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Midrashic Reflections on Redemption:
The Meaning of *Ge'ula* in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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3.8.99
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Midrashic Reflections on Redemption:
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Anne Ebersman

The goal of this thesis was to explore the aspects of the meaning of redemption in the early rabbinic period, and to offer a sharper, more thorough translation of the word *ge'ula*, the rabbinic term which is translated into English as "redemption."

To do this, I chose to focus on rabbinic commentary about the *ge'ula* from Egypt from the earliest midrash on the book of Exodus, Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael. My premise was that the Egyptian *ge'ula* was seen as the paradigm for the *ge'ula* to come. Thus, an analysis of the rabbis' comments on the events which took place when the Israelites were liberated from Egypt would reveal a great deal about beliefs regarding the *ge'ula* to come. This exploration yielded several interesting discoveries.

(1) According to the commentaries of Mekhilta, the Jewish people played (and, by inference, will play) an important role in bringing *ge'ula*. In the Biblical depiction of the *ge'ula* from Egypt, the Israelites are seen chiefly as recipients of God's *ge'ula*. By contrast, in Mekhilta it is clear that the Israelites, both through their actions and through a transformation of their inner state, played an integral role in insuring the arrival of *ge'ula* at the time promised to the forefathers in the book of Genesis.

(2) My analysis of *ge'ula* led to the conclusion that redemption is not in fact an accurate translation of the Hebrew value concept. *Ge'ula* can be more aptly described as rescue, or restoration. In Mekhilta, God acts as a *go'el ha dam*, the Biblical term for a strong kinsman who restores the equilibrium of the clan by overpowering the enemy. However, it is true that *ge'ula* as portrayed in Mekhilta contains within it aspects of redemption. In Mekhilta, the Jewish people is seen as redeeming itself in order for the action of *ge'ula* to occur. And even more surprisingly, Mekhilta states that in rescuing the Israelites, God redeemed Godself.

The thesis is divided into five chapters: (1) Methodology; (2) Biblical Antecedents; (3) When Will *Ge'ula* Come; (4) What Factors Will Influence its Arrival; and (5) What does *Ge'ula* Mean. My primary source was Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, a *tannaitic* midrash on the book of Exodus.

Introduction

Every evening, as part of the *Arvit* service, in the blessing which follows the *Sh'ma*, Jewish worshippers declare:

The Eternal has delivered Jacob, and redeemed him from the hand of one stronger than himself. Blessed is the Lord, The Redeemer of Israel.¹

Following this statement, in the *Amidah*, the centerpiece of Jewish prayer, we beseech God:

Look upon our affliction and help us in our need: O mighty Redeemer, redeem us speedily for Your name's sake.²

The power of redemption is invoked in the two central prayers of the Jewish liturgy. The question that generated this thesis was: what exactly *is* this redemption that is being prayed for, and about, with such yearning and devotion? After beginning to look at some of the sources, this broad query evolved into a more nuanced set of questions:

¹Stern, Chaim, ed. Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook, New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1987, p. 35.

² Ibid, p. 40

- (1) Given that *ge'ula* is a situation which we pray for and look towards with great devotion, what, if anything, does our tradition teach us about when it will come; to what extent its arrival can be predicted; and what factors, if any, will influence its timing?
- (2) What exactly is this *ge'ula* that we are wishing for? Does it truly mean redemption, as translated, or is this mapping of English to Hebrew a modern attempt to join Jewish theological perspectives to Christian ones in the Christian world in which we live? What is its actual meaning?

Even with these newly honed questions, the subject remained dauntingly vast. In searching for a way to limit the enormous question of "what is redemption?" I found guidance in a pattern established in the liturgy quoted above. In the two blessings quoted, the first refers to an event that occurred in the past. God redeemed the Jewish people from Egypt, from the hands of Pharaoh. This is an event about which we know a great deal, from the account of this event in the book of Exodus. The second blessing asks for God's help in bringing redemption now. We do not know a great deal – if, indeed, we know anything at all – about the redemption to come. However, our understanding of the redemption to come can be enhanced by considering the characteristics of the redemption that has already happened. In this way, we can try to gain more insight about the future by looking at the past.

The principle of seeking to understand the future by looking closely at the past will be employed in this thesis by looking at a *tannaitic* midrash (second century commentary on the Torah) called the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael. The subject of the Mekhilta is the book of Exodus. The Mekhilta examines in great detail the events that occurred when the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt. These events were not interpreted with such care by the rabbis of the Mekhilta merely because they were points of academic interest about the past. The Mekhilta's examination of how the Israelites were delivered from their oppressors contained far greater meaning than a mere historical inquiry. The results of this review of the Exodus by these early rabbis would be seen as the paradigm for understanding – perhaps even predicting – how the Jewish people would be redeemed from the oppressors under whom they lived at the time when the traditions collected in the Mekhilta were being generated. Therefore, in turning to Mekhilta to gain insight about the meaning of redemption, I will join its authors in focusing on the past as a way of understanding the future, in seeing the redemption from Egypt as the template for all present and future redemption.

Chapter One: Methodological Issues

Before proceeding with any kind of analysis of the materials in the Mekhilta, it is necessary to begin with a consideration of two issues. The first is, what kind of text is being analyzed – what are its provenance and its characteristics. Its companion is, what are the methods, the hermeneutic tools which will inform the analysis of this text.

Background on Mekhilta

Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael is one of the group of so-called *halakhic midrashim* or *tannaitic midrashim*. There are eight such works, four of which are complete and exist in manuscript form (our Mekhilta; Sifra, on Leviticus; Sifrei Bamidbar, on Numbers; and Sifrei Devarim, on Deuteronomy) and four of which are fragments which have been reconstructed by scholars from later compendia. Scholarly opinion on the *halakhic midrashim* divides them into two groups, based on stylistic differences such as names of rabbis quoted, hermeneutic principles used, and the way they are quoted in the Talmud. Half of the works are attributed to the school of Rabbi Ishmael, including our Mekhilta, whose full name, quoted above, is the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael. The four works attributed to Rabbi Akiva include the Mekhilta de Rabbi Simeon, an incomplete exegesis of the book of Exodus.³

³ Dr. Norman Cohen, "Introduction to Midrash" lectures, HUC-JIR, spring 1996

There has been scholarly controversy regarding all of the characteristics of these *midrashim* – are they in fact *tannaitic* (from the period before the redaction of the Mishnah in 220 c.e.), are they in fact *halakhic* (focusing on legal as opposed to narrative aspects of the Bible), are they really from two different schools. The Mekhilta is definitely included in these disagreements. In this section I will summarize briefly some of the issues regarding the Mekhilta specifically, and consider how they impact the analysis of this thesis.

Jacob Lauterbach, a leading scholar of the Mekhilta who translated the work in 1933, characterizes the Mekhilta as “one of the oldest *midrashim*....It contains very old material and has preserved teachings of the early *tannaim*.”⁴ He remarks further that the teachers mentioned by name are, with a few exceptions, all *tannaim*.⁵ Lauterbach’s early dating has been supported by several recent studies of parts of the Mekhilta. Susan Niditch, in her article, “Martyrs, Merits and Your Life as Booty,” argues that the opening of the Mekhilta conveys an emphasis on the efficacy of martyrdom, a position that fits with the historical events of the *tannaitic* period.⁵ There has also been a great deal of scholarship in the past few decades discussing a midrash in the Mekhilta which states that when God sees the blood on the lintels of the Israelites’ doors in Exodus 12, He sees the

⁴ Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael, A Critical Edition on the Basis of the Manuscripts and Early Editions with an English Translation, Introduction and Notes, Philadelphia: JPSA, 1933, p. xix

⁵ Susan Niditch, “Merits, Martyrs and Your Life as Booty: An Exegesis of Mekhilta, Pisha 1, Journal for the Study of Judaism, XIII, no. 1-2, p. 166

"blood of the Akedah of Isaac"⁶. According to B.D. Chilton, whose "Commenting on the Old Testament" offers an overview of the issues surrounding the dating of the Mekhilta, "The notion that Isaac actually shed his blood on Moriah is not attested before the tannaitic period. On the other hand, the more elaborate references to a later period, to Isaac's being burned, are absent from the passage."⁷ Chilton here is inferring that since the idea that Isaac's blood was shed -- which can be attested no earlier than the *Tannaitic* period -- is apparent in the Mekhilta passage, while reference to his being burnt -- a characteristic of later commentaries -- is absent, one can tentatively conclude that Mekhilta is a Tannaitic document

Ben Zion Wacholder, who places the work in the eighth century, has challenged an early dating for Mekhilta.⁸ However, as Chilton points out "The only positive indication [Wacholder] supplies in favor of a late dating, however, is that the Mekhilta uses a greater variety of phrases to cite Scripture than do the Tannaim."⁹

The other issue raised regarding the dating of the Mekhilta is that it is not mentioned in the Talmud, unlike its counterparts, Sifra and Sifrei. Lauterbach, however, rejects the importance of this fact. "The fact that our Mekhilta is

⁶ Massekhet de Pisha, parasha 7 (from here forward, cites from Mekhilta will be referred to with the Massekhet name and parasha number, e.g. Pisha 7)

⁷ B.D. Chilton, "Commenting on the Old Testament (with particular reference to the pesharim, Philo and the Mekilta", in *It is Written*, ed. D. Carson and H. Williamson, 134

⁸ Ben Zion Wacholder, "The Date of the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael," *HUCA*, XXXIX (1968), p. 26

⁹ Chilton, 133

nowhere mentioned in the Talmud by name could, at most, prove that in Talmudic times it was not known under this name....The absence of the name Mekhilta in the Talmud, however, cannot prove that the midrash as such was unknown to the *Amoraim* (rabbis from 220 c.e. forward)."¹⁰

Gary Porton chooses the middle ground in relation to the dating issues. He states that it is quite possible to conceive of a layered process of transmission and interpretation extending to the period posited by Wacholder, but the substance of the work appears to be *tannaitic*.¹¹

This paper will follow Lauterbach and Porton in assuming that while the redaction of the Mekhilta may be much later, much of the material contained in it represents *tannaitic* traditions.

The term "*halakhic midrash*" has also been called into question regarding the Mekhilta. As Lauterbach observes, "the contents of this Midrash...consist of both Halakah and Haggadah. In fact, they are more haggadic than halakic...More specifically, only about two-fifths of [Mekhilta's] total contents is halakic in character."¹² Lauterbach goes on to point out that since the book of Exodus itself contains more narrative than law, it is only natural that its rabbinic commentary would contain a wealth of aggadic material. Lightstone goes further in stating

¹⁰ Lauterbach, p. xxi

¹¹ Gary Porton, "The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael," *SJLA* 19 (1982), p. 167

¹² Lauterbach, xix

that the "halakhic aspects...seem innocuous at best," a finding which leads him to the conclusion that "the editor's purpose is other than halakhic instruction."¹³

These observations regarding the content of Mekhilta give support to the hypothesis with which I began, that Mekhilta would provide fertile ground for a consideration of redemption. If Mekhilta, like its *tannaitic* counterparts, contained only *halakhic* materials, it would probably have provided less of the rich imagery, detail and narrative that will be considered closely in the body of this thesis. At the same time, since Mekhilta, by general scholarly consensus, is believed to contain very early rabbinic traditions, it can provide insight into the point of view of some of the earliest strata of rabbinic thought.

Another important characteristic about Mekhilta that will impact on the analysis in this thesis is that, like all rabbinic midrash, it contains a multiplicity of points of view. In commenting on the book of Exodus, different rabbis weigh in with differing, often contradictory, opinions. Sometimes one position is deemed the correct interpretation and sometimes divergent opinions are allowed to stand without harmonization. In any case, it would be impossible to make a statement such as "the Mekhilta says that..." For each of the topics considered in this thesis, there will be a range of commentary, some of which leads to certain conclusions, but some of which is inherently self-contradictory. My goal is to investigate and present the different opinions and look for trends that may indicate certain overarching positions.

¹³ J.N. Lightstone, "Form as Meaning in Halakic Midrash: A Programmatic Statement," *Semeia* 27 (1983), p.35

Finally, a general overview of the Mekhilta would not be complete without mentioning the tools of interpretation it uses in its analysis of the Torah. In describing rabbinic methods of interpreting the Torah, Adin Steinsaltz, in his guide to the Talmud, writes, "arbitrary explanations of the Biblical text are not to be found in either the *Halakhic* or *Aggadic Midrashim*. All these works follow fixed principles of interpretation."¹⁴ The Mekhilta employs many of these fixed principles. In the passages that will be explored in this paper, there are two frequently used hermeneutic tools. The first is what Steinsaltz calls *yitur*, or superfluity. This principle is based on the conviction that "every word in the Torah is significant. Thus if a word [or words] in the Torah appear superfluous, we may assume that it was intended to teach us something that we would not otherwise have known."¹⁵ This principle will become important in resolving many of the Mekhilta's disagreements about the meaning of the Exodus narrative.

The second hermeneutic tool used in many of the commentaries quoted in this paper is *qal v' homer*, or an *a fortiori* inference. Steinsaltz writes of this procedure, "in essence, this is a rule of logical argumentation by means of which a comparison is drawn between two cases, one lenient and the other stringent. *Qal v' homer* asserts that if the law is stringent in a case where we are usually lenient, then it will certainly be stringent in a more serious case."¹⁶ In the examples cited from Mekhilta, this principle, which is explained by Steinsaltz as it relates to legal

¹⁴ Steinsaltz, The Talmud: A Reference Guide, New York: Random House, 1989 p. 147

¹⁵ Ibid., 152

¹⁶ Ibid., 153

matters, will be used somewhat more creatively in relation to narrative portions of the Mekhilta. In the passages to be considered from Mekhilta, the rabbis will be arguing from a "less important" case to a "more important" case, since the categories of more and less stringent are not technically accurate in evaluating narrative material.

