



Pesah

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

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REVOLUTION IN THE TEMPLE

A physical and historian, David Matar's book, Sages and Princes in the World of the Talmud Yerushalmi, will be published in Hebrew in 2025 by Yediot Sefarim, with an English edition to follow.

Rabbinic collections are replete with fascinating stories that recount pivotal events in Jewish religious and political history. One such event was the first recorded appearance of the famous sage Hillel on the national stage, when he ruled on a halakhic question with regard to the offering of the Passover Sacrifice in the Temple.

This rabbinic story has come down to us in three versions: The original recension as told by Tanna'im in the Tosefta (*Pesahim* 4:13-14); a later adaptation and retelling by Amora'im of Eretz Yisrael in Talmud Yerushalmi (*Pesahim* 6:1); and a still later reworking of the Yerushalmi version by

Babylonian sages that can be found in Talmud Bavli (*Pesahim* 66a). Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the differing goals and ends of the Amoraic editors in the Yerushalmi and the Bavli. In this essay, I will attempt to show that the original Tosefta version is itself edited and adapted from an even earlier tradition, a version that has not come down to us. Moreover, several obvious omissions and inconsistencies in the Tosefta version will lead me to a likely reconstruction of the dramatic events in Hillel's time that constituted no less than a revolution in the governance of the Second Temple.

Here is the relevant text from the Tosefta,¹ divided into three parts:

1. Once, the 14th (of the month of Nisan) fell on the Sabbath. They asked Hillel the Sage, "The Passover Sacrifice – Does it override the Sabbath [laws]?" He said to them, "Is there only one

¹ Translation is my own.

‘Passover Sacrifice’ a year that overrides the Sabbath? We have more than 300 ‘Passover Sacrifices’ a year that override the Sabbath!” The entire [Temple] courtyard banded together against him.

2. He [Hillel] said to them, “The *Tamid*, daily sacrifice, is offered by the public, and the Passover Sacrifice is offered by the public; just as the daily sacrifice is offered by the public and overrides the Sabbath, so too the Passover Sacrifice is offered by the public and overrides the Sabbath. Another argument: It is said [in the Scriptures] with regard to the daily sacrifice that it is offered in *mo’ado*, its appointed time, and it is said with regard to the Passover Sacrifice that it is offered in *mo’ado*, its appointed time; just as the daily sacrifice, where *mo’ado* is mentioned, overrides the Sabbath, so too the Passover Sacrifice, where *mo’ado* is mentioned, overrides the Sabbath. Additionally, one can make an argument a fortiori: If the daily sacrifice, where there is no punishment of Divine excommunication (for non-performance), nevertheless overrides the Sabbath, certainly the Passover Sacrifice, where non-performance is punished by Divine excommunication, overrides the Sabbath. In addition, I have received a tradition from my teachers that the Passover Sacrifice overrides the Sabbath. [This is true] not just for the first, or original, Passover Sacrifice (offered in Nisan), but also for the second, or alternative, Passover Sacrifice (offered a month later in the month of Iyyar); and [this is true] not just for the Passover Sacrifice offered by the public [in the Temple], but for the Passover Sacrifice offered by individuals [outside the Temple].”

3. They said to him, “What will be with the people, who have not brought their knives or their Passover Sacrifices to the Temple?” He said to them, “Let them be. The Divine spirit is upon them; if they are not themselves prophets, they are the sons of prophets.” What did Israel do at that time? He whose Passover Sacrifice was a lamb, buried [the knife] in its wool; he whose Passover Sacrifice was a kid, tied it [the knife] between its horns. And they brought their knives and Passover Sacrifices to the Temple, and slaughtered [there] their Passover Sacrifices. On that same day, they appointed Hillel as the Prince (*Nasi*) , and he instructed them in the laws of Passover.

To understand this rabbinic story, a short history of the Passover Sacrifice from its inception to the era of Hillel is in order. The Passover Sacrifice first appears in Exodus 12 as a divinely mandated ritual that proved central to the redemption of the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage. This sacred ritual was carried out in two stages: In the first stage, every head of an Israelite household obtained a one-year-old lamb, slaughtered it in the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan, and then smeared the lamb’s blood on the doorframes of his home. This bold demarcation enabled the Lord to spare the Israelites when He passed through the land of Egypt at midnight on the night of the 15th of Nisan, in order to strike down the firstborn and the gods of Egypt. The second phase of the ritual was a family feast, where the sacrificial lamb was roasted and eaten in its entirety by the members of each household; the original Passover lamb was eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and was consumed in great

haste, as this was the last meal before the Israelites set forth on their miraculous journey out of Egypt.

The first Passover Sacrifice is known as *Pesach Mitzrayim* – the Passover Sacrifice of Egypt; however, this sacrifice was never meant to be a one-time offering, but rather an everlasting law (Exodus 12:14), publicly celebrated on an annual basis as *Pesach Dorot* – the Passover of generations to come. In the years that followed the Exodus from Egypt, the holiday of the Passover Sacrifice on the 14th of Nisan was connected to the separate seven-day holiday called *Hag Ha-Matzot*, the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The festive family meal on the night of the 15th of Nisan, when the Passover lamb was eaten, became the initial celebratory feast of the Festival of Unleavened Bread; the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud gave the meal a religious and educational dimension, and made the Passover *Seder* a central feature of the Jewish calendar.

