the death of the firstborn, on Pesach.

The ninth plague was a miracle, but not an event wholly unknown to the Egyptians, then or now. Why then does it figure in the narrative, immediately prior to its climax?

The answer lies in a line from Dayyenu, the song we sing as part of the Haggadah: “If G-d had executed judgment against them [the Egyptians] but had not done so against their gods, it would have been sufficient.” Twice the Torah itself refers to this dimension of the plagues:

I will pass through Egypt on that night, and I will kill every firstborn in Egypt, man and animal. I will perform acts of judgment against all the gods of Egypt: I (alone) am G-d. (Exodus 12:12)

The Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, struck down by the Lord; and against their gods, the Lord had executed judgment. (Numbers 33: 4)

Not all the plagues were directed, in the first instance, against the Egyptians. Some were directed against things

they worshipped as gods. That is the case in the first two plagues. The Nile was personified in ancient Egypt as the god Hapi. Offerings were made to it at times of inundation. The inundations themselves were attributed to one of the major Egyptian deities, Osiris. The plague of frogs would have been associated by the Egyptians with Heket, the goddess who was believed to attend births as a midwife, and who was depicted as a woman with the head of a frog.

These symbolisms, often lost on us, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians. Two things now become clear. The first is why the Egyptian magicians declared, “This is the finger of G-d” (Exodus 8:15) only after the third plague, lice. The first two plagues would not have surprised them at all. They would have understood them as the work of Egyptian deities who, they believed, were sometimes angry with the people and took their revenge.

The second is the quite different symbolism the first two plagues were meant to have for the Israelites, and for us. As with the tenth plague, these were no mere miracles intended – as it were – to demonstrate the power of the G-d of Israel, as if religion were a gladiatorial arena in which the strongest god wins.

Their meaning was moral. They represented the most fundamental of all ethical principles, stated in the Noahide covenant in the words “He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.” This is the rule of retributive justice, measure for measure: As you do, so shall you be done to.

By first ordering the midwives to kill all male Israelite babies, and then, when that failed, by commanding “Every boy who is born must be cast into the Nile” (Exodus 1:22), Pharaoh had turned what should have been symbols of life (the Nile, which fed Egyptian agriculture, and midwives) into agents of death. The river that turned to blood, and the

Heket-like frogs that infested the land, were not afflictions as such, but rather coded communications, as if to say to the Egyptians: see what it feels like when the gods you turned against the Israelites turn on you.

Hence the tenth plague, to which all the others was a mere prelude. Unlike all the other plagues, its significance was disclosed to Moses even before he set out on his mission, while he was still living with Jethro in Midian:

You shall say to Pharaoh: This is what the Lord says. “Israel is My son, My firstborn. I have told you to let My son go, that he may worship Me. If you refuse to let him go, I will kill your own firstborn son.” (Exodus 4:22-23)

Whereas the first two plagues were symbolic representations of the Egyptian murder of Israelite children, the tenth plague was the enactment of retributive justice, as if heaven was saying to the Egyptians: You committed, or supported, or passively accepted the murder of innocent children. There is only one way you will ever realize the wrong you did, namely, if the same thing happens to you.

This too helps explain the difference between the two words the Torah regularly uses to describe what G-d did in Egypt: *otot u-mofetim*, “signs and wonders.” These two words are not two ways of describing the same thing – miracles. They describe quite different things. A *mofet*, a wonder, is indeed a miracle. An *ot*, a sign, is something else: a symbol (like tefillin or circumcision, both of which are called *ot*), that is to say, a coded communication, a message.

The significance of the ninth plague is now obvious. The greatest god in the Egyptian pantheon was Ra or Re, the sun god. The name of the Pharaoh often associated with the exodus, Ramses II, means meses, “son of” (as in the name Moses) Ra, the god of the sun. Egypt – so its people

believed – was ruled by the sun. Its human ruler or Pharaoh was semi-divine, the child of the sun-god.

In the beginning of time, according to Egyptian myth, the sun-god ruled together with Nun, the primeval waters. Eventually there were many deities. Ra then created human beings from his tears. Seeing, however, that they were deceitful, he sent the goddess Hathor to destroy them; only a few survived.

The plague of darkness was not a *mofet* but an *ot*, a sign. The obliteration of the sun signalled that there is a power greater than Ra. Yet what the plague represented was less the power of G-d over the sun, but the rejection by G-d of a civilization that turned one man, Pharaoh, into an absolute ruler with the ability to enslave other human beings – and of a culture that could tolerate the murder of children because that is what Ra himself did.

When G-d told Moses to say to Pharaoh, “My son, my firstborn, Israel,” He was saying: I am the G-d who cares for His children, not one who kills His children. The ninth plague was a Divine act of communication that said: there is not only physical darkness but also moral darkness. The best test of a civilization is: see how it treats children, its own and others’. In an age of suicide bombing and the use of children as instruments of war, it still is.

Actions Shape Character¹

Nehama Leibowitz

This sidra², the fifteenth in the order of our Sabbath readings from the Pentateuch, is the first to contain a comprehensive list of religious ordinances, of positive or negative injunctions. The previous subject matter in the Torah has been mainly a narrative character, the moral lessons and occasional precept being woven into the fabric of the story. Indeed, Rashi's first words in his commentary on the Torah are in the form of a question as to why Scripture did not begin with the first precept given to the Children of Israel, a precept which occurs in this sidra (Exodus 12:1). There are no less than twenty precepts in our sidra according to the Rambam's enumeration. The first command is that of sanctifying the New Moon, followed by a detailed list of Passover ordinances which surround that historic festival of redemption with seemingly irksome domestic duties and laborious legal minutiae. What was the Torah's purpose in framing so many precepts? Why is the Jewish way of life distinguished for these numerous commands, negative and positive, that govern its every facet?

The unknown author of *Sefer Ha-hinukh*, a work of listing the six hundred and thirteen Divine precepts in their order of occurrence in the Pentateuch, attempts to supply a reason for each of the commandments. This thirteenth century Jewish philosopher develops his main thesis in explanation of one of the ceremonial details governing the

¹ The following article was reprinted, with permission, from Nehama Leibowitz's *New Studies in Shemot*, translated and adapted from the Hebrew by Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Eliner Library), pp. 178-182.

² I.e., this *parashah*.

partaking of the Paschal Lamb (precept 16), “neither shall you break a bone thereof” (Exodus 12, 46), thus:

Our first appearance in world history in the role of God’s chosen people as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation took place at this season. It is accordingly fitting that we should commemorate this event by performing such acts as would re-enact within us that spiritual achievement, thus perpetuating its impact on us for all time.

Do not think my son to find a flaw in my argument and ask, why did God have to command us to do all this in order to commemorate this miracle. Surely one commemorative act would have been sufficient to ensure that the event would be recalled by us and not be forgotten?...Know that man is influenced by his actions and his intellectual and emotional life is conditioned by things he does, good or bad. Even if he is thoroughly wicked and his mind is dominated by evil thoughts the whole day long, if he bestir himself and endeavour to be constantly occupied with the Torah and its precepts, though not with godly intent, he will inevitably veer towards the good. From the wrong motive he will be led to the right one and by the force of his actions he will kill the evil inclination since it is *actions* that shape character. Conversely, even if a man is completely upright in character and positively conditioned to the Torah and its precepts, if he is constantly engaged in crooked pursuits they will ultimately lead him astray and turn him into a criminal. For it is abundantly clear that every man is influenced by his actions as we have already noted. For this reason our sages stated: “The Holy One blessed be He desired to give Israel the opportunity of gaining merit; He therefore gave them many precepts,” since through good actions we are moved to be good and merit the Hereafter. To this alludes their statement: “Whoever has a *mezuzah* on his

doorpost and *zizit* on his garment and *tefillin* on his forehead may be assured that he shall not sin.” Since the foregoing constitutes precepts of continuous application, their influence is likewise continuous.

Consider well therefore your occupations and pursuits; for you will be influenced by them and not vice versa. Do not be lulled into a false sense of security as if to say: “Seeing that my heart is perfect and unimpaired in its belief in God what harm is there if I occasionally indulge in worldly pleasures, in idling in the streets and marketplaces, engaging in vain and boastful talk with the scorners...Why should it influence me?” Nay my son, beware of them lest you be caught in their net. Many have thus drunk a lethal dose. Will you then be saved? Now that you know this do not be puzzled by the large number of precepts connected with the commemoration of miracles of Egypt. It is a fundamental principle of our Torah that the more we become preoccupied with them, the more we are influenced in the way we have described.

In other words, religious training should not proceed from mind to deed, from reason to action. The educator need not appeal to the understanding of his charge through oral persuasion in the hope that convincing will ultimately lead to the appropriate actions. Rather as Rambam observes in his introduction to *Avot*:

A man should cultivate good deeds in order to improve his character and eschew evil deeds for undesirable traits to disappear. Know that good and bad qualities can only be cultivated by repetitive acts. If those actions are good we acquire a praiseworthy trait, if bad an undesirable one.

Should we doubt the efficacy of this mode of education, let us but for a moment recall those concentration camp officials who had to carry out the orders of their masters

and remember how ordinary folk who were neither angels nor devils became brutalized as a result of the brutal preoccupations to which they had been appointed. Though they might have at the beginning experienced revulsion, habit and custom soon got the better of them and the words of the author of *Sefer Ha-hinukh* were borne out, that actions shape character. But the converse is also true. If we recognize that the preoccupation with evil pursuits can brutalize human character why should we not believe that good deeds and performance of Divine precepts can exert a benevolent influence over man? One objection may be raised to this mode of character training emphasizing the importance of habit and performance: the demoralizing effect of perfunctory religious practice where the spirit is sacrificed to the letter. This is alluded to by the prophet Isaiah in his denunciation of his contemporaries:

וַתְּהִי יְרֵאתָם אֵתִי, מִצֹּת אֲנָשִׁים מְלַמְּדָה :

Their fear of Me is but a precept of men, learnt by rote. (Isa. 29:13)

Isaiah's complaint would seem to apply though to a generation saturated in Jewish tradition and practice. There the danger existed of religious ceremonies degenerating into mere lip service as indeed the prophet indicates had happened. But where the bond of tradition and the legacy of generations were in danger of disappearance, a return to Jewish practice and precept constituted the elementary first step in remedying the situation. Unlike Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah finds in his generation that even elementary Jewish practice is lacking:

זֶה הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לֹא-שָׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹל יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֵיָו, וְלֹא לָקְחוּ מוֹסֵר ; אֲבָדָה הָאֲמוּנָה, וְנִכְרְתָה מִפִּיהֶם :

This is the nation that has not listened to the voice of the Lord its God, nor accepted

correction; faith is perished and is cut from their mouth. (Jeremiah 7:28)

Malbim interprets each phrase in the above citation to refer to a specific flaw in Israel's conduct. The first line, "that has not listened to the voice of the Lord," refers to their lack of religious conviction; the second line, "nor accepted correction," to the punishment they had suffered but the lesson of which they had not taken to heart; "faith is perished" – from their heart; "and is cut off from their mouth" – that they have not even the practice of ancestral custom to their credit. Such a generation requires training in practical Jewish precept, in observance of at least of the letter even before the spirit, in accordance with the findings of the *Sefer Ha-hinukh* that actions shape character and performance out of wrong motives eventually lead to the right ones. This order is ancient indeed and was followed by our ancestors on Mount Sinai when they said: "We shall do and hearken," putting performance first and conviction afterwards.

Accordingly it would have been quite inadequate for the Torah to have perpetuated the message of the Exodus from Egypt by calling on us merely to recount the story. The profound implications of this event through which the Almighty acquired us as His people (warranting its being referred to in the opening words of the Ten Commandments) were engraved on the historic memory of the Jewish people through countless symbols and precepts applying to every facet of our existence. They involve positive *performance* for every age-group, every station of life, at all times and places, at home and abroad. Their spiritual impact was meant to be irresistible since *actions shape character*.

Moshe's Deceit in His Negotiations with Pharaoh¹

Rabbi Elchanan Samet

Three Instances of Deception

The specter of apologetics has haunted biblical exegesis since its inception. The temptation to make the Torah conform to the values of one's surrounding society has on many occasions led exegetes to distort the meaning of the text. The opening parshiot of Sefer Shemot (from Shemot until Beshalach) present classic instances of this phenomenon, for they contain three instances of Israel deceiving the Egyptians. Moreover, each case of deception is mandated by God!

The first instance is to be found in Moshe and Aharon's repeated request of Pharaoh: "Let us go on a journey of three days in the desert that we may offer sacrifice to the Lord our God" (5:3).

This deceptive request follows God's command to Moshe at the burning bush:

And you and the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him: "The Lord God of the Hebrews appeared to us; now let us go on a journey of three days in the desert that we may offer sacrifices to the Lord our God." (3:18)

The second deception is the Jews' "borrowing" of the Egyptians' vessels as they leave Egypt (12:35-36). Moshe had previously been commanded in this regard (11:2); at

¹ This article was translated by Kaeren Fish and is available online at www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/15bo.htm.

the burning bush, too, God had told Moshe that this would happen (3:21-22).

The third deception occurs after the nation departs from Egypt. God commands Moshe:

Speak to Bnei Yisrael and let them return and encamp before *Pi Ha-chirot*...And Pharaoh will say of Bnei Yisrael, “They are lost in the land; the desert has closed upon them.” And I will harden the heart of Pharaoh, that he will pursue them. (14:2-4)

In other words, they are intentionally tricking Pharaoh into chasing them. Immediately thereafter (end of verse 4) we read, “And they did thus.”

Although the borrowing of the vessels has especially occupied apologetic commentary, I would like to focus here on the first deception.

Was Any Real Deception Used Here?

Both R. Yitzchak Arama (Akedat Yitzchak, sha’ar 35) and the Abarbanel (ch. 3, question 16) pose the question of why God commanded Moshe to speak deceitfully to Pharaoh. Instead of asking Pharaoh to permit the Jews to celebrate a brief festival in the desert, why did Moshe not simply demand their freedom from an unjust state of slavery?

Nechama Leibowitz z”l² examines and rejects a number of answers to this question before settling on the answer offered by both the Akedat Yitzchak and the Abarbanel. They claim that this was no deception but rather a genuine request, meant to serve as a test for Pharaoh. If he would refuse even this minor request, his hard-heartedness and stubbornness would be revealed to all. If, however, he would have acceded to this request, the Jews would indeed

² *New Insights into Sefer Shemot*, Hebrew, pp. 73-75.

have returned to Egypt after several days, and Moshe would then continue to negotiate slowly for their freedom.

Nechama Leibowitz also quotes the author of *Ha-ketav Veba-kabbala*, who follows the approach of the commentators quoted above, and adds an interesting point. Since Pharaoh had failed the test, there was no further point in presenting him again with the request for a short journey.

God commanded that at first Moshe should request something small, such as to go on a three-day journey, in order to discern Pharaoh's stubbornness. Once he refused even this small request, Moshe asked several times for complete and eternal freedom.

Where does Moshe request "complete and eternal freedom?" *Ha-ketav Veba-kabbala* (4:23) ingeniously attempts to prove that the words, "Send My people and they will serve Me" can be interpreted as, "Free them permanently so that they may be servants unto Me." He distinguishes between the *kal* and the *pi'el* forms of the verb *Sh-L-Ch*, indicating that the latter means to send out permanently.

