Vol. II. Issue 40
14 Nissan 5779 / 19 April 2019
TheLehrhaus.com

LEHRHAUS Over Shabbos

CONTENTS:

PESAH

MIKRA BIKKURIM AT THE SEDER: A VIEW FROM DEUTERONOMY

TZVI SINENSKY is the Director of Interdisciplinary Learning and Educational Outreach at the Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School in Livingston, NJ.

The problem is familiar enough: why does the *Haggadah* feature *mikra bikkurim*, the grateful farmer's declaration, as the textual basis for analyzing the miracles of the Exodus, instead of the original story in *Parshat Bo*?

Many of the classic solutions are widely known.[1] Daniel Goldschmidt claims that in the early centuries of the Common Era, when the *Haggadah* was being formed, Jews were simply more familiar with the text in Deuteronomy.[2] The brilliant if controversial Yisrael Yuval theorizes that the Rabbis sought to avoid the text in *Bo* for a polemical reason: many Easter homilies were based on Christological renderings of Exodus 12. They therefore preferred to select a different chapter entirely.[3]

Joshua Kulp suggests that the relative brevity of the passage in Deuteronomy made it more attractive for inclusion on the already-lengthy *Seder* night.[4] R. Joseph Soloveitchik similarly contends that if Torah study is the primary vehicle for retelling the Exodus narrative, the concise text in Deuteronomy better serves this purpose than the far longer narrative in Exodus.[5] Finally, R. Shmuel Goldin hypothesizes that the farmer, who never left Egypt himself, is meant to serve as a role model for the Passover celebrant: just as the farmer successfully linked his personal narrative to the Exodus, we are urged to do the same. Had we used the verses in *Parshat Bo*, the model of one who "sees himself as if he left Egypt" would be lost.[6]

Many of these resolutions are rooted, naturally enough, in an understanding of the *Seder* night or the historical moment in which the farmer's recitation was introduced as part of the *Haggadah* liturgy. None is rooted in an understanding of the larger significance of the pilgrim's recitation. Yet, as we will demonstrate, a proper understanding of the Rabbis' selection of *mikra bikkurim* is best understood against the backdrop of the book of Deuteronomy as a whole.

This is particularly true given that the aforementioned commentators sidestep a basic observation: the farmer's declaration allocates a full four verses to the Exodus, and just two to the entry to Israel. Given that the declaration is intended to thank God for gifting us "the land flowing with milk and honey," this proportion seems imbalanced. What's more, the farmer could have easily omitted the Exodus entirely. Instead, he seems to disproportionately underscore the Exodus.

The pilgrim's emphasis on the Exodus is part of a larger pattern that recurs throughout Deuteronomy. It's not so much that Moses regularly references the Exodus - that is to be expected - but the regularity with which he does so, especially as compared with the sin of the Spies (Deuteronomy chapter 1), *Matan Torah* (only mentioned in Deuteronomy chapters 4-5), and the Golden Calf (only mentioned in Deuteronomy 9:8-21), each of which receives significant emphasis but on only one occasion apiece.

Moreover, Moses unexpectedly invokes the Exodus in particularly consequential contexts. For instance, as opposed to *Parshat Yitro*, which explains that Shabbat commemorates creation (Exodus 20:11), *Parshat Va-Ethanan* contends that Shabbat is intended to recall the Exodus (Deuteronomy 5:15). As the commentators note, this linkage is bewildering: Shabbat and the Exodus seem to have no connection.[7]

---

[1] For useful summaries, see David Silber, *A Passover Haggadah: Go Forth and Learn* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2011), 1-3; and R. Shmuel Goldin, *Unlocking the Torah Text, Devarim* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2014), 262-6.

[2] Daniel Goldschmidt, *The Passover Haggadah: Its Sources and History* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1960), 30.

[3] Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 109.

[4] Joshua Kulp and David Golinkin, *The Schechter Haggadah: Art, History and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2009), 213-15.

[5] *Shiurim le-Zekher Abba Mari z"l*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2002), 156-7.

[6] Shmuel Goldin, *Unlocking the Torah Text, Devarim* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2014), 265-6.

[7] See, for example, Nahmanides to Deuteronomy 5:15. Bothered by the apparent incongruity, some commentators sought to downplay the connection between Shabbat and the Exodus. Ibn Ezra (Shemot 20:10, *Peirush Sheni*) maintains that unlike creation, remembering the Exodus is not the reason for Shabbat, but merely for including one's servants in the day's observance. Alternatively, Nahmanides (ibid.) contends that the Exodus is not a theme in its own right, but that its miraculousness serves to reinforce our faith in God as Creator.

And, as opposed to the rebuke of *Parshat Behukotai*, which ends on an optimistic note (Leviticus 26:44-45), *Ki Tavo* concludes with the prediction that the Jews will be sold again into Egyptian bondage (Deuteronomy 28:68).

Why the repeated, seemingly disproportionate emphasis on the Exodus? As Nahmanides notes in his Introduction to Deuteronomy, Moses invokes the Exodus not only because of its centrality, but also to demonstrate to the Jewish people that God wishes the best for them.

The theme of God's beneficence occurs repeatedly throughout the *sefer*. To take just two examples, Moses exhorts the nation that "the Lord commanded us to observe all these laws, to revere the Lord our God, for our lasting good and for our survival" (6:24). Later, he reminds them to "keep the Lord's commandments and laws, which [He] enjoin[s] upon you today, for your good" (10:13). Moses' point is simple: as the Jews are on the cusp of entering the Land of Canaan, they might feel overburdened by the host of commandments God imminently will demand of them. Addressing this concern, Moses reminds the people that God is not capricious. Of course, if the Jews continue to sin and overlook God's kindness, they will be severely punished. But in the end, the commandments are not intended to make life miserable but to enable the Jewish people to flourish.