According to Scripture, the very first *Pesach Dorot* was celebrated by the Israelites in the Sinai desert on the first anniversary of the Exodus from Egypt (Numbers 9:1-5). We next hear of the Israelites performing the Passover Sacrifice in their encampment at Gilgal, after they entered the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua (Joshua 5:10). Deuteronomy 16:1-8 insists that the Passover Sacrifice be offered only “at the place that the Lord will choose as a dwelling for His name” – that is, at the Temple in Jerusalem. However, it seems that the offering of the Passover Sacrifice as a public ceremony at the Temple was honored more in the breach than in

performance throughout the First Temple period. Only in the generation before the destruction of the First Temple did King Josiah organize a mass Passover Sacrifice as the centerpiece of a religious revival that reaffirmed and renewed the people’s covenant with their G-d. The Book of Kings (II Kings 23:21-22) reports that Josiah commanded all of the people to perform the Passover Sacrifice “as written in the book of the covenant,” and comments: “Now, no such Passover Sacrifice had been made since the days of the judges who ruled Israel, nor during all the days of the kings of Israel and Judea.”

Whatever the fate of the public Passover Sacrifice in the First Temple period and the subsequent Babylonian exile, we do know that, with the return to Zion and the construction of the Second Temple, the Passover Sacrifice served an important role in bringing the returned exiles to the Temple “to seek out the Lord, the G-d of Israel” (Ezra 6:21). We have no written sources that document the 400 years from the days of Ezra in the mid-5th century BCE to the days of Hillel in the late 1st century BCE, but the rabbinic literature assumes that, during this period, Passover Sacrifices were brought annually to the Temple courtyards in Jerusalem by *havurot*, dedicated family groups, from all over Israel and the diaspora.

The Mishnah (*Pesahim* 5) paints the Passover Sacrifice in the Temple as an impressive and majestic spectacle. Representatives of each *havurah* arrived with their lambs at the Temple on the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan, and were ushered into the inner courtyard in three

successive groups. Representatives of the *havurot* in each group slaughtered their animals in the inner Temple courtyard. Then the Temple priests received the animals' lifeblood in gold and silver vessels; they then conveyed the blood through a human chain of priests to the altar, where a designated priest threw the blood of the sacrifices onto the foundation of the altar. The Temple priests also burned the fats of the Passover Sacrifices on the altar. Trumpets were blown at the beginning of the sacrificial process, and, throughout the ritual, those who brought the sacrifices sang the *Hallel*, psalms of praise (Psalms 113-118), in the Temple courtyard accompanied by the professional Levite singers.

Our story in *Tosefta Pesahim* posits a situation where the designated day of the Passover Sacrifice, the 14th of Nisan, fell on the Sabbath. The narrative implies that the ritual was canceled or suspended by the Temple authorities, most likely on the grounds that elements of the sacrificial process, such as the act of slaughtering, violated the Sabbath laws. In a last-ditch effort to reverse this ban and bring the masses to the Temple courtyards to offer their Passover Sacrifices, unnamed persons approached the prominent Pharisaic sage Hillel during the Sabbath that fell on the 14th of Nisan and spoke to him in the Temple precincts. Phrasing their request as a halakhic query, they in effect asked Hillel to convince the priestly administrators of the Temple to allow the sacrificing of the paschal lambs despite the Sabbath prohibitions. Hillel agreed to support this initiative, but before he could marshal his arguments he encountered

determined opposition; we are told that 'the entire Temple courtyard' banded together against him. This unique phrase can only mean one thing: the priestly administrators, who were present at the time in the Temple courtyard, united in order to frustrate the demand made in the name of the people, opposing the offering of the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath.

Why did the chief priests oppose the initiative of the people and their advocate Hillel? I suggest that we identify the recalcitrant priests who banded together against Hillel in the Temple courtyard as members of the sect of the Sadducees, an aristocratic priestly caste who controlled the Temple administration for some two hundred years – from the reign of the Hasmonean king Yohanan Hyrcanus (134-103 BCE), through the era of Hillel (flourished circa 30 BCE), until the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE). The Sadducees are often portrayed in rabbinic literature in a negative sense, as opponents of the Pharisaic sages in the determination of the *halakhah* in and outside the Temple, and as deniers of basic theological doctrines of the Pharisees, such as faith in the afterlife and in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees, however, saw themselves in a positive light, as faithful guardians of ancient traditions that had been customary in the Temple for most of the First Temple and Second Temple periods. These traditions were gathered and transmitted by the High Priests of the House of Tzadok, a prestigious priestly dynasty named after the High Priest who served under King Solomon, builder of the First Temple.

The Sadducee heads of the Temple who confronted Hillel saw the Passover Sacrifice as an anomalous and problematic phenomenon. This sacrifice had originated outside the Temple as a familial offering that was slaughtered and eaten near the home; this semi-private sacrificial process was only introduced into the Temple precincts at a later date. The Sadducees relied on internal and autonomous Temple traditions that contradicted Hillel's casuistic arguments, and therefore did not equate the Passover Sacrifice with the daily offerings (which were indeed routinely offered on the Sabbath). Hillel's rhetorical brilliance left the priests in the Temple courtyard unimpressed, since they did not possess a specific internal tradition that would legitimate the offering of the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath.

In the end, the priests were cowed only by Hillel's assertion that he had received the requisite tradition independently from his Pharisaic teachers. Hillel claimed that the locus of authority as far as Temple ritual was concerned was not centered on the Temple priesthood and their traditions; popular traditions transmitted by the Pharisaic sages are to be considered as even more authoritative than Temple traditions.