Unfortunately, however, this explanation does not stand up to a careful examination of the text. The distinction between the *kal* and *pi'el* forms of this verb has nothing to do with whether the sending is done with the intention of return or if it refers to complete and permanent freedom. The distinction between them lies in the strength of the action of the one who is sent: in the *pi'el* form it refers to a strong movement of sending (either as a result of banishing him or as a result of removing a barrier which had previously prevented him from breaking loose). Following such a "freeing," nothing prevents the one who was freed from returning to the one who freed him. (See, for example, Bereishit 28:6, Shemot 22:4, Shemuel I 2:20.) In fact, the opposite is true: a person can "send" in the *kal* form

without the one who is sent returning to him (e.g. Bereishit 45:5, Shemot 9:14).

A Deception from Beginning to End

The above explanations demonstrate the danger of getting carried away with apologetics. The story is presented to us over a course of four parshiot (Shemot–Beshalach), and nowhere throughout this narrative do we read even once of any request for “outright freedom.” From Moshe’s first appearance before Pharaoh (chapter 5) until after the slaying of the firstborn (chapter 12), the request under discussion remains only a journey to the desert to serve God, and thereafter a return.³

Let us examine, for example, the dialogue between Moshe and Pharaoh preceding the plague of *kinnim* (gnats). Moshe is commanded to tell Pharaoh (8:16): “Send out My nation that they may serve Me.” And Pharaoh, temporarily capitulating, agrees (8:21): “Go and *offer sacrifices to your God* in the land.” By the word “*ba-aretz*” (in the land), he means “in the land of Egypt” and not “in the desert,” as they had first requested (even though they do not mention the desert here). But Moshe insists specifically on going to the desert, saying (8:23): “*A journey of three days* we shall go in the desert, and we shall offer sacrifices to the Lord our God as He told us.” Pharaoh concedes to this too (8:24): “I shall send you and you will sacrifice to the Lord your God in the desert, *only do not go too far*,” and Moshe agrees to this, adding (8:25): “Only let Pharaoh no more deal falsely in not sending out the nation to sacrifice to God.”

Could there be any clearer proof of the continued deception of Pharaoh than this debate?

³ See e.g. 5:1, 5:3, 7:16, 7:26, 8:4, 10:8-11, 10:24-26, 12:31-32.

When Pharaoh finally capitulates, following the final plague, he agrees to let them take their children and flocks “as you have spoken” (12:32). At no point did it enter the thoughts of Bnei Yisrael to return to Egyptian slavery at the end of the agreed time, and Moshe never imagined that his negotiations with Pharaoh would continue. What in fact happened was:

And it was told to the king of Egypt that *the nation had escaped*, and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants turned towards the nation, and they said: What is this that we have done? For we have sent Israel out of our service! (14:5)

To Pharaoh it finally became clear, with complete certainty, that the entire negotiation process had been based on deception. The continuation of the “negotiations” between him and Moshe and Bnei Yisrael took place, as we know, at the Sea of Reeds.

The Connection Between the Three Incidents of Deceit

Now that we have freed ourselves of the apologetic explanations that deny the facts of the story, let us return to the question of the deceit (whose scope has become clear to us), and let us try to understand not its justification but rather its simple motive. What function did it serve in the negotiations?

The Ibn Ezra answers this question (Perush Hakatzar 11:4; see also Perush Ha’arokh 10:10):

Know that this was a great thing, and Bnei Yisrael were completely righteous in that they did not reveal the secret (that they would not return). Pharaoh believed Moshe’s words, “a journey of three days,” to mean that they would go and then return to Egypt. Heaven forbid that [we say that] the prophet spoke a lie, for he never explicitly said, “We shall return.”

God's wisdom is beyond our understanding. It would appear to me, though, that this [deception] was performed for two reasons: firstly, in order that they would give them vessels of gold and silver – for had they known that they would not return, they would not have given them. And secondly, in order that Pharaoh and his army would drown. For had they left with his permission, and had he not believed that they would return, he would not have pursued after them. And the proof [of this explanation] is (14:5) “And it was told to the king of Egypt that the nation had escaped.”

The Ibn Ezra's explanation is impressively developed by the Ran (Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven) in his Derashot (end of #11). The Abarbanel, though, rejects his words: “His explanation is insufficient, for it would not have been difficult for God to harden Pharaoh's heart in order that he pursue them, without any need for deception.”

However, an examination of what the Ran says shows that he answers this claim:

The way God acts is to bring ‘counsel from afar’ to make His enemies fall into our hands and to avenge Himself of them...He wished to punish all the Egyptians by the means they had used to commit evil against Israel (i.e. since they drowned the Israelite boys in the water, they too were drowned in the water)...and He wished to bring about a situation where they themselves, of their own choice, would enter the water and die there. Had Moshe informed Pharaoh from the beginning that their time had come to be redeemed, he would certainly have agreed [to their demand] because of the plagues, and would not have pursued them thereafter, for why would he

pursue them after having willingly let them go when they were still under his rule?

Therefore God did not want Moshe to tell Pharaoh exactly what was happening, but rather to say that they were going to offer sacrifices on a three-day journey, such that when they would tell Pharaoh thereafter “that the nation had escaped,” he would think...that everything Moshe had done had not come from God but rather had been done deceitfully and fraudulently. For had it not been thus, why would Moshe have fooled him by saying that they were going only to offer sacrifices? For this very reason He commanded, “Let each man ask his neighbor [for vessels of silver and gold]”; even though the money rightfully belonged to the Jews and they could have taken it openly, God nevertheless told them to dissemble...so that when it was told to the king of Egypt and his nation that Bnei Yisrael were escaping, there is no doubt that they regarded them as bandits and swindlers...and this, without doubt, brought them to pursue them...The intention behind all of this was hidden from Israel, and perhaps even from Moshe.

According to the Ibn Ezra and the Ran, there is a direct link connecting the three acts of deception, and all were directed toward attaining revenge on Pharaoh and all his army. The negotiations conducted between Moshe and Pharaoh were not of the type that follow regular diplomatic rules. Rather, the negotiations were merely one aspect of the war between them, and in a war deception is permissible, since its purpose is to bring about the enemy’s downfall. I found a wonderfully simple expression of this view in a commentary whose author I do not know; it is quoted in the Chumash Rav Peninim (Levin-Epstein, Jerusalem 5726) on 3:18:

“And now let us go on a journey of three days...” Abarbanel found a difficulty...and the author of D.R. (?) wrote that he read in a certain book that this presents no difficulty at all: *for in a war it is permissible to engage in every type of deceit and wiliness against the enemy*, even to lie to him explicitly with words. We found this in the case of Yehoshua in his war against Ai, where God commanded him (Yehoshua 8:3), “Make you an ambush for the city behind it” – in order to mislead the enemy. There is not the slightest prohibition involved, for this falls under the category of “If someone comes to kill you, get up and kill him first.” Anything is justified in order to kill him. Here, likewise, there was great benefit to be gained from misleading Pharaoh such that he would believe that they only wanted to go on a journey of three days, in order that consequently he would pursue them to the sea and be drowned in it, just as they drowned Bnei Yisrael in the water. Therefore it was completely permissible to deceive him...

This also answers the question of what He said at the burning bush, “Each woman will ask of her neighbor [vessels of silver and gold]” – why is this written here, for this happened at the end of the plagues? The purpose was to explain to Israel that for this reason they should speak falsely, that they should ask only to go for three days, for thereby they would be able to ask the Egyptians for vessels of silver and gold, because they told them that they were going only for three days. The lending of the vessels was also the cause of their drowning in the sea, for they desired the silver and gold that Israel had taken from them, and therefore they pursued them into the sea and drowned. *All of this was permissible for Israel to*

do to these wicked people who had embittered their lives with forced hard labor for no reason, and had drowned their children in the river.

To bring this home to the contemporary reader, substitute the word “Nazis” for “Egyptians” and you will see why any means were legitimate in order to wreak God’s vengeance upon the cruel oppressor.

False Pretenses as a Basis for the Negotiations

Let us return to examine the deceit in the negotiations in isolation from the other two incidents of deceit. Can it be explained in terms of the requirements of the negotiations themselves? Was there any need for it or benefit to be gained from it in the negotiations? I propose the following positive answer: Pharaoh’s honor and his own self-interest required this deceit.

Despite the fact that Pharaoh was Israel’s enemy, and “all is fair in war” (as we may conclude from the commentary quoted above), we may also say the opposite: the stage that preceded the war (the battle itself having taken place only at the Sea of Reeds) was the stage of diplomatic relations, and in diplomacy one must act diplomatically. This is how Rashi interprets the verse (6:13), “And He gave them a charge for Bnei Yisrael and for Pharaoh in Egypt.” According to the Midrash (Tanchuma Shemot 2), “‘Gave them a charge for Pharaoh’ means that they were charged to give him honor through words.” For this very reason Moshe was commanded not to tell him the truth.

God does not demand of His creatures things that are clear in advance as being beyond their abilities. The abyss separating the true purpose of Moshe’s mission from what could have been told to Pharaoh is clearly illustrated in what God says at the burning bush, where these two are juxtaposed (3:16-18):

Go and collect the elders of Israel and tell them...I have remembered you...I shall lift you up from the suffering of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite...And you shall come...to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him...Let us go on a journey of three days in the desert that we may offer sacrifices to the Lord our God.

Could Pharaoh have been made party to the true purpose of the Jews' journey from Egypt? He could not have agreed to free them under any circumstances, for two reasons:

1. The demand to free Israel from their slavery in Egypt implied a questioning of the legality of this slavery. Perhaps this question would not have been perceived by Pharaoh and his nation as a legitimate and justified one, in light of the accepted norms of their society (compare *Melakhim I* 9:20-22).

2. Historians who have studied this period conclude that the land of Canaan was at that time under Egyptian rule. (A clear hint at the Egyptian control of Canaan is to be found in the Torah itself, in the story of Yosef where three successive verses [Bereishit 47:13-15] mention Egypt and Canaan together as a single political-economic unit.) A demand to free Israel from Egypt could obviously not hide their desired destination—Canaan. Pharaoh could not agree to free a nationalistic element whose proclaimed aim was to dilute Egyptian rule in its long-held colony. The Egyptian nation would also have refused to accept this.

In order to facilitate the very existence of the negotiations with Pharaoh, and in order to provide Pharaoh with an honorable way in which to allow the requests made of him, such that his ministers and his nation would not

resent him, it was essential that the smallest possible demand be presented: to go on a three-day journey to offer sacrifices in the desert.

But this does not mean that Pharaoh did not suspect Bnei Yisrael's true intention: starting at least at the time of the plague of gnats his suspicion is aroused, and he demonstrates readiness to accede to their request only in such a way as would ensure Israel's return (by leaving their children or livestock in Egypt or by sacrificing in Egypt itself). Prior to the plague of locusts, he gives clear expression to his suspicion: "See that evil will confront you" (Shemot 10:10; see Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Ramban). Nevertheless he wordlessly "asks" them to continue in their deception. It was only on the basis of this continued bilateral pretense that the negotiations could proceed and ultimately achieve a willing capitulation (albeit as a result of circumstances which forced it) by Pharaoh and the Egyptian nation.

Parashat Bo: *Torah Shebichtav* vs. *Torah Shebe'al Peh*

Rabbi Alex Israel

Throughout the book of Bereshit (Genesis), and the first section of Shemot (Exodus), we have become accustomed to the Torah as a master storyteller. However, this narrative style is only one of the literary genres employed by the Torah. Now, as we reach Chapter 12 in Sefer Shemot, we encounter that other main typology of Torah literature, the legal sections, with their painstaking attention to detail. Much of the remainder of Shemot is composed in this style: The laws of Pesach, the Ten Commandments, the Mishpatim and the Laws of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The precise legal formulations with their emphasis on instruction and prohibition, measurements and materials, categorization and classification, may lead at times to a rather technical and dry reading experience. And yet, we remain aware that these sections create entire worlds of Jewish ritual, holy space and time, social justice and ethical living.

As we begin the legal passages in the Torah, we are going to dedicate this *shiur* to thinking about the way in which the Torah teaches us Halakha. We shall raise a fascinating dispute between the Ibn Ezra and the Rashbam regarding the manner in which the written text links to the Halakhic normative tradition, the connectedness between *Torah Shebichtav* and *Torah Shebe'al Peh*.

A Sign on Your Hand...That You May Know

The passages at the end of parashat Bo are filled with symbolic mitzvot that are designed to preserve and evoke

the memory of the Exodus. Time after time,¹ parents are instructed to engage with their children, retelling and transmitting the legacy of the miraculous events in Egypt. One of those particular devices that further the collective and individual memory is depicted here in these pesukim (Shemot 13:7-9):

(ז) מצות יאכל את שבעת הימים ולא יראה לך חמץ ולא יראה לך שאר בכל גבלך: (ח) והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה יקוק לי בצאתי ממצרים: (ט) והיה לך לאות על ירך ולזכרון בין עיניך למען תהיה תורת יקוק בפיהך כי ביד חזקה הוצאת יקוק ממצרים:

Matzot shall be eaten for seven days...You shall explain to your son on that day, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.” *And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead* – in order that the teaching of God may be in your mouth – that with a mighty hand the Lord freed you from Egypt.

In a reading that would seem quite expected, Rashi interprets the phrase of “as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead” as referring to the mitzva of Tefillin: “Write down these passages and tie them to your head and to your arm.” And indeed, this parashia (Biblical passage) is one of the four texts that are inserted into the boxes of our Tefillin. The Torah mentions this idea of “a sign on your hand and *totafot*² in between your eyes” in three other places³. In the Tefillin that we wear, all four texts are written on parchment and inserted into the leather boxes that are bound to the arm and the head.

¹ See Exodus 12:26, 13:9, 13:14.

² Difficult to translate. The philological difficulty is evident in the comments of the commentaries to 13:16.

³ Shemot 13:10-16, Devarim 6 (the Shema) and Devarim 11 (2nd paragraph of the Shema).

The Rashbam's Reading

But the Rashbam reads this command according to the words themselves. The practical instruction delivered by the passuk is read by the Rashbam as symbolic, rather than the mitzva of wearing Tefillin:

A sign upon your hand: According to the deep peshat, it should be for a constant state of consciousness as if it were written on your very hand, just like the phrase (Shir Hashirim 8:6) “Place me as a seal upon your heart.”

The Rashbam suggests that the *peshat* of the passuk requires no actual putting on of Tefillin. It requires a cognitive gesture of awareness, remembering, knowing. If you look at the words, the text talks of a “sign upon your hand and a reminder on your forehead.” It is referring to a state of mind that is ongoing, continual, constant. The literal meaning of *the words* does not refer to Tefillin. In this reading, the Rashbam differs significantly from Rashi.

The Ibn Ezra, aware of the “textual” approach that leads to a more symbolic understanding of the phrase, and also aware of Rashi’s halakhic approach, follows Rashi, adopting a reading that is reflective of halakhic practice:

There are two possible readings here: The first is in the manner of “tie them over your heart always; bind them on your neck”⁴ (Mishlei 6:21), and “for a sign” means as a symbol...The second reading would be literally: to make Tefillin for the hand and head. Now that the Rabbis have adopted this (second) explanation, the first is obsolete, for there are no proofs for the first interpretation that compare with the supports for the second. (Short Commentary, 13:9)

⁴ See Mishlei 6:21 and note the striking similarity to Shema.