Modes of Inquiry

The rabbis had their tools of interpretation; we modern readers have our own methods of analysis. In my analysis of Mekhilta, some of the axioms and principles that inform my inquiry are so familiar to any modern reader that they are almost taken for granted, yet for the purpose of this paper, they bear being made explicit. In addition, I have utilized some less well-known, yet equally powerful tools for gaining understanding.

The work of the New Critics flourished in America from the 1930's to 1950's. Previous to their work, the dominant literary theory held that "Great Literature is the product of Great Men [sic], and its value lies chiefly in allowing us intimate access to their [the Great Men's] souls."¹⁷ The New Critics, who called this principle into question, created a new way of looking at literature, by "insisting that the author's intentions in writing, even if they could be recovered, were of no relevance to the interpretation of his or her text."¹⁸ This point of view has become so common it is almost a truism, yet it bears repeating in this context:

¹⁷ Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory, An Introduction, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 41

I follow the New Critics in that I believe the rabbis' intentions are unrecoverable, they are lost to history. What can be analyzed, observed and explored are the words they have left us. While this is not a guarantee of knowledge of the rabbis' minds it is the only information available to us. There is an excitement about this way of looking at a text, since it gives the text the dignity of having its own personality, point of view and lessons to teach, which may be independent from the mind(s) that created it. This point of view also raises some questions about the act of interpretation, which will be raised briefly later in this chapter.

Another approach to literature that will be employed in this paper is the field of metaphor theory. Specifically, I want to mention the ideas of one of the seminal thinkers in the area of philosophy of metaphor, Max Black.

Metaphor has been observed and commented on by philosophers since the days of Aristotle. For most of its history, metaphor has been seen simply as a comparison. From this perspective, a metaphor is a condensed or elliptic simile. To say "A is B" is an indirect way of getting at a speaker's intended literal meaning, which is that "A is like B in the following respects."¹⁹

Black problematizes this view. He suggests instead another way of looking at metaphor, which he called the "interaction view." The interaction view asserts that a metaphorical statement has two subjects, to be identified as "primary" or "secondary." The secondary subject is to be regarded *as a system rather than an individual thing*. For instance, when Wallace Stevens says,

¹⁸ Ibid.

"society is a sea," to understand what he means we must look at the sea as a system of relationships, not just as a monolithic thing.²⁰

According to Black, metaphor works by "projecting on" the primary subject a set of "associated implications" which are the predicates of the secondary subject. To continue our Wallace Stevens example, all of our associations with "sea" (it is vast, mysterious, contains complicated social systems, can be dangerous, etc.) are now brought to bear on "society," resulting in a radical new perspective in our understanding of "society." In this way, makers of metaphoric statements select, emphasize, suppress and organize features of the primary subject (society) with members of the secondary subject's implicative complex.²¹

The rabbis were inveterate users of metaphor. Their images can be as evocative as they are unusual. In seeking to "unpack" the valences of these metaphors, I will be calling on Black's understanding of metaphor.

Black's theory of metaphor takes some of the premises of the New Critics and pushes them even further. Not only does the text have meaning that is independent of its author, that meaning can be opened up to reveal even more ideas, associations, and connections through a thorough look at the metaphors chosen. Both of these theories place a great deal of emphasis on, and even trust in, the reader of a text, the one who is performing the act of interpretation. In this

¹⁹ Mark Johnson, ed., Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981, 17

²⁰ Ibid. 43

²¹ Ibid.

case, what are the standards for whether the interpretation of such a reader is accurate? If the author's intention cannot be deduced, and if associations – which are inherently personal – are the hallmark of understanding metaphor, how can we judge anyone's interpretation? To be more blunt, the observations about Mekhilta in this thesis are, I believe, original – they emerge from my reading of the text. How can they be evaluated if objectivity has been thrown into question by these approaches to literature?

One possibility defines meaning within the context of the community of readers. As Peter Elbow puts it, “[a] reading is correct which the speech community builds in or could build in without violating its rules.”²² The “speech community” is the group of people who share a common culture and language. In writing that they could “build in” certain meanings, Elbow is suggesting that the test of new ideas is whether a group of readers can accept them, can “build them in” to their previous understanding of reality without violating their own common sense or their previous understandings of how things work. Elbow's comments are the closest I have come to addressing the difficult questions posed above. In the end, the reader(s) of this paper will make their judgments and it is these – imperfect, subjective – judgments, as a group, which will be the means of evaluating the congruency of my observations with the contents of the Mekhilta.

²² Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers, London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 159

Focus of Inquiry Within the Mekhilta

The Mekhilta contains a vast range of material – its commentary on the book of Exodus covers a wide range of topics. In defining the boundaries of this thesis, I chose to limit my inquiry in two ways.

First, I chose to focus my analysis on the use of one particular root which is translated as the equivalent of the English concept of redemption, the root *ga'al*. There were two reasons for this choice, one of which is external to the materials in the Mekhilta, and one which emerges from an encounter with the materials within the text itself.

As noted in the opening sentences of my Introduction, when the rabbis had to choose a phrase for the *hatimah* (seal, or closing line) of the prayer for redemption in the daily liturgy, in both the blessing after the *Sh'ma* and in the prayer within the *Amidah*, the root chosen was *ga'al*. The *hatimah*, as explained in the Mishnah (Berakhot 1:4), is a very important component of a given prayer, one that was designated as fixed, not to be improvised upon. In determining how to express our people's yearning for redemption in the prayers which constitute our communication God, the rabbis chose *ga'al* from the multiplicity of terms relating to redemption in the Bible. *Ga'al* had come to stand for the experience of redemption in its broadest sense. While the Bible, and, indeed, rabbinic writings, know many verbs which relate to the concept of redemption, including the roots *pada*, *hatzal*, and *hoshia*, the term which, for the rabbis, comes to epitomize the overall experience of the redemption from Egypt is *ge'ula*. Perhaps *ga'al* was chosen because of its usage in Exodus 6:6-7, the verses in which God promises

the Israelites exactly what will be done to them in the coming redemption, including:

וגאלתי אתכם בזרוע נטויה ובשפטים גדלים

And I will *ga'al* you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

For the rabbis, these verses are arguably the most important description of redemption in the Bible. The verbs in these verses are designated by the rabbis as the "four expressions of *ge'ula*," expressions which form the basis for the four cups of wine which we drink at the Passover Seder.²³

Thus, there is clearly a tradition in rabbinic literature generally to give *ga'al* pride of place in a consideration of redemption. However, in addition, in looking at the Mekhilta itself, it becomes clear that this concept holds strongly with regard to the traditions contained in this particular early midrash. For instance, while the verb *hitzil* is also used in the promises God makes in Exodus 6 -- וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעֲבָדָתָם -- and I will rescue you from their servitude -- in Mekhilta, this term is used only within a narrow range of situations, referring to a physical rescue from danger.

²³ Palestinian Talmud, 10:1, 37b-c, asks:

-- מניין לארבעה כוסות רבי יוחנן בשם רבי בנייה כנגד ארבע גאולות -- how do we know that there are four cups [at the Passover Seder]? Rabbi Yohanan in the name of Rabbis Beniah said they correspond to the Four Ge'ulot ("the four terms and dimensions of redemption used in Exodus 6:6-7, Barukh Bokser, "Changing Views of Passover and the Meaning of Redemption According to the Palestinian Talmud," AJS Review, Spring 1985, p. 8)

Other verbs for redemption are also used only in narrow contexts in the Mekhilta. The root *pada*, for instance, is often used in the Bible as a synonym for *ga'al*. In fact, in many prophetic passages, the two verbs are presented in parallel. For instance, Jeremiah 31:10, the verse used in blessing after the *Sh'ma*, is a messianic vision of a future when all Israel will be gathered together into the Land; at that time:

כִּי פִדְהוּ יִרְדּוּ אֶת יַעֲקֹב וְגָאֵלוּ מִיַּד חֲזָק מִמֶּנּוּ

God will ransom Jacob and redeem him from one stronger than him.

In this case, *pada* and *ga'al* are used to emphasize the same action on God's part. If anything, *pada* seems the more general term, *ga'al* only applying to situations in which God will rescue Jacob (representing Israel) by force.

In opposition to the trend in the Bible, in which the prophets move towards joining the meaning of the two verbs *pada* and *ga'al*, in Mekhilta, the root *pada* is only mentioned in the Mekhilta in one specific, ritual context. This context is two passages that discuss the command to redeem a first-born animal or son through payment to the priests. *Pada* does not appear in the Mekhilta in connection with the narrative of the Exodus.²⁴ In Mekhilta, the verb *pada* indicates that something has been set aside solely for use in a ritual context.

²⁴ There is one exception to this statement, an extraordinary midrash about *God's redemption*, which will be discussed later in this paper. However, even in this case, *pada* is not used in connection with the redemption of the Jewish people.

In Mekhilta, *ga'al* is the word which has been chosen to represent the totality of the experience of the redemption from Egypt. While other verbs, like *hatzal* and *hoshia*, are used to convey aspects of the experience in Egypt, two points about their usage makes them more limited in use for our purposes. First, they are used only to describe limited parts of the experience – for instance the physical rescue from danger that was part of the experience of redemption.²⁵ Also, these verbs are used to describe both actions of God and actions of human beings²⁶.

By contrast, *ga'al* is used in Mekhilta to signify the totality of the experience of leaving Egypt. For instance, a controversy occurs in the Mekhilta over whether the future *ge'ula* will take place in *Nisan*, as did the *ge'ula* from Egypt, or in *Tishrei*, when the world was created. R. Joshua affirms that the future *ge'ula* will occur in *Nisan* because *בר ננאלו ובו עתידין להגא'ל* -- in *Nisan* they were *nig'alu* and that is when they will be *nig'alu* [in the future]. Here, *nig'al* comes to signify the whole experience, which will be repeated either in *Nisan* or *Tishrei* in the future.

Also, unlike the other verbs of redemption, *ga'al* is only used in connection with the experience of leaving Egypt. Finally, while other verbs can

²⁵ For instance, in Beshallah 2, when the Israelites stood on the shores of the Red Sea, hearing Pharaoh's chariots in the distance, from Moses tells the Israelites: *התיצבו וראו את ישועת ה'*, "Stand and see the *yeshua* of God." The *yeshua* he is referring to is, of course, the splitting of the Red Sea. In this instance, *yeshua* is a specific, miraculous act, not an ongoing process.

²⁶ For example, the Mekhilta quotes Mordechai as lauding his cousin Esther because he knows that *הם עתידין להנצל על ידה* -- in the future, they will be saved by her (Amalek 2)

be used to apply to God or human beings, *ga'al*, by contrast, is reserved for God's actions (human beings can be the subject of *ga'al*, but only in the passive form as in the example above).

Thus, in Mekhilta, *ga'al* signifies the total experience of the Exodus as opposed to any particular part of it; it is reserved especially for discussions of this important event; and it describes God's actions particularly. For these reasons, I have chosen *ga'al* as the focus of my search into the meaning of the journey leaving Egypt, which was seen by the rabbis as a paradigm for all redemption to come.

There is one more point of clarification about the use of *ga'al* in this thesis. Thus far, I have been equating *ge'ula* with "redemption," as well as translating other roots from the Bible with the same English word. One of the main questions this thesis raises is whether redemption is a fair translation of the word *ge'ula*. So from here forward, I will be speaking not of redemption, but of *ge'ula*. As far as the other verbs mentioned above, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to uncover their true, nuanced meanings – what I have done in this section is merely to provide a superficial examination which hopefully will provide insight to the in-depth consideration of *ge'ula* to follow.

Finally, to simply look at the instances of one particular verb root would not adequately convey the complexity of the Mekhilta's ideas about the value concept we are for exigency's sake designating as redemption. To gain a fuller view, it is necessary to look more closely at how Mekhilta interprets all of the different aspects of the experience of leaving Egypt, since this experience as a

whole was seen as constituting the process of *ge'ula*. For that reason, I will also focus in this thesis on the first two Massekhtot (divisions) of the Mekhilta, *Massekhet d'Pisha* and *Massekhet de Vayehi Beshallah*. These two portions cover the events in Exodus 12:1 – 14:31, which is the narrative of the Israelites departure from Egypt through the moment of crossing the Red Sea.

Chapter Two: Biblical Background

As I mentioned in the introduction, the basis for the Mekhilta's comments on *ge'ula* is the biblical account of the Exodus from Egypt. To fully understand the rabbinic point(s) of view about *ge'ula* contained in Mekhilta, it is necessary to begin with a brief look at the material on which these commentaries are founded: how *ge'ula* is portrayed in the Bible itself, and particularly in the book of Exodus. This analysis will have two parts. The first part will be a general consideration of how the paradigmatic experience of *ge'ula*, the Exodus from Egypt, is presented in the narratives of the first two books of the Torah. (As we will see, in the Torah, the book of Genesis is as important as the book of Exodus for gaining a full understanding of the meaning of the Exodus from Egypt.) The second part of the analysis will look at the meaning of *ge'ula* in the Bible generally to gain insight about the foundation on which the Mekhilta builds its understanding of *ge'ula*.

The Exodus Story as Paradigm for *Ge'ula*

The first stirrings of *ge'ula* occur long before the Israelites are even a people, much less a people enslaved in Egypt. In Genesis 15, God makes the first covenant with Abraham, the content of which is described in Genesis 15:13-16

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יְדַע תְּדַע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זֶרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעִבְדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה:
וְגַם אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנִי וְאַחֲרַי כֵּן יֵצְאוּ בִּרְכֻשׁ גָּדוֹל וְאַתָּה תָּבוֹא אֶל אֲבֹתֶיךָ

And God said to Abram, Know for a certainty that your offspring shall be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end, they go free with great wealth. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a ripe old age. And they shall return here in the fourth generation.²⁷

Both the experience of slavery in Egypt and the *ge'ula* which will follow it are foretold to Abraham by God. Before the enslavement has even begun, God makes a promise to the not-yet-existent Jewish people regarding its termination. It is important to note that while God takes great pains to spell out specifically the timing of the Exodus, there remains a lack of clarity about the date of the events to come. *In verse 13 of the Genesis text above, God promises that they will leave Egypt after *ארבע מאות שנה* -- four hundred years. But a mere three verses later, God follows with *דור רביעי ישובו הנה* -- the fourth generation shall return [to the land of Israel]. This lack of congruence within the Biblical text about when *ge'ula* will arrive will become an important issue for consideration in the Mekhilta's analysis.