Again and again, Moses returns to this motif. The word *tov* appears twenty-eight times in the book of Deuteronomy. Moreover, the emphasis on the *mitzvot* being for the Jews' good also explains the conspicuousness of the *hovot ha-levavot* [obligations of the heart] in the book of Deuteronomy. Throughout *Parshat Va-Ethanan* in particular, Moses urges the Jews to revere God (6:2) and love Him (6:5), because He loves them (7:8). Our obligation to love God is an outgrowth of the fact that He desires the best for us.

Conversely, during the desert sojourn, Moses regularly cites the Jews' complaints to underscore their inability to appreciate God's benevolence. Hoping that the new generation will not be entrapped by the slave mentality that plagues their parents, Moses underscores the twin sentiments of underappreciation and appreciation, as he tries to move a new generation from the former toward the latter.[8]

Urging a new generation not to fall into the mentality of the previous generation, Moses references the Exodus no less than twenty times in his final address.[9] God's miraculous intervention, he argues, is the clearest evidence that God loves His people.

This accounts for the anomalous references to the Exodus in relation to Shabbat and the rebuke. As Maimonides suggests (*Guide to the Perplexed* 2:31), the verse in *Va-Ethanan* suggests that the Exodus enabled us to observe and appreciate the gift of Shabbat.[10] Had we not been freed, we would be unable to enjoy a weekly respite from hard work. Shabbat, like all the commandments, is a loving gift from God, and the Jews should respond by faithful observance.

Much the same may be said for the rebuke, which concludes on a straightforward if sobering note: spurn the gift of the Exodus, and you will be sold right back into Egyptian bondage. What is more, in this light, we may understand Moses' admonition in *Parshat Shoftim* that the king not return the nation to Egypt (17:16) along similar lines: whatever the king does, he ought not desire to roll back Jewish history and return the Jewish people to an abusive place that they thought they had left for good.[11]

And so, Moses concludes, the events of Exodus serve as evidence that the gifting of Canaan and its attendant commandments are borne of love. This also explains why Moses opens his farewell speech with the story of the Spies, who questioned the value of the Land: the book of Deuteronomy, which combats precisely such ingratitude, opens with the Spies' shortcoming.

The farmer's appreciation of God's gifts can be even more fully understood in light of *Ki Tavo*'s extensive textual parallels to the episode of the Spies in *Parshat Shelah*,[12] as noted by R. Elchanan Samet.[13] Picking up on these striking similarities, R. Menahem Ziemba[14] cites the Arizal as having suggested that *bikkurim* are a

---

The seeming difficulty in drawing this connection may have motivated Maimonides (*Hilkhot Shabbat* 29:1) to omit the requirement of mentioning the Exodus in his description of the essential obligation of Kiddush, notwithstanding R. Aha bar Yaakov's teaching that one is obligated to mention the Exodus in Kiddush (*Pesahim* 117b). For further discussion of the halakhic implications of this requirement, see Tosafot Rid (*Pesahim* 117b s.v. *tzarikh*), Magen Avraham Orah Hayyim 271:1, Minhat Hinnukh 31, and Be'ur Halakhah Orah Hayyim 271 s.v. *mi-yad*.

For an original understanding of the connection between Shabbat and the Exodus, see Ezra Sivan's treatment, located at https://www.thelehrhaus.com/timely-thoughts/three-in-one-creation-exodus-and-equality/.

[8] This also accounts for the emphasis on chosenness and being children of God, such as in 14:1. It is also no coincidence that Deuteronomy describes the land of Canaan as "flowing with milk and honey" seven times, more than any other book in the Bible.

[9] 4:20, 5:15, 6:12, 7:8, 7:18-20, 8:14, 10:19, 10:22, 13:6, 13:11, 15:15, 16:1-3, 16:12, 17:16, 20:1, 23:5, 24:9, 24:19, 24:22, and 25:17.

[10] See also Bekhor Shor to Exodus 20:10.

[11] It is not only regarding the Exodus that Moses argues for God's goodness. A close reading of *Va-Ethanan* demonstrates that a primary thrust of Moses' invocation of the Sinaitic revelation is to argue for God's beneficence: As Deuteronomy chapter five concludes:

> Be careful, then, to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. Do not turn aside to the right or to the left.
> Follow only the path that the Lord your God has enjoined upon you, so that you may thrive and that it may go well with you, and that you may long endure in the land you are to possess. (5:29-30)

[12] For a summary of some of these parallels, see http://congkins.blogspot.com/2009/09/parshat-ki-tavo-mitzvah-of-bikurim-and_04.html.

[13] *Iyyunim be-Farashot ha-Shavua*, Vol. 2. (Jerusalem: Mekhon Ma'aliyyot, 2002), 398-9.

[14] *Sefer Hiddushei ha-Gaon R. Menahem Ziemba*, no. 50.

tikkun, antidote, to the sin of the Spies. If the Spies were unable to appreciate the uniqueness of God's gift that is the Land of Israel, the farmer celebrates precisely this kindness. If the Spies' spiteful report was the ultimate act of ingratitude, the farmer's heartfelt appreciation is the perfect paradigm for the praise we are charged to offer on the *Seder* night.