Despite Hillel's triumph in forcing the Temple priests to agree in principle to offer the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath, a practical halakhic problem now came to the fore: those who had pushed Hillel to intervene on their behalf with regard to offering the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath were not prepared for the unforeseen victory of their champion, and had left at home

the lambs, kids, and the slaughtering knives needed for the sacrificial act. The people were concerned that bringing their animals and knives to the Temple would violate the Sabbath laws with regard to transporting objects between domains as well as within the public domain. Once again, questioners turned to Hillel for a solution, but, in this instance, he did not have a tradition at hand that would circumvent the prohibition against carrying items on the Sabbath.

Hillel was now forced to abandon his original argument from a competing tradition, and boldly make a radical, even revolutionary, claim. Hillel declared that the common people of Israel act in the public sphere as inspired by the Divine Spirit. The statement that the people of Israel are, if not prophets, at least the sons of prophets, is extraordinary, for these 'sons of prophets' and their representatives – the Pharisaic sages headed by Hillel, could exploit their prophetic status to create new traditions that override and replace ancient traditions of the Temple priests! One should note that once Hillel had come so far in his rhetorical journey as to claim for the people the authority normally reserved for the prophets of old, that he no longer needed to rely on the traditions he had received from his teachers with regard to bringing the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath.

Hillel's new argument marked a turning point in the administration of the Temple. No longer would decisions about ritual be governed by internal traditions of the Sadducees that were supposedly of prophetic origin. The Pharisees led by Hillel advanced an alternative line of authority

that lent Divine sanction to any custom or legislation that enjoyed wide popular support. In the balance of power between the Sadducees and Pharisees, roles were reversed: Sages were no longer intimidated by ancient priestly traditions, so long as they could invest popular practice with the authority of prophecy and the plausible rationale of casuistic arguments. These new 'traditions' of the Sages would come to reshape Temple ritual.

Both the Yerushalmi and the Bavli adaptations of this story do not admit the circumstances reflected in the Tosefta, that an internal tradition of the Temple priesthood negated the offering of the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath. Both sources assume that the Sages, not the priests, were in control of the Temple from the days of Ezra the Scribe, and therefore posit that the crisis arose when the chief Sages of Hillel's time had simply forgotten what had been done in the Temple the last time the 14th of Nisan fell on the Sabbath. This interpretation of events is hardly tenable on its face. After all, according to astronomic calculations, the 14th of Nisan falls on the Sabbath roughly once in fourteen years; if the Sages were really in charge of administering the Temple, any and all legal precedents would be enshrined in rabbinic tradition rather than forgotten! It would seem that later talmudic editors of the Yerushalmi and the Bavli projected their own post-Temple reality onto the Tosefta story, and were no longer aware of clashes between the Sadducees and Pharisees in the Temple. Thus, they moved the locale of the controversy over the offering of the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath from the courtyard of the

Temple to the rabbinic study hall, and explained ignorance of the law by positing that senior Sages had forgotten their own traditions and precedents.

Truth be told, the fateful conflict between the Sadducees and Pharisees over control of the Temple ritual is not clearly delineated in the Tosefta text; the protagonists are referred to obliquely, and any mention of their motivations is entirely suppressed. Thus, the vigorous opposition of the priesthood to Hillel's initiative is cloaked in the vague description of 'the entire courtyard banding together.' Moreover, the persons who sent Hillel into the fray against the Temple leadership are never named throughout the story; "They" asked Hillel about offering the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath, and those same anonymous figures said to him that there was still an issue of bringing animals and knives into the Temple on the Sabbath. Presumably, these same unidentified persons appointed Hillel as the Nasi – a semi-royal title that denotes leadership.

In order to clarify the meaning of the Tosefta, we must ask: Over which group was Hillel appointed Nasi? The answer lies in the identification of the mysterious persons who spoke to Hillel. If we posit that these people were the leaders of the sect of the Pharisees who sent their colleague Hillel to battle their Sadducee rivals, we will conclude that Hillel was appointed leader of the Pharisees – that is, chief of the Sages of that generation. However, it is more likely that representatives of the masses were the ones who approached Hillel; these were spokesmen for all

those common people who had prepared lambs and knives in their homes but were not allowed to bring their sacrifices to the Temple on the Sabbath. It seems clear from the course of events in our story that the pressure for change in the laws of the Passover Sacrifice came from below, for Hillel gave credit to the people (and not his fellow Pharisees) as “sons of prophets” who knew how to solve halakhic problems that they encountered. According to this approach, Hillel was appointed Nasi over all those who benefitted from the change that he brought about in the Temple – that is, the masses who sought to offer their Passover Sacrifices in the Temple.

The appointment of Hillel as the Nasi over the people and by the people serves as the coda to this story, and in fact functions as its point and object lesson. The Mishnah (*Avot* (1-2) traces a dynastic line of scholarly leaders from Hillel (30 BCE) to Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi (180-220 CE) and beyond, until the end of the dynasty in 429 CE. The halakhic and administrative authority of the Patriarchal dynasty, exercised over some 17 generations and 450 years, rested to a great extent on the claimed descent of the family from the iconic sage Hillel. For advocates of the *Beit Ha-Nasi*, the Patriarchate, the popular acclamation of Hillel as Nasi set a precedent that legitimated the rule of his descendants over scholars and commoners alike in all following generations. In the era of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi in the early third century, a further claim was circulated by the patriarchal court: Hillel was himself descended from King David, and thus the institution of the Patriarchs took on royal and

messianic overtones.