God's promise to Abraham that his descendents will be forced to serve and suffer in a foreign land begins to unfold in the first chapters of Exodus. Just how long the slavery has been going on when the book of Exodus opens, is not

²⁷ Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. Unless indicated, all Biblical translations are from this text, except those quoted as part of a midrash from Mekhilta, which are my own translations.

mentioned specifically. We learn in Exodus 1:8 that “a new king rose over Egypt who did not know Joseph,” and in Exodus 2:23-24, the Torah recounts that “a long time after that, the king of Egypt died...God heard [the Israelites’] moaning and God remembered the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.”²⁸ God chooses Moses to lead the people out and tells Moses to convey to the Israelites what is about to happen:

לכן אמר לבני ישראל אני ידוד והוצאתי אתכם מתחת סבלת מצרים והצילתי אתכם מעבדתם וגאלתי אתכם בזרוע נטויה ובשפטים גדלים ולקחתי אתכם לי לעם והייתי לכם לאלהים וידעתם כי אני ידוד אלהיכם המוציא אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים והבאתי אתכם אל הארץ אשר נשאתי את ידי לתת אתה לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב ונתתי אתה לכם מורשה אני ידוד

Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: “I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will *ga'al* you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”²⁹

God’s actions are as follows: והוצאתי, והצילתי, וגאלתי, ולקחתי. The first description is the most general: “I will take you out.” There are many occasions, both during the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt and in later comments in the Bible referring back to the experience, in which the experience of *ge'ula* is described simply as “the going out of Egypt.” God states in Exodus 7:4

²⁸ Exodus 2:23

²⁹ Exodus 6:6-9

והוצאתי את צבאתי את עמי בני ישראל מארץ מצרים

I will take my legions, my people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt.

Again in Exodus 12:42, in the context of the Passover offering and night-escape, the Torah describes the events as

ליל שמרים הוא לה' להוציאם מארץ מצרים

It will be a night of watching for Adonai, who will take [the people] out of Egypt.

This means of describing the *ge'ula* is also employed frequently in the later books of the Bible. Deuteronomy 5:6 contains one of many reminders from God in this book of the Torah that

אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים

I am Adonai your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the place where you were slaves.

In 1 Kings 8:16, in a discussion of the building of the Temple, God states that one place has not been designated for God's dwelling

מן היום אשר הוצאתי את עמי את ישראל ממצרים

From the day on which I took my people Israel out of Egypt.

All of these examples indicate that the experience of *ge'ula* is referred to at many times in the Bible with the most general description, that of being taken out of Egypt. For this reason, my analysis of Mekhilta and its understanding of *ge'ula* will include not only the specific verbs which designate *ge'ula*, but also a general consideration of the chapters of Mekhilta which focus on the events that form God's "taking the people out of Egypt."

The second promise God makes in Exodus 6 is **והצילתי אתכם מעבדתם**. As discussed in the introduction, in the Bible as well as in Mekhilta, the root *hatzal* expresses a limited part of the overall experience of *ge'ula*, that of rescue from physical danger and hardship, such as the servitude under which the Israelites were suffering in Egypt. The next promise is:

וגאלתי אתכם בזרוע נטויה ובשפטים גדלים

And I will *ga'al* you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

This portion of the promise will be considered on its own in this chapter. The two final promises, **ולקחתי אתכם לי לעם**, and I will take you to be my people, and **והבאתי אתכם אל הארץ** (and I will take you to the land), focus on a later part of the experience of the Exodus. The process of God taking the children of Israel to be God's people, while it is begun during the events surrounding the Exodus, comes to fruition only at Sinai. The final promise deals with going in to the land, which only occurs after the Torah has concluded, in the book of Joshua.

One general observation about God's promises in Exodus 6 will be relevant to our examination of the Mekhilta. God continues to recognize the status of the promise made to the Patriarchs: "And I will bring you in to the land, concerning which I swore to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage." God exhorts Moses to communicate to the people that the time for bringing this promise to fruition has come.

In the narrative that follows, God brings plagues on the land of Egypt, culminating in the death of the first-born, from which the Israelites are spared by following God's command to slaughter lambs and place the blood of the animals on the doorposts of their homes. The story concludes:

ויהי בחצי הלילה וידוד הכה כל בכור בארץ מצרים מבכר פרעה הישב על כסאו עד בכור
השבי אשר בבית חבור וכל בכור בחמה פרעה לילה הוא וכל עבדיו וכל מצרים ותחי
צעקה גדלה במצרים כי אין בית אשר אין שם מת ויקרא למשה ולאהרן לילה ויאמר קומו צאו
מתוך עמי גם אתם גם בני ישראל ולכו עבדו את ה' כדברכם

In the middle of the night the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the cattle. And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians – because there was a loud cry in Egypt; for there was no house where there was not someone dead. He summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, "Up, depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you! Go, worship the Lord as you said."³⁰

The Israelites leave quickly, with the Egyptians urging them along. This hurried exit is the beginning of the *ge'ula*, the first part of the Israelites' liberation

³⁰ Exodus 12:29-32

from Egyptian servitude. It takes place in the middle of the night, a fact that will not go unnoticed by the commentators of the Mekhilta. And when does this moment occur in relation to God's promise that they would go out after four hundred years/four generations of slavery in Egypt? "The length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years; at the end of the four hundred and thirtieth year, to the very day, all the ranks of the Lord departed from the land of Egypt."³¹ Again, this seeming inconsistency will soon provide fertile ground for rabbinic interpretation in Mekhilta's commentary.

But the *ge'ula* from Egypt does not conclude here. Pharaoh changes his mind and the Egyptians pursue the Israelites to the shores of the Red Sea. The miracle wrought by God at this juncture – "the waters were split and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left"³² – has been memorialized in the Song of the Sea, the Israelites' song of thankfulness and victory. In this paean, the Israelites jubilantly shout: נחית בחסדך עם זו נאלת (In Your mercy you have led out and brought *ge'ula* to Your people).³³ As can be seen from the lyrics of the Song, the splitting of the Red Sea is still considered by the Israelites as part of the *ge'ula* which began with the night journey out of Egypt.

Thus there are two main events which characterize the *ge'ula* as recounted in the book of Exodus. The stories that follow the moment at the Red Sea -- the desert wandering and theophany at Sinai -- are certainly deeply

³¹ Exodus 12:40

³² Exodus 14:21

connected to the experience of *ge'ula*. However, the stories of the desert wanderings which follow the crossing of the Red Sea can be seen as the beginning a separate miraculous event in the story of the children of Israel – the giving of Torah at Sinai.

In summarizing the Torah's narrative of *ge'ula*, several important factors emerge. The Torah relates the story of *ge'ula* in the context of a promise made to the patriarchs – *ge'ula* is the inheritance of the children of Israel. The specific timing of the event is problematic – the time expressed in Exodus is not congruent with the time predicted in Genesis, and even within the Genesis text itself, there is some confusion about when *ge'ula* will come. The moment of *ge'ula* itself seems two-fold: first, there is the midnight escape from Egypt; and then later, the miraculous events at the Red Sea that prevent Egypt from interfering in Israel's escape to freedom. All of these issues will be taken up and considered by the Mekhilta.

One final observation of the story as a whole: in the Exodus story, it is clear that the Israelites become *nig'al* from an external foe: the oppression of Pharaoh and the slavery under which they are suffering. When the Israelites cry out to God, they are "groaning under their bondage." When God promises to intervene, it is to save them from "the servitude of the Egyptians," an action which will be done with an "outstretched arm." The need for *ge'ula* comes from the Israelites' hard labor and slavery. It does not, according to the Torah, emerge from any aspect of their behavior or inner state. This is important to remember,

³³ Exodus 15:13

for the Mekhilta will work alchemy on the Torah's perspective, turning the Egyptian servitude, עבדותם, into an altogether different kind of *avoda*, that of idolatry.

The Root *Ga'al*

Having considered the general context of the Exodus story as a background for the Mekhilta's comments, it is also necessary to look at the Biblical usage of the root *ga'al*, to see if there are insights drawn from the Biblical text which can inform the analysis of *ga'al* in Mekhilta, which follows. A natural starting point is the use of *ga'al* in God's promise from Exodus 6: ונאלתי אתכם בזרוע נטויה ובשפטים גדלים, and I will *ga'al* you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. There is an interesting relationship to the previous promise, והצלתי אתכם מעבדותם. The most basic sense of the root *hatzal* is "to tear away."³⁴ Here it is implied that God is using an outstretched arm to tear away, but the phrase "and I will *ga'al* you with an outstretched arm" conveys more than that. God is tearing the people away from something in order to bring them *towards* something. This usage points towards the root meaning of the verb *ga'al*.

An understanding of the theological use of *ga'al* in our Exodus passage begins with a consideration of the social and legal context in which the verb appears in the Torah. In Leviticus 25:25, we learn that if a person sells a piece of

³⁴ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906, p. 664

land which belongs to his family (presumably to pay off debt), then that person's closest relative, called a *go'el*, has the right to buy it back, to restore the land to the family. The same is true if a person sells himself into slavery. The family has the right to *ga'al* him, to buy him back and the one who had purchased the indebted man may not reject the family's offer.³⁵

But payment is not the only means of restoration. Numbers 25 describes the punishment for premeditated murder. "The *go'el* -- the victim's kinsman -- shall put the murderer to death; it is he who shall put him to death upon encounter."³⁶ This situation came to be known as the *go'el ha dam*, the avenger of blood. As A.R. Johnson points out, "Kinship groups were seen as a unit -- a corporate personality -- so when something was disturbed in the kinship group, the group needed to restore itself to wholeness."³⁷ The idea is that the actions of the *go'el* are returning the family to its previous state before the murder, by evening the score.

What both kinds of *ge'ula* have in common is that they are intended to restore something which has gone awry. The family buying back land or a member of the clan is restoring the land or the person to its/his proper place. When the blood avenger, the *go'el ha dam*, murders the murderer, he can be seen as restoring the equilibrium of his family -- someone has shed their blood, and now that person's blood will be shed in return.

³⁵ Leviticus 25:48

³⁶ Numbers 25:19

³⁷ A.R. Johnson, "The Primary Meaning of *Gaal*" in Supplement to Vetus Testamentum, Copenhagen, 1953, p. 68

This background illuminates the use of *ga'al* in the Exodus story. As mentioned earlier, the *ge'ula* from Egypt was seen in the context of a promise made to the patriarch Abraham, a free man living in the land of Israel. In the book of Exodus, when God reaches out to the enslaved Israelites with an outstretched arm, that arm is designed to transfer the Israelites to a new-old state. They are being restored to the original status of their ancestors. God functions as the ultimate *go'el* of the people, the strong kinsman who restores them to the proper situation using whatever means is appropriate. In the prophetic books of the Bible, this metaphor of restitution is often used to describe the *ge'ula* from Egypt. In Isaiah 52:3, God reminds the people of the Egyptian experience:

חנם נמכרתם ולא בכסף תגאלי -- you were sold for nothing and will be *nig'alu* without money.

Thus *ga'al* is used in the Bible to signify the restoration to a previous state, which can be achieved through different means – by payment, or by overpowering an enemy. In this way, the object of the *ge'ula* is literally redeemed: having been deemed as possessing a debased state, they are restored to an original, more lofty plane.

Chapter Three: What Can Be Known About When *Ge'ula* Will Come

To return briefly to the questions raised in the Introduction, questions which the following sections will address, they were three-fold; (1) what can be known about when what exactly is *ge'ula* -- Is it really redemption or is this an inexact translation? *ge'ula* will come; (2) are there factors which will influence its arrival; and (3) What precisely is the experience which is being hoped for and/or worked for with such diligence by the Jewish people?

Two preliminary points about these questions before beginning to answer them. The first is a reminder of one of the methodological propositions of this thesis. While *ge'ula* can refer to an event in the past – the *ge'ula* from Egypt – and an event in the indeterminate future – the Messianic age – the Mekhilta's commentaries relate to the *ge'ula* from Egypt. However, this is not to minimize the importance of the Mekhilta's exegeses in understanding the rabbinic concept of *ge'ula*. The Mekhilta's observations about the *ge'ula* from Egypt are not posed merely as interesting facts about an event that happened a long time ago. These events were seen as the template for the ultimate *ge'ula* to come. Therefore, the points gleaned about the nature, meaning, timing and quality of the *ge'ula* from Egypt are directly related to the corresponding features of the *Ge'ula To Come*. This gives the Mekhilta's analysis of the events that occurred in Egypt great significance, and establishes their importance in this thesis, which seeks to gain insight into the meaning of *ge'ula* in early rabbinic thought generally.

The second point relates to the order of the two questions being asked. Logically, one would think that the first question would be "what is *ge'ula*?" and only then could we follow with "what can be known about when it will come and what factors will influence its arrival?" The fact that these questions are being asked in reverse order in this paper speaks to one important fact about considerations of *ge'ula* in Mekhilta. In Mekhilta's considerations of *ge'ula*, the question of "what is *ge'ula*?" is never raised. All comments about *ge'ula* in Mekhilta assume an understanding of what *ge'ula* is and proceed directly to a consideration of when it will come and other related issues. To use a crude analogy, it can be likened to reading contemporary magazine articles about "losing weight." The goal of losing weight is so well-known and important in our cultural milieu that there would be no reason to define it; rather, articles will focus on how to do it in the least time, what foods to eat to make it happen, etc.

In this analysis of the Mekhilta, therefore, we will work backwards, by beginning with the questions asked by the commentators of the Mekhilta about *ge'ula*, and then inferring from these answers what *ge'ula* is. The first section, which deals with the questions asked by the Mekhilta, focuses on what we can learn about when and under what circumstances *ge'ula* will come. This analysis breaks down into several smaller units: (1) can the arrival of *ge'ula* be predicted?; (2) is *ge'ula* a process or an instantaneous transformation of status; (3) what factors, if any, can influence the arrival of *ge'ula*?