In fact, in the classic verses cited in the *Haggadah*, Moses makes precisely this point, linking the Exodus and entry to Canaan:

> When, in time to come, your children ask you, "What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that the Lord our God has enjoined upon you?" you shall say to your children, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our fathers. (6:20-23)

This is precisely the pilgrim farmer's achievement: he fulfills the mandate of the Deuteronomic Jew, atoning for the generation of the desert.[15]

In this light we may return to *mikra bikkurim*. The farmer fulfills the entire message that Moses seeks to impart. R. Soloveitchik put it the following way:

> Even though *haggadah* (as in "*ve-higgadta le-vinkha*") and *mikra bikkurim* constitute two separate, independent *mizvot*, their common root is to be found in the norm of *hakarat ha-tov*, expressing gratitude and thanksgiving.[16]

To R. Soloveitchik's insight about the centrality of gratitude to the *Seder* night we may add one further observation. The farmer sees the fullest evidence of his gratitude as rooted not just in the Exodus, but in its larger significance: God redeemed us from Egypt because He cares for us, and He gifted us our Homeland for the same reason. The second-generation pilgrim atones for the sins of his parents' generation by correctly seeing the beneficence of God as manifest by his gift of Canaan and as evidenced by the Exodus. It is for this reason that *mikra bikkurim* features the Exodus so heavily: far from an afterthought, a true appreciation of the Exodus' lesson is the starting point for the farmer's declaration.

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits' Faith and Freedom Passover Haggadah

ROSS SINGER received rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, Rabbi David Bigman, and Rabbi David Weiss-Halivni.

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits was one of the most creative and radical thinkers in Modern Orthodoxy. Some have placed him outside the camp of Orthodoxy, yet others have heralded his work and called for its reexamination. For nearly two decades, his writings have been republished in both Hebrew and English.[17] Academics and scholars have been producing essays and books exploring the relevance and significance of his intellectual legacy. The latest addition to this growing collection is the *Faith and Freedom Passover Haggadah with Commentary from the Writings of Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits*, compiled and edited by Rabbi Reuven Mohl.

Rabbi Mohl in his introduction to the volume describes his early fascination with R. Berkovits' work and his more recent undertaking "to read through his entire oeuvre" (11). Indeed, his mastery over all of R. Berkovits' corpus is evident in the wide-ranging selections in this *Haggadah*. He includes some of his lesser-known writings, such as the fascinating collection of sermons, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*. The reintroduction of these more obscure works takes the renewed interest in R. Berkovits' legacy to previously neglected horizons.

While completing his survey, Rabbi Mohl noticed that there were "many themes tied to the Haggadah" in R. Berkovits' corpus and so he "began to organize a Haggadah commentary compiled from his writings" (11). Rabbi Mohl is certainly correct that much of R. Berkovits' writing is extremely relevant to the *Haggadah* and the perennial Jewish narrative arc of exile to redemption. R. Mohl has done us a great service by connecting these themes in R. Berkovits' writings with relevant passages in the *Haggadah*.

Notwithstanding this service, sometimes the connections between the extracts from R. Berkovits' writings and the text of the *Haggadah* seem artificial and forced. For example, the mention of Rabbi Eliezer in the *Haggadah*'s telling of the Seder in Bnei Berak is used as a springboard to explore the dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua over the oven of *Akhnai*. In this well-known Talmudic story, Rabbi Eliezer calls up Heaven to prove that his position is correct. A heavenly voice indeed proclaims that the *Halakhah* follows Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Yehoshua and the other Sages reject the heavenly voice (*Bava Metzia* 59b).

R. Berkovits uses this story to demonstrate how essential are human responsibility and subjectivity to the halakhic process. "What God desires of the Jewish people is that it live by His word in accordance with its own understanding. In theoretical discussions man strives to delve into the ultimate depth of the truth; but when he decides that he has reached it, it is still only his own human insight that affirms that indeed he has found it … The result is not objective truth but pragmatic validity" (43)

While this is one of R. Berkovits' important and idiosyncratic positions regarding his philosophy of Halakhah, it is hard to see its relevance to the themes of the *Haggadah*. The only apparent link is the mere mention of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua in the *Haggadah,* and their appearance in the oven of *Akhnai* story. The Bnei Brak Seder in the *Haggadah* has no clear connection to their dispute.

Another theme is tenuously tied to this same passage. The Bnei Brak Seder is cut short at daybreak, as the time for the recitation of the morning Shema has arrived. This affords R. Mohl the opportunity to share R. Berkovits' understanding of R. Akiva's recitation of Shema at

[15] It is worth noting that we find this linkage elsewhere in the *Haggadah*, such as in *Dayyenu*, in which we express gratitude for each stage of God's redemption.

[16] *Kol ha-Rav*, cited in *The Seder Night: An Exalted Evening*, ed. Menachem D. Genack (New York: OU Press, 2009), 60.

[17] Examples include *Essential Essays on Judaism* (Shalem Press 2002); *God Man and History* (Shalem Press 2004); עמו אנכי בצרה, הוצאת שלם בשיתוף יד ושם, ירושלים, תשס"ו.

his martyrdom (43-44). Unlike other martyrs who recited the Shema as a spontaneous dramatic final declaration of faith, Rabbi Akiva's recital of Shema was "at the appointed time of its recitation."

R. Berkovits explains that R. Akiva's recitation of Shema points to an alternative type of resistance to oppression that was common in the ghettos and death camps of the holocaust—the act of ignoring the horrific circumstances of persecution, and continuing "about the business of living the daily life of a Jew." Rabbi Akiva's recitation of the Shema "at its appointed time" typifies this type of resistance. The only link between the *Haggadah* and R. Berkovits' interpretation of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom is the mention of "the appointed time to recite the Shema" at the Bnei Berak Seder.