But in a later commentary he argues more vociferously:

Some [commentators] dispute our holy ancestors [i.e. Chazal—the Rabbinic tradition] when they say that “for a sign... a reminder” is to be understood in the manner of, “They are a wreath upon your head, a necklace upon your throat” (Mishlei 1:9). They also say that “you shall tie them to your arm” (Devarim 6:8) is similar to “tie them to your heart always” (Mishlei 3:3)...All this is incorrect! For at the beginning of the book [of Mishlei] it states: “The parables of Solomon.” All that is mentioned there is by nature of metaphor and parable. But in the Torah it is not written as parable – God forbid! It is to be understood literally. And hence we shall not draw the passuk out of its *peshat* meaning, in that its understanding does not contradict logical thinking....And the way of tradition is strong and needs no strengthening. (Long Commentary, 13:9)

Ibn Ezra and His Complex Approach to Chazal⁵

Ibn Ezra rejects the Rashbam’s “symbolic” reading of the text despite his literal translation. This is interesting, as usually the Ibn Ezra shares the Rashbam’s adherence to literal readings, to *peshat*. It would appear that we have to understand more about the Ibn Ezra’s methodology to fully appreciate what is happening here.

Let us explain. In the narrative sections of Torah, the Ibn Ezra is a fierce advocate of *peshat*, the reading of the text based upon logic, grammar, context, and other linguistic rules. “The human mind is the angel that mediates between man and God,” he writes.⁶ And hence he

⁵ For an excellent article about the Ibn Ezra’s methodology, see Amos Chacham in the journal *Machanayim* from 1993.

⁶ In his introduction to the Torah.

uses rules of language to interpret the Biblical text. In general he is wary of added, imposed readings attached to the story, even when they find their origin in Midrashic, Rabbinic sources. He prefers to read the text “as is.”⁷ One could say that the Ibn Ezra is a fanatic for the raw text, untouched even by the Rabbinic tradition.

But when it comes to reading Halakhic texts, the Ibn Ezra swings in the opposite direction:

If we find two readings to the text and one accords with the opinion of the Rabbis – who were all righteous – we shall rely upon their truth with no doubts.⁸

In other words, whenever it comes to legal matters, even if the *peshat* meaning is stretched somewhat, the Ibn Ezra prefers a reading that accords with normative Jewish Law, and the Halakhic readings of Chazal. In this situation he abandons his pursuit of strict textual rigour and allows a certain fluidity.

A great example to illustrate this⁹ is the verse in Parashat Mishpatim (21:23-5) that issues a directive

⁷ In the case of famous Midrashim that do *not* clash head on with the text, he frequently concedes them as one possible reading, but only if they are an authoritative tradition. For a few examples, see his commentary to Shemot (long) 15:22, Bereshit 22:4, 11:28.

⁸ From his introduction to his Torah commentary. Here is the poetic Hebrew:

ובעבור הדרש דרך הפשט איננה סרה, כי שבעים פנים לתורה, רק בתורות ובמשפטים ובחקים, אם מצאנו שני טעמים לפסוקים, והטעם האחד כדברי המעתיקים, שהיו כולם צדיקים, נשען על אמתם בלי ספק בידי חזקים. וחלילה חלילה מלהתערב עם הצדוקים, האומרים כי העתקתם מכחשת הכתוב, והדקדוקים. רק קדמונינו הי' אמת, וכל דבריהם אמת וה' אלקים אמת ינחה את עבדו בדרך אמת:

⁹ For other examples, see commentary to: Shemot 23:19; Vayikra 1:4; Devarim 25:2. There are many other examples, including the famous Iggeret HaShabbat where he directly confronts the Rashbam's interpretation to Bereshit 1:5.

regarding personal injury: “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” The Rabbis interpreted this verse, according to the *Torah Shebe’al Peh* that the verse required monetary payment exclusively. No physical retribution was to be exacted. And the Ibn Ezra with his tendencies to textual precision is hard pushed reading “an eye for an eye” other than the way it translates – literally! At the end, he says:

The rule is – that we cannot interpret the legal passages of the Torah adequately unless we rely upon the tradition of the Rabbis. *As we received the Torah from our ancestors, we also received the Oral Law*, there is no difference between them. In which case we shall say in explaining “an eye for an eye” that it would be befitting for him to pay an eye for an eye were it not for the monetary compensation.

Now, when we begin to explain Ibn Ezra’s view, we must probe this dichotomy between his approach to narrative and Halakhic Torah passages. Why does he adopt a totally different approach to the two genres of the Torah? I would like to suggest a few possible theories.

Explaining Ibn Ezra

The first relates to the Karaites¹⁰ who were a prominent school of thought in Ibn Ezra’s period and a threat to traditional Judaism and its observance. The Ibn Ezra felt a responsibility to keep their readings at a distance, to delegitimize their understandings of Tanach and he did this by being careful to interpret no verse in a direction that could possibly support Karaite leanings.

¹⁰ See Note 8 – the underlined section. There he refers to the Tziddukim.

A second possibility simply goes to the heart of Jewish Halakhic observance.¹¹ Quite obviously, if the Torah text contradicts or challenges a traditional reading in a *narrative* section, if it is a mere matter of interpretation; no harm is done. However if it engenders incorrect Halakhic observance, that is more severe. It might lead to a weakening of religious norms. And hence the Ibn Ezra was wary and ensured that his commentary did not undermine Halakhic observance in any form.

Of course a third possible approach is theological. If God's revelation is one integrated whole, and that revelation envelops both the written and oral Torah, then no contradictions are possible between the written and oral tradition.¹² Hence, even if the *written text* suggests a particular direction that is divergent with oral law as reflective of the oral law, an interpretive approach that unifies the written tradition with Halakha is preferred, thereby unifying the two "branches" of revelation.

Back to the Rashbam

But let us return to the Rashbam and his metaphorical interpretation. Just to clarify, despite his reading of the text,

¹¹ See the commentary of the Bechor Shor to Devarim 6:9 that this allegorical understanding of Tefillin had given an excuse to many who simply ignored the daily mitzvah of Tefillin. See further the article by Professor Ephraim Kanarfogel entitled "Rabbinic Attitudes to non-Observance in the Medieval Period" pgs. 9-11 where he talks about how in the medieval period in Spain there were widespread lapses in the observance of Mezuzah and Tefillin. The article is in the volume of the Orthodox Forum, *Jewish Tradition and the Non-traditional Jew* (Aaronson 1992) edited by Jacob J. Schachter. In the Ibn Ezra's famous Iggeret HaShabbat, he opposes the Rashbam's reading to Bereshit 1:5 out of concern for the proper *observance* of shabbat.

¹² See the quote above from his commentary to Shemot 21:23: "As we received the Torah from our ancestors, we also received the Oral Law, there is no difference between them."

of course the Rashbam did wear Tefillin. He was not suggesting that one belittle the mitzva of Tefillin. What then is the basis of his explanation?

In our example of the passuk that refers to Tefillin, due to the particular wording of the text, the Rashbam decided that this verse in particular was expressing a metaphor about the inner purpose of Tefillin. Tefillin is worn on the outside, but its intent is to effect the inside. It is to be a reminder, a constant presence. The “sign on the hand” indicates that the message should be before the person at all times, present during their every activity. And the “reminder between the eyes” refers to a constant state of awareness. But was the Rashbam not bothered by the dissonance between the biblical text and the Halakhic tradition? Why would the Torah write something which does not accord with religious practice?

We might suggest that for the Rashbam, there are times when the halakhic-oral tradition contains one understanding, whereas the written-textual tradition presents a complementary but alternative aspect. In this instance, the Halakha talks of Tefillin to be bound upon hand and head, but the deeper philosophical dimension refers to a certain consciousness, awareness, a state of mind, a Kavanna, a powerful impact that the Tefillin will give. The two readings are complimentary, and yet in translating the biblical text, they offer contradictory readings. In the final analysis, the *Torah Shebichtav* has an independent message that is closer to the inner philosophy of the mitzvah, whereas the *Torah Shebe'al Peh* is concerned more with the mitzva's pragmatic fulfilment.¹³

¹³ Other pesukim in the Shema might allow a similar dichotomy. The phrase, “When you lie down and when you rise up” seemingly – in *peshat* – refers to the fact that the Shema should be the first things on your lips in the day and the last thing at night, as if to say that Torah should be our constant and perpetual topic of conversation. But the

In other words, the disparity between the *peshat* of a passuk and its Halakhic application is quite deliberate. Neither may be abandoned for they both reflect a dimension of truth.

Clearly, the Rashbam was capable of making a dividing line to separate the textual reading and his Halakhic practice! Sometimes *Torah Shebichtav* **should** be read differently than the understandings of *Torah Shebe'al Peh*.

And so, according to the Rashbam, the dissonance between *peshat* and Halakha is not a problem. It is necessary in order to describe the mitzva its truest form.

In Conclusion

In our *shiur* this week, we have presented a dispute between two of the great Biblical commentators: the Rashbam and Ibn Ezra. Both commentators are proponents of the “*peshat*” school. This raises a critical question in the understanding of the Torah text. Do we interpret solely on the basis of the text, or do we allow the *Torah Shebe'al Peh*, the Halakhic tradition to influence our reading of the text. Behind the scenes might be a fundamental dispute regarding the nature of revelation through Torah. Does Torah have a single view that is revealed through a uniform *Torah Shebichtav* and *Torah Shebe'al Peh* together, or might there be a duality in revelation, a dialogue between two different truths expressed through the two separate channels of revelation, *Torah Shebe'al Peh* and *Torah Shebichtav*?

The Ibn Ezra will not tolerate any dissonance between the two; *Torah Shebichtav* and *Torah Shebe'al Peh* must share a single reading. The text must accord with traditional practice. But the Rashbam is willing to countenance a dual

Halakha understands this as the obligation to “recite” Shema by morning and evening irrespective of my sleep pattern. Halakhic understanding is at variance with the *peshat* in this instance.

reading. *Torah Shebichtav* offers one dimension of God's vision; *Torah Shebe'al Peh* offers a second dimension. And the combination of both is representative of God's truth.

Insights into Moshe's Development

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

Many of the central figures in the Torah narrative are not described in a static way. Instead, the Torah sketches the course of the character's development. This is done not only because it makes the story more interesting, but because self-development is an essential aspect of spiritual life. By charting the character's development, the Torah displays models of self-improvement – a behavior that is applicable to ourselves even within our own more limited spiritual levels. In the story of Moshe's early experience as a leader, we see a development of another kind.

One aspect of Moshe's development as a leader is seen from his encounters with Pharaoh. The Torah describes in detail only several meetings of Moshe with Pharaoh. By examining the dialogue of the encounters, specifically the first and the last, we see that Moshe has developed into a forceful speaker and a strong leader. His effectiveness as a speaker is demonstrated throughout his later career.

Although Moshe displayed significant reluctance in taking the position, God prepared Moshe for the first encounter with Pharaoh by scripting the request and its tone. The request is:

YHWH, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us – so now, pray let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness and let us slaughter (offerings) to YHWH our God! (3:18; Schocken Bible¹)

¹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (The Schocken Bible, Volume 1)* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995). Henceforth in this article, we will refer to the Schocken Bible as SB.

Besides this courteous request, God tells Moshe to threaten Pharaoh stridently, saying:

When you go to return to Egypt, see: All the portents that I have put in your hand, you are to do before Pharaoh, but I will make his heart strong-willed, so that he will not send the people free.

Then you are to say to Pharaoh: Thus says YHWH: My son, my firstborn, is Israel!

I said to you: Send free my son, that he may serve me, but you have refused to send him free, (so) here: I will kill your son, your firstborn! (4:21-23; SB)

Moshe's first speech to Pharaoh is similar to the content of the first request, but lacks the stridency of the second demand. Although Moshe begins the first encounter with Pharaoh confidently, he quickly crumbled at Pharaoh's rebuff. Moshe retreated from his first more strongly-worded statement into a more reserved one.

Moshe's first statement to Pharaoh announces:

Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel:

Send free my people, that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness! (5:1; SB)

This statement is a direct demand from YHWH, the God of Israel, to the enslaver of His people. This request identifies YHWH as the source of the statement, using the specific name of God and the noble name of Israel. Moshe gives no reason for the request – the mere fact of God commanding it is enough reason to obey.

Moshe's second request is more meekly worded:

The God of the Hebrews had met with us; pray let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, and let us slaughter (offerings) to YHWH our God, lest He confront us with the pestilence or with the sword. (5:3; SB)

This is not a demand of Pharaoh, but a plea to his authority. It is not even clear that God is the author of this petition. Although Moshe does mention “the pestilence and the sword,” these words function less as a threat and more as a reason why Pharaoh’s compliance would be to his benefit (i.e. to prevent the diminishing of his work force that would result from a plague, or to spare the Egyptians the harm that also would affect them if Israel were decimated). Even assuming Rashi’s explanation, that Moshe is showing respect to the king, the words can hardly be called a threat and differ markedly from the brazen ultimatum with which God commanded him to confront Pharaoh. Moshe, reduced to being a meek petitioner to the throne, is now ignored by Pharaoh.

Pharaoh then referred to Moshe and Aharon in the third person—as if they were not there. There is no formal dismissal of Moshe and Aharon. Pharaoh belittled Moshe and Aharon by ignoring them. He turns instead to the business of increasing the Israelites’ oppression.

It is little wonder that Moshe is upset after his first encounter. Moshe’s distress at his failed first attempt is apparent in his strong words to God:

My Lord, for what reason have you dealt so ill with this people? For what reason have you sent me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has dealt only ill with this people, and rescued—you have not rescued your people! (5:22-23; SB)

God’s response to Moshe, “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh,” is necessary not only for the Israelites but for Moshe’s own development as a confident leader.

Although God commanded Moshe to speak to Pharaoh before the first plagues, the Torah does not report those encounters. The next reported encounter between Moshe and Pharaoh comes during the plague of frogs when

Pharaoh asks Moshe to pray that God will remove the plague. Moshe obviously has the upper hand in that encounter – with Pharaoh now entreating him. Moshe sarcastically toys with Pharaoh asking him:

You may have this triumph over me (*hitpa'er `allai*):
for what time shall I plead in behalf of you. (8:5;
NJPS)

The next two encounters reported by the Torah, during the plagues of *'arob* (flies or wild animals) and the plague of hail, continue the tendency, with Moshe becoming more powerful and Pharaoh becoming weaker.

The plague of locust represents an important milestone in the relationship. Pharaoh's servants' derision ("Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?") caused Pharaoh to recall Moshe and negotiate even before he suffered the plague. The Torah's account of this plague reflects the change, by reporting, for the first time, the pre-plague warning. Moshe abruptly ends the encounter by disrespectfully turning and leaving ("*vayyifen vayyesse*") after describing, in detail, the devastation awaiting Egypt.

After Moshe and Aharon are brought back to the palace, Pharaoh agrees to let them worship but asks who will be going. Moshe's semi-poetic response to Pharaoh's question displayed a superiority that infuriated Pharaoh and caused him to suspect their true intentions of flight. Although Pharaoh did not capitulate to all Moshe's demands, he conceded to Moshe by permitting (even commanding) the men (alone) to go. Pharaoh's concession is, of course, not enough. Moshe and Aharon are chased away from Pharaoh, in a pretense of domination and control. This supposed domination is shown to be baseless when Pharaoh is forced to rush Moshe back in order to rid Egypt of the locust.