In order to turn the appointment of Hillel into a binding precedent, it was necessary for the Toseftan editors of this story to hide the sectarian background of Hillel’s political victory as much as possible. Since the Sadducees had disappeared with the destruction of the Temple, long before the Tosefta was edited in the first third of the third century, Hillel is depicted not as a Pharisaic polemicist arguing with other sectarians, but as a champion of the people, a leader who advanced a populist agenda and taught Torah to the masses. Hillel was, in effect, transformed into the first of the Patriarchs.

Despite the Toseftan editors’ attempt to recast this story to glorify Hillel, and by extension - the Patriarchal dynasty for generations to come, the original significance of this story must not be overlooked. The resolution of the controversy over offering the Passover Sacrifice on the Sabbath signified a major victory of the Pharisaic sages over the Sadduceean priests. As a result, from the days of Hillel until the destruction of the Temple 100 years later, the Sadducees indeed administered and carried out all of the manifold Temple rituals, but they were directed and supervised in many respects by their Pharisaic opponents. This shift was symbolized by the tradition that located the Pharisee-dominated *Sanhedrin*, High Court, in the *lishkat ha-gazit*, the office of the hewn chamber adjacent to the Temple precincts. On the 14th of Nisan that fell on a Sabbath, Hillel led a bloodless revolution in the Temple courtyard that conquered the Temple on

behalf of his fellow Pharisaic sages, but, in a broader perspective, on behalf of the entire Jewish people.

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WHERE IS THE JUSTICE IN THE TENTH PLAGUE?

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At Seders this weekend throughout the world, Jews will seek to fulfill the “obligation to see [ourselves] as if [we] had taken part in the exodus from Egypt.” This is far easier said than done. Not only must we imagine ourselves as people who had been oppressed slaves for generations, we must also ponder what it would have been like to take leave of our former oppressors. To do that, we must grapple with the question of whether the Egyptians were treated justly by both God and Israel.

To be sure, God foretells in the Covenant of the Parts that the nation that would host and subjugate Abraham’s descendants as “stranger(s)” would be “judged”; and that in the wake of such judgment, Abraham’s descendants would leave for the promised land with “much movable property” ([Genesis 15:14](#)). But how was it just for God to kill all the Egyptian first-born in

the tenth plague, including the first-born of prisoners, servants, and animals? And how was it just for Israel to “strip” the Egyptians of their valuables forever while telling them that this was just one “neighbor” “borrowing” from another (Exodus [3:22](#), [12:36](#))?

It is insufficient to explain this question away by noting that the Egyptians were complicit in the enslavement of Israel. After all, a close reading of Genesis 47 reveals that Israel had previously been complicit in the enslavement of the Egyptians! Whereas there was “no bread” in all the land of Egypt ([Genesis 47:14](#)), thus leading the Egyptians to sell themselves, their livestock, and their lands to Joseph (on Pharaoh’s behalf), Joseph made sure that there was sufficient bread for everyone in his family (Genesis 47:12).¹

Moreover, even if we stipulate that the Egyptians were more blameworthy (perhaps the Egyptians were more directly involved in Israel’s enslavement, or perhaps the manner of enslavement was crueler), this begs the question of why Egyptian suffering took the form that it did: Why specifically the firstborn? Why must even the weakest and least morally autonomous members of society (the children of captives, slaves, and animals) be punished? And why must the Egyptians be seemingly cheated out of their valuables?

In the following, I present a text-based sociological theory that addresses these and related questions. I will uncover a theme lying just

¹ For elaboration on these points, see my Lehrhaus essay [“Why Do we Deserve God’s Favor?”](#)

below the surface of the text that sheds distinctive light on one of the key moral lessons imparted by the Exodus. The central idea is captured by Deuteronomy's (23:8) enigmatic injunction "not to abominate the Egyptian, since you were a stranger in his land." Egypt in fact *had* abominated the stranger, and the Hebrew in particular. The tenth plague subverts this treatment in a dramatic way and it thereby puts the lie to arbitrary systems of social classification more generally.

Puzzles of the Tenth Plague

Let us first review the puzzles concerning the tenth plague. First, it is unclear why the plague focuses on the firstborn, and why there is such emphasis on how the plague struck the full gamut of social statuses in Egyptian society: "from the firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne, to the firstborn of the maidservant behind the millstones, to every first-born of the livestock" (Exodus 11:5); "every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from man up to and including livestock" (Exodus 12:12); and "from the first-born of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the first-born of the captive, who is in the dungeon (*beit ha-bor*), and every first-born of the livestock" (Exodus 12:29). It is unclear why the Torah must stress the range in social statuses subject to this particular plague. It is noteworthy, though, that the term for dungeon leads the attentive reader to recall Joseph, who is the only person in the Bible to be held captive in a *bor* (the literal meaning of which is "pit" or "cistern"), something that was

perpetrated against him twice—once by his brothers in Canaan (Genesis 37:22-29), and once by the Egyptians (40:15, 41:14).

Second, it is concerning that Israel seems to acquire the Egyptians' valuables via a ruse. Two verbs must be reckoned with in this regard: *she'ielah* and *netzilah*. The biblical text uses the first verb three times to describe how Israelites should ask their neighbors for their gold and silver vessels and for their clothing² (Exodus 3:22; 11:2; 12:35-36); the second verb is used on the first and third occasions to summarize (seemingly extraneously) what was accomplished via such property transfer. Each of these verbs is rare and difficult to interpret.