Can The Arrival of *Ge'ula* Be Predicted by Human Beings?

Gershom Scholem has written that "In opposition to [apocalyptic calculations about when redemption would come] stands the no less powerful sentiment that the Messianic age cannot be calculated."³⁸ Scholem is, of course, speaking about the future Messianic Age, the *ge'ula* still to come. However the same comment can be made about the comments regarding *ge'ula* in the Mekhilta. Despite attempts at calculation within our Mekhilta text, the latter perspective expressed in Scholem's quote is the dominant point of view in the Mekhilta. The strongest message in the Mekhilta regarding the timing of the *ge'ula* seems to be that it isn't within our power to predict when it will happen. It is possible that this perspective can be seen as a subtle polemic, an exhortation to the Jewish people to focus more on what we can do to bring *ge'ula* and less on calculations about when the event will take place.

One of the key passages from Exodus which is considered closely by the Mekhilta in depicting the arrival of *ge'ula* is the moment when God comes to strike down the first born of Egypt. This moment is understood to be the inauguration of *ge'ula*.³⁹ Mekhilta's comments about this moment in the Torah are exegeses of two specific passages. In Exodus 11:4 we read

³⁸ Gershom Scholem, "Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism" in The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality. New York: Schocken Books, 1971, p. 11

³⁹ We read of this moment in the Talmud (Berakhot 9a) "R. Abba said: all agree that when Israel were *nig'alu* from Egypt, they were *nig'alu* in the evening...But did they leave in the night? Did they not in fact leave only in the morning, as it

ויאמר משה כה אמר ה' כחצת הלילה אני יוצא בתוך מצרים

And Moses said: thus says God, "At [approximately] midnight I will go out through Egypt."

Following this prediction, Exodus 12:29 recounts:

ויהי בחצי הלילה וה' הכה כל בכור בארץ מצרים

and it was at midnight that God struck all the first-born of Egypt.

The passages contain two grammatical differences; one of these discrepancies becomes the focus of interpretation in Mekhilta. In Exodus 11, Moses predicts that the actions of redemption will happen *כחצת הלילה* and then in Exodus 12, when this statement comes to pass, the Torah recounts that the action occurred *בחצי הלילה*. In each place the word midnight is used, it is introduced by a different preposition. In Exodus 11:4, the prefix "ca", "about" is used, whereas here, 12:29, the prefix is "ba", "at," and this prefix is made the subject of interpretation.⁴⁰

ויהי בחצי הלילה למה נאמר לפי שנאמר ויאמר משה כה אמר ה' כחצות הלילה אני יוצא וגומר

says, "on the morrow after the Passover the children of Israel went out with a high hand? But this teaches that the *ge'ula* had already begun in the evening." While this statement is not made explicitly in Mekhilta, the care with which this moment is weighed, evaluated and commented on testifies to its importance in the rabbis' understanding of the unfolding of *ge'ula*.

⁴⁰ Max Kadushin, *A Conceptual Approach to the Mekilta*, New York: JTSA, 1969, p. 128

(שמות יא ד) שאי אפשר לבשר ודם לעמוד על חציו של לילה אבל כאן יוצרו חלקו

The Creator of midnight divided the night exactly (referring to *בחצי הלילה*). How is this made explicit? Because it says, “and Moses said, ‘Thus says the Lord, at about midnight (*כחצית הלילה*)’ I will go out. (Exodus 11:4)” Is it possible for a human being to know exactly when midnight is? Rather, only the Creator of the night [can know to divide the night exactly].⁴¹

As Kadushin explains, “About midnight is said by Moses who, although speaking in the name of God, must nevertheless use the indefinite expression since, as a human being, he cannot presume to know the exact moment of midnight. That is not the case when it is Scripture itself which speaks, and hence “at midnight” is the expression employed here.”⁴²

The point is that only God knows when the exact moment of midnight is, only God can tell exactly when the *ge'ula* will begin. We are literally in the dark about it. We may have some sense of when it is coming, just as we can have some sense of when midnight is, but we can never know exactly. There are distinctions that we are incapable of making, like exactly when midnight comes, and, by implication, when *ge'ula* will arrive.

Another metaphor used in relation to the coming of *ge'ula* is equally revealing of what we can and cannot know about its timing. In Pisha 5 we read the following, striking midrash:

⁴¹ Pisha 13, following Lauterbach's translation of *helku* as “divided it exactly” (*Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, A Critical Edition on the Basis of the Manuscripts and Early Editions with an English Translation, Introduction and Notes*. Philadelphia: JPSA, 1933, p. 96)

⁴² Kadushin, p. 128

הגיע שבתותו שנשבע הקב"ה לאברהם שיגאל את בניו ולא היה בדם מצות שיתעסקו בהם כדי שיגאלו שנאמר שדים נכונו ושערך צמח ואת ערום וערירה וגו' (שם /חזקאל טז/ז) ערום מכל מצות נתן להם הקדוש ברוך הוא שתי מצות דם פסח ודם מילה שיתעסקו בהם כדי שיגאלו שנאמר ואעבור עליך ואראך מתבוססת בדמך וגומר (שם /חזקאל טז/ו) ואומר גם את בדם בריתך שלחתי אסיריך מבור אין מים בו (זכריה ט יא) לכך הקדים הכתוב לקחתו של פסח לשחיטתו ד' ימים

For what reason did the Torah cause the taking of the Passover offering to precede its slaughter by four days? Rabbi Mettias b. Heresh would say, "Scripture says 'When I passed over you and I saw you, behold, it was your time for love (Ezekiel 16:8).'" The time had come for keeping the oath which God swore to Abraham, that He would *ga'al* His children, but they did not have in their hands *mitzvot* to perform in order to be *yig'alu*, as it is written, "your breasts were formed and your hair was grown, yet you were naked and bare. (15:7) Naked of all the *mitzvot*, so the Holy One gave them two *mitzvot*, the blood of the Passover offering, and the blood of circumcision, which they could perform in order to be *yig'alu*, as it is written " and when I passed over you, I saw you wallowing in [or, 'firmly established in'] your blood, and I said to you, 'In your blood, live.'"

There are many important clues to the meaning of *ge'ula* in this passage, but for now I want to focus on one particular element of the midrash – the use of the image of a young girl. An artful analogy is being made between the Israelites on the brink of *ge'ula* and the young woman in the Ezekiel quote on the brink of sexual maturity. We learn that the Israelites were close to being ready for *ge'ula*, just as the young girl, her breasts formed and [pubic] hair grown -- secondary sex characteristics which indicate the coming of sexual maturity – was almost ripe for sexual contact. And what is it that moves the Israelites to complete-readiness? *Mitzvot*, of course, but a particular type of *mitzvot* – those having to do with blood. The other side of the metaphor is implied here – just as blood brought the

Israelites to complete readiness, it is blood that will bring the young woman to complete sexual readiness.

Using Black's ideas about metaphor, we can see female sexual maturation as a system which is being mapped onto the system of *ge'ula*. One important fact about sexual development is that it is somewhat but not completely predictable. To some extent we know the progression of events, and to some extent it can be estimated when a girl will begin her menstrual cycle. But just as we saw in the previous passage about deciphering when midnight comes, we cannot exactly predict when the onset of menstruation, and with it, full physical maturity, will occur. So too with *ge'ula*. It cannot be exactly predicted by human beings – that is a privilege reserved only for God.

Finally, one of the key passages in Mekhilta in examining the question of when *ge'ula* will come is the passage which addresses the different predictions made in Genesis and the assertion of the actual date in Exodus. To review what was stated in Chapter Two, In Genesis 15:13, God promises Abraham that his descendents will leave Egypt after *אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה* -- four hundred years. But a mere three verses later, God follows with *דֹּר רְבִיעִי יָשׁוּבוּ הֵנָּה* -- the fourth generation shall return [to the land of Israel]. And then in Exodus 12:40 we read: "The length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years; at the end of the four hundred and thirtieth year, to the very day, all the ranks of the Lord departed from the land of Egypt." The Mekhilta bravely faces these seeming contradictions in Pisha, Parasha 14:

ומושב בני ישראל וגו'. כתוב אחד אומר שלשים שנה וארבע מאות שנה וכתוב אחד אומר ועבדום
 תענו אותם ארבע מאות שנה (בראשית טז יג) כיצד יתקיימו שני מקראות הללו שלשים שנה עד שלא
 נולד יצחק נמרה נזירה בין הבתרים. רבי אומר כתוב אחד אומר ועבדום תענו אותם ארבע מאות
 שנה וכתוב אחד אומר ודור רביעי ישובו הנה (שם / בראשית / טז) כיצד יתקיימו שני כתובין אלו אומר
 הקדוש ב"ה אם עושין תשובה אני גואלם לדורות ואם לאו אני גואלם לשנים.

One passage says "four hundred and thirty years' (Exodus 12:40) and another passage says "and will serve them, and they will afflict them for four hundred years (Genesis 15:13)." How can we uphold both of these passages? Thirty years before Isaac was born, the decree covenant between the pieces was made. Rabbi says "one passage says "and they will afflict them for four hundred years" and another passages says "in the fourth generation they will return (Genesis 15:15). How can we uphold both of these passages? The Holy One said "if they repent, I will go'al them according to the generations, and if not, according to the [centuries of] years.

The reasons for the different dates will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. What is relevant to the question at hand is the message in this passage that although, given the contradictions within the Biblical text, it may seem to the human eye that the time when *ge'ula* will come is uncertain, this is not in fact true. These seeming contradictions in fact lead us to greater meaning. At the time of the *ge'ula* from Egypt, the players in the drama may not have understood that the timing was unfolding exactly according to God's plan. But that doesn't mean that the plan wasn't there. Again, as was shown in the two previous examples, the recipients of *ge'ula* are simply not privy to the calculations that would enable them to understand perfectly its timing.

Process or Instantaneous Transformation?

One additional observation emerges from the preceding examples. They each, in their own way, address the question of whether *ge'ula* is a process with

many steps or a transformation which takes place in a moment. In considering the use of midnight as a metaphor for the arrival of *ge'ula*, this image supports a perspective that *ge'ula* can take place in an instant.

Kadushin comments that "The redemption was precisely at midnight. There was not even a moment of transition between slavery and freedom."⁴³ Important transformations can take place without fanfare and even without notice. To our eyes, things may look exactly the same after midnight as before – it's still every bit as dark at 12:01 as it is at 11:59. But to God, who understands all change, a transition has taken place in an instant. So too, the text seems to suggest, with *ge'ula*. It is a change that can take place in a moment.

This is not, however, the only perspective on the progression of *ge'ula* in Mekhilta. To return to our metaphor of the young woman reaching physical maturity, we all know that sexual development is a process with many steps. The Ezekiel quote used in Pisha 5 itself points to this fact – different secondary sex characteristics come at different points, followed by the onset of menstruation, which completes the physical process ("your breasts were formed and your hair was grown..."). And the *nimshal*, the secondary system of the metaphor – that is, the taking and slaughter of the Passover lamb -- is also clearly a process with steps. In fact, the question around which the midrash is built asks why the process must include different steps at different times. Why, asks the Mekhilta, did the Torah cause the taking of the lamb to precede its slaughter by four days? Why the wait? Why not just say "on the fourteenth day, take a lamb and

slaughter it"? In raising this question, the Mekhilta points to the fact that *ge'ula* is a process. Like the process of physical maturation, it has an order, and one part follows another in sequence.

It is interesting to note the Mekhilta's characterization of the moment when Moses tells the Israelites what they should do in relation to the Passover offering. "The Israelites said, 'Moses, if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians [in front of their eyes, will they not stone us]?' He replied 'from the miracle which God will do for you on the day when you take the beast, you will know what God will do when it is slaughtered.'"⁴⁴ According to this passage, the fact that the Egyptians will not attack the Israelites when they purchase the lambs for slaughter [despite the fact that the Torah seems to perceive the lambs' impending slaughter as a desecration of Egyptian religious beliefs] will be a sign to the Israelites of the greater miracle to come when the animals are slaughtered. What is implied in this passage is that when the Israelites first go to purchase the beast, they are operating on faith. They are entering the process of *ge'ula* despite the fact that danger is associated with it, and without the guarantee of a reward until later in the process. Thus, the process of *ge'ula* itself contains uncertainty, and requires faith to continue with our part in it. This fact will become important in the next chapter, dealing with how our actions relate to the arrival of *ge'ula*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Pisha 5. My translation follows Lauterbach, who includes the bracketed words based on what Moses himself says to Pharaoh in Exodus 8:21-22, "Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'Go and sacrifice to your God within the land. But Moses replied, 'It would not be right to do this, for what we sacrifice to

One of the traditions the rabbis bring to Jewish scholarship is a genius for harmonizing different perspectives. In considering the distinction between *ge'ula* as process and as instantaneous transformation, I believe there is room for these two observations to co-exist harmoniously. For within any process, there will be moments of intense change. A baby gestates in its mother's womb for nine months, growing and changing and developing. But this long process of development does not make the moment of birth any less dramatic in its transformational power. So too, the commentaries of the Mekhilta suggest, *ge'ula* is a process which has different parts, which occurs over time, and which also includes moments of dramatic, irrevocable change.

God's Knowledge of the Timing of *Ge'ula*: The Power of Oaths

Having established that we human beings are not privy to the details of when *ge'ula* will occur, the question arises of God's knowledge about the timing of *ge'ula*. Does God know exactly when *ge'ula* will come, or are there factors which prevent perfect Divine knowledge?

The major difference between human knowledge of *ge'ula*'s timing and Divine knowledge is that God is the one who set the process of *ge'ula* in motion, through the action of making an oath to Abraham about when *ge'ula* would occur. To understand fully the nature of God's knowledge of the timing of *ge'ula*, it is

our God is an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice that which is an abomination to the Egyptians before their very eyes, will they not stone us?"

necessary to explore more deeply the meaning of making an oath and particularly the meaning of God making an oath.