Moshe's next encounter with Pharaoh, coming after the plague of darkness and before *makkat bekhorot* (the plague of the firstborn), is the last time Moshe speaks to Pharaoh (but not their final encounter). Pharaoh called Moshe and said to him:

Go, serve YHWH, only your sheep and your oxen shall be kept back, even (Hebrew: *gam* –“also”) your little-ones may go with you! (10:24; SB)

Even this more generous concession by Pharaoh is not accepted by Moshe. Pharaoh, in a show of astounding arrogance, thinks that he can still dictate the terms to Moshe. Moshe responds:

You yourself (Hebrew: *gam atta*) will provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to YHWH our God. Our own livestock, too, shall go along with us—not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of YHWH our God; and we shall not know with what we are to worship YHWH until we arrive there. (10:25-26; NJPS)

Moshe sarcastically begins his response with the very word that Pharaoh used to emphasize his further concession (*gam*, “also”). Moshe's use of exaggeration in his rejection of Pharaoh's proposition displays his strength. Pharaoh is still very strong also – at least in his own mind – as he chases Moshe away saying:

Go from me! Be on your watch: You are not to see my face again, for on the day you see my face, you shall die! (10:28; SB)

Unfazed by this threat, Moshe sardonically responded:

You have spoken well, I will not henceforth see your face again. (10:29; SB)

Before leaving Pharaoh, Moshe receives another prophecy, or he remembers something which God had communicated to him earlier. God communicated to Moshe the details of the last plague, *makkat bekhorot* (the plague of the firstborn), that Moshe conveys to Pharaoh. Moshe ends with the following words:

“Then all these your servants shall go down to me, they shall bow to me, saying: Go out, you and all the people who walk in your footsteps! And afterward I will go out.” He went out from Pharaoh in flaming anger. (11:8; SB)

These are the last words that Moshe speaks to Pharaoh. He will go out when he is ready – after he has won over Pharaoh’s servants, undermining Pharaoh’s authority. Moshe underscores the fact that he is in control by leaving in anger. He left the palace when he wants, and he will leave Egypt when he wants. Moshe had the last word in this encounter, unlike the first encounter when Pharaoh has the last word.

The final (eighth, seventh in the context of the plagues), encounter with Pharaoh occurs at midnight, in the midst of the devastation resulting from the tenth plague. In this encounter only Pharaoh talks:

Arise, go out from amidst my people, even you, even the Children of Israel! Go, serve YHWH according to your words, even your sheep, even your oxen, take, as you have spoken, and go! And bring a blessing even on me! (12:31-32; SB)

Pharaoh is frantically urging Moshe and Israel out of Egypt. There are seven words in the imperative (command) form in these verses. The words “go out” (*sse’u*) and “go” (*lekhu*) recur several times. Pharaoh repeats the word *gam* (“even”) four times indicating his complete capitulation to

Moshe's position. The fact that Pharaoh had to retract his threat to not see Moshe again is humbling. Pharaoh's request that Moshe and Aharon should also bless him illustrates Pharaoh's absolute submission. In sharp contrast to his first words to Moshe, where he claimed he did not know God, he now sees that he is in need of His blessing.

What is surprising is that Moshe does not respond at all to Pharaoh. Pharaoh's words have no consequence for Moshe, as he did not need Pharaoh's permission to leave. Moshe and Israel were going whether Pharaoh let him or not. Moshe's silence in the face of Pharaoh's unconditional surrender shows that Moshe is not at all dependent on Pharaoh. Moshe's final denigrating disregard of Pharaoh is the ultimate sign of Moshe's triumph in the power struggle with Pharaoh.

At the burning bush Moshe answers God's calling by saying:

Please, my Lord, no man of words am I, not from yesterday, not from the day before, not (even) since you have spoken to your servant, for heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I! (4:10; SB)

The precise meaning of Moshe's excuse has been argued by Torah commentators. Rashbam explains that it means that Moshe was not familiar with the Egyptian language, having been away from Egypt for so many years.² Shadal found Rashbam's explanation unconvincing, arguing that Moshe grew to adulthood in the king's palace and was therefore very familiar with the Egyptian language and would not likely forget it. Shadal instead explains that Moshe was not an orator—gifted with rhetorical abilities. Moshe's first encounter with Pharaoh, as analyzed above, supports Shadal's position.

² He cites Ezekiel 3:4-6 as proof. He also argues against the interpretation that says that Moshe had a speech impediment.

God answers Moshe by saying:

Who placed a mouth in human beings or who (is it that) makes one mute or deaf or open-eyed or blind? Is it not I, YHWH? So now, go! I myself will be there with your mouth and will instruct you as to what you are to speak. (4:11-12; SB)

Moshe's inability to speak is seen by his weakness in the first encounter with Pharaoh. His subsequent speeches to Pharaoh, culminating in the final two encounters, are the result of God's "being with Moshe's mouth and instructing him what to say." Moshe, with God's help, has become an effective speaker, advocate and *nabi* (usually translated "prophet" is better understood as "spokesman." See Exodus 7:1). This divinely bestowed ability is used throughout the rest of Moshe's reign. It is used when Moshe deals with men (Qorah, Aharon, the Israelites) and, ironically, even in his dealings with God Himself.

Parashat Beshallah: Upon Leaving Egypt¹

Rabbi Moshe Shamah

The Opening Verse

Our *parashah*'s opening words, וַיְהִי בְשַׁלַּח פְּרֹעֹה אֶת-הָעָם, (“And when Pharaoh sent forth the people” [Exod. 13:17]), speak of Israel’s leaving Egypt in terms of Pharaoh’s sending them forth. This phraseology constitutes a subordinate “when” clause that marks a point in time and introduces the principal clause² that deals with God’s manner of leading the nation forth. Why did the Torah not begin this new phase of national life with a locution that is more consistent with the larger picture and with the narrative that follows, such as, “When God took Israel out of Egypt,” or merely, “When Israel departed from Egypt”?

It appears likely that these opening words were intended to highlight the fact that Pharaoh finally acceded to God’s request of שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי (“Send forth My people” [Exod. 5:1]), reversing his resounding pronouncement of refusal, לֹא אֶשְׁלַח (“I shall not send” [v. 2]). It also points out the precise fulfillment of the guarantee God gave Moses at the burning bush וְאַחֲרֵי-כֵן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם (“And afterwards he

¹ Reprinted with permission from “Parashat Beshallah Part I” of Rabbi Shamah’s book, *Recalling the Covenant* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2011), pp. 321-328.

² The verse is complex and its syntactical parsing is in dispute. The principal clause may be the assertion immediately following the statement of when Pharaoh sent them out, that G-d did not lead the nation via the most direct route. Alternatively, the latter statement, as well as the following ones explaining His reason for doing so, may also be subordinate to the next verse’s announcement that He turned the nation toward the wilderness.

will send you” [3:20]). In the account of the actual sending the Israelites forth, the ה-ל-ש stem had only appeared in conjunction with the Egyptian populace, וַתְּחַזְקוּ מִצְרַיִם עַל-הָעָם, (“And Egypt pressed the people, hurrying to send them forth from the land” [12:33]), not with Pharaoh. Thus, an aspect of the previous narrative is here given “literary closure” (see *Exod. Rabbah* 20:3).

The opening verse continues with וְלֹא-נָהָם אֱלֹקִים דֶּרֶךְ אֲרָץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים (“God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines”). The verse explains that because via that route their destination was close the Israelites would soon confront war, and God was concerned that in that circumstance they might have a change of heart and return to Egypt. Juxtaposing וַיְהִי בְשִׁלַּח פְּרַעֲהַ with וְלֹא-נָהָם אֱלֹקִים suggests that when Pharaoh finally yielded to God’s demand, a chapter in Israel’s history was concluded and another chapter began under a very different mode of divine governance. It is one thing for God to overpower and manipulate the heart of Pharaoh (who, after all, was a side player in His plans for the Israelites) in order to achieve His ends for His people. But He does not want to so manipulate the Israelites, the focus of his present purpose; He does not want to remove their free will and thereby force them to proceed to Canaan. God will not now compel His people to go forth prematurely; He will nurture and educate them, prompting them to develop into the nation He would like them to become. He will respect the condition of free will and lead them in a manner accommodating their immaturity.

God’s leading Israel via the indirect route to Canaan is not a surprise to Moses or to the reader. Moses had been informed at the burning bush that upon leaving Egypt the Israelites would serve God “on this mountain” (3:12). He was then at Horeb, located in the general direction of Midian, and not in northern Egypt, near “the route to the

land of the Philistines.” God had decided from early on that the Israelites should not proceed to the promised land through the closest route, one that would have taken a matter of days. Taking the long route led to the lawgiving occurring in the wilderness.

The Pursuit

What were Pharaoh and the Egyptians thinking after the devastating tenth plague when they assented to Moses’ request? Moses had never requested permission for the Israelites to go beyond a three-day distance to serve Hashem, but he also never mentioned that they would return. It goes without saying that previously free people, who had been invited to dwell in the land and been unjustly enslaved against their will, when away on leave have neither a moral nor legal obligation to return to slavery. This is especially the case with people who had been treated with inhumane harshness.

When Pharaoh gave permission he said **כִּדְבַרְכֶּם** and **כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם** (“as you have spoken” [12:31-32]), meaning that they may go – men, women and children, with all their cattle presumably only on the three-day-distance journey. Previously, he had intimated to Moses that he realized that in such an eventuality they would not return. When he first agreed – after the fourth plague – that they may go, he specified that they “not go far” (8:24). Subsequently, he stated that their request was clearly for (what to him was) a nefarious purpose (10:10). This implies that he sensed they would not return.

The Egyptians who pressed the Israelites to leave seem to have done so without mentioning any conditions, “hurriedly sending them out, for they said ‘We will all be dead’” (12:33). Although we only know of it from Moses’ assertion in the predictive mode, it may be assumed that Pharaoh’s ministers came to Moses, bowed, and requested,

“Leave, you and all the people that follow you” (11:8). As the psalmist put it: “Egypt was happy when they left” (Psalms 105:38). So while the populace was urging the Israelites to depart at once and his ministers were begging Moses to leave, Pharaoh’s granting permission while insisting on the point, stating “as you have spoken,” was only a formality. It constitutes a farcical and pathetic scene of a monarch who in his haughtiness “just doesn’t get it.” He could not publicly admit that Moses’ awaiting his permission at this juncture was only to demonstrate that the mightiest of human kings must yield to God’s request. This is part of the mockery God perpetrated in Egypt (Exod. 10:2).

Shortly after the Israelite’s departure, God directed them to make a “detour” to lead Pharaoh to believe they were hopelessly lost in the desert. This provided the Egyptians a basis to rethink their position and pursue the Israelites to bring them back. God was preparing the way for another major manifestation of His glory.

When the information that Israel was not returning – and apparently hopelessly lost in the desert – reached the king, he and his ministers had a “change of heart” and said, “What did we do that we sent Israel out from serving us?” (14:5). For Pharaoh, granting permission for the journey turned out to be equivalent to sending the nation out of slavery; for his ministers, it seems natural to take their question to mean that when they pressed the Israelites to leave it was understood to be permanent. Regardless, king and ministers regretted what they did and mobilized a mighty force to bring the Israelites back. The stage was set for the miracle at the sea and for Egypt to finally recognize that “I am Hashem.”

Despite all that God had already done for them, when Israel saw the mighty Egyptian military in pursuit, they were very fearful and complained bitterly to Moses, “What

did you do to us to take us out of Egypt?” (14:11-12). Ibn Ezra asks, why did they not think about fighting for themselves and their children? He answers:

The Egyptians were Israel’s masters and this generation was trained from its youth to endure the yoke of slavery. Possessed of a subdued disposition, they could not now battle with their masters. Also, they were not learned in war...they would also not have been able to battle the Canaanites at that time, until a new generation arose that did not know slavery and acquired a lofty spirit.³

Marah

Immediately following the sea crossing we are informed *וַיַּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף* (“Moses moved Israel from the Sea of Reeds⁴” [Exod. 15:22]). The causative verb *וַיַּסַּע* seems to indicate that Moses had to prod the Israelites to leave the Sea of Reeds to continue on their journey, which entailed entering the desert, a fearful prospect to be sure. Despite having recently witnessed God’s great intervention on their behalf, the Israelites were reluctant to abandon a comfortable location in a well-watered area, free from slavery and from pursuit, and enter a dangerous expanse. Thus, at the beginning of the national enterprise there is tension between God’s exalted plans for the nation and its mundane, earthly orientation.

Sure enough, they travel three days without finding water. When they finally found water it was bitter and undrinkable (the location was called Marah, “bitter”). The people murmur against Moses, who cries out to Hashem, who shows Moses a tree. Moses casts the tree (or a portion thereof) into the water and the water sweetens. Then and

³ We will discuss the Song at the Sea in the next study (pp. 329-336).

⁴ Traditionally, but incorrectly, “Red Sea.”

there God officially charged the nation for the first time with the basic principles of responsibility and accountability: וְשָׂם לָהֶם חֹק וּמִשְׁפָּט וַיִּנְסֶהוּ (‘‘There He set for it [the nation] statute and ordinance and there He tested it’’ [15:25]). He proclaimed that if the nation is fully obedient to the will of Hashem its God ‘‘all the maladies that I brought upon the Egyptians I will not bring upon you, for I, Hashem, am your healer’’ (v. 26).

When the Israelites departed from the Sea of Reeds to enter the desert, like all prudent travelers, they undoubtedly took a large supply of water with them. At Marah the text does not state that they were thirsty (as it does at a subsequent station, Rephidim [Exod. 17:3]), but that they were complaining, ‘‘What shall we drink?’’ Perhaps they desired a source of water to drink from rather than consume their limited reserves. In any event, the Israelites are being taught that they must learn to trust that God will provide for their needs in a timely fashion. The manna passage that follows shortly expands on this concept.

The Marah episode, preparatory to revelation and the lawgiving that follow in due course, appears intended to achieve a preliminary status of commitment to God’s laws on the part of the Israelites. *Hoq umishpat* (a phrase generally translated as ‘‘statute and ordinance’’) may possibly be a reference to the *huqqim umishpatim* categories of law that will be attached to revelation (see Deut. 5:28; 6:1; etc.). This interaction with God provided Israel a mini-lawgiving that contained certain basics as an introduction to the upcoming Decalogue and the major law compendium attached to it.

The Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 56b) cites a *baraita* that views the Marah passage in such a manner. It states (to some degree in an aggadic vein) that ten laws were given to

Israel at Marah. These were the seven *mišvot* of *bene Noah*⁵ – the great foundational code governing the essentials of human behavior – plus *dinim* (civil law, above and beyond what the laws of *bene Noah* require in that area), the Sabbath, and honoring father and mother.⁶ Conceptually, *hoq* is very appropriately applied to the Sabbath, a ritual law that defines man’s relationship with God, which is central to the upcoming episode of the manna and prominent in the Decalogue. *Mishpat* (justice) may readily be seen as referring to *dinim*, laws regulating interaction between man and man, the theme of the later Decalogue commandments.

Rabbi S. D. Sassoon thought that the words *hoq umishpat* possess much broader connotations than merely a statute and an ordinance; rather, he thought, *hoq umishpat*

⁵ The details are still a matter of discussion but the standard enumeration comprises: belief in G-d; prohibitions against blasphemy, murder, adultery (as well as incest) and stealing; a requirement to have a legal justice system to regulate laws between man and man; and the prohibition of eating a limb shorn from a live animal (exemplifying cruelty to a living creature).