Based on the only other time the latter verb is used in the Hebrew Bible—when Israel stripped their "finery" at the culmination of their process of atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf (Exodus 33:6)—it is generally understood as meaning that Israel "stripped" Egypt of its valuables. Since in one other context (Exodus 22:13) the verb *she'ielah* clearly means to borrow, it is typically understood as meaning that Israel asked their Egyptian neighbors if they could borrow their expensive vessels and clothing. This is troubling, given that Israel apparently knew they were not going to return to Egypt (see Exodus 6:6-9). Moreover, even in the description of the moment, "borrowing" mixes uneasily with the imagery of "stripping" someone of their valuables.

² The reference to clothing is absent in 11:2.

As reviewed by R. Elhanan Samet,³ debates go back more than two thousand years as to how it could have been justified to borrow Egyptian valuables under apparently false pretenses. Various exegetes have tried to resolve the difficulty by arguing that *she'eilah* does not actually mean “to borrow” here, but rather “to ask to give.”⁴ But R. Samet argues persuasively that this position is hard to sustain; after all, had the text wanted to say clearly that the Egyptians had been asked to give the vessels and clothes as gifts, it could have done so. Rather, and as best captured in the use of the word *she'eilah* in I Samuel 1 when Hannah names her son Samuel “because from God *she'iltiv*,” *she'eilah* connotes some degree of shared ownership whereby multiple parties have rights with respect to the person or object (e.g., Hannah is borrowing Samuel for a time, but she is also lending him to God). And yet even if shared ownership is less problematic than borrowing, it still begs the question: wouldn't a request for transfer of ownership be more straightforward and honest than a request for shared ownership?

This question is compounded by the Egyptians' apparent motivation for acceding to the request. One would imagine that the Egyptians would only agree to share their valuables under great duress—that the specter of further suffering and death was the motivating factor. Perhaps so, but

the text repeatedly emphasizes that “God [would] give the favor of the [Hebrew] nation into the [Egyptians'] eyes” (Exodus [3:21](#), [11:3](#); [12:36](#)). It is perhaps not a surprise that Egypt would need prodding from God to look upon Israel favorably. But why was it important that this happen? Wasn't it sufficient that they share their property? Did they have to like doing so, too?

A final aspect of the tenth plague also deserves our attention, both because it too is puzzling but also because it provides a path towards resolving the larger puzzle. In particular, it is noteworthy that unlike the other nine plagues, the tenth was apparently a surprise, even to Moses, despite his being given advance warning of it.

Consider first the dialogue between Pharaoh and Moses after the ninth plague ([Exodus 10:21-11:10](#)). Based on their stormy exchange (“And Pharaoh said to him, ‘Leave me. See that you never see my face again because on the day you next see my face, you will surely die!’ And Moses responded, ‘You have spoken truly; I will never see your face again!’”), it seems evident that Moses thought the ninth plague was the final one.⁵ But, apparently, before Moses could leave Pharaoh's presence, God revealed Himself to Moses and instructed him regarding the tenth plague. It is puzzling that Moses wasn't expecting a tenth plague, because God had foreshadowed it

³ Samet, Elhanan. 2004. [“She'ilat Hakeilim through the Lens of the Apologetic Commentary and the Lens of Other Commentary” \(Hebrew\)](#). *Iyunim be-Parashat Hashavua* Volume 1, Series 2.

⁴ See e.g., S.R. Hirsch, *op cit*.

⁵ Important evidence that the tenth plague was a surprise to Moses is that he and Pharaoh do in fact see each other again, when Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron to the palace to usher them out of the country ([Exodus 12:30-32](#)).

much earlier ([Exodus 4:22-23](#)):

And you should say to Pharaoh,
“So says the Lord, ‘Israel is my first
born.’ And I will say to you, ‘Send
[forth] my son so he may serve
me.’ And if you refuse to send him
[forth], behold I will kill your first
born son.”

Neither Pharaoh nor Moses should thus have been surprised by the tenth plague. Perhaps the surprise was that it was not just Pharaoh’s son who was to be killed, but all the firstborn of Egypt. That is indeed hard to fathom.

Even clearer evidence that the tenth plague was surprising can be derived from a comparison of the tenth plague with the aftermath of the fourth. After the fourth plague, the first in which the Israelites (at least those in Goshen) were spared, Pharaoh makes his first concession to Moses: he offers that Israel can offer sacrifices “in the land.” Moses counters by saying ([Exodus 8:22](#)) that

it is not appropriate to do this,
because it would be an
abomination to Egypt [*to’avat
Mitzrayim*] that we would sacrifice
to the Lord our God; could we
sacrifice an abomination to Egypt
[*to’avat Mitzrayim*] before their
very eyes—wouldn’t they stone
us?

A hint that this passage should be compared with the events of the tenth plague lies in the fact that

it is the only other time in the narrative when Egyptian “eyes” are mentioned. And when we perform this comparison, the results are striking; whereas Moses could not imagine that Israel would offend Egyptian cultural sensibilities by performing sacrifices before the Egyptian people, this is precisely what happened immediately before the tenth plague. Indeed, Israel had to set aside a sheep or goat to sacrifice for four days before slaughtering, grilling, and consuming these animals, and slathering their blood on their doorposts. And somehow the Egyptian neighbors who were subject to these taboo sights and smells, and whose children were dying, looked upon Israel with favor, and readily agreed to strip their valuables and share them with the former slaves who smelled of “abominable” barbecue?!

Perhaps it is not surprising that this scene was unimaginable, even to Moses. The events of the tenth plague seem to have overturned basic assumptions about how Egyptian culture worked.

What is *To’avat Mitzrayim*?