An oath is understood by Jewish tradition as a serious undertaking.

Numbers 30:3 explains that:

אִישׁ כִּי ... הִשָּׁבַע שְׁבַעָה לְאָסֵר אָסֵר עַל נַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יִחַל דְּבָרוֹ כִּכֹּל הֵיזָא מִפִּי יַעֲשֶׂה

a man who makes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips.⁴⁵

If it is true for flesh-and-blood human beings that an oath is a responsibility which must be fulfilled, how much the more so for the Master of the Universe? When God makes an oath, it is not a statement to be trifled with, and this fact comes through clearly in the Mekhilta's commentary about God's oath regarding the *ge'ula* of the Jewish people.

In Exodus 12:12, God states 'ובכל אלהי מצרים אעשה שפטים אני ה' "and I will mete out punishment to all the gods of Egypt, I am Adonai." The commentators of the Mekhilta notice that this is an occurrence of *yitur*, superfluity. Why does God need to say "I am Adonai"? Why can't God just state the fact that the punishments will be meted out? God is speaking here to the children of Israel, to whom God's identity has already been made known. The Mekhilta offers a reason for God's re-stating the Divine identity:

אני יי' מה שאי אפשר לבשר ודם לומר כן אני יי' בשבועה אני נפרע מהם
 וחלא דברים קל וחומר. ומה מדת פורענות מעוטה אמר הקב"ה לעשו' ועשה
 מדה טובה מרובה על אחת כמה וכמה

I am Adonai – What is not possible for a human being to say, 'I am Adonai' means that I affirm under oath that I will exact punishment from them. And is it not true that it is *a fortiori*, if God takes an oath regarding punishment, which is of less importance, how much the more regarding meting out goodness, which is more important, [will God fulfill an affirmed oath].

In this midrash, the words "I am Adonai" are added to God's statement for an important reason – to affirm that God's words have the power of an oath. And, continues the midrash, if God fulfills an oath regarding punishment (as we know from the outcome of the narrative in Exodus 12:29-30 – that the Egyptians, and through them, their gods, are punished), how much the more so will God fulfill an oath regarding meting out goodness to the Israelites?

This midrash uses the technique of *qal v' homer*, discussed in the introduction, to emphasize by inference the seriousness with which God takes the fulfillment of the oath to the forefathers regarding *ge'ula*. As the Mekhilta points out, we know from the Torah that God will fulfill the oath implied in "I am Adonai" regarding the punishment of the Egyptians. We also know that God is first and foremost a merciful God, "showing kindness to the thousandth generation" (Exodus 20:6). In that case, arguing from the less important case to the more important, it must be true that God will surely fulfill God's oath of goodness to the Israelites. In this midrash in particular, one feels poignantly the

⁴⁵The Torah, A Modern Commentary, W. Gunther Plaut, ed. New York: UAHC Press, 1981. I have used Platt's translation of the above verse.

yearning for the *ge'ula* to come which is an undercurrent to all of the Mekhilta's discussions of the *ge'ula* from Egypt.

We learn from the above midrash that God's oath, since it is such a strong incentive for bringing *ge'ula* at the appointed time, provides God with great power with regard to knowing *ge'ula*'s timing. However, another commentary highlights a less positive corollary to this position. While God's oath can grant perfect knowledge about the timing of *ge'ula*, as well as providing an opportunity to benefit the Israelites, God's oath can also impose a serious constraint on God in relation to *ge'ula*.

The verse under consideration is "and it came to pass at the end of four hundred and thirty years, even on that very day it came to pass, that all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt."⁴⁶ The Mekhilta commentary on the above passage explains: מגיד שמכיון שהגיע הקץ לא עכבן המקום כהרף עין, "This [the verse just quoted] tells us that at the time that the end⁴⁷ arrived, God did not wait even an instant [to bring *ge'ula*]. Jastrow defines הרף עין as "an indefinable portion of time."⁴⁸ The use of the word עין even suggests the English usage "in the blink of an eye." In this image, the instant that the time designated by the oath was up, God brings *ge'ula*. The startling aspect of this midrash is that in its vision of *ge'ula*, there are forces more powerful than God. It seems that God is not free to bring *ge'ula* any sooner than the appointed time. God too is waiting for the years of servitude to be over, and from the characterization in the lines quoted

⁴⁶ Exodus 12:41

⁴⁷ *Kaitz* is used as a synonym for *ge'ula* in this midrash

above, waiting with as much alacrity as the Israelites themselves. But in this depiction, God cannot simply decide to end the servitude when God pleases – there is a term that must be finished first. Thus it is clear that God knows exactly when *ge'ula* will come, just as God was seen earlier as having the ability to discern exactly when moment of midnight occurs. The interesting twist Mekhilta offers on this knowledge of timing through the power of an oath is that God is also portrayed as bound by it, unable to act on *ge'ula* until the term of the oath is up.

Having explored the knowledge of the different players about when *ge'ula* will come, the next question to be asked is: can these parties influence its arrival, and if so, how? To answer this next query, we move to the next chapter in our process of understanding *ge'ula*, a consideration of the different people and forces which may play a role in bringing – or even hastening – *ge'ula*

⁴⁸ Marcus Jastrow, Dictionary of the Talmud, Jerusalem: Horeb Publishing.

Chapter Four: Factors Influencing the Arrival of *Ge'ula*

The Role of the Israelites

There is a great deal of controversy about how the commentaries contained in *tannaitic midrashim* like the Mekhilta were originally mediated to their audiences. Were these expositions originally oral traditions passed from teacher to student, or were they sermons preached in the *beit knesset*? Did *amkha*, the average Jew living in Rome, hear or read these rabbinic riffs on the Torah, or were these interpretations the provenance of the educated elite, passed down as part of an esoteric tradition?

I raise this issue at this particular juncture because it seems uniquely relevant to an examination of the role of the Israelites in bringing *ge'ula*. The first and most general observation to be made about the part the Children of Israel play in bringing their own *ge'ula* is: of all the players in the Exodus drama, the Mekhilta lavishes the most attention on the Israelites in its consideration of this issue. Far more commentary focuses on the Israelites, as we shall see, than the role played by the Egyptians and even by God. While this does not constitute evidence that the contents of the Mekhilta were preached to the masses, it is worth noting that there is a distinctly exhortative tone about much of the commentary to follow.

In fact, the question of the Israelites role in bringing *ge'ula* is so dominant in the Mekhilta that it will be necessary to divide the foregoing analysis into

sections. There are several different, possibly contradictory, positions within the Mekhilta about the means available to the Children of Israel in preparing for -- or, perhaps, hastening -- *ge'ula*. The three main avenues of influencing the arrival of *ge'ula* seem to be: through their deeds; through a transformation of inner state; and/or by reminding God of their connection to meritorious ancestors.

The Importance of Deeds

A good starting point for considering the role of deeds in bringing *ge'ula* is the midrash quoted in Chapter Four, which asks "why did the Torah cause the taking of the Passover offering to precede its slaughter by four days?" The answer, discussed earlier, is that the Israelites needed the four intervening days to perform their first two *mitzvot*, the *mitzvah* of circumcision and the *mitzvah* of offering the Passover sacrifice. The midrash closes with an overall statement of why these actions were necessary: שאין נוטלין שכר אלא על ידי מעשה, "there is no reward given except through actions."

In this statement, "actions" means something more specific than any kind of good deed. The midrash just quoted comes to comment on a momentous occasion in the history of the Jewish people. The verses in the Torah being commented on here (Exodus 12:3-9, 43-49) constitute the first *mitzvah* given to the Israelites. Thus, the midrash is teaching that to be able to experience *ge'ula*, there is a necessary pre-condition. As the Mekhilta puts it,

הגיע שבתותו שנשבע הקב"ה לאברהם שיגאל את בניו ולא היה בידם מצות שיתעסקו בהם כדי שיגאלו

The time had come to fulfill the oath which God swore to Abraham that He would *go 'el* His children, but they did not have the ability (literally, it was not in their hands) to do *mitzvot* to be *yig'alu*.

In this portrait, the performance of *mitzvot* is crucial to the process of *ge'ula*. But these deeds do not hasten the coming of *ge'ula*. Rather, their power is the power to withhold. The order of things is as follows: *when* the time comes for *ge'ula*, *if* the Israelites have done *mitzvot* to prove their worthiness, *then* the *ge'ula* will be activated and will indeed happen. The implication is that without these actions on the part of the Jewish people, the time for *ge'ula* could come and go and the opportunity would have been missed. But the converse does not appear to be true: it is not suggested that if the Israelites had begun doing *mitzvot* earlier, then the *ge'ula* would have arrived sooner.

In fact, the midrash continues with a dissenting voice on this very subject. Rabbi Eleazar ha Kappar asserts that the Israelites did in fact have *mitzvot* they were doing in Egypt, including not changing their names, not committing sexual transgressions, not gossiping and not changing their language.⁴⁹ Whether the Israelites had *mitzvot* before the taking of the Passover offering is not resolved in the Mekhilta passage. However, it is clear in either case, the presence of actions does not hasten *ge'ula*, but rather facilitates it. Clearly, the power of God's oath still holds – the arrival date of *ge'ula* is still dictated by the oath which was made in Genesis. But now another component has been added. Even if the time comes,

⁴⁹ Pisha 5

there are certain actions that have to be taken by the Israelites to make use of the opportunity.

While we are on the subject of oaths, another way in which the Israelites' actions have an impact on the arrival of *ge'ula* has to do with how they act in relation to an oath taken many years ago. As we have seen, an oath made to the forefathers by God in the book of Genesis has a powerful impact on the events in Exodus. But God's oath from Genesis is not the only one which comes to term during the time of the *ge'ula* from Egypt. A human oath taken by the Children of Israel also becomes an important element in the timing of *ge'ula*.

In Genesis 50:25, Joseph implores his brothers from his deathbed, " 'I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'when God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here.'"

Even in the text of Genesis, the two oaths – God's and the brothers' (representing the Israelites) -- are seen as connected. Joseph refers to God's oath as he requests that the Israelites make an oath of their own. In Exodus 12:41 we read the conclusion to this episode: "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph laid an oath on the people of Israel saying, 'God will visit you; then you must carry my bones with you from there.'"

Mehkhilta takes up this theme and brings the events to life, describing the scene as Moses took Joseph's bones and further intertwining the oaths and the action of *ge'ula*.

מהיכן היה יודע היכן היה קבור יוסף אמרו סרה בת אשר נשתיירה מאותו הדור והיא הראתה למשה קבר יוסף אמרה לו במקום הזה שמוהו עשו לו מצרים ארון של מתכת ושקעוהו בתוך נילוס בא תעמד על נילוס נטל צרור חרק לתוכו חזק ואמר יוסף יוסף הגיעה השבתה שנשבע ה' לאברהם אבינו שהוא גואל את בניו תן כבוד לה' אלהי ישראל ואל תעכב את גאולתך כי בגללך אנו מעוכבים ואם לאו נקיים אנחנו משבתתך. מיד צף ארונו של יוסף ונטלו משה

How did Moses know where Joseph's bones were buried? Serah the daughter of Asher, who was still alive from that generation, told him, and she showed Moses the grave of Joseph. She told him: "They put him in this place, and the Egyptians made him a metal casket which they sunk into the Nile. Moses went and stood by the Nile and took a pebble⁵⁰ and threw it into the Nile and cried out, "Joseph son of Jacob, the oath to *go'el* His children, which God swore to our father Abraham, has reached its fulfillment. If you come up, well and good. If not, we are not responsible for fulfilling your oath." Immediately Joseph's coffin came to the surface, and Moses took it.⁵¹

As the Mekhilta passage vividly points out, the *ge'ula* cannot begin until the oath to Joseph has been fulfilled or rendered void. But there is a problem. Moses intends to fulfill the oath, but he cannot do so unless he can find Joseph's coffin. Therefore, Moses appeals to Joseph for help, calling out to him, "Joseph son of Jacob, the oath to *go'el* His children, which God swore to our father Abraham, has reached its fulfillment. If you come up, well and good. If not, we are not responsible for fulfilling your oath."

There is an interesting symmetry proposed in Mekhilta between God's relationship to the oath He made to the forefathers and the Israelites' relationship to the oath they made to Joseph. God, as we have seen, cannot begin the *ge'ula* even an instant before the time of the oath made to the forefathers has been

⁵⁰ Lauterbach (p. 176) amends to "a tablet of gold and engraved God's name on it" from a variant manuscript.

⁵¹ BeShallah Petikhta

completed. However, once the moment of *ge'ula* has been reached, and God is free to begin the process, at that precise instant, the Israelites become responsible for another oath. Now *they* cannot move forward without attending to their part in the *ge'ula*. The Israelites' oath is represented as an obligation that literally weighs them down, keeping them from moving forward, signified by Joseph's heavy casket buried deep in the Nile. It is only when the burden is lifted, and the casket comes to the surface, that they can initiate their participation in the *ge'ula*. Thus, the Israelites have the power to allow *ge'ula* to take its course, or to block this eventuality, through a specific kind of action – the fulfillment of an oath.

Another text which emphasizes the importance of actions is a commentary on Exodus 12:33:

ותחזק מצרים על העם למהר לשלחם מן הארץ כי אמרו כלנו מתים

And the Egyptians were urgent with the people, to send them out of the land in haste, for they said 'we will all be dead.'

The verse is somewhat perplexing – what do they mean by “we will all be dead,” which can also be translated as “we are all dead” (the tense is ambiguous)?

Mekhilta offers the following explanation:

כי אמרו כלנו מתים אמרו לא כגזרת משה משה אמר ומת כל בכור בארץ מצרים והיו סבורין שכל מי שיש לו ה' או ה' בנים אין מת אלא הבכור שבהם והם לא היו יודעין שנשותיהן חשודות בעריות וכולן בכורים מרווקים אחרים הן עשו בסתר וחביה פרסם אותם. והרי דברים ק"ו ומה אם מדת פורענות מעטת העושה בסתר הקדוש ב"ה מפרסמו מדה טובה מרובה על אחת כמה וכמה.