⁶ Also in aggadic fashion, the Talmud derives the Sabbath and honoring father and mother from the fact that in the Deuteronomy text of the Decalogue, the phrase *כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּיָהּ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ* (“as Hashem your G-d had [previously] commanded you”) is mentioned only with those two commandments. Since that version recited by Moses is understood to reflect verbatim what was said in the original Decalogue proclamation, it is interpreted to mean that those two laws had been commanded before the Decalogue, presumably at Marah. In regard to the Sabbath, it should be noted that in the manna narrative that follows shortly there is a statement that may imply that the law of the Sabbath had already been given to Israel. When the people gathered their manna on Friday it turned out to be a double portion and the chieftains asked Moses about it. He answered, “This is that which Hashem has spoken, *Shabbaton*, tomorrow is the holy Sabbath for Hashem” (Exod. 16:23). There is no explicit record of Hashem having previously transmitted the law of the Sabbath so some associate Moses’ announcement with the lawgiving at Marah.

referred to the covenant itself. *Hoq* is widely attested as parallel to *berit* (covenant), apparently being somewhat of a synonym for it. Concerning the earth's defilement for Israel's violation of the moral code, speaking in large categories, Isaiah states: "For they transgressed the teachings, abrogated *hoq*, annulled the ancient covenant" (Isa. 24:5). In reference to the eternal laws of nature, God states: "If My covenant was not with day and night, if the *huqqot* (plural of *hoq*) of heaven and earth I did not appoint..." (Jer. 33:25). In regard to God's scolding of the wicked, He states: "What are you doing, relating *huqqai* (My statutes) and mentioning My covenant upon your mouth?" (Ps. 50:16). Elsewhere, the psalmist states: "He established it unto Jacob as *hoq*, to Israel as an eternal covenant" (Ps. 105:10).

Mishpat also takes on broad meaning. "For it is a *hoq* for Israel, *mishpat* for the God of Jacob" (Ps. 81:5). These usages demonstrate that *hoq* and *mishpat* refer to the fundamental principle central to the relationship between God and Israel (see *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, 153-5).

Upon Hashem's benefaction on behalf of Israel – His sweetening the water – He charged the nation with the foundation of the covenant, an increased degree of commitment to their relationship with Him. The attached verse constitutes a brief statement of basic covenant procedure (see our study "The God-Israel Covenant: On Meaning and Format" [p. 886]). In it God requests a full measure of loyalty to His will and provides a promise of reward for compliance and a hint of punishment for betrayal. Such an explanation is supported by a passage in the book of Joshua.

When "Joshua made a covenant with the people" (וַיִּכְרֹת [Josh. 24:25]), the conclusion of the verse states: וַיִּשָּׂם לוֹ חֻק וּמִשְׁפָּט בְּשֵׁכֶם ("He established it as *hoq umishpat* in Shechem"). He defined the enactment with the

identical locution that appears in our Exodus passage. In addition, the Joshua passage relates to ours in standard chiasmatic fashion. In the verse that precedes the contracting of the covenant, the people say to Joshua 'אָת ה'...הָעָם (‘‘The people said...we will serve Hashem our God and hearken to His voice’’ [v. 24]), a statement that corresponds with Moses’ proclamation that follows the *hoq umishpat* of our passage. The last clause of the people’s statement to Joshua corresponds with the first clause of our passage’s proclamation, which begins by calling for אֱלֹהֵינוּ תִשְׁמַע לְקוֹל ה' (‘‘Our God will hear the voice of the Lord’’). The first part of the people’s statement to Joshua is a digest of the later clauses of Moses’ proclamation. Joshua next engages in what clearly are covenant-concluding procedures, namely, writing down the agreement and designating a large stone as witness.

Elim and the Wilderness of Sin

After Marah the Israelites came to Elim where there were ‘‘twelve water fountains and seventy palm trees and they encamped there by the water’’ (Exod. 15:27). In accordance with ancient Near Eastern symbolism that considered the numbers seven and twelve as especially prominent, these water fountains and date trees undoubtedly possess figurative meaning in our context. This must be viewed in the light of the new symbolism established in the Torah for the numbers thirteen and eight, which symbolize achievements associated with the commitment to one God and acceptance of the covenant, respectively (see our study ‘‘On Number Symbolism in the Torah’’ [p. 1057]).

Accordingly, the numbers twelve and seventy very likely allude to the distinguished, but limited, level of spiritual achievement attained by the Israelites before the Mount Sinai experience. This is immediately following

Marah, consistent with the notion of Marah being a preliminary stage to the Sinai covenant. (The wilderness of Sinai, where Mount Sinai is located, is appropriately the eighth station of Israel's travels upon exiting Egypt, as recounted in Exodus 13-19: Succoth, Etham, Pi-hahiroth, Marah, Elim, the wilderness of Sin, Rephidim, and the wilderness of Sinai.)

The following verse speaks of Israel's arrival at "the wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month from leaving Egypt" (Exod. 16:1), exactly one month after the Exodus. The people murmur against Moses and Aaron because of the shortage of food. Instead of celebrating the one-month anniversary of the Exodus, they turn to complaining. They express nostalgia for Egypt, where "we sat by pots of meat and ate bread to fullness" (16:3). They express the feeling that they are doomed to die in the wilderness.

It should be recalled that when the Israelites left Egypt it was "along with sheep and cattle, a very heavy amount of livestock" (12:38). Although the Israelites had essentially been transformed into slaves, they maintained their possessions. As their arrival at the wilderness of Sin was only one month following the Exodus, the present situation was not one of life and death. The people, however, placed a higher priority on the preservation of their livestock than on their trust in God's promises.

Trials and Tribulations

Although the Israelites had believed in Hashem and in Moses his servant, as stated at the sea crossing (14:31), their commitment was not maintained through the arduous vicissitudes that arise in life. Complaints and trials were common. *Parashat Beshallah* contains six of the ten instances to which the Mishnah (*m. 'Abot* 5:4) makes reference (according to the Rambam's enumeration in his

commentary on 5:3) wherein Israel “challenged” God during the wilderness period.

- 1) The complaint at the Sea of Reeds, before the sea splitting (Exod. 14:11- 12)
- 2) The complaint for water at Marah (15:24)
- 3) The complaint for food, followed by the quail and manna (16:2)
- 4) Some individuals retaining manna until morning (16:20)
- 5) Some individuals going out to gather manna on the Sabbath (16:27)
- 6) The complaint for water at Rephidim (17:2-3).

All this happens between the Sea of Reeds and the arrival at Sinai – a period beginning about one week after leaving Egypt and extending about six weeks, as described in the narrative. Nevertheless, with great forbearance, God proceeds with His plans for revelation. Although disappointed with Israel’s failings, He seems to have viewed them as frailties that to some extent are part of the human condition; they were indications of the Israelites’ great need for an educative process, but not a reason to postpone revelation. On the contrary, the inability of the Israelites to abide by the preliminary stage of the lawgiving at Marah supports the need for a more inspirational and comprehensive experience of revelation and law that will ultimately discipline them more fully.

Of course, even with the Sinai revelation and lawgiving and establishment of the covenant it is understood that the vision of the Torah is lofty and sublime and will not totally remake the character of the people overnight. Many would not abandon their habits and previous practices without protracted effort. A national transformation requires God to extend His extraordinary patience and perseverance over

the long term.⁷ The prophetic message in our passages seems to be providing a telescopic view of the macrocosmic reality at work in the subsequent centuries of Israel's history.

The Battle with Amalek

The concluding passage in our *parashah* is the story of the coming of Amalek to battle against Israel (17:8-16). Moses appointed Joshua to lead the military campaign. With the rod of God in his hand, Moses, together with Aaron and Hur, ascended to the hilltop. When Moses held his hand aloft, Israel prevailed; when he let it down, Amalek prevailed. Moses' hands became heavy; Aaron and Hur placed a stone for him to sit on and supported his uplifted hands, which remained faithful until the sun set.

The literal explanations proffered here are implausible. When Moses holds the rod of God high, perhaps with a flag or symbol attached to it, the Israelite soldiers see it, are encouraged and succeed; when his hand is down they are deflated and fail. Or when he raises his hand he focuses God's supernatural intervention in Israel's favor. Or when he raises his hand and inclines the rod of God upon the Amalekites, he brings plagues upon them.

The Mishnah sages recognized that a literal reading of this passage was problematic and ask rhetorically: "Is it possible that Moses' hands win or lose the war?" (*m. Rosh. Hash.* 3:8). Of course not! This incisive question brushes aside all literal explanations. The sages could not believe that military ups and downs are the result of the position of Moses' hands or that the status of his hands somehow reflects military ups and downs. The Mishnah

⁷ The Israelites' transgression with the golden calf is a different matter altogether from the violations that preceded Sinai; it was a breach of the covenant recently contracted at Sinai. God considered annihilating everyone except for Moses and starting a new nation with him (32:10).

acknowledges that the Torah is to be read with rationality and common sense. Whenever clearly indicated that a passage is not literal it must be so acknowledged.

In this case the Mishnah itself provides an allegorical interpretation. Moses' lifting his hand represents the Israelites turning their hearts toward their father in Heaven, and then they triumph; when they do not do so, they fail.

This is not to say that in the course of the particular battle with Amalek, at some moments the Israelite soldiers turned their hearts heavenward and prevailed, and at some moments turned their hearts away and failed. Rather, it should be recognized that this passage describes the first military battle Israel engaged in. The verses connecting Moses' hands with victory or defeat refer to a general spiritual truth applicable at all times and in all battles. The Mishnah further informs us that the case of the copper serpent (Num. 21:9), in which all who were bitten by the serpent and looked at the copper replica were healed, should similarly be understood in such allegorical fashion.

The Mishnah teaches that the Torah's primary intention cannot always be discerned from the literal translation of the words (see our study "Parashat Beshallah Part III: On Interpreting Midrash Part I: General Remarks" [p. 336]).

The Meaning of the Prohibition Against Returning to Egypt¹

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun

It happened that when Pharaoh sent the nation forth, God (*Elokim*) did not guide them along the way of the land of the Philistines, which is close; because God said, “Lest the nation have a change of heart when they see war and return to Egypt.” So God led the nation roundabout, along the way of the desert by the Reed Sea; the Israelites left Egypt armed. (Shemot 13:17–18)

Despite the many interpretations that have been offered, the meaning of these verses is very problematic and they seem as baffling as ever. There are three basic questions:

- (1) What is the meaning of “which is close” (*Ki karov hu*)?
- (2) Which war is being referred to in the phrase “if they see war”?
- (3) Why is the phrase, “the Israelites left Egypt armed,” included in this context?

There are three further difficulties we must raise:

- (1) Why do these verses refer to God as *Elokim*, the only such instance in the Exodus narrative, rather than God’s “personal” or “historical” name Y–H–V–H, the only Name which appears from the burning bush story onward?

¹ This article is published, with permission, from www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.58/16besha.htm

(2) The goal of the exodus has been repeatedly defined in relation to Sinai, which lies on the “way of the desert” and not the “way of the Philistines.” For example:

When you bring the nation out of Egypt, you will worship the Lord on this mountain. (Shemot 3:18)

Indeed, Pharaoh’s permission to worship at Sinai is the expressed goal of all Moshe’s negotiations, threats, and wonders, and it is with this understanding that Pharaoh finally gives his permission:

Get up and leave my nation – you and the Israelites; go and worship the Lord as you say. (Shemot 12:31)

But this directive of Pharaoh is diametrically opposed to our verses, which imply that the Revelation at Sinai was virtually accidental, merely an outcome of God’s concern that “the nation would have a change of heart” if they encountered war on the shorter, more direct coastal road.

(3) The basic assumption in all the traditional interpretations is that God wanted to avoid confronting Israel with war at all costs, at least at the outset, since He was concerned that this would inspire them to abandon their cause and physically turn around and return to Egypt.

The difficulty in this assumption is that in actuality, the alternate route through the desert led them **into** war with Egypt almost immediately, causing an instant public outcry to return to Egypt. God’s action seems to have achieved the opposite of its intention. Furthermore, why could God not have saved them from disaster on the desert route in exactly the same miraculous manner that He saved them at the Sea?

After all, the reaction of the Jews when the Egyptian army caught up with them – “for it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert” – was exactly the reaction that God feared “should they see war,” and God nevertheless dealt with it – “God will fight for you and you shall be still.” This repeated itself several times during the journey to the land of Israel, so that it is clear that changing the route did not solve the problem. The longer route did not, in fact, lead them away from war.

The classical commentators, noting this difficulty, proposed solutions which seem somewhat contrived. For example:

If the circuitous route resulted in their saying: ‘Let us...return to Egypt,’ how much worse would the direct route have been! (Rashi, based on the Mekhilta)

According to Rashi, the phrase “which was close” means “close to Egypt,” making it easier to return there. Taking the nation to Canaan along the more distant desert road would deter the people from returning.

The Rashbam reads “close” – to Eretz Yisrael; the shorter route would have brought the war for the Land earlier. By delaying the Canaanite wars, the people were less psychologically connected to Egypt when the crisis struck.

The Rambam is of a similar opinion:

It is contrary to human nature that a person be raised in slavery, doing the most menial of tasks, and promptly wash the filth off his hands and go wage war with the gigantic Sons of Anak ... God’s wisdom led them roundabout, through the desert, until they learnt to be brave. It is well-known that travelling in the desert without luxuries such as washing and the

like gives rise to bravery, while the opposite gives rise to cowardice. Furthermore, men not habituated to subservience and slavery, were born in the desert. (Guide, 3:32; see also chapter 24)

The Ramban, on the other hand, interprets “which was close” as referring to the path traversing the land of the Philistines. Even though this route was shorter, God wished to avoid war with the Philistines. However, the Ramban is confronted with the difficulty that on the longer route they meet Amalek instead of the Philistines.

All of these interpretations contain important points but do not address the cardinal problem: the war at the Sea of Reeds with Egypt, the superpower to whom they had been enslaved for centuries and with whom they had struggled for independence. This war was potentially far more deadly than any war with the Amalekites, Canaanites or Philistines could have been. This war came immediately, and at a time when Israel was weak and confused.

Modern scholars offer a different solution to our problem, which resembles the Ramban’s interpretation. Bas reliefs on the walls of the temple at Karnak, dating to the rule of Pharaoh Seti I (toward the end of the thirteenth century BCE), show that the entire northern Sinai coastal region was under direct Egyptian sovereignty, with Egyptian military outposts all along the way. Israel, fearing a trap, avoided the coastal road from the outset. Plausible though this theory may sound, the reason it proposes for the change of route is not that mentioned in the Torah. God did not fear an Egyptian trap but rather the desire of the Jews to return to Egypt.

Various early commentators hinted that there is a hidden reason for the change of routes – God’s plan to drown the Egyptians. For Abarbanel, God’s motive was not concern for Israel’s fear, but rather His will to give the

Torah at Sinai (see Abarbanel, the second question; Mekhilta ad loc.).

I would like to propose a different interpretation for these verses:

“Which is close” – and therefore should have been the route of travel (following the Ramban),
“... God said, ‘Lest the nation have a change of heart if they see war’” – any war, whether for the Land or at any point in history,
“...and return to Egypt” – to request aid and patronage from Pharaoh;
“so God led the nation roundabout, along the Way of the desert by the Sea of Reeds” – **so that** Pharaoh would pursue them, guaranteeing that war would take place,
“...and the Israelites left Egypt armed.”