This last observation offers a tantalizing clue to the larger puzzle: if one aspect of the tenth plague—the sacrifice of the paschal lamb—disrupted Egyptian social mores, perhaps this was true of the other aspects of the plague we have noted as troubling. Put differently, the Torah seems to be implying that in order to truly see things from the perspective of the participants, we must ponder what is meant by *to’avat Mitzrayim* (an “abomination to Egypt”).

To do that, we need to consider the other two episodes in which this phrase is used: (a) by the

biblical narrator, to explain that the reason Egyptians would not break bread with Joseph or with his brothers was because it was “an abomination to Egypt to eat bread with Hebrews” ([Genesis 43:32](#)); and (b) by Joseph, to explain to his brothers why Pharaoh would assign Jacob’s family land in Goshen (which had good pastoral land) if he found out that they were shepherds: “because all shepherds are an abomination to Egypt” ([Genesis 46:34](#)).⁶

Putting aside the question of how these taboos (and the one referenced by Moses in claiming that the Egyptians would stone them for performing sacrifices in Egypt) correspond to ancient Egyptian mores,⁷ several aspects of the Torah’s account of these taboos seem clear. First, the taboos have something to do with pastoral animals. This may reflect the larger tension in the ancient world between farmers and shepherds over land use

(with the Torah generally critical of agricultural powers like Sodom and Egypt, and intent on a reformed vision of an agricultural economy based on the spirit of the herdsman).⁸ More prosaically, the Egyptian aversion may be due to the “malodorous woolen garments” they wore.⁹ Accordingly, Joseph sent his brothers home with new clothes ([Genesis 45:22](#)).

Second, the taboos seem to have had something to do with eating together with foreigners, “Hebrews” in particular. Such taboos are consistent with Hebrews being “outcastes” or “untouchable” in the manner of caste systems where there is a “[line of touchability](#).” Castes above that line cannot eat from the same utensils used by members of lower castes, and certainly cannot break bread at the same table.¹⁰ It bears underlining how astonishing it is that Joseph was treated in this fashion¹¹ even though he was the

⁶ It is puzzling that, while Joseph instructs his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they are men of “*mikneh*” or “livestock” rather than “shepherds” (since the latter are an abomination to Egypt), and while Pharaoh also uses the term “livestock” in affirming the brothers request ([Genesis 47:6](#)), the brothers in fact use the term “shepherds” (compare [Genesis 47:4](#) with [46:34](#)) in reporting on their vocation to Pharaoh. It is unclear what accounts for this discrepancy, since Joseph apparently achieved his goal of getting Pharaoh to understand that they were shepherds and should thus be consigned to Goshen. One possibility is that these terms are interchangeable. Another is that “men of livestock” was a euphemism for shepherds, useful to cover the fact that sheep were necessary if taboo. Perhaps the brothers did not understand the need for such a euphemism because they were unfamiliar with Egyptian mores, and committed the *faux pas* of blurting out what should have been said sotto voce. As such, this would embed in the story a subtle critique of the contradictions that are inherent to arbitrary systems of social classification. After all, the entire episode turns on the contradiction that shepherds are taboo but are nonetheless employed by the king. And the larger story

revolves around the Egyptian abomination of the Hebrew despite using his cunning to save Egypt.

⁷ For a review of approaches to this question, see Pinker, Aron. 2009. “Abomination to Egyptians’ in *Genesis 43:32, 46:34, and Exodus 8:22.*” *Old Testament Essays* 22(1): 151-74.

⁸ See Hazony, Yoram. 2012. *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*. Cambridge.

⁹ Pinker, *op cit.*, p. 151.

¹⁰ Dumont, Louis 1980. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. University of Chicago Press.

¹¹ Some exegetes offer that Joseph must sit separately because of his royal status, but only one explanation is given to cover the entire seating arrangements: the Egyptians would not break bread with Hebrews. Moreover, Joseph was consistently referred to as a Hebrew by the Egyptians; there is no reason to think that changed.

viceroy and had married the daughter of an Egyptian priestess. It would seem that there is essentially *nothing a foreigner, or at least a Hebrew outcaste, can do to gain membership in Egyptian society*.¹² As such, it may be that the only option for Joseph was to play the role of “Court Jew,” serving the crown to save their lives but thereby likely stoking Egyptian resentment towards them as low-caste outsiders who had attained high status through illegitimate means.

Note, finally, that there are various other hints in the text that the Hebrews were treated as outcastes (in Genesis) and then as subhuman (in Exodus). The first such hint is in how Potiphar’s wife charges her husband of bringing a “Hebrew” into her house and thus “making a mockery” of her ([Genesis 39:14,17](#)). Realizing perhaps that she may be recognized as the true initiator, she plays her trump card: her husband should never have violated Egyptian caste norms and given such authority to a Hebrew. Note also the way Egyptians “recoil in disgust” as Israel becomes more numerous ([Exodus 1:12](#)); how the Hebrew mothers are described as “beasts” ([Exodus 1:19](#)); and how the Israelite overseers are worried that Moses and Aaron’s initial appeal to Pharaoh has given them a “putrid smell in the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his servants, to place a sword in

their hands to slay us” ([Exodus 5:21](#)). The Torah is tracing a process whereby the stranger begins as outcaste, and is then relegated to subhuman, in preparation for genocide. The parallels with modern times are obvious and eerie.¹³