Some other examples of resistance in the camps from R. Berkovits' writings are at least somewhat more closely related to the Seder. The mention of the bread of affliction in *Ha lahma anya*, for instance, serves to recall the Jews in Buchenwald who, on Pesah 1945, gave up their bread ration in the camps for small portions of thin soup. One of the survivors noted, "It may well be that their determination not to partake of bread, notwithstanding the starvation, equipped them with strength beyond that of other camp inmates" (35-36).

Similarly, *Kadesh* serves as the backdrop to introduce a historical halakhic discussion of the appropriateness of making Passover kiddush in a concentration camp over bread when that was all that was available to the starving inmates. Unlike the previous excerpts, these last two are directly connected to Passover. Still, it is hard to see even these passages as illuminating the text of the *Haggadah* in any but the most oblique of ways.

These tangential connections to the text of the *Haggadah* allow R. Mohl to introduce themes from the wide scope of R. Berkovits' thought, including the importance of the Hebrew language (25), R. Berkovits' insistence that Halakhic decision making must yield ethical conclusions (39), his position that Halakhah must reexamine the status of women in modern times (48-49), divine affirmation of the material world and the human body (26-28), the proper attitude towards secular studies (86, 104), the Jewish insistence on deeds against Paul's polemic for faith over law (50), and numerous other important topics. If intended to introduce the uninitiated into the breadth and depth of R. Berkovits' thought in a popular format, then the awkward connections can be understood. However, for this reader they were distractions from the most powerful aspect of the book: a reframing of the *Haggadah*'s recounting of the Exodus saga through the prism of R. Berkovits' theology and philosophy.

Like many thinkers in the Religious Zionist camp, R. Berkovits puts great emphasis on interpreting history. However, while many attempt to identify individual historical events of the past century or so as fulfillments of biblical prophecies or rabbinic proclamations about redemption, R. Berkovits is interested in the larger arc of Jewish history. He explores the theological significance of the powerlessness of exile, the persistent aspiration for redemption, and the meaning of its fulfillment. His original interpretation of the classic narrative of slavery to freedom provides a deeply challenging and meaningful retelling of the story of the Exodus.

The *Haggadah*'s most succinct summary of the Exodus narrative states, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord, our God, took us out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (37). It is natural to look to God's salvation to find the theological significance of the story. However, Rabbi Berkovits' thought draws us to focus on the theological significance of the subjugation and exile of the story.

R. Berkovits notes that exile

> "stands at the very beginning of the road. It all started with the call to Abraham: 'Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee…' When the father of the nation-to-be was still childless, it was already decreed and revealed to him 'Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years' … even before there was a Jewish people there was already Exile and promise of Redemption (53-54)."

From this R. Berkovits concludes that "most of the following exiles of the children of Israel were not God-ordained punishments but man-imposed persecutions" (37). And so the question that begs to be answered is, what is the significance of powerlessness and exile that is inherent in the Jewish experience?

While the overpowered status of the People of Israel should not be taken as divine punishment, it is not without theological significance. R. Berkovits explains that the experience of the subjugation in Egypt was a crucible intended by God to inculcate in His people a humility and a distaste for power. However, the experience of the Egyptian persecution was too overwhelming: "Had the Egyptian slavery lasted any longer, it would have completely broken the nation … (God) could only partly achieve His purpose with them, because the trials of their slavery exceeded their ability to suffer" (84).

Because the experience of Egyptian subjugation was too extreme, God had to cut short the lesson of exile before it could be fully apprehended. This is why the Israelites had to leave so quickly; this is why there was no time for the dough to rise. Yet this premature salvation would come at great costs in the future: "Israel was saved from destruction; (but) it was not yet mature for its mission. Hence, failure followed upon failure. The nation even lost its Homeland and was sent into the Galut once more, to learn the rest of the lesson (84)."

The experience of Galut in Israel's initial stages was intended not only for Israel's benefit but also to teach all of humanity: "God needs a small and relatively weak people in order to introduce another dimension into history—human life—not by might, not by power, but by His spirit … He could not associate His cause with the mighty" (25). Only a weak people that is committed to forgoing brute force can teach the world that might does not make right. The powerlessness of the Jewish people is part of the divine plan. For a people to be God's chosen people, they must not have or make use of brute force. Powerlessness and exile are built into the very project given to the Jewish people.

This theological interpretation is particularly poignant, as R. Mohl juxtaposes it with the passage "Not only one enemy has risen against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise against us to destroy us; and the Holy One Blessed be He saves us from their hand." Upon this we read, "The survival of a people that has lived without power is inexplicable in a world that lives essentially by reliance on power" (56-7). The Jewish people is an entity devoid of political power that somehow survives in a world of realpolitik.

R. Berkovits explains that the Holy One saves Israel despite their lack of overt power. "The secret is God's hidden presence in history. It consists of God's power-divested guidance in history. Because it is "powerless" it is hidden; yet its reality is intimated in the inexplicable survival of God's people" (57). While some might focus on the miraculous power of God's outstretched hand at the Seder as the most theologically significant gesture, R. Berkovits turns us away from the plagues and the splitting of the sea. The most theologically significant moments of salvation are the ones that took place "in every generation," by God's hidden "power-divested guidance in history."

Accordingly, impressive miracles undermine the more regular and hidden divine guidance, the purpose of which is to manifest the message of "not by might and not by power" (25). Yet this is not the only problem with miracles. They also undermine human freedom and thereby human responsibility. "Manifest divine intervention would subjugate man and destroy that very freedom without which he cannot be human" (76). This explains "the rabbinical dictum that one must not rely on miracles. For man has been called to fulfill his humanity in responsible action."