Because they said "we are all dead." They said, this is not according to the decree of Moses, Moses said, 'All the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die.' (Ex. 11:5) The people had thought that anyone who had four or five sons, only one son would die.

They did not know that their wives were suspected of sexual transgression, and each son was a first-born [of another father]. They [the wives] acted in secret, and The Holy One punished them in public. And is it not *qal v' homer* that if God applies this principle to matters of punishment – that things done in private bring consequences from God in public -- how much the more so will God apply this principle to matters of reward?⁵²

Kadushin offers a helpful step-by-step explanation of this midrash. He states that according to the above commentary, the Egyptian people know that Moses had announced the plague of the first-born. However, they were willing to overlook those deaths. (In this interpretation, the Egyptians' desire to keep the Israelites as slaves is so strong that they were willing to have their first-born die rather than allow the Israelites to go). But when the plague came, sons were killed despite the fact that they were not the firstborn, or so their fathers believed. At this point, the Egyptians thought God was about to kill everyone ("we are all dead") and it is only now that the Egyptians begin rushing the Israelites out of Egypt, when their own lives appear to be on the line.⁵³

However, the midrash explains, the Egyptian people were wrong in their interpretation of God's actions. What they didn't know was that their wives were suspected of sexual transgression, so that all the sons were firstborn of other men.⁵⁴ They [the wives] acted in private and the Holy One made things public. And this is a *qal v' homer* situation, arguing from a less important case to a more important case. Since God meted out *punishment* in public for something that

⁵² Pisha 13

⁵³ Kadushin, 142

⁵⁴ Ibid.

occurred privately, it must be that God will mete out *rewards* in public for the Israelites' private merits.

This midrash asserts that even actions that happen on the inside – in secret, as the Mekhilta puts it – bring consequences on the outside. According to this midrash, all actions count, whether they are public or private. God sees even the most private behaviors, things which would be hidden from anyone else. Thus, the midrash implies, the merits of the Israelites' actions may not be visible to the human eye, but God can see them, and as a result, God will bring *ge'ula* publicly as a reward for private virtue.

Another midrash, this time from BeShallah 7, which may seem at first to contradict the primacy of action, can, on closer consideration, be seen as supporting it. The subject of the midrash is *אמנה*, which is usually translated as faith, but which can be seen as meaning something more akin to acting-out-of-faith. This distinction is made by Norman Cohen in his article, "Analysis of An Exegetic Tradition in the Mekhilta De Rabbi Ishmael: The Meaning of 'Amanah in the Second and Third Centuries." The verses being commented on by Cohen include:

גדולה האמנה... שלא נגאלו ישראל ממצרים אלא בשכר האמנה שני ויאמן העם (שמות ד לא)

Great is *amanah*... for Israel was only *nig'al* from Egypt as a reward for their *amanah*, as it is written, and the people had faith (*y'amen*, from the same root as *amanah*); and when they heard that God had remembered the children of Israel (Exodus 4:31)

Cohen points out that “though on a *peshat* level the verb *pakad* is understood as ‘remember,’ it can also mean ‘command.’ Therefore, the verse is interpreted as saying that Israel showed their faith in God when they had internalized, i.e. accepted God’s commandments.”⁵⁵ Thus, he concludes, “the Israelites’ redemption from Egypt must be seen as being due to their observance of the *mitzvot*.”⁵⁶ The Israelites’ faith in God is concretized by their performance of *mitzvot*. As in the previous midrash, therefore, it is action – specifically, actions in regard to *mitzvot* – which determines their ability to be *nig'al*.

One of the most famous commentaries in the Mekhilta also speaks of the importance of action. The hero of this story is Nahshon of the tribe of Judah. As recounted in the Mekhilta, we learn that:

בלשון אחר ויבאו בני ישראל בתוך הים כיון שעמדו שבטים על הים זה אומר אין אני יורד תחלה לים זה אומר אין אני יורד תחלה לים שני סבבוני בכחש אפרים ובמרמה בית ישראל (הושע יב א) מתוך שהיו עומדין ונוטלין עצה קפץ נחשון בן עמינדב ונפל לים עליו הכתוב אומר הושעני אלהים כי באו מים עד נפש ואומר טבעתי ביון מצולה ואין מעמד באתי במעמקי מים ושבולת מים שטפני ואומר אל תשטפני שבולת מים ואל תבלעני מצולה ואל תאטר עלי באר פיה (תלים / תהלים / סט ב - ג, טז) מיד אמר המקום למשה ידידי טובע בים והים סוגר ושונא רודף ואתה עומד ומרבה בתפלה אמר לפניו רבוננו של עולם ומה בידי לעשות אמר לו ואתה הרם את מטך

R. Judah made a different commentary (on the verse “and the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea,” Exodus 14:22). When the children of Israel came to the deep point of the sea, all the tribes were standing there, one saying “I’m not going in first” and another saying “I’m not going in first” as it is written “Ephraim surrounds me with lies and the house of Israel with deceit.” As they were standing there and deciding what to do Nahshon ben Amminadav jumped into the sea as it is written

⁵⁵ Norman Cohen, “Analysis of an Exegetic Tradition in the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael: The Meaning of *Amanah* in the Second and Third Centuries,” Journal for the Association of Jewish Studies, IX:1 (Spring 1984), 15

⁵⁶ Ibid.

"Save me, God, for the water has come up to my neck (Psalm 69:2)" and it is written "I am sunk in deep mire, where there is no standing, I am come into deep waters and the flood overwhelms me (Psalm 69:16)." God said to Moses, "My friend is drowning in the sea, it is closing in around him, and the enemy is pursuing him, and you stand there and pray!" Moses said, "Master of the Universe, what can I do?" God replied, "Lift up your rod!"

In this audacious elaboration on the moment of standing before the Red Sea, Nahshon becomes the teacher of Moses. As Moses stands there praying for the sea to part, Nahshon takes action. He jumps into the sea. It is only then that Moses, with God's prompting, lifts his rod to part the sea. Nahshon's role here is that of a shock trooper, who enters the dangerous situation first. The implication is that if Nahshon had not jumped into the fray, the Israelites might have continued arguing, and Moses might have continued praying, until it was too late to cross before the Egyptians. The message of the midrash is unequivocal -- there are times when the only thing to do is act. Nahshon's action epitomizes Cohen's definition of *amanah*. His faith in God is clearly very strong, but in addition, it is expressed through concrete action. As we saw with the *mitzvot* that the Israelites took on to merit the *ge'ula*, there is a window of opportunity to seize the moment, and if that opportunity isn't taken, the moment is lost. As the Mekhilta tells it, Nahshon's actions are directly responsible for the Israelites' ability to sing later, on the other side of the Sea, נחית בחסדך עם זו גאֵלָת (In Your mercy you have led out and brought *ge'ula* to Your people).

Finally, the midrash quoted earlier in connection with the timing of *ge'ula* is perhaps the Mekhilta's strongest statement about the power of our actions in bringing *ge'ula*. In attempting to understand the differing predictions of when

ge'ula will come in Genesis 15 (will it come after 400 years, as stated in verse 13, or in four generations as stated in verse 16), the Mekhilta harmonizes these positions in the following way.

כתוב אחד אומר ועבדום וענו אותם ארבע מאות שנה וכתוב אחד אומר ודור רביעי ישובו הנה
כיצד יתקיימו שני כתובין אלו אמר הקדוש ב"ה אם עושין תשובה אני נואלם לדורות ואם לאו אני
נואלם לשנים.

One passage says "and they will afflict them for four hundred years" and another passages says "in the fourth generation they will return." How can we uphold both of these passages? The Holy One said "if they repent I will *go 'al* them according to the generations, and if not, according to the [centuries of] years.

In this passage, the Israelites can have the opportunity to choose between four hundred years and four generations. It all comes down to whether or not they do *teshuvah* – if they choose to repent of their former, idolatrous actions and change their ways, it will be four generations, and if or not, it will be four hundred years. This is quite a difference in timing. The Israelites here are given the ability to eliminate over 200 years from the term of their slavery, an impressive parole, if they successfully repent and change their ways.

It is interesting that in this presentation, even if the Israelites do not change their ways, *ge'ula* will still come, it will simply take much longer. This position is in contrast to some of the other passages, which state that if the Israelites are not ready, the opportunity for *ge'ula* will simply pass them by. In this version, *ge'ula* is coming to them in either case, and they have the ability to influence how quickly it will arrive.

A difficult question to answer in regard to this verse is: does this qualify as a case in which the Israelites can hasten *ge'ula* with their actions? At first, it seems clear that they can, as the difference between four generations and four hundred years is no small change in term. But on closer consideration, the oath God makes in Genesis does include the position that they will return to the Land in the fourth generation. In that case, the Israelites are simply bringing *ge'ula* at one of the appointed time periods. In the end, this example is tantalizingly ambiguous – there is a hint towards the daring idea that we have the ability to hasten *ge'ula*, within the safety of remaining true to the timeframe predicted in the Torah. Perhaps in this way, the commentators of the Mekhilta turned a possible problem in the Torah into an opportunity to press their point of the importance of action as far as possible. In this way, they were able to make sure that their readers/hearers understood how crucial their own behavior was without sacrificing loyalty to the perfection of the Torah, whose every word is true.

Transformation of Inner State

It is clear from the above examples that Mekhilta definitely stresses the importance of actions, and specifically, the performance of *mitzvot*, in bringing *ge'ula*. An often made general observation about rabbinic Judaism generally is its emphasis on deeds as a means of serving God. Rabbinic Judaism's emphasis on action is posed against the beliefs of a new sect gaining popularity during the

tannaitic period, followers of a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, some scholars have seen in the Mekhilta's emphasis on deeds a polemic against the newly developing Christian sect, with its emphasis on faith. Norman Cohen writes of the passage about *amanah* described earlier in this chapter:

It is against the backdrop of Christianity's rejection of the law as the means of attaining salvation and its emphasis upon the faith of the pious believer in the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the antinomianism of its Gnostic counterparts that our Mekhilta passage must be read. When Gentile Christians and Gnostics were claiming that salvation would come as a result of either faith or mystical knowledge, the rabbis of the second and third century had to go out of their way to emphasize that for the Jew, redemption would be the reward for observance of the commandments.⁵⁷

Certainly the examples cited above from Mekhilta support Cohen's observation about the importance the rabbis credited to performance of *mitzvot*. However, I would like to suggest that in addition, Mekhilta's commentaries show a striking sensitivity to the fact that preparation for *ge'ula* requires a change of inner state. There are many comments in the Mekhilta which indicate an understanding that we cannot play our part in bringing *ge'ula* simply by performing certain deeds; rather, that these deeds have to be accompanied by an inner change of intention and perspective on the world. Thus it is not only action, the Mekhilta seems to counsel, which allows us to be ready for the coming of *ge'ula*, but a less visible kind of change.

There is one difference between the portrayal of the movement from servitude to freedom in the Torah and in Mekhilta that is so overarching it almost

becomes the forest that one might miss in the midst of a careful analysis of the trees. In the Torah, as I mentioned in Chapter One, the servitude of the Israelites is "harsh labor at mortar and bricks."⁵⁷ The Israelites' slavery is physical. They are literally oppressed by their taskmasters. The fact that the Egyptians worship their own gods is certainly part of the Exodus story. As we saw in a midrash quoted earlier, Moses tells Pharaoh that his people need to leave Egypt to worship God because their means of worship will be an abomination to the Egyptians, the implication being that Israelite worship will fly in the face of the Egyptians' cultic practices. However, the fact that the Egyptians worship other gods does not seem to impact the Israelites in any other way. It is not connected to the Israelites' slavery. The Israelites are slaves, Exodus tells us, because they are forced to work for Pharaoh, building Pithom and Ramses, because their bodies belong to the Egyptians.

Mekhilta, on the other hand, begins with the assumption that the real servitude of the Israelites is that they have adopted the practice of worshipping Egypt's false gods. In the midrash from Pisha 5, quoted earlier, the question is asked: "why did the Torah cause the taking of the Passover offering to precede its slaughter by four days?" The first opinion, already discussed is so that they Israelites would have the time to do *mitzvot*. There is a second opinion offered that differs subtly from the answer that the Israelites needed the four days to begin the performance of *mitzvot*.

⁵⁷ Cohen, p. 25

⁵⁸ Exodus 1:14

ומפני מה הקדים לקחתו של פסח לשחיטתו ד' ימים לפי שהיו ישראל שטופין
בע"ז במצרים וע"ז שקולה כנגד כל המצות

Why the Torah cause the taking of the lamb to precede its slaughter by four days? The Israelites were steeped in idol worship, and idol worship is [equal in opposite weight to] all of the *mitzvot* in the Torah.

In this version of the midrash, the reason for the lag in time before the moment of *ge'ula* is portrayed with a vivid image. The Israelites are -- שטופין -- steeped, or soaked would be another possible translation – in idolatry. Just as the lamb which would be offered on the fourteenth day would need to have the blood drained out of it to be considered a fit offering to God, so too the Israelites needed four days to have the idolatry drained out of them before they could be considered fit to receive and participate in *ge'ula*. Indeed, as the midrash continues, it states:

וכי יולד אדם שהוא מתבשר בשורה טובה ואינו שמח נולד לך בן זכר רבך מוציאך לחירות ואינו שמח אם כן למה נאמר ולא שמעו אל משה (שמות ו ט) אלא שהיה קשה בעיניהם לפרוש מעבודה זרה

Can it be that a person receives good news and is not happy? "A son is born to you." "Your master is setting you free." If this is the case [that one must be happy on receiving good news] then why does the Torah say of the Israelites, "and they did not listen to Moses" (Exodus 6:5)? Because it was hard for them to separate from idol worship.

The change the Israelites needed to make, according to this midrash, is that they needed to give up their attachment to the idolatry they had become accustomed to practicing. The real slavery was not the bricks and mortar. Rather,

it was the enslavement that had taken place inside of their souls. They had become so immersed – or soaked, to use the language of the Mekhilta – in idolatry that they could not even recognize the good news that was brought to them regarding *ge'ula*. In this example it is clear that the preparation they need to make is to change their inner state, otherwise the opportunity for *ge'ula* will certainly pass them by.