There is one last feature of the rigid Egyptian social classifications that seems important if we are to understand the tenth plague: the status of the firstborn. In short, veneration of the firstborn seems fundamental to the Torah’s account of Egyptian society. As [R. Ari Kahn notes](#) (building on R. Naphtali Zvi Yehuda Berlin and R. J.B. Soloveitchik), “Egyptian culture was built on a hierarchical system of primogeniture, in which the firstborn ruled the family by controlling the younger siblings who in turn, controlled the lower classes, who in turn controlled the slaves.” Accordingly, just after the text describes the seating arrangements at Joseph’s home, it tells us that Joseph made sure to seat the brothers according to their birth order. The brothers were “amazed”—apparently because Joseph could “divine” their birth order (cf., Genesis 44:15). Another implication is that the brothers would otherwise not have emphasized their birth order. This may be in keeping with the Torah’s larger project of suggesting that the firstborn son (Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Reuben, Aaron) does not deserve

¹² Indeed, nothing apparently changed from when Potiphar put him in charge of everything in his house except for “the bread that he eats ([Genesis 39:6](#)).” It is not clear what Joseph meant by this, but one common interpretation is that Joseph could not touch Potiphar’s food.

¹³ For recent research on how dehumanization promotes (instrumental) violence, see Rai, Tage S., Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Jesse Graham. 2017. [“Dehumanization Increases Instrumental Violence, but not Moral Violence.”](#) *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 114 (32): 8511-8516.

as much honor as was traditionally supposed.

The Tenth Plague as Antidote for Egyptian Taboos

While Joseph was just playing God (he knew the birth order because he was actually a member of the family), God Himself was responsible for divining birth order in the tenth plague. In that respect, the tenth plague was the climax of the plagues in that it demonstrated God's ability and willingness to make distinctions as He saw fit and in direct subversion of the pretense that Pharaoh was the master of natural and social order. It is easy to make distinctions based on visible differences such as place of residence (plagues 4 and 7) or ethnicity (plagues 5 and 9); it is quite another thing to distinguish between household (and barnyard) members based on when they were born.

In addition, beyond demonstrating God's omniscience and mastery, the tenth plague also attacked the false god of arbitrary social hierarchies. Given the Egyptian veneration of the firstborn, and given the importance of Pharaoh's firstborn in perpetuating the system more generally, these are natural targets for an effort to "collapse the (Egyptian) pyramid scheme."¹⁴

¹⁴ Kahn, Rabbi Ari. "Parashat Bo: The Collapse of the Pyramid Scheme." See <https://arikahn.blogspot.com/2019/01/parashat-bo-collapse-of-pyramid-scheme.html>.

¹⁵ To be sure, this is hardly the consensus view among commentators and it begs the question of why a different term, *edyam* ("their finery") is used, as well as why God asks for such stripping after they had apparently already refrained from putting it on.

The Torah's emphasis on the range of statuses hit by the plague dovetails with this theme. What better way to show that social distinctions are meaningless than to have every single household—from the top to the very bottom of the Egyptian social pyramid, including even slaves, captives, and livestock—suffer from the same plague? All are equal before God.

"Stripping" the Egyptians accomplishes a complementary objective. Someone who has been stripped of their clothing is naked. If everyone is naked, how will status differences be recognized—especially if they have also been stripped of their valuables?

It is intriguing to compare this act of stripping with the other case of stripping—the stripping of "finery" demanded by God after the sin of the Golden Calf in order to earn His mercy (Exodus 33:6). The provenance of this finery is unclear, but the most likely source would seem to be that this is the very finery that the Egyptians had stripped off their own bodies!¹⁵ The apparent implication is that the Torah is drawing a parallel between the sin of the golden calf and the Egyptians' sin, which seems to consist of erecting arbitrary status differences.¹⁶

¹⁶ Of course, the sin of the golden calf did not involve erecting status differences. In fact, one could argue that since it too began with stripping off finery (more literally, the "breaking off" of gold jewelry; Exodus 32:3), it involved the erasure of status differences. However, perhaps the key difference is that the jewelry was not stripped but contributed to a project and perhaps each contributor could claim status by pointing to his contribution to the project.

Now let us turn to the puzzle of the sharing of utensils and clothing. To see how this fits with the proposed theme, it is instructive to consider the closest parallel in modern America: a homeless person tells you they are hungry and cold. Perhaps you offer them some food in a Tupperware. And perhaps you offer them an old coat of yours. But what if the homeless person, in a bid to preserve their dignity, tells you that they want to return the Tupperware to you after they have finished eating? And what if they offer to return the coat to you when they get back on their feet? Our instinct of course is to say, *No that's OK. You keep it.* Better to give a gift than to ask for it back, right?

Not necessarily. If the goal is to achieve fellowship between two people, sharing is actually more effective than a gift (even if there is an expectation of reciprocity). Gifts from higher status to lower status members of society are not uncommon; they may be well-intentioned but they also reinforce social hierarchy. What better symbolizes equality is the *exchange* of gifts. And paradoxically, *sharing* is even better for this purpose. Not only does it avoid the problem that the gifts may not be of commensurate value, it can blur the “line of touchability.” If I am willing to use what you have used, to wear to what you have worn, I am saying louder and more credibly than words ever could that *I am no better than you.*

It is thus perhaps not surprising that, although God had told Moses about the tenth plague,

Moses nevertheless did not expect it. It is one thing for God to intervene in the natural world. But when social processes are deeply institutionalized, they are taken for granted to the point that it may be impossible to imagine something different.¹⁷ Could Israel really sacrifice pastoral animals in front of the Egyptians given their apparent aversion to them? And then, with their bodies and clothes stinking of barbecue and perhaps even with the blood of taboo sacrifice on them, would they have the nerve to ask their Egyptian neighbors to share their clothes and utensils with them? And would the Egyptians really share them willingly? Unthinkable.