We must then ask, what is the significance of all the miracles in the Exodus narrative? R. Berkovits explains that, sometimes, the freedom that God grants humanity can bring the world to the brink of collapse. "For the freedom that allowed him to continue the works of Creation may also be used for the [destruction} of man and the world. Man's own exercise of his freedom may at times necessitate God's corrective intervention."

One might ask if R. Berkovits' continual deemphasis on both God's and Israel's manifest power can be reconciled with the age-old longing for redemption. Isn't the longing for redemption a deep-seated aspiration for a final vindication of the Jewish people through the establishment of a dominant and powerful Jewish polity? R. Berkovits insists otherwise. In fact, we should take satisfaction in having eluded the curse of political power all these years.

Echoing Rav Kook's seminal first essay in his book *Orot*, R. Berkovits writes that the powerlessness of exile has "been unpleasant, but, we say, thank God for it … Let us be grateful to the Galut; it has freed us from the guilt of national existence in a world in which national existence meant guilt. We have been oppressed, but we were not oppressors. We have been killed and slaughtered, but we were not among the killers and slaughterers" (63).

Both Rav Kook and Rabbi Berkovits had to conclude that there must be something different about the age of redemption that will allow the people of Israel to manage a polity without brute power. Rav Kook the optimist believed that "it will soon be possible for us to govern our nation by principles of goodness, wisdom, rectitude, and divine enlightenment" (*Orot,* 14).

R. Berkovits, living after the Holocaust (Rav Kook died in 1935), could not justify such optimism. Instead he concluded that in a post nuclear world, "man, having amassed so much power that he is able to destroy life and civilization on a global scale, must learn to renounce power as a means of ordering or controlling relations between people and nations … This is no longer mere sermonizing; it has become the "iron law" in the new phase of global history. Be decent or perish!" (*Faith After the Holocaust*,139) It is only in this era, when nations must renounce using their full arsenal of power, that the Jewish people can enter the stage of politics.

While R. Berkovits emphasizes the prophetic vision of world peace for the end of days, he insists that "the universal expectation is inseparable from Israel's homecoming … The redemption of mankind includes the redemption of the Jewish people in the land of the Jews" (46-47)." If Jewish dominance and political power is not the fulfillment of the redemptive posture, why this insistence on a return to the Land of Israel and Jewish sovereignty?

Rabbi Berkovits explains that "the structuring of the whole of life, personal and communal, economic, civic, social and political, that the Torah prescribes, the all-comprehensive deed which is required can ideally be achieved only by a community that is in control of its daily life." Only a sovereign nation can play out the message of the spirit over might and power in all aspects of human endeavor. Redemption, for R. Berkovits, is the ability to apply the lessons of the experience of a powerless exile to the smallest unit of fully constituted human experience: the nation.

To summarize R. Berkovits' conception of Jewish history: The Israelites could have expected the subjugation and suffering that became their lot. The exile had a pedagogic element for Israel itself. It is also part and parcel of the role of being God's chosen people—chosen to teach that one must act in this world by the spirit and not by might and power. The most significant manifestation of God's salvation is not in the pyrotechnics of the miraculous exodus. It was unfortunate that God needed to intervene in a way that undermined human freedom.

Moreover, had the Israelites had the wherewithal to withstand the Egyptian subjugation they could have learned completely the lessons that exile was intended to teach. The premature and hasty exodus would ultimately lead to other national misfortunes. Rather than the miraculous exodus, it is the mysterious sustained existence of the people Israel that best demonstrates a supernatural guiding presence in the world.

This subtle divine protection of the relatively powerless Israel throughout history teaches the great lesson of the spirit, morality, ethics, and compassion. In our post nuclear world, where restraint of power is necessary for survival, the Torah ethic of spurning power is ascendant. It is in this era that the return of Jews to their homeland and to sovereignty has taken place.

The return to the Land and sovereignty is not the end of the story. R. Mohl brings the following passage as a comment to the *Haggadah*'s closing line, Next year In Jerusalem: "The restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Zion is not a goal in itself … Political sovereignty is only the framework within which this remarkable people of history may lead its life according to its own vision and create a culture whose essential resources can only be of the spirit (142-143)."

This unconventional, and perhaps counterintuitive, conception of Jewish history is the legacy of Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits' historiosophy. Rabbi Mohl has done a wonderful job of juxtaposing and interpolating that thought into the text of the *Haggadah*. Whether or not the *Haggadah* can bear this interpretation, I leave for the reader to decide.

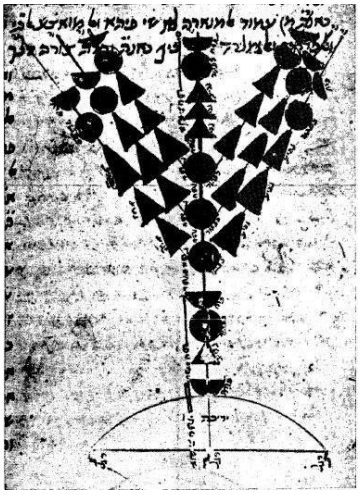
In their Forward to this *Haggadah*, Rabbi Berkovits' sons write that at their father's Seder, when the door was opened for Elijah, "our father *z"l* would say quietly in his clear baritone, 'Baruch Haba, Rebbe' (Welcome, my Rebbe). It was clear to all of us that the prophet was actually present and, more, that he carried with him the secret of Jewish history in its entirety" (8). After reading *Faith and*

Freedom, I too feel I will be able to say at my Seder this year *Barukh Haba* to Rabbi Berkovits, and that his spirit will be present, bearing the secret of Jewish history in its entirety.
whose sons and daughters are all headed in very different directions. So when we read our *Haggadot* this Seder night, do not think the pictures are just for fun or for kids. They are a rich reflection of our values and fears, raise questions about what we should depict and what we should see, and are a powerful tool for fulfilling the central *mitzvah* of the Seder night. The illustrations allow us to visualize the Exodus like we were there, to truly see ourselves as those slaves, experiencing the miracle of freedom.