The importance of inner change is underscored again in another midrash, this time from Pisha 6.

ונתנו על שתי המזוזות ועל המשקוף. מבפני' אתה אומר מבפני' או אינו אלא מבחוץ ת"ל וראיתי את הדם, הנראה לי ולא הנראה לאחרים דברי ר' ישמעאל ר' נתן אומר מבפנים. אתה אומר מבפנים או אינו אלא מבחוץ ת"ל והיה הדם לכם לאות ולא לאחרים לאות. ר' יצחק אומר לעולם מבחוץ כדי שיהיו המצריים רואין ומעידהו מתחתכין

And they shall take from the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel (Exodus 12:7). This means, on the inside. You say inside, but maybe it is outside. But scripture says, "and I will see the blood" – this means, the blood which will be seen by me [that is, by God] and not by others, these are the words of R. Ishmael. R. Jonathan says, this means on the inside. You say inside, but maybe it is outside. But scripture says, "and the blood will be a sign to you." To you, but not to others."

To fully appreciate the significance of this midrash, it is important to remember that the moment when God passes over the Israelites' homes is the initiating moment of *ge'ula*. As we saw in the midrash asking who can know when it is midnight, quoted in Chapter 3, this is the moment when all the events which constitute *ge'ula* are first set in motion. The question at issue is where on the doorposts should the Israelites place the blood of the Passover lamb? An anonymous commentator suggests the inside, and this position is immediately contradicted. But then proof is brought to support the choice of inside from

Exodus 12:13, a few verses later, which states "and when I see the blood. The reason the blood should go on the inside of the doorpost is that it is a sign for God, and as we know, God can see things that human beings can't. God can see what is on the inside.

Here again, the imagery suggests that God can detect changes made on the inside, which would be invisible to anyone else. The Israelites' sign that they should be among the ones who take part in the *ge'ula* – the blood of the Passover offering – is literally located on the inside, the inside of their doorpost. The imagery here makes concrete the idea that the signs we need to show God that we are ready for *ge'ula* are interior. They do not occur in the public domain.

The midrash continues with another interesting twist on this idea. The position that the blood should be on the inside of the doorpost is maintained, but the reason offered is different: "R. Jonathan says, this means on the inside. You say inside, but maybe it is outside. But scripture says, 'and the blood will be a sign to you.' To you, but not to others." R. Jonathan again brings the possibility that the blood should be on the outside of the door. But this position is overridden again, with the proof that the Torah says "and the blood will be a sign to you [meaning, to the Israelites]," the significance of which is that it will be a sign to you but not to others. In this formulation, the significance of putting the blood on the inside is that it will be seen by the person him or herself and not by others. This commentary suggests that the signs that a person is ready to receive *ge'ula* can be seen by the person him or herself, though not by others.

In both cases, whether it is God who sees the sign, or the recipient of *ge'ula* him or herself, the point is clearly made that the sign is an interior one. It cannot be seen on the outside, it cannot be seen by others. Our ability to influence our own participation in *ge'ula* is dependent on making inner changes which will symbolize readiness, to God and to ourselves.⁵⁹

Inner signs of readiness for *ge'ula* are the subject of another commentary from Mekhilta, one which has become quite well-known through its placement in the Passover Haggadah. Exodus 13:8 contains the commandment to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt to one's children, which is the basis for the celebration of the Passover Seder:

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ידוד לי בצאתי ממצרים

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "it is because of what God did for me when I came out of Egypt.

Mekhilta's commentary on this verse is:

בעבור זה עשה ה' לי למה נאמר לפי שהוא אומר מה העבודה הזאת לכם אלא זה בן רשע הוא שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל ולפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל אף אתה הוציאהו מן הכלל בעבור זה עשה יי' לי בצאתי ממצרים לי ולא לך ולפי שהוצאת את עצמך מן הכלל אלו היית שם לא היית ננאל

⁵⁹ As I mentioned in Chapter One, the Mekhilta is not a text with a singular voice. The midrash quoted above is a good example of this characteristic. After the two opinions quoted in the text of this paper, a third is offered, "R. Isaac says, I still think it means outside, so that the Egyptians would see it and it would feel as if their guts were cut through." R. Isaac seems to feel that the sign of *ge'ula* should be external to insure the Egyptians receive the appropriate punishment for their actions (although the punishment itself is internal, acting on their inner organs). None of the opinions are designated as correct – they are allowed to stand as they are, voicing contradiction without the need for reconciliation.

Because of what the Lord did for me. Why is this said? Because he says "What is this worship to you? (Ex. 12:26). This can only be the question of the wicked son. Since he takes himself out of the group, you should take him out of the group. You should say to him "because of this, which God did for me." "For me" and not "for you" for had you been there, you would not have been *nig'al*.⁶⁰

The Mekhilta asserts that the father's comment is being made to the wicked son, since it is a logical response to the question "what does this mean to you?" The father's reply, according to the Mekhilta, is swift and unforgiving. When he says, "because of what God did for *me*" (picking up on the grammar of the son's question, as he asked what does this mean to *you*), the father's intention is to explain "for me" and not "for you," for had you been there, you would not have been *nig'al*.

While this comment may not reflect contemporary wisdom about successful parenting, it is extremely revealing about the role that one's attitude plays in *ge'ula*. The son's question is deemed as wicked by the Mekhilta because he "takes himself out from the group." Therefore, the midrash asserts, he will also be taken out of the group when it comes to *ge'ula*. The implication is that had this child been present for the moment of *ge'ula*, despite being a member of the Israelite clan, his attitude would have prevented him from participating in the liberation from Egypt. We have come a long way from the Torah's *go'el ha dam*, about which A.R. Johnson commented that "kinship groups were seen as a unit -- a corporate personality" (see footnote in Chapter Two). In the Mekhilta,

⁶⁰ Pisha 17

individual identity is affirmed by stating that if one, as an individual, does not possess the correct attitude, then one is not ready or worthy to take part in *ge'ula*.

A midrash from Pisha 17 goes even farther in describing the power of an individual's attitude in affecting *ge'ula*. The son in the above midrash was not included due to his point of view; in this midrash, someone is included in the external *ge'ula* but remains internally oppressed. Pisha 14 includes this striking comment:

ר' אליעזר אומר עבודה זרה עברה עם ישראל בים שנאמר ועבר בים צרה והכה בים גלים
(זכריה י"א) ואי זה זה צלמו של מיכה

R. Eliezer says: idol worship crossed the sea with the Israelites, as it is written, 'And a rival crossed the sea.' And what is this? It is the image of Micah.

The quote from Zēchariah 10:11 is difficult to understand. JPS translates "A hemmed in force shall pass through the sea."⁶¹ The Mekhilta, however translates צרה as a rival, thus rendering the verse "and an idol [a rival god] crossed the sea with the Israelites. This midrash is an oblique reference to a comment from Judges 17:5, "And the man Micah had a shrine and made an *efod* and *terafim*." Terafim were considered by the rabbis to be idols. In Pesahim 117A, the presence of this man Micah's idol is explained as follows: "The Israelites brought along with them from Egypt an idol, which they worshipped for a long time."

To return to the Mekhilta passage: idol worship crossed the sea with the Israelites. Micah's *teraph* or idol, as we learn from Pesahim 117A, was brought along and worshipped. So the Mekhilta passage seems to state that even when

one is physically *nig'al* one can continue to keep idolatry inside. In this case, the lack of an inner change means that even physical *ge'ula* fails to truly transform a person into a servant of God.

There are two other powerful commentaries related to the moments at the Red Sea, both of which speak of the importance of an inner change in bringing *ge'ula*. In the first, God's command to Moses at the Red Sea in Exodus 14:15, "tell the people to go forward!" is reinterpreted by Mekhilta in an unusual way.

רבי אומר דבר אל בני ישראל ויסעו ויסעו דברים שהיו דוברים מלבן אמש היו אומרים המבלי אין קברים במצרים ועכשיו אחה עומד ומרבה בתפלה מה תצק אלי דבר אל בני ישראל ויסעו ויסעו דברים מלבן

R. Judah the Prince said: "Tell the Children of Israel to move forward," means "to move forward from the words that they were saying in their hearts." Yesterday, they were saying "are there not enough graves in Egypt [that you are taking us here to die in the wilderness]?" and now you stand here and pray and cry out to me? Tell the Children of Israel to move forward from the words in their hearts.⁶¹

This is a wonderful portrayal of a God with an ironic wit. Moses is crying out to God and God replies, "You're asking *me* to handle this? Turn to your people, who have not displayed an inch of faith in me since being taken miraculously out of Egypt, and perhaps if they change their perspective, your situation will also change." From God's point of view, according to this midrash, the change that must occur for the Israelites to make it safely across the sea is a change inside of the Israelites. They must change "the words in their hearts,"

⁶¹ JPS translation

⁶² Beshallah 3

their faithless attitude to God. They need to become more like Nahshon. But here, what God is asking is not for a leap of action but rather a leap of intention.

Finally, a stirring image in the following chapter of Beshallah emphasizes viscerally that *ge'ula* certainly includes an inner component. The context is Exodus 14:21,

וַיֹּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדוֹ עַל הַיָּם וַיּוֹלֶךְ יְדוֹד אֶת הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קְדִים עֹזָה כָּל הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת הַיָּם לַחֲרֵבָה וַיִּבָּקְעוּ הַיָּמִים

And Moses stretched out his hands over the sea and God drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground.

Mekhilta picks up on the fact that despite the fact that God has told Moses if he lifts his arms, he will cause the sea to part, in this verse the parting of the sea is attributed to God, not Moses. What is the reason for this? The Mekhilta answers with the following parable:

וַיֹּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדוֹ עַל הַיָּם, הִתְחִיל הַיָּם עֹמֵד כִּנְגֵדוֹ אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה בְּשֵׁם הַקִּבְיָה שִׁיבָקֶע וְלֹא קָבַל עָלָיו הִרְאָהוּ אֶת הַמָּטָה וְלֹא קָבַל עָלָיו. מִשָּׁל לְמָה הִדְבֵּר דּוֹמָה לַמֶּלֶךְ שֶׁהָיוּ לוֹ שְׁתֵּי גִנּוֹת זוֹ לִפְנֵים זֶה מִכָּר אֶת הַפְּנִימִית וְבָא הַלּוֹקֵחַ לִיכָנֵס וְלֹא הִנִּיחוּ הַשּׁוֹמְרִים אָמַר לוֹ הַלּוֹקֵחַ לְשׁוֹמְרֵי בְּשֵׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ וְלֹא קָבַל עָלָיו הִרְאָהוּ אֶת הַטְּבַעַת וְלֹא קָבַל עָלָיו עַד שֶׁנִּיחָה הַלּוֹקֵחַ אֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ בַּעֲצָמוֹ וְבָא כִּיּוֹן שֶׁבָּא הַמֶּלֶךְ הִתְחִיל הַשּׁוֹמֵר בּוֹרֵחַ אָמַר לוֹ כָּל הַיּוֹם הָיִיתִי אוֹמֵר לָךְ בְּשֵׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ וְלֹא קָבַלְתָּ עָלֶיךָ וְעַכְשֵׁי מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתָּה בּוֹרֵחַ אָמַר לוֹ לֹא מִפְּנֵי אֲנִי בּוֹרֵחַ אֲלָא מִפְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, כֵּךְ עֹמֵד מֹשֶׁה עַל הַיָּם אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה בְּשֵׁם הַקִּבְיָה הַקִּבְיָה בִּכְבוֹדוֹ וּבִגְבוּרָתוֹ הִתְחִיל הַיָּם בּוֹרֵחַ שְׁנֵי הַיָּם וַיִּנָּס (תְּחִלִּים קִדָּה ג) שִׁיבָקֶע וְלֹא קָבַל עָלָיו הִרְאָהוּ הַמָּטָה וְלֹא קָבַל עָלָיו עַד שֶׁנִּגְלָה הַקִּבְיָה עָלָיו בִּכְבוֹדוֹ וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁנִּגְלָה

And Moses stretched out his hands over the sea. At first, the sea resisted him. Moses said to it, "I ask you in the name of the Holy One to split" but the sea would not receive his command. Moses showed him the rod of God and the sea would still not receive his command. To what may the matter be compared? To a king who had two gardens one inside the other. He sold the inside garden and the buyer went to enter, but the guard would not let him. The buyer told the guard, "I am here in the name of the king, but the guard would not receive his command. The buyer showed the

guard the king's signet but the guard still would not receive his command until the buyer brought the king himself. Then the guard started to flee. The buyer said "all day I was telling you I came in the name of the king and you wouldn't receive me, and now why are you running away? The guard replied, "I'm not running from you, I'm running from the king. So too when Moses stood at the shores of the sea, and said in the name of God to split, the sea did not receive his command, when Moses showed the sea God's staff, the sea did not receive his command, until God Himself appeared in His full glory and then the sea began to run away.

Moses's dilemma trying to part the sea is compared to a man trying to enter a garden he has bought from the king, but who is prevented from entering by the guard (the sea). In this parable, dividing and crossing the sea is compared to entering the innermost garden. So the act of *ge'ula*, that is, crossing the sea, is akin to entering the innermost region. In this metaphor, the most external, physical component of *ge'ula*, the crossing of the Red Sea, becomes inextricably linked to an image of interiority, of privacy. *Ge'ula* is entering the innermost garden of the king. There is perhaps even a hint of a sexual overtone to this image. Earlier in the Mekhilta, Song of Songs 4:12, "a garden shut up is my sister," is explained as referring to the lack of sexual transgression among the Israelite women in Egypt. This subtext lends an even stronger sense both of going inward, the male perspective on sexuality, and of intimacy. In any case, the parable of entering the innermost garden powerfully evokes the concept that even at the most outward moment of *ge'ula* there is an important inner component.