Note, finally, how God giving “the favor of Israel in Egypt’s eyes” fits with this. The conventional interpretation of this common biblical phrase is simply that one person likes the other. But a more precise interpretation emerges from a review of the cases where this phrase occurs. Consider the first instance, when Noah is said to have found favor in God’s eyes ([Genesis 6:8](#)), or the second instance, when Abraham sought to find favor in the eyes of the passing angels ([Genesis 18:3](#)).

In these and all other cases in the book of Genesis, when one agent found favor in another agent’s eyes, this meant that the first agent had succeeded in causing the second agent to look more carefully at a situation and *adjust their predetermined valuation and course of action.* God’s conclusion that man is evil and His regret at having created the world seemed definitive

¹⁷ Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckman. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* Anchor Books.

(Genesis [6:5-7](#)), but somehow Noah disrupted it. Similarly, in order to get the angels to veer off their path, Abraham had to run and intercept them, and convince them to stay. It is perhaps not surprising that the most intense use of the phrase “to find favor” (four times in Genesis 32-3) occurs when Jacob appealed to Esau to rethink his plan to kill him and his family. Esau knew Jacob, after all. How could Jacob convince him to see him differently and spare his life?

Revisiting our assumptions about a person we already know is a hard task for any of us. Accordingly, it sometimes seems to require divine intervention—when God “gives favor” to someone in an antagonist’s eyes because they apparently cannot find such favor on their own. Interestingly, the first time that God intervened to “give favor” to someone is when Joseph had fallen to the very bottom of the Egyptian social pyramid, as a prisoner in the “house of the pit” ([Genesis 39:21](#)). This was the very last divine intervention in history for several generations, not until God heard Israel cry out in agony ([Exodus 2:23](#)). He then initiated the process that began the exodus. The story thus began with a divine intervention that got an Egyptian to recognize the value of an outcaste Hebrew slave, and it culminates in a divine intervention that induced the Egyptian people generally to recognize that the Hebrews were, in fact, just like them and should have been treated as equals.

At the same time, it is good news to learn that this process did not rely solely on divine intervention. There are two key turning points in the narrative where someone who was reared at the very top of the Egyptian social pyramid was able to “see” beyond status differences and even take a risk on behalf of someone who is low-caste: (a) when the daughter of Pharaoh “saw” Moses in the basket and recognized him as a “crying lad” even though he was “from the children of the Hebrews” ([Exodus 2:7](#));¹⁸ and (b) when Moses himself “saw” the suffering of his “Hebrew brothers” and saves one of them from a beating ([Exodus 2:11-12](#)). It may be telling that these subversive actions were taken by people who were not as well-served by the Egyptian social hierarchy as others in the palace: a woman and a Hebrew. It may also be no coincidence that the former helped to raise the latter.

Conclusion

I have suggested that a central part of what it means to relive the exodus is to reckon with the Egyptian experience, one which culminated in a plague of unspeakable horror and seeming injustice. I have identified a logic underlying the troubling events of this plague, based on a theme that runs through the Torah’s account of Israel’s encounter with Egypt.¹⁹ The key idea is that beginning with Joseph’s arrival in Egypt, the Torah seems intent on sensitizing us to the awful injustices that ensue from rigid, arbitrary social

¹⁸ This insight is due to a lecture by R. Shai Held, “Turning Memory Into Empathy: The Lessons of Exodus.” Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 9, 2019.

¹⁹ Arguably, it is presaged in Abram’s original visit to Egypt. Like Joseph, he was apparently forced to make a difficult accommodation to Egypt’s treatment of foreigners.

hierarchies, and especially the injustice of treating foreigners as outcasts who can never be incorporated into the host society, to the point that they are “untouchable.”

The tenth plague is a profound retort to such arbitrary systems. There is no truer testimony to the fundamental equality of all of God’s creatures no matter their social standing than for the lives of all their own first creations to be claimed by God. There is no more vivid reversal of a conventional social valuation scheme than for former oppressors to publicly acknowledge the fellowship of the people they had regarded as outcasts and even as subhuman. And there is no more powerful gesture of fellowship than a willingness to share one’s valuable utensils and clothing. The overall effect is to strip oneself of all pretense, to stand naked before God.

It is fitting that the Torah concludes the narrative of Israel in Egypt with instructions for how strangers can join the congregation (via circumcision) and the injunction that “there shall be a single law for the citizen and for the stranger who (has joined the congregation and) dwells among you ([Exodus 12:49](#)).” This is a fitting retort to an Egypt that allowed no pathway for a foreigner—even a viceroy—to join the community.

It should also now be evident why Deuteronomy ([23:8](#)) enjoins Israel “not to abominate the Egyptian because you were a stranger in his land.” The children of Israel experienced a fundamental injustice in how Egypt had abominated them because they were strangers. What better way to

demonstrate a lesson learned than to transcend this practice? To relive the Exodus is to “know the soul of the stranger because (we) were strangers in the land of Egypt” ([Exodus 23:9](#)). It is to “love the stranger” as we do “ourselves” because we were strangers in the land of Egypt” ([Leviticus 19:34](#)). To relive the exodus is to allow strangers others to find favor in our eyes; to “see” beyond the institutionalized social distinctions that make us forget that we are all God’s creatures and are equal before him, and that we should treat one another accordingly.

This piece was written l’zecher nishmat my father-in-law Neil T. Wasserman (Naphali Michael ben Yosef Meir), whose seventh yahrzeit is observed on the 22nd of Nisan.

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