Contrary to the accepted opinion, God’s intention was not to avoid war and save Israel undue fear, but precisely the opposite – to drag them straight into a confrontation, and achieve final, total independence at the Sea of Reeds. The Jews need to be liberated not only politically and economically, but also mentally, as is evident from their demand:

Leave us be and we will serve Egypt, because we prefer serving Egypt to dying in the Wilderness.
(Shemot 14:12)

This complete liberation will result from the experience of war (“the Lord will fight for you”) and through the rejoicing and singing of victory.

The expression “to return to Egypt” refers to seeking support from Egypt, as is clear from the repeated words of the prophet Yeshayahu:

Woe to those who descend to Egypt for aid, who rely on their multitude of chariots, and on the immense power of their horsemen, but did not desire Israel's holy [God] and did not consult the Lord. (31:1)

They who go and descend to Egypt and did not consult Me, to be powerful in Pharaoh's power, and be safe in Egypt's shadow. (30:2)

Egypt is human, not divine; her horses flesh, not spirit; God will spread out His arm; helper will fail, and helped will fall – all will be destroyed together. (31:3)

This last quotation contains more than one allusion to the Parting of the Sea.

The prophet Hoshea also condemned reliance on Egypt, probably referring to King Hoshea's request for the protection of So, king of Egypt (II *Melakhim* 17:3):

Ephraim is like a silly dove without a heart; they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria. (*Hoshea* 7:11)

Now their sin will be remembered and their error recalled; they will return to Egypt. (8:13)

Yirmiyahu offers a similar condemnation:

You will be shamed by Egypt as you were shamed by Assyria. From this one too you will depart with your hands on your head, for the Lord has rejected those you trust; you will not prosper with them. (2:36-37)

These prophecies do not see returning, or “going down,” to Egypt as the physical emigration of all or part of the nation to Egypt. Suffice it that an Israelite king sent messengers to Pharaoh saying, “I am your servant and son” (I *Melakhim* 16:7), and the prohibition against “returning” has been violated.

The Torah itself, in describing the duties of the king, commands that he “not return the nation to Egypt in order to acquire many horses” (Devarim 7:16). It is clear that this refers to seeking military support from Egypt. King Shlomo, for example, disobeyed the commandment not by sending his entire royal house to Pharaoh, but rather by dispatching to him a handful of merchants (I *Melakhim* 10:28,29). “Returning to Egypt” not to dwell there but rather to gain support and patronage is the spiritual opposite of the independence gained via the Exodus.

The *tokhecha* (rebuke) of Sefer Devarim ends with the same theme:

The Lord will return you to Egypt in ships, on a route I told you that you would never see again; there you will be offered to your enemies for sale as slaves, but no one will buy you. (26:68)

But did Israel leave Egypt in ships, that God is threatening them with return along the same route? The Torah is not describing the route of return to Egypt, but rather the implication of return to Egypt – renewed bondage. The common denominator of a request for Egyptian protection, physical return to Egypt of one’s own free will, and sale into Egyptian captivity is forfeiture of independence. The route God said Israel should never see again is the route of slavery.

The Rabbis understood this point as being the crux of the commandment to pierce the ear of the voluntary slave:

An ear which heard [at Sinai], ‘I am the Lord your God’ and went and bought itself a master – should be pierced. (Rashi to Shemot 21:6, based on *Yerushalmi Kiddushin* 1:2; *Sifra Vayikra* ad loc.)

At this point, we can take a new look at the prohibition against returning to Egypt and serving her:

And the Lord said you would never return this way again. (Devarim 17:16)

On the road I told you that you would never see again. (Devarim 28:26)

Where and when did God previously tell Moshe that they would not return this way? The recurring theme of “never seeing Egypt again” leads us to Moshe’s words to Israel before the parting of the Sea as they cried out, in their panic, that they preferred slavery:

The Lord will fight for you...for as you have seen Egypt today you will never see them again. (Shemot 14:13)

In my opinion, the verse reads thus:

*“As you have seen Egypt today” – in the **manner** that slaves look up to their masters – “you will never see them again.”*

That the halakha understood patronage to be the true meaning of “returning to Egypt” is clear from the following midrash:

The Torah warned Israel three times against returning to Egypt [here the Talmud quotes the three verses we saw above]...but Israel returned to Egypt three times, and as is written, “Woe to those who descend to Egypt for aid”; three times they failed. The first was in the time of Sancherev; the second was in the time of Yochanan ben Keire’ach; and the third was in the time of Torginos. (*Mekhilta Beshallah*, mas. 2, par. 2; *Yerushalmi Sukka* 5:1; *Bavli Sukka* 51b)

Three prohibitions and three “returns” mean three different kinds of submission. The first is asking for Egyptian patronage, as Chizkiyahu did when he was threatened by Sancherev (according to the prophecies

quoted earlier). The second is actual physical emigration to Egypt, as the Judeans, led by Yochanan ben Keire'ach, did (Yirmiyahu 40–43). The third kind of “return” is that of the Jewish community of Alexandria, which lived under Egyptian patronage from the time of Alexander the Great (c. 333 BCE) until the period of the Roman emperors Trajan (evidently the Torginos of our text) and Hadrian. The defeat spoken of is the decimation of the Alexandrian community after hatred and persecution drove the Diaspora Jewry to all-out revolt, forty-five years after the destruction of the Temple.

It is submission that the Rabbis see as the true meaning of “return,” as is evidenced by the conclusion of the *Yerushalmi*:

One may not return to Egypt to live there, but one may return there for trade, for business, and for conquest. (*Sanhedrin*, end of ch. 10)

Financial dealings do not imply submission, and are therefore permitted.

We can now return to our parasha. The exodus came about based on Pharaoh's consent.

Our verses call God **Elokim** (“God”), the “general” or “international” name known to all nations, which is used, as a rule, when the Torah presents dialogue with gentiles.² The reason for its use here is precisely because the Jews finally left Egypt with Pharaoh's permission. This account of the exodus describes a political-historical event which takes place along natural, political lines; its goal is not revelation at Sinai.

Only when the Torah returns to describe the “other” exodus, the journey towards complete freedom, with no foreign protection whatsoever, and where the goal is the

² See Bereishit 20, 31:40–41; Shemot 5:1–4; see also Ibn Ezra to Shemot 3:15; Kuzari, fourth chapter.

Torah, does it speak of Revelation and Lawgiving, and does God reveal Himself through His transcendental, historical attribute Y–H–V–H: “HaShem went before them by day” (v. 21).

The “Way of the Land of the Philistines” was an official route under Egyptian jurisdiction, as were considerable portions of Canaan. Had Israel taken Pharaoh’s road, they would have displayed good faith to him, and de facto, recognition of his protection. At every checkpoint along the road, they would have shown Pharaoh’s letter of safe passage; the sentries would have passed them through, and entered in their logs that Pharaoh’s **subjects** passed through according to his instructions. Israel would have sent Pharaoh a letter of thanks. Whenever they found themselves in danger, especially in situations of war, they would have sent Pharaoh letters similar to the petition for aid sent to Pharaoh by Biridia, king of Shekhem:

To my king, my lord and my sun: So speaks Biridia, the King’s faithful servant. Beneath the feet of my king, my lord and my sun, I grovel on my belly and on my back. (from the Tel El-’Amarna letters)

Had Israel left Egypt in this fashion, Pharaoh would never have pursued them at all. He could have granted them the mountain region and even made them his representatives there. In times of war, the people would have returned to Egypt to seek protection. Needless to say, this exodus would not have been conducive to Revelation. A slave-nation which progressed from slave status in Egypt to vassal status in Canaan would not have achieved true freedom, even if it would have been freed from hard labor. A nation which is not free could not have received the Torah. God’s sovereignty is possible only after all other sovereignties have been renounced:

I am the Lord your God...you will not have other gods beside Me. (Shemot 20:2-3)

Moshe's prophecy and leadership – including God's revelation at Sinai and giving the Torah – stem from a state of complete independence from Pharaoh. For this reason, God led them on the desert route, into confrontation, into war, into salvation and singing, and into complete freedom:

You will never see them [through the eyes of slaves] again. (Shemot 14:13)

From Egypt to Sinai¹

Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

In Chapter 13 of the first volume, I suggested a resolution of the “two Creation stories” by viewing the entire doubled narrative as an extended chiasmus. In that chapter, I introduced the meaning of structure as a tool of interpretation and literary analysis and, specifically, the impact of a chiasmus, in which common or symmetrical anti-themes occupy parallel “slots” on both ends of a narrative, such that the first and last segments are related, the second and penultimate are related, etc. to the end of establishing a large literary structure which highlights the center. As pointed out there, many chiastic structures can be found in single verses, small passages and brief narratives throughout the canon. It is possible, however, to identify much larger swaths of text which are part of a complex structure. By identifying such structures, we may be able to get to the “heart and soul” of the narrative and understand its underlying message.

I. From Egypt to Sinai – Seven Chapters of Growth

Chapters 13 through 19 of Exodus (in the universally adopted Babylonian sectioning of the Torah – the last sixteen verses of Parashat Bo, all of Parashat Beshalach and the first chapter [plus] of Parashat Yitro) essentially map out the road from Egypt to Sinai. Following the climactic verse at the end of Chapter 12: “And on that very day Hashem brought the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions” (12:51), we would expect to come directly to

¹ The following piece is excerpted from chapter 10 of Rabbi Etshalom’s book *Between the Lines of the Bible: Exodus* (Jerusalem, Israel: Urim Publications and OU Press, 2012), pp. 110-122

Sinai, following the divine promise given at the beginning of the entire process:

Therefore, say to the B'nei Yisra'el: "I am Hashem, and *I will bring you out (vehotzeiti etkhem)* from under the yoke of the Egyptians.
I will free you (vehitzalti etkhem) from being slaves to them,
and *I will redeem you (vega'alti etkhem)* with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.
I will take you as My own people (velakachti etkhem li le'am),
and I will be your God..." (6:6-7)

The first three prongs of the divine promise had been fulfilled: God redeemed the Israelites at the slaying of the firstborn (see Exodus 7); He freed them from their enslavement that night, when the Egyptians deported them, and they left the slave-town of Raamses and He took them out when they moved from Sukkot. All that remained, following the events presented in Exodus 12, was for God to take them as His people – the Covenant at Sinai (see *Between the Lines of the Bible*, vol. 2, chapter 5; Exodus 3:12).

Why doesn't the next chapter detail a direct and immediate move to Sinai and to the fourth step of the Exodus? Why does the Torah detail certain events of the Israelites' travels to Sinai, and take six chapters to do so?

A verse in Deuteronomy may hold the key to solving this puzzle:

...or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty and outstretched arm and awesome power, as Hashem

your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?
(Deuteronomy 4:34)

In this reference to the Exodus, the Israelites are described as “a nation” in the midst of “another nation,” in other words, the same as the nation around them (the Egyptians). Yet God took them out and “made them His.”

I would like to propose that the events spanning Exodus 13–19:6 describe the process by which Bnei Yisrael became worthy and ready to enter into the eternal covenant with God at Sinai.

II. “Doubled” Events

A careful read through these chapters brings us specific questions about some of the events:

- (1) Why does Moses exhort the people about observance of *mitzvot* at Marah (15:26) before the Torah had been given?
- (2) What is the significance of the “twelve springs and seventy date-palms” at Elim (15:27)? We are generally not given such detailed landmarks in our travels. Note that this seemingly minor detail is repeated in the much terser travelogue in Numbers 33.
- (3) What is the significance of the second water-scene, where the waters flow from a rock on Horev (=Sinai)?
- (4) Why is Shabbat introduced before we get to Mount Sinai (in the Mannah narrative – 16:23, 29)?
- (5) There seem to be a number of “doubles” in this section: two water scenes (15:22–26; 17:1–7); two wars (Amalek, Egypt); two educationally-oriented commands (teaching children in 13:8; training judges in 18:20). Why the “doubling?”

A Brief Outline

Let's first take a look at the events in outline form (the first two of these are assayed from a different perspective in the previous chapter of this volume).

- A: *Kiddush Bekhorot* – the divine command to sanctify the firstborn (13:1–2)
- B: The commemoration of the Exodus – including instructing our children (13:3–16)
- C: The events at the Reed Sea, including the Song at the Sea (14:1–15:21)
- D: The waters at Marah (15:22–26)
- E: The Mannah (16:1–36)
- F: The waters from Horev (17:1–7)
- G: Amalek (17:8–16)
- H: Yitro and the appointment of judges (18:1–27)
- I: The preparation for entering the Covenant (19:1–6)

Looking at it again with a few added details will give us a new perspective on this sequence. First, a brief recap of the nature of structure within biblical narrative in general and the mechanics of “chiasmus” in particular.²

III. Structure as Message

The Torah not only informs us in words, it also informs us in style and structure. Not only by juxtaposing certain laws or narratives (e.g., the juxtaposition of the mitzvah of the fringes on our garments with the prohibition of mixed-garments);³ but even the greater structure of the narrative can often be instructive. A wonderful example of this is the structure of the “28 times” in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes.

² See the *schema* at the end of this chapter.

³ Cf. BT *Yevamot* 4a.

Chiasmus

One common feature of biblical literary structure – chiefly found in “*Shirah*” (poetry) – is known as “Chiasmus.” This form, taken from the Greek letter X (Chi), is basically an A-B-B-A (or more intricate – like A-B-C-B-A, etc.) structure, with which we are all familiar in biblical poetry. An obvious example is found in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:24):

Most blessed of women be Ya’el, the wife of Hever
the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.

תברך מנשים יעל אשת חבר הקיני באהל תברך:

We could better see it as follows:

A: Most blessed...

B: ...of women...

C: ...be Ya’el, the wife of Hever the Kenite...

B’: ...of tent-dwelling women...

A’: ...most blessed.

For clarity – here is the chiasmic layout in the original:

תברך
מנשים
יעל אשת חבר הקיני
מנשים באהל
תברך:

The purpose of a chiasmus is to create a center and put the focus on the middle section – in this case, Ya’el.

I would like to propose that the seven (plus) chapters under discussion are also arranged in a chiasmic structure as follows [I will include (in parentheses) those terms or ideas which connect the given section with its chiasmic partner]:

A: *Kiddush Bekhorot* - (קדש לי...לי הם) – “sanctify unto Me...they are Mine”)

B: The commemoration of the Exodus – (instructing children)

C: The events at the Reed Sea (God’s war against Egypt, 14:14, 25; 15:3)

D: The waters at Marah (thirst)

E: The מן (Mannah)

D’: The waters from Horev (thirst)

C’: Amalek (God's war against Amalek, 17:16)

B’: Jethro and the delegation of judges (instructing the people)

A’: The preparation for entering the Covenant (והייתם לי...ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש – “you will be unto Me...and you will be to Me”)

This scheme allows us to understand two basic things about the events as they are presented:

(1) The apparent “doubling” (e.g., the water-scenes) are sequenced in order to highlight the changes that take place from one occurrence to the next (the evolution of the Israelites);

(2) The fulcrum of the chiasmus is the point of dramatic turning, which helps us understand the goal and method of this educational process in readying the Israelites to enter into the Covenant at Sinai. Since the fulcrum of our chiasmus is the narrative of the Mannah, we will have to examine that section with an eye towards finding the “secret” of this evolution.