The Upside-down search for hametz

ELI GENAUER is an avid collector of antique seforim who has written extensively about his collection.

The use of diagrams or pictures by exegetists to "illustrate" their points is well known. One of the most famous of these might be the *Menorah* as drawn by Maimonides himself: [18]



One of the issues that has arisen over the years is that mistakes have been made in reproducing many of these illustrations. This changes the picture considerably.

An example which is especially pertinent to the holiday of *Pesah* can be found in an attempt to print the Greek letter Gamma and the resulting error, which turns the search for *hametz* quite literally upside down.

My focus is on an illustration by Maharam Lublin (1558-1616) dealing with the laws of the search for *hametz*. I will show how a simple mistake in printing resulted in an upside-down view of Maharam's opinion. This mistake was made approximately 200 years ago and then made its way into the famed Vilna Shas, printed in the 1880's, where it has remained until this day. Ultimately, in this case, the canonical status of the Vilna Shas led many others to reprint this brief comment of Maharam incorrectly.

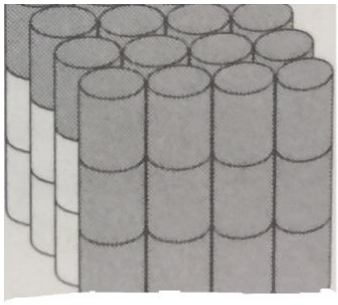
Pesahim 8b discusses the opinion of Beit Shammai regarding which part of a wine cellar needs to be searched for *hametz*, for fear that a servant has accessed the cellar during the year while holding *hametz* in his hand.

> Beit Shammai say, two rows. Rav Yehudah said: The two rows that they stated are from the ground up to the ceiling. And Rabbi Yohanan said: one row at a right angle, **like the shape of the letter gamma**.

The explanation above contains two main points in the opinion of Rabbi Yohanan:

1. A person must search the entire length and height of the front row and the **entire top row** of the barrels of a wine cellar; and
2. This area is pictorially represented by the Greek letter Gamma.

It would thus look something like this:



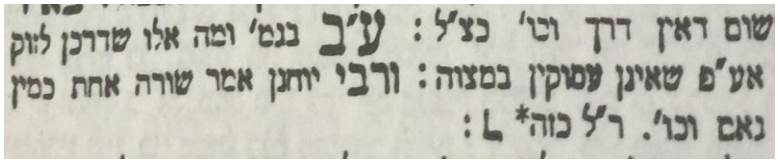
This in fact does look like the Greek letter Gamma, which consists of a vertical line joined to a horizontal line on top.

Γ

Rashi explains that the Greek letter Gamma looks like the final *khaf* in Hebrew, which has the horizontal line facing the other way.

ך

Maharam Lublin offers a very short explanation of the phrase, "like the Greek letter Gamma," simply writing "meaning, like this," and providing a picture of a Gamma. The version of the text and picture printed in the back of the tractate in the Vilna Shas and most subsequent editions is as follows:



[18] Drawing of the Temple *Menorah*, in Maimonides's own hand, in a manuscript of his *Peirush ha-Mishnah*, illustrating his comments to *Menahot* 3:7. Reproduced in Y. Kafih's edition, Jerusalem, 1967, vol. 3 p. 79.

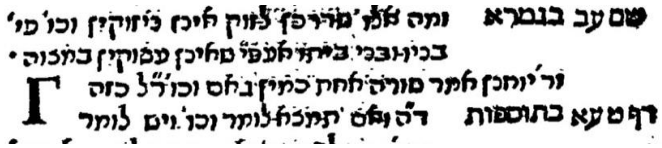
All we really have to go on in understanding his explanation is his illustration, ⌊.

This, however, seems to be incorrect on two counts:

1. It doesn't look like the Greek letter Gamma; and
2. It seems to indicate that one would have to search the front row and also the bottom row all the way to the back of the wine cellar. How would one be expected to access that back portion?

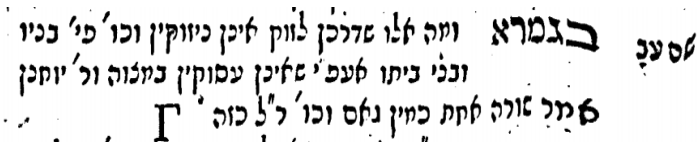
We don't have a manuscript of Maharam's commentary on the Talmud, but we do have access to its first edition. Originally entitled "*Mei'er Einei Hakhamim,*" based on his name, Meir ben Gedaliah, this version was first published in Venice in 1619.

This is how his comment on "like the Greek letter gamma" appears in the first edition.



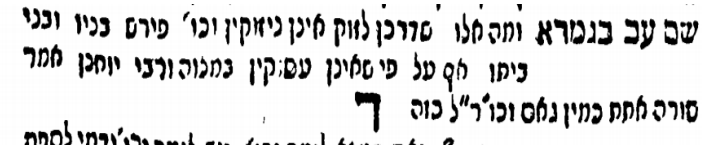
It is most likely an authentic reproduction of Maharam's handwritten notes, and also conforms with the shape of the Greek letter Gamma.