Let’s take a closer look at the components of our structure to understand the developments.

IV. A: Sanctification

13:1–2

At the first steps out of Egypt, God commands us to sanctify our firstborn. Although this involves some level of sacrifice (offering the firstborn animals, redeeming the firstborn children), its scope is minimal in two ways:

- (1) It involves a one-time act (offering/redemption);
- (2) It takes place solely within the purview of the family. Each family must sanctify its own firstborn, but this does not impact on the rest of the nation.

In addition, this act is a confirmation of God's sanctification of the firstborn during the last plague (see *Between the Lines of the Bible*, vol. 2, ch. 7), but it involves no new sanctification on the part of the people.

19:5–6

As they now stand at the foot of Sinai, the Children of Israel are called to become God's people. Instead of merely confirming that which God already did that night in Egypt, they are asked to move forward and become holy. This holiness is distinct from the earlier one in two ways:

- (1) It involves a constant sanctification involving a life of *mitzvot*;
- (2) It involves every member of the nation, not just the firstborn.

We might posit that the earlier sanctification was a foreshadowing of the latter one. As if the “sanctify unto me” was the first step in fulfilling “I will take you unto Me,” and “you will be unto Me a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation” was the consummation.

V. B: Instruction

13:3–16

The people are instructed to commemorate the Exodus and to tell their children about it. The *tefillin* are even presented as a way to constantly keep this story “in our mouths” (v. 9).

Here again, we find the same two features:

- (1) The story is only to be told within the context of family;
- (2) The information to be transmitted is a one-time event – the Exodus. There is no mention of teaching children about laws, statutes, ethics, etc.

Keep in mind (more about this later) that until this time, the Israelites had a group of *mitzvot* to fulfill – some in perpetuity – but they all related to the Exodus and were all commemorative. The one exception to this rule is *Brit Milah* – the Covenant of Circumcision.

18:19–27

Here, Moses is advised to teach the Torah to two groups: to the entire nation, and to a select group of “minor” judges. The two features, noted above, are again expanded:

- (1) The teaching takes place on a national level – to the nation or its representatives.
- (2) The information is an ongoing, growing process – “to teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do” (v. 20).

Several things have changed here. Besides the scope of involvement becoming broadened to include everyone interacting with Moses and his designated judges, the nature of the information has changed. Instead of one static

story to transmit, Torah has taken on a life – a life of new circumstances and applications. As God instructs Moses regarding new *mitzvot* and laws, which he faithfully transmits this instruction to the people, new situations arise which demand analysis and discussion of those divine words. The “story-time” of Chapter 13 has evolved into the “academy” of Chapter 18. The dynamic discussion which is the inevitable blessing of Torah analysis carries with it a tremendous sense of creativity.⁴ As R. Joshua avers: There is no session of the Academy without a novel explanation or new insight.⁵

Beyond the creativity, this type of learning invests the student with a sense of involvement in Torah, a partnership in creating Torah. Many statements found in Rabbinic literature attest to this approach to Torah study. The best illustration is the story of the Akhnai oven (BT *Bava Metzia* 59b).

VI. C: War

14:1–15:21

One might ask about the necessity of the entire scene at the Reed Sea. Besides the obvious need to defeat (and destroy the army of) Egypt and to ensure the safe Exodus of the Israelites – there was another component which is a significant piece of this evolution.

For all of the miracles and plagues in Egypt, we never have a clear indication that the Israelites witnessed any of them first hand. Some of the plagues only took place in the Egyptian neighborhoods (e.g., darkness), meaning that the Israelites were only aware (by viewing the destruction afterwards) that a plague had taken place. That is not the same as seeing it firsthand. That is why the verse notes that

⁴ I highly recommend reading Rabbi Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man* on this point.

⁵ BT *Hagigah* 3a.

“Israel saw the great work which Hashem did against Egypt; they feared Hashem and believed in Hashem and in Moses his servant” (14:31).

This is, clearly, a necessary prerequisite to entering into the Covenant – having the full experience of seeing God’s power. However, note a salient feature of this war: God does all of the fighting and the Israelites are totally passive. The verse is quite clear:

Hashem will fight for you, and you have only to keep still. (14:14).

When the Israelites sing to God, they describe Him as a “Man of War” (15:3). It is God who fights for His people, just as He did in Egypt via the plagues.

17:8–16

Note the dramatic evolution. When Amalek attack the people, Moses immediately charges Joshua to choose valorous men to go and fight Amalek. Moses, for his part, ascended the mountain and raised his hands. The Torah relates that as long as his hands were raised, the Israelites were successful in war, and when they fell, so did the fortunes of the Israelites. The Mishna astutely explains that it was not Moses’s hands that were fighting, but that when he raised his hands, the Israelites would look heavenward and succeed.⁶ In other words, this war was an almost direct inversion of the earlier one. In this war, the Israelites are doing the fighting and God is apparently passive. “Apparently” because it is a basic tenet of faith and philosophy that God is never passive, but, within the description of the war, God and the Israelites almost reverse roles. The denouement of this war comes when God declares that the war against Amalek is His war forever (17:16) – the wars of the Israelites are also God’s wars.

⁶ Mishna *Rosh HaShanah* 3:8.

VII. D: Thirst

15:22–26

The scene at Marah is enigmatic. The Israelites have wandered for three days without water, yet we hear nothing of their legendary complaining. They only lodge a complaint when they come to the waters of Marah and they prove to be undrinkable. In spite of this obstacle, they don't yet phrase their complaints in the familiar litany of "...why did you take us out of Egypt" (Exodus 17:3) or, worse yet "...let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt" (Numbers 14:4).

Surely the name of the place and the bitterness of the waters must have caused great chagrin among the people. They had just left the bitter work of Egypt (Exodus 1:14), and celebrated that by eating bitter herbs (*merorim*) with their Pesach offering (12:8). Suddenly, their first stop after seeing the end of Egypt and the embittering Egyptians is – Marah – a place of bitter waters. The lesson here is powerful: The Exodus was not a single event, an irrevocable evolution away from oppression. There is always the potential for bitterness and trouble. This is a brand-new lesson for the Israelites: that their relationship with the God of liberation is not over (which they had every reason to believe until this point). Rather, they have an ongoing interaction with Him.

This idea is underscored in two ways. First of all, Moses throws a stick into the water, making them sweet and drinkable. This is a clear inversion of the first Egyptian plague – where sweet, drinkable waters were made unusable when he struck his staff on them. Moses is showing that the same God who can embitter waters and destroy Egyptians is the source of life and sweetness. This is followed by Moses's statement of the relationship between their allegiance to God and their welfare:

If you will listen carefully to the voice of Hashem your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am Hashem who heals you. (15:26)

There is new information here – that the duties to God extend beyond the few *mitzvot* which He already gave, almost all of which focus around a commemoration of the Exodus.

Note that the waters of Marah are stagnant (although the verse does not say so, there is no indication that these waters flowed in any way and every indication points to settled waters) and that Moses takes the existent waters and changes their taste.

17:1–7

Here, we have an entirely different “water-experience.” Besides the stronger complaint of the Israelites, note what type of waters Moses brings them. He hits a rock which is on Horev (Mount Sinai) and waters gush forth. The symbolism of new waters flowing from Sinai speaks for itself. Unlike Marah, these waters are flowing (indicating dynamism and growth) and come from Sinai (the source of that dynamism and growth).

VIII. Interlude:

Twelve Springs, Seventy Date-Palms (15:27)

R. Elazar HaModa'i says: “When the Holy One, Who is blessed, created the world, He created twelve springs corresponding to the twelve tribes of Jacob

and seventy date-palms corresponding to the seventy elders.”⁷

Before addressing the connection, why are there always seventy elders among the Israelites (see Exodus 24:1, Numbers 11:16)? I would like to suggest that this number held great significance for the Israelites, since it is the exact number of their ancestors who had descended to Egypt (Exodus 1:5, Deuteronomy 10:22). The Israelites understood that their future was strongly rooted in their past – a past of twelve brothers, constituting seventy family members.

This is the connection with our springs and date-palms (which represent nourishment). Let’s summarize the evolution of the Israelites since the Exodus:

- (1) They take the first step towards sanctification.
- (2) They are given a system of perpetuating the story of their Exodus and transmitting it to their children.
- (3) They experience God’s power first-hand.
- (4) They learn that their relationship with God is eternal.

They also learn that their relationship is not beginning now, nor did it begin in Egypt. Their relationship is built on an ancient one that goes back to the Land where they are headed – and to their ancestral family which came down from there to Egypt. With this lesson in hand, they were ready for the big lesson of the Mannah.

IX. E: Mannah

16:1–27

As mentioned above, since the story of the Mannah sits at the center of our chiasmus, it must include some clue as

⁷ Mekhilta (Parashat vaYassa 1).

to how the Israelites evolved into the people who could stand at Sinai and become God's nation.

There are two central features of how the Israelites were to respond to the Mannah:

- (1) They were to only take the proper amount per person in the household.
- (2) They were to take double on Friday and take none on Shabbat.

Each of these commands (which, for the most part, the whole nation followed) carries a critical step in the development of the holy nation.

The command for each person to restrict himself to a daily portion for each member of the household represented not only a good deal of faith in God, but also tremendous self-restraint and concern for one's fellow.⁸ This is how He explains the "test" of the Mannah (16:4) – that we were tested to see how much concern each of us could demonstrate for our fellow, knowing that if we took more than our portion, someone else would go hungry. Indeed, the Israelites passed this test with flying colors! (v. 18) For a slave people, wandering in a desert to exercise this much self-restraint was a demonstration of their readiness to stand as a unified nation and to enter into a covenant which includes mutual responsibility.

The second piece is an even stronger statement. We first learn about Shabbat in the beginning of Genesis. God created the world in six days and ceases creating on the seventh day. For the first time, we are given the command to abstain from certain types of creative actions on Shabbat – in imitation of God. The lesson of Shabbat is integral to the education of the B'nei Yisrael: They are not

⁸ Cf. Y. Medan, "Efah v'Efah: An Inquiry into Israel's Travels in the Desert," *Megadim* 17:61–90 [Hebrew].

merely to be the recipients of God's bounty – they are to be His partners in this world.

X. Summary

Now we can see the step-by-step education of the Israelites and how they come from being a “*nation in the midst of another nation*” to “*a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation.*”

Moving from a static relationship with God which revolves around one event in their personal past and which would be celebrated and commemorated in the family (13:1–16)...

...to experiencing of God's power “firsthand”; (14:1–15:21)...

...to learning that the relationship with God will be ongoing (15:22–26)...

...to a reminder that their roots are ancient and that their nourishment comes from those roots (15:27)...

...to an exercise in concerned fellowship and partnership with God (16:1–27)...

...to a demonstration that the relationship with God will be a flowing source of life coming from Sinai (17:1–7)...

...to demonstrating their own readiness to fight and play a role in their own survival (17:8–16)...

...to being introduced to the Academy of Moses our teacher (18:1–27)...

...to standing at Mount Sinai and being invited to become God's holy people (19:1–6).

Afterword

By finding the beginning and end points of the journey, each marked with a common word *li*, we were able to identify a large chiasmus which takes us from the passive, relatively impotent nation of slaves to an active, dynamic

nation prepared to enter the Covenant at Sinai. The axis of the story, the fulcrum of the chiasmus, is the story of the Mannah, where the ultimate lessons needed for any people to be free – the lessons of communal responsibility and the maturity to exhibit self-restraint to ensure the common weal – are learned and the people pass their test successfully.

ב

ז: 1

הנני עמד לפניך שם על הצור בחרב והכית
בצור ויצאו ממנו מים ושתה העם ויעש כן
משה לעיני זקני ישראל:

ט: 1

ויאמר משה אל יהושע בחר לנו אנשים וצא הלחם
בעמלק מחר אנכי נצב על ראש הגבעה ומטה
האלהים בידי:

יח: כא–כב

ואתה תחזה מכל העם אנשי חיל יראי א-להים אנשי אמת
שנאי בצע ושמת עליהם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי חמשים
ושרי עשרת:
ושפטו את העם בכל עת והיה כל הדבר הגדל יביאו אליך
וכל הדבר הקטן ישפטו הם והקל מעליך ונשאו אתך:

ט: 7–1

אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי למצרים ואשא אתכם על כנפי נשרים
ואבא אתכם אלי: ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקלי ושמרתם את בריתי
והייתם לי סגלה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ: ואתם תהיו לי
ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל בני ישראל:

The Structure of Exodus 13:2–19:6 מבנה פרשת בשלח



יג:ב

קדש לי כל בכור פטר כל רחם בבני ישראל באדם ובבהמה לי הוא :

יג:ד

והיה כי ישאלך בנך מחר לאמר מה זאת ואמרת אליו בחזק
יד הוציאנו ה' ממצרים מבית עבדים :

יד:ד

ה' ילחם לכם ואתם תחרישון :

טו:כג–כה

ויבאו מרתה ולא יכלו לשתת מים ממרה
כי מרים הם על כן קרא שמה מרה :
וילנו העם על משה לאמר מה נשתה :
ויצעק אל ה' ויורהו ה' עץ וישלך אל המים
וימתקו המים שם שם לו חק ומשפט ושם
נסהו :

טו:כז

ויבאו אילמה ושם שתים עשרה
עינת מים ושבעים תמרים ויחנו
שם על המים :

טז

ויאמר ה' אל משה הנני ממטיר
לכם לחם מן השמים ויצא העם
ולקטו דבר יום ביומו למען אנסנו
הילך בתורתך אם לא :
... זה הדבר אשר צוה ה' לקטו
ממנו איש לפי אכלו עמר לגלגלת
מספר נפשתיכם איש לאשר
באהלו תקחו : ויעשו כן בני
ישראל וילקטו המרבה והממעט :
וימדו בעמר ולא העדיף המרבה
והמעט לא החסיר איש לפי
אכלו לקטו :

Joseph's Bones: *Peshat*, *Derash*, and in Between

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Introduction

At the conclusion of Genesis, Joseph adjures his brothers to bring his bones out of Egypt when God fulfills His promise to redeem the Israelites:

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. (Gen. 50:24-26)¹

Joseph alludes to the family tradition that anticipates Israel's slavery and eventual exodus (see Gen. 15:13-16; 48:21).

During the commotion of the exodus several generations later, Moses locates Joseph's bones. The Torah refers to Joseph's oath, highlighting that Israel fulfilled that promise:

And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, "God will be sure to take notice of you: then

¹Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

you shall carry up my bones from here with you.”
(Exod. 13:19)

The saga of Joseph’s bones reaches its conclusion at the end of the Book of Joshua, when the Israelites bury them in Shechem:

After these events, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of one hundred and ten years...The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought for a hundred *kesitahs* from the children of Hamor, Shechem’s father, and which had become a heritage of the Josephites. (Josh. 24:29-32)

That Tanakh devotes such attention to Joseph’s bones highlights their significance and invites readers to explore the meaning behind them.

The strictest *peshat* reading of these verses points to Israel’s faithfulness in keeping Joseph’s oath and to God’s fulfillment of His covenantal promises to the Patriarchs regarding the exodus and the land. Additional layers of meaning may be ascertained by viewing Joseph as a non-prophetic religious model and even as a symbol of the people of Israel whose fate is tied to theirs. These layers range from close text readings that have bearing on *peshat*, to *derash* readings that may be inspired by elements in the text but that go beyond the *peshat*. In this essay, we explore the various strands of meaning of Joseph’s bones.

A Non-Prophet Who Feels God’s Constant Presence

Though God speaks to many people in Genesis—including Hagar, Lot, Abimelech, and Laban—God never speaks directly to Joseph. The only time God speaks during the Joseph narrative is when He assures Jacob that he should go to Egypt:

God called to Israel in a vision by night: “Jacob! Jacob!” He answered, “Here.” And He said, “I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph’s hand shall close your eyes.” (Gen. 46:2-4)

God’s promise to Jacob is fulfilled immediately after Jacob’s death. In contrast, Joseph’s oath to his brothers is not fulfilled until the exodus many years after Joseph’s death. *Mekhilta*, followed by Rashi (on Exod. 13:19), suggests that Joseph believed it impossible that Pharaoh would grant permission to remove Joseph’s bones from Egypt, since Joseph’s brothers did not have the political clout that Joseph had when requesting permission to bring Jacob’s bones back to Israel. Alternatively, William Propp submits that Joseph personally chose to remain in Egypt to demonstrate his faith in Israel’s eventual redemption.² At any rate, the delayed burial of Joseph’s bones is symptomatic of Israel’s story. Joseph remains in Egypt with them, is redeemed with them, and enters the Promised Land with them.

Joseph models ideal behavior, as well. Though he never receives prophetic revelation, Joseph is constantly aware of God’s presence. He forgives his brothers by viewing their sale of him as divine intervention:

God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance (45:7).

Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for

² William H. C. Propp, *Anchor Bible 2: Exodus 1-18* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 489.

good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children” (50:19-21).

Joseph similarly credits God for his dream interpretations: “Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams]” (40:8) and “Not I! God will see to Pharaoh’s welfare” (41:15-16). Pharaoh also recognizes that Joseph has God with him: “And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, ‘Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?’” (41:38-39). These acknowledgements of God are particularly impressive given that there is no indication that Joseph received divine inspiration in the text.

Jerome Segal³ notes that it is potentially dangerous to interpret personal events as divine signs, as this method of thinking does not always lead to higher morality or spirituality. It can instead lead to arrogance and the shirking of personal responsibility. Joseph is an ideal model of a non-prophet who brings God into his life. He humbly attributes his talents to God, and has the integrity to avoid Mrs. Potiphar and to break generations of family conflict by forgiving his brothers. Sirach 49:15 appears to take the biblical emphasis on Joseph’s bones as an affirmation of Joseph’s exemplary righteousness: “There has not been born another man like Joseph, yea, his remains were taken care of.”⁴

Joseph, Moses, and Joshua

In addition to Joseph’s personal righteousness, a consideration of the interrelationship between Joseph, Moses, and Joshua further expands the significance of

³ Jerome M. Segal, *Joseph’s Bones: Understanding the Struggle between God and Mankind in the Bible* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), pp. 1-34.

⁴ James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 129.

Joseph's bones surrounding the narrative of Egypt and Israel's possession of the land.

Joseph was the last noted leader of the nation prior to Moses. Moses was Israel's greatest prophet, whereas Joseph was the nation's first leader who never received prophecy. Joseph led his people from Israel to Egypt, whereas Moses led his people from Egypt to the doorstep of the Promised Land. Fittingly, Moses brought Joseph's bones out of Egypt. Only Joseph's bones crossed the Jordan, though, whereas Moses' bones remained on the east bank of the river.⁵

Moses' disciple Joshua then became the leader who, with Joseph, brackets Moses' tenure. Hailing from the Tribe of Ephraim, Joshua was a direct descendant of Joseph. Additionally, Joseph and Joshua are the only people in all Tanakh who lived to the age of 110.⁶ The respective burials of Joshua and Joseph are mentioned together at the conclusion of the Book of Joshua (Josh.

⁵ One midrash homiletically uses this contrast to teach the importance of publicly identifying oneself as a Jew: "R. Levi said: Moses said to God: 'Master of the Universe, the bones of Joseph are entering the Land, and am I not to enter the Land?' The Holy One, blessed be He, answered him: 'He who acknowledged his native land is to be buried in that land but he who did not acknowledge his native land does not merit to be buried in his land.' Whence do we know that Joseph acknowledged his native land? 'His mistress exclaimed of him, See, he has brought in a Hebrew, etc.' (Gen. 39:14); and he did not deny it, but in addition said, 'For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews' (Gen. 40:15); he is to be buried in his native land...But you who did not acknowledge your native land will not be buried in that land. When was this? When the daughters of Jethro said, 'An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds' (Exod. 2:9), and Moses heard and kept silence; therefore he is not to be buried in his land" (*Deut. Rabbah* 2:8). Translations of the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah are taken from Soncino.

⁶ In ancient Egypt, 110 was considered the ideal life expectancy. See Shemuel Ahituv, *Mikra LeYisrael: Joshua* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1995), p. 373.

24:29-32). Rashi, Kara, and other commentators find it unlikely that the nation waited until Joshua's death to bury Joseph; rather, their burials were juxtaposed in the text to demonstrate the thematic link between the two figures. Once Israel possessed the land and Joshua completed his mission, the text could mention Joseph's bones being laid to rest.

Midrashic Readings

Midrashim use the biblical text as a springboard to advance their educational goals, and often were not intended as literal.⁷ The Sages ask: (1) Where was Joseph's coffin kept in Egypt? (2) How did Moses obtain it? (3) Where did the Israelites keep Joseph's coffin in the wilderness? These questions belong primarily to the realm of *derash*, as Tanakh provides insufficient information to ascertain answers at the level of *peshat*.

One midrashic tradition expounds on these questions as follows:

When God went down to Egypt and the time for the redemption of Israel had come...Moses was going

⁷ See, in particular, R. Moshe Shamah, "On Interpreting Midrash," in *Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2011), pp. 336–358; reprinted in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel. *Conversations 15* (Winter 2013), pp. 27-39. R. Shamah cites earlier rabbinic opinions expressing this view, and then illustrates its application with several concrete examples. For further discussion and sources, see R. Marc D. Angel, "Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries," *Tradition* 25:2 (Winter 1990), pp. 18-27; R. Hayyim David Halevi, *Aseh Lekha Rav*, vol. 5, resp. #49 (pp. 304-307); R. Michael Rosensweig, "Elu va-Elu Divre Elokim Hayyim: Halakhic Pluralism and Theories of Controversy," *Tradition* 26:3 (Spring 1992), pp. 4-23; Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 1-20.

round the city, and for three days and three nights was laboring to find Joseph's coffin, for the Israelites could not leave Egypt without Joseph. Why? Because he so bound them by oath before his death, as it is said, And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel saying, etc. (Gen. 50:25)...Moses placed himself by the bank of the river and called out: "Joseph, Joseph, you know how you have adjured Israel [with the words], God will surely remember you; give honor to the God of Israel and do not hold up the redemption of Israel; you have good deeds to your credit. Intercede then with your Creator and come up from the depths." Whereupon immediately Joseph's coffin began to break through the waters and to rise from the depths like a stick. (*Deut. Rabbah* 11:7)

This midrash is consistent with related sources that the Egyptians had deposited Joseph's coffin into the Nile so that the Israelites would not be able to bring him back to Israel.⁸ Joseph Heinemann suggests that the midrashic traditions about the Nile drew their cue from the Torah's formulation that the Egyptians "put him in a casket in Egypt," and not that they "buried" him.⁹

This midrash also portrays Moses as encouraging Joseph to rise from the depths since Israel could not be redeemed unless he came with them. A related tradition appears in Tractate *Sotah*, but with a different slant:

⁸ E.g., *Mekhilta Beshallah* 1; *Tosefta Sotah* 4:7; *Sotah* 13a. These midrashim also suggest the possibility that Joseph was buried among the royal Egyptian tombs.

⁹ Quoted in Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, p. 138. Hizkuni and Sforno (on Gen. 50:26) make the same observation, and conclude that Joseph's brothers chose not to bury Joseph properly so that one day their descendants would be able to readily access his bones during the exodus.

Moses went and stood on the bank of the Nile and exclaimed: “Joseph, Joseph! The time has arrived which the Holy One, blessed be He, swore, ‘I will deliver you,’ and the oath you imposed upon the Israelites has reached [the time of fulfillment]; if you come, well and good; otherwise, behold, we are free of your oath.” Immediately Joseph’s coffin floated [on the surface of the water]. (*Sotah* 13a)

In this version, Moses threatened Joseph. If Joseph refused to rise, then Israel would leave Egypt without him and Joseph would remain unredeemed. Understanding these sources conceptually, *Deuteronomy Rabbah* teaches that Israel requires a deep connection to its ancestors to attain redemption—Israel needs Joseph. In contrast, *Sotah* teaches that the legacy of Israel’s ancestors depends on whether later generations faithfully preserve their traditions—Joseph needs Israel. These lessons complement one another, teaching Israel’s intergenerational dependence on one another to carry out the vision of the Torah.¹⁰

A different midrash discusses the location of Joseph’s bones in the wilderness:

All the years that the Israelites were in the wilderness, those two chests, one of the dead and the other of the Shechinah, proceeded side by side, and passersby used to ask: “What is in those two chests?” They received the reply: “One is of the dead and the other of the Shechinah.” “But is it, then, the way of the dead to proceed with the Shechinah?” They were told,

¹⁰ The earlier version in *Mekhilta* combines these two elements: “[Moses] cried out: Joseph! Joseph! [The time of the] oath has come...Give honor to the Lord, the God of Israel, and do not hold up your redemption, for on your account we are now held up, and if not, then we are hereby free from your oath” (translation from Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House*, p. 131).

“This one [Joseph] fulfilled all that was written in the other.” (*Sotah* 13a-b; cf. *Mekhilta*)

This teaching is remarkable, given the status of ritual impurity the Torah attributes to human corpses. Although the text does not mention the precise location of Joseph’s bones in the wilderness, one might have surmised that they would have been kept at the fringes of the camp.

There are textual cues—while not the *peshat*—that generate the midrashic reading. The Hebrew word *aron* meaning coffin appears only regarding Joseph in all Tanakh. *Aron* generally refers to the Ark of the Covenant. It also is possible that the midrash derives in part from the formulation that Moses took Joseph’s bones “with him” (Exod. 13:19). If Moses literally continued to keep the coffin with him in the wilderness then it would have been located toward the center of the camp among the Levites or alongside the Ark at the precise center.¹¹

On its most basic level, this midrashic tradition highlights Joseph’s exemplary righteousness. Jerome Segal¹² further suggests that Joseph epitomized forgiveness after his reconciliation with his brothers. The Ark represents God’s ideal standard, whereas the placement of Joseph’s bones next to the Ark represents the people’s longing for a restored relationship with God whenever they would fall short of God’s standard.

Another element in the biblical text sheds further light on the relationship between Joseph and the Ark. When Moses located Joseph’s bones, whose oath was he honoring? *Mekhilta*, followed by Rashi and Ibn Ezra, assumes that Joseph made his brothers swear that they would adjure their children until a future generation would

¹¹ Cf. *Pesahim* 67a; *Nazir* 45a; *Sotah* 20b.

¹² Segal, *Joseph’s Bones*, p. 121.

redeem Joseph's bones. These interpreters understand Joseph's adjuring *benei Yisrael* (Gen. 50:25) to refer to the sons of Israel, namely, Joseph's brothers. In this reading, Moses in fact honored the oath of Amram, who had honored the oath of Kehath, and so on.

R. Bahya (on Gen. 50:25) disagrees. The Torah could have referred to Joseph's brothers as *ehav* as it does in the previous verse. By using the term *benei Yisrael* regarding the oath, the Torah refers to the entire nation of Israel.¹³ Moses therefore was included along with all Israelites in Joseph's initial oath. Additionally, Exodus 13:19 indicates that Moses fulfilled Joseph's oath to the children of Israel. In his *Torah Temimah* commentary, R. Barukh Epstein connects this discussion to the midrashim that refer to Moses' pleading with Joseph to rise from the Nile. Those formulations similarly indicate that Joseph's swear was binding on all future generations.¹⁴

This concept of a binding intergenerational covenant is epitomized by God's giving the Torah for all generations. Perhaps this layer of meaning also underlies the Talmudic notion of the placement of Joseph's bones next to the Ark. The Ark represents God's eternal covenant with Israel and Joseph's bones represent Israel's eternal covenant with one another. God fulfills His oath to the Patriarchs to give their descendants the land in the Book of Joshua. The placement of the burial of Joseph's bones at the book's end brings full closure to the Torah narratives.

¹³ The first time the term *benei Yisrael* appears in the Torah likewise refers to the nation: "That is why the children of Israel (*benei Yisrael*) to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle" (Gen. 32:33).

¹⁴ *Torah Temimah* and R. Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, Exodus 13:273 cite sources that invoke this verse in a halakhic debate over whether vows can have intergenerational force.

In addition to the deep connections between Joseph and the nation, the Talmud (*Sotah* 13b; cf. *Mekhilta*) also senses personal closure for Joseph. When Joseph was seventeen years old, his father sent him to Shechem to check on his brothers but instead he was sold into slavery (Gen. 37:12-14). Fittingly, Joseph was buried in Shechem, closing that circle.¹⁵ Alternatively, Radak (on Josh. 24:32) suggests that the Israelites buried Joseph in Shechem since that city was Jacob's first land acquisition and it was located in Ephraim's tribal inheritance. This interpretation connects Joseph's story with that of the nation.¹⁶

Conclusion

The story of Joseph's bones envelops the account of Israel's developing into a nation, being redeemed, accepting God's covenant, and possessing the land. The attention given to Joseph's bones by Tanakh indicates their significance. The *peshat* highlights Israel's loyalty to Joseph's oath and God's faithfulness in keeping His promises to the Patriarchs for the exodus and land. *Derash* layers of interpretation teach Israel's dependence on its ancestors, and the dependence of the ancestors' legacy on the behavior of their descendants. They also teach how an

¹⁵ While Jacob did send Joseph to Shechem, the brothers had moved to Dothan and Joseph actually was sold from Dothan (Gen. 37:17). Rashi (on *Sanhedrin* 102a) suggests that Dothan was a nearby suburb of Shechem so it would still be accurate to refer to Joseph's having been sold from Shechem.

¹⁶ Yehudah Kiel (*Da'at Mikra: Joshua* [Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1970], p. 227) and Shemuel Ahituv (*Mikra LeYisrael: Joshua*, p. 374) connect Joseph's burial in Shechem to Jacob's possible gift of the city to Joseph: "And now, I assign to you one portion (*shechem*) more than to your brothers, which I wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow" (Gen. 48:22). If the term "*shechem*" in this verse refers to the city, then this interpretation is possible.

exemplary figure who lives to the Torah's standards can serve as a complement to the Torah itself. In between these two realms of interpretation, there are parallel binding intergenerational covenants: one between Israelites and the other between God and Israel. Joseph also serves as a symbol of the nation of Israel and his fate is tied to theirs.

Where precisely one draws the lines between *peshat* and *derash* always will be subject to debate. By carefully outlining what is explicit in the text, what can be inferred from the text, and what lies beyond the text, readers can engage with these issues and appreciate the remarkable wealth of interpretation that ties together the different strands of the text in an ongoing effort to derive the religious messages underlying biblical narrative.