Mei'er Einei Hakhamim was reprinted many times during the late 1600s, the 1700s, and early 1800s. Here is an example of an edition printed in Frankfurt am Main in 1709:

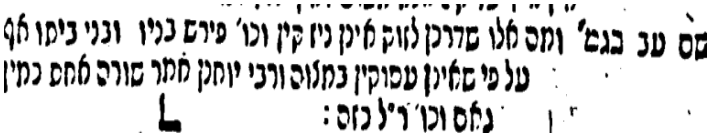


I also found the Gamma depicted correctly in editions printed in Wilhelmsdorf 1737.

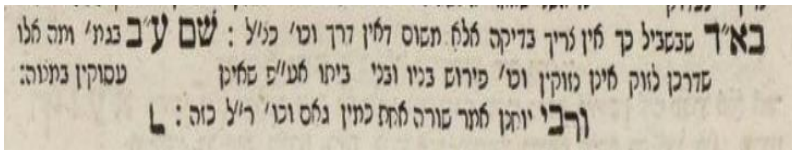
In an edition printed in Sulzbach in 1786, the horizontal line on top faces the other way, but it still gives the correct impression that it is the top row which requires it to be searched for *hametz*:[19]



The first time I found the Gamma upside down was in an edition printed in Polonia in 1809:



It was printed in a similar manner in the highly regarded Zhitomir edition of the Talmud (1861)
(courtesy of Russian State Library, "*Oseph Lubavitch*"):



It is possible that the editors of the Vilna Shas did not have access to the first edition of Maharam's commentary and therefore included a replica of an earlier printing which had it wrong. However, because of the iconic nature of the Vilna Shas, this reproduction gave it almost a sense of permanence, which is unfortunate.

One would hope that new editions of the Talmud would rectify this error and turn the search for *hametz* right side up.

Book Review: Haroset: A Taste of Jewish History by Susan Weingarten

YAKOV ELLENBOGEN is a doctoral student in Columbia University's Department of History studying medieval history with a focus on medieval Jewry.

The Seder is one of the most recognizable rituals in the Jewish liturgical calendar. This yearly celebration of the Exodus from Egypt serves as a touchstone of Jewish religion and culture, with many of its features recognizable to participants regardless of their personal background. Like few other rituals, the Seder, a night when practitioners are urged to invite strangers into their homes, binds Jews of disparate backgrounds by recalling their joint history and experiences. Of course, this night of recollection has a history of its own. Numerous scholars have written about the evolution of the Seder night, from its earliest sources of Jewish law,[20] its transformations in medieval Europe,[21] and to its more modern iterations.[22]

Yet, for many participants, the most memorable part of the Seder night is not found in the text of the Magid—the recollection of the

[19] Perhaps it was meant to mirror Rashi's explanation that it looked like a final *khaf*.

[20] Most recently, David Henshke, *Mah Nishtanah? The Passover Night in the Sages' Discourse.* (Jerusalem; Magnes Press, 2016).

[21] Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. (Univ of California Press, 2008), 205-256.

[22] See, for example, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Haggadah and History: A Panorama in Facsimile of Five Centuries of the Printed Haggadah from the Collections of Harvard University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America* (Jewish Publication Society, 1975), as well as Carole B. Balin, "The Modern Transformation of the Ancient Passover Haggadah." *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times. Two Liturgical Traditions*, 1999, 189–212.

Exodus—one of the two Biblically mandated mitzvot that we undertake at the Seder, along with eating matzah. Instead, many Seder goers are drawn to the unique foods eaten at the Seder, and the interactive ways in which they are consumed, whether they are repeatedly covered and uncovered , dipped, or made into sandwiches. While these foods may not be the primary commandments of the night, this does not mean that they are without meaning.

Food generally carries larger significance with it, and can be seen as "an expression of culture, a sign of identity, and an index of social as well as technological change."[23] The cultural importance of food is on full display when it comes to Passover, most obviously as the normal rules of Kashrut are heightened with restrictions on *hametz* (leaven) taking effect for the eight days of the festival. Other types of food take on a heightened importance as well. As the Haggadah reminds us, Rabban Gamliel rules that one does not fulfill their obligations of the day unless they recall the paschal sacrifice, the matzah that replaces bread, and the maror that symbolizes the bitterness of Egyptian oppression.

However, the food that Susan Weingarten chooses to focus on in her book *Haroset: A Taste of Jewish History* is not one of these three staples. Rather, Weingarten's subject, as her title implies, is *haroset*. Weingarten's book is full of texts that discuss *haroset*, and her book is replete with descriptions of the food, and its preparation and consumption from Mishnaic times through the modern era.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Weingarten's work, beyond serving as a collection of disparate sources about *haroset* in one place, is her ability to contextualize the food beyond the strict boundaries of the Rabbinic works in which it appears, a feature that also ties her book to larger trends in food history. From examining the origins of *haroset* as an acidic condiment similar to dips that are present in Greco-Roman culinary literature, to explaining the changes in *haroset* ingredients based on locale (Middle Eastern *haroset* is largely made from dates, whereas Northern European versions include apples and pears, and Italian and Provencal *haroset* features widely available chestnuts), the reader begins to see *haroset* as a contextualizing substance, reflecting the culture and food trends in which it was eaten.

The contingency of *haroset* is not simply based on geographical factors. Weingarten makes the interesting argument that, as time went on, *haroset* was a minor flash point for tension between laity and rabbinic authorities. With the onset of modernity, "alternative local traditions" for the preparation of *haroset* "were growing and proliferating," perhaps most memorably when some Middle Eastern communities added ground up bricks into their *haroset*, against rabbinic norms.[24] Even more scandalously, in recent years not only were the traditional ingredients of *haroset* replaced with others, but *haroset* itself could be removed from the Seder table altogether. This was often done in Israeli Kibbutzim, which rejected the traditional stress on food in an effort to create new rituals in a new land.

Thus, for Weingarten, *haroset* should be seen not only in its geographical context, but in its temporal context as well. Its changes are not only dependent on the place where it was being prepared, which could be explained as simply a function of what produce was available. Rather, *haroset* was subject to the same cultural currents that affected many aspects of Jewish ritual life, and examining its features at any given time serves to provide further insight into cultural trends.

The distinction between the practices of the laity and the rabbinic leadership highlights an important point of Weingarten's study. *Haroset* treats its subject as part of a larger religious context. Clearly, this is necessary, as the food itself only appears in the religious context of the Seder, but religion does not always feature prominently in other works of food history, and its role can occasionally be glossed over in historical treatments.[25] For Weingarten, however, religious discussions are of primary importance, shaping the food and our understandings of its symbolism.

Indeed, Weingarten maintains a discussion throughout her work of various interpretations of *haroset*, citing the classical understandings of *haroset* that have their roots in Talmudic sources. Thus, throughout the work *haroset* is presented as a substance that recalls the bricks used by Jewish slaves in Egypt,[26] and the spices added to it stand for the straw necessary to make bricks,[27] while other classical interpretations of the food are present as well, including the Jerusalem Talmud's line of interpretation that identifies *haroset* with blood (although whose blood is not specified).[28]

One of the primary symbolic themes that emerges time and again throughout the work is the inclusion of apples in *haroset* in some cultural settings, a practice that has its roots in the opinion of the Amora R. Levi, that *haroset* is in memory of the apple.[29] Weingarten compellingly argues that this elusive phrase should be connected to midrashic understandings of apples as symbols of God's care for the Jewish people, especially during their enslavement in Egypt.[30] This interpretive stream, that *haroset* serves as a representation of God's favor, extends through the medieval period into the early modern, although without referring to the same midrashic symbolism. Both Lurianic Kabbalah and Hasidic authors argue that *haroset* should be seen as a sign of God's protection now and in the messianic future.

[23] Paul Freedman, Preface to *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, eds. Paul Freedman et. al. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014), xii.

[24] Susan Weingarten, *Haroset: A Taste of Jewish History* (Toby Press, 2019), 93

[25] This is true throughout much literature on food history, but to cite two notable examples, two reference works of food history, the American Historical Association's *Food in Time and Place* as well as *The Cambridge World History of Food*, do not have articles dedicated to food's place in religious contexts, and religion comes up on a more ad hoc basis.

[26] The opinion of R. Yohanan in BT Pesahim 116a and R. Joshua b. Levi in JT Pesahim 37d.

[27] BT Pesahim 116a

[28] See JT Pesahim 37d

[29] BT Pesahim 116a.

[30] See, for example, Shemot Rabbah, 1:12.

Finally, in a particularly interesting section Weingarten argues that *haroset* was an important symbol not only in an internal Jewish context, but in Jewish-Christian interactions as well. Jews were accused of using Christian blood in their *haroset*, providing another layer of meaning to the opinions maintaining that it was meant to symbolize blood in the first place.

The historical changes of *haroset* and of the cultures surrounding it, as well as its various symbolic interpretations, are only one part of Weingarten's work. What makes this book special is its concern for modern *haroset*, bringing the historical into the present. Weingarten often notes when historical recipes match or differ from contemporary recipes she has found. These recipes are given a full treatment in the final chapter of the book which is dedicated to different *haroset* recipes that the author has gathered, most often from first-person interviews. While this goes outside the normal bounds of food history, which attempts to place food within a specific context rather than note its journey throughout time, it appears to me that this is an extremely fitting method through which to approach the Passover foods.

The Seder, while universal for all Jews on some level, is also a personal journey. We are all required to see ourselves as if we were taken out of Egypt. The tastes and smells we experience throughout the night are themselves memories—of the bricks we laid in Egypt and to the Matzah we carried out in our haste, but also of the Sedarim that our ancestors had before us. Weingarten's work makes us think not only about what *haroset* means to us, but what it meant to the generations of Jews who have eaten it before us, and how we have kept their traditions alive through our preparation, consumption and discussions of *haroset*.

Where's the Justice in the Tenth Plague?

EZRA W. ZUCKERMAN SIVAN is the Alvin J. Siteman Professor of Entrepreneurship and Strategy at the MIT Sloan School of Management, where he currently serves as deputy dean with responsibility for faculty affairs.

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).[31]

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 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 clothing[32] (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

[31] For elaboration on these points, see my Lehrhaus essay "Why Do we Deserve God's Favor?"

[32] The reference to clothing is absent in 11:2.

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.

As reviewed by R. Elhanan Samet,[33] 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."[34] 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.[35] 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 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

[33] 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.

[34] See e.g., S.R. Hirsch, *op cit*.

[35] 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).

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).[36]

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,[37] 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).[38] More prosaically, the Egyptian aversion may be due to the "malodorous woolen garments" they wore.[39] 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.[40] It bears underlining how astonishing it is that Joseph was treated in this fashion[41] even though he was the 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*.[42] 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.[43]

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"

---

[36] 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.

[37] 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.

[38] See Hazony, Yoram. 2012. *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*. Cambridge.

[39] Pinker, *op cit*., p. 151.

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

[41] 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.

[42] 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.

[43] 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.

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 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."[44] 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![45] 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.[46]

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.[47] 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 (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

[44] 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.

[45] 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.

[46] 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.

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

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);[48] 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.[49] 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 hierarchies, and especially the injustice of treating foreigners as outcastes 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 outcaste 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 strange 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.

[48] This insight is due to a lecture by R. Shai Held, "Turning Memory Into Empathy: The Lessons of Exodus." Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 9, 2019.

[49] 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.