Having proposed that inner change is regarded as equally important to changes in behavior, there is one other means through which the Israelites may

have an impact on their own *ge'ula*, according to Mekhilta. Unlike the two categories above, however, this means of effecting *ge'ula* does not relate to the Israelites themselves; rather, it focuses on those to whom they are related.

Connection to Meritorious Ancestors

When God first communicates with Moses, God makes the Divine identity known by telling him: "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." It is through this reference to a past relationship that God's enduring connection to Moses and the Israelites is established. In Mekhilta, this mode of establishing connection is reversed. One means by which Mekhilta's commentaries affirm that the Israelites can play a role in bringing *ge'ula* is by reminding God of the merits of their ancestors, with whom God established an enduring relationship.

As discussed earlier, the moment which can be seen as the starting point of *ge'ula* occurs at midnight on the night before the Israelites leave Egypt. After seeing the sign of blood on the Israelites' doorposts, God passes over their homes, not killing the first born. In connection with this moment, we read the following in Pisha 7:

מה ראה ראה דם עקדתו של יצחק

What did God see? The blood of the Aqedah of Isaac.

This may at first seem like a puzzling comment, since as we know from the story in Genesis 22, Isaac's blood is not shed. God sends an angel to stay Abraham's hand before he lifts it against his son. However, when Mekhilta

speaks of עֲקֵדַתוֹ שֶׁל יִצְחָק -- the Aqedah of Isaac, what is being referred to is not simply the story of Abraham and Isaac as told in the Torah in Genesis 22.

As Philip Davies writes in his article, "Passover and the Dating of the Aqedah," "the Jewish doctrine of the Aqedah regards the offering of Isaac narrated in Genesis 22 as an actually accomplished sacrifice in which blood was shed."⁶³ This tradition has its roots in the Targumic accounts of the story from Genesis 22, and was evidently known to the rabbis whose opinions we read in the Mekhilta.

But why would the Mekhilta choose to include this *midrashic* tradition that Isaac's blood was, in fact, shed in this particular context? Why assert that the blood seen by God on the Israelites' doorposts was not simply the blood of the Passover offering, but rather, was the blood of their ancestor Isaac? Susan Niditch sees this issue as related to the problem of communication with God in the era after the destruction of the Temple. Prophecy ceased after the destruction of the second Temple. Therefore, the Jewish people lost their means of communication with God. Niditch argues that "The potential divine-human communications gap is mediated by the perfect intermediary, the merit of the ancestors, those heroes of Israel's past now intercessors with God – human, and yet in death more than human."⁶⁴

Thus, merely by invoking Isaac, one of the meritorious ancestors, has the potential to effect a connection between the Israelites and God. But Niditch

⁶³ Philip Davies, "Passover and the Dating of the Aqedah," Journal of Jewish Studies, Spring 1979, p. 59

argues further that to invoke Isaac's Aqedah, his moment of ultimate sacrifice, is of even greater worth than other references to meritorious ancestors. The reason that Isaac holds such a special place is as follows. "The willingness to offer one's life has become a means of effecting mediation between God and Israel, a radical means especially necessary in the face of a reduction in traditional prophecy."⁶⁵ In alluding to Isaac's near-sacrifice, transformed by rabbinic tradition into an actually accomplished sacrifice, the Mekhilta is in effect reminding God of the ultimate devotion of the ancestors of the Jewish people. In this way, Isaac's blood acts as a motivator in the crucial moment when God begins the process of *ge'ula*. Perhaps, the Mekhilta seems to suggest, it is God's perception of Isaac's blood, and all the memories this carries with it, which motivates God to take on the task of initiating *ge'ula*.

The Aqedah is invoked again in Beshallah 3, during the other miraculous moment of *ge'ula*, the parting of the Red Sea. In this case, it is the Biblical account to which Mekhilta's midrash refers. We read:

ר' בנאה אמר בזכות מצוה שעשה אביהם אברהם אני אקרע להם את הים שני ויבקע עצי
עולה (בראשית כב ג) וכתיב ויבקעו המים.

R. Banaah says, on account of the *mitzvah* that Abraham performed, I will split the sea for them, as it is written, "and he split wood for the offering (Genesis 22:3); and it is written here (Exodus 14:21) "and the waters were split."

⁶⁴ Niditch, 164

⁶⁵ Ibid. 167

At the two important junctures of *ge'ula*, the night escape and the splitting of the Red Sea, the two forefathers are invoked by Mekhilta. In the midrash just quoted, Abraham's devotion to God, his willingness to split the wood for the sacrifice, is directly related to God's action of splitting the sea. It can be seen as measure for measure. But here, as with the example of Isaac above, the virtues which entitle the Israelites to have *ge'ula* take place at its appointed time are not their own. It is by virtue of their connection to meritorious ancestors that they are given the privilege of participating in *ge'ula*.

In this category, it is clear that the power given in relation to *ge'ula* is not to hasten. Rather, on the strength of relationship to the past, the Israelites remind God that they are worthy of receiving *ge'ula* at its appointed time, of not letting the moment of opportunity pass.

Thus, Mekhilta establishes three categories by which the Israelites can participate in bringing *ge'ula*. In all cases, their power is the power to cause the *ge'ula* to arrive at its appointed time, but not to hasten it beyond the parameters set in Genesis 15. We now turn to the other players in the drama, the Egyptians and God, to explore how their roles may be similar to or different from that of the Children of Israel.

The Other Players: The Egyptians and God

Just as the amount of space devoted to the Israelites and their role in *ge'ula* is revealing, the same can be said about the Egyptians. One might assume, knowing the Exodus story, that the Egyptians and Pharaoh would be seen as

playing an important role in the coming of *ge'ula* in Mekhilta. After all, it is they who pursue the Israelites out of Egypt, setting the events to follow in motion, and it is they who chase the freed slaves to the sea, causing the need for the great miracle that occurs there. Thus, in the Torah text, the Egyptians definitely contribute to the action of *ge'ula*.

In Mekhilta, this starring role has all but disappeared. The commentaries that deal with the Egyptians focus mainly on the punishments meted out to them for their sinful behavior (such as the midrash that their wives infidelities, quoted earlier in this chapter). In the few comments about the Egyptians' role in *ge'ula*, the purpose of the midrash seems to be to minimize the impact they had on the experience. Two examples of this tendency can be found in Pisha 13. The context for the commentaries to follow is the events that occur in the moments after the first born Egyptians have been killed, when the Egyptians urge the people out of Egypt. In each case, it is the word *nig'alu* in the Mekhilta which changes the meaning of the Exodus verse and de-emphasizes the role of the Egyptians.

The first midrash is a commentary on Exodus 12:34 --

וישא העם את בצקו טרם יחמץ

And the people took their dough before it was leavened

Mekhilta adds succinctly:

מגיד שלשו את העיסה ולא הספיקו לחמצה עד שננאלו

This tells us that they had kneaded the dough but there had not been time for it to rise before they were *nig'alu*.⁶⁶

Kadushin observes that "at first glance, the comment seems to convey merely the literal meaning."⁶⁷ Thus, Mekhilta's commentary seems to have added nothing – we already know from the Exodus text that the dough did not have time to rise. The words, "before they were *nig'al*," however, identify the idea in the comment as rabbinic. It was because of the Israelites' redemption [sic] by God, not because they were driven out by the Egyptians, that they 'had not sufficient time to let it [the matzah] leaven."⁶⁸ Thus, the plain sense of the Exodus verse is overturned. One might think that the reason the people took the dough before it was leavened it that they were being chased out of Egypt. But, explains Mekhilta, the real reason for the haste was not the pressure of the Egyptians; it was the fact that the time of *ge'ula* had arrived.

The same logic is used to interpret another verse on the same subject.

וַיֹּאפֹּרוּ אֶת הַבֶּצֶק אֲשֶׁר הוּצִיאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם עֲנַת מִצּוֹת כִּי לֹא חֶמֶץ כִּי גֵרְשׁוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְלֹא יִכְלּוּ לְהַחֲמִמָּהּ

And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay.⁶⁹

The Mekhilta elaborates on the second half of this verse, "for they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay."

⁶⁶ Pisha 13

⁶⁷ Kadushin, 143

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Exodus 12:39

כי גורשו ממצרים שומע אני מאליהם ת"ל ולא יכלו להתמהמה עד שנגאלו

I might have thought that they were driven out by the Egyptians, but the Torah teaches: 'And they could not delay,' meaning that they could not delay until they were *nig'alu*.⁷⁰

Here, the Mekhilta affirms that the Egyptians could not delay in banishing the Israelites from Egypt because that the time of *ge'ula* had arrived. Their actions were not a result of their own free will – they did not rush the Israelites out due to their own wish to have them gone. Rather, they literally were *not able* to delay. God was forcing their hand, so to speak, using them as pawns on God's chessboard. Again, the role of the Egyptians is minimized and the Israelites' actions are seen as being dictated by God and by the arrival of the *ge'ula*. The pressure of the Egyptians has become merely a means through which God's will is accomplished. In this way, Mekhilta affirms that in the game of *ge'ula*, there are really only two players: God and Israel.

Thus, the Egyptians have their starring role in the Exodus taken away from them. Instead of acting as participants in bringing *ge'ula*, they become props, who happen to be standing around when the cosmic drama between God and Israel unfolds. The rabbis of the Mekhilta, living under their own oppressors as part of the Roman Empire, were not willing to allow the Israelites' oppressors to play an important part in their telling of the Exodus story – not even as the villains of the drama.

⁷⁰ Pisha 14

The Role of God

There is, however, one key player whose role has not yet been considered.

As I mentioned in Chapter One of this paper, one characteristic of the usage of *ga'al* is that it describes not just any rescuing action, but particularly the actions of God. What are the qualities of those actions? Is God's power boundless as relates to *ge'ula*, or is God also constricted by outside forces, unable to bring *ge'ula* at exactly the time desired?

A midrash considered earlier about the discrepancy in time frames in Genesis 15 (four hundred years versus four generations) reveals the ways in which even God is not the master of destiny regarding *ge'ula*. God says in that passage:

אם עושין תשובה אני גואלם לדורות ואם לאו אני גואלם לשנים.

If they repent, I will *go'al* them according to the generations, if not, according to the years.

God, having given the Israelites free will, has to abide by their choices. If they choose to repent, then God can bring the *ge'ula* sooner, after four generations, but if not, God too must wait.

God's waiting is not, however, seen as an act of patience. In Mekhilta, God is portrayed as deeply invested in the moment of the Israelites *ge'ula*.

In a midrash on the verse "ואכלתם אתו בחפזון" (Exodus 12:11) raises the question of whose haste is being invoked.

וככה תאכלו אותו, כיוצאי דרכים. ר' יוסי הגלילי אומר בא הכתוב ללמדנו דרך ארץ מן התורה על

יוצאי דרכים שיהיו מזרחין ואכלתם אותו בחפזון זה חפזון מצרים. אתה אומר כן או אינו אלא חפזון ישראל כשהוא אומר ולכל בני ישראל לא יחרץ כלב לשונו (שמות יא ז) הרי חפזון ישראל אומר הא מה אני מקיים ואכלתם אותו בחפזון זה חפזון מצרים. רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר ואכלתם אותו בחפזון זה חפזון ישראל. אתה אומר כן או אינו אלא חפזון מצרים כשהוא אומר כי גורשו ממצרים הרי חפזון מצרים אומר. ומה תלמוד לומר בחפזון זה חפזון ישראל. אבא חנן משום רבי אליעזר אומר זה חפזון שכינה אף על פי שאין ראיה לדבר זכר לדבר. קול דודי הנה זה בא מדלג על ההרים מקפץ על הגבעות (שיר השירים = ב ח) ואומר הנה זה עומד אחר כתלנו (שם/שיר השירים ב/ט)

This is the haste of the Egyptians. You say it is the haste of the Egyptians, but perhaps it is the haste of the Israelites, as it says, "But against the children of Israel, a dog shall not whet his tongue (Exodus 11:7)." The haste of Israel is referred to there so what do I do with the verse "and you shall eat it in haste?" This is the haste of the Egyptians. R. Joshua ben Karha says, "and you shall eat it in haste," this is the haste of the Israelites. You say that it is the haste of the Israelites, but maybe it is the haste of the Egyptians, as it is said, "for they were banished from Egypt and could not tarry (Ex. 12:39)," this is a reference to the haste of the Egyptians. How then shall I interpret "and you shall eat it in haste?" This is the haste of Israel. Abba Hanin says in the name of R. Eliezer, this is the haste of the *Shekhina*, despite the fact that there is no proof for this, there is a hint of this interpretation: "the voice of my beloved, behold he comes...he stands behind our wall (Song of Songs, 2:8-9)."⁷¹

This long, somewhat confusing, set of arguments can be summed up as follows.⁷² The simple reading of this verse is that the Israelites must eat in haste, since the moment of *ge'ula* has arrived. However, there is a problem with this simple reading of the verse. Earlier, in Exodus 11:7, we read "and against the children of Israel, a dog shall not whet his tongue."⁷³ This is taken by Mekhilta to refer to the haste of the Israelites (the verse is seen as referring to a miracle by which dogs did not bark at the Israelites when they left Egypt, despite the fact that

⁷¹ Pisha 7

⁷² In an effort to facilitate clarity of understanding, I have presented the arguments in a different order than they are offered in the midrash itself.

⁷³ Translation from Lauterbach, p. 52

they were leaving in great haste). In that case, it would be *yitur*, superfluity, for Exodus 12:11 to refer again to the haste of the Israelites. So the midrash suggests that *ואכלתם אותו בחפז* refers to the Egyptians. In this interpretation, "and you shall eat it in haste" means that the Israelites should eat the Passover offering during the time when the Egyptians are "in haste," that is to say, all in a bustle over the death of the first born, before they have a chance to start forcing the Israelites out of Egypt.⁷⁴ However, there is again a problem of *yitur*, superfluity. Another verse is brought, Exodus 12:39 (discussed above in this chapter) and this verse is taken to describe the haste of the Egyptians. So whose haste is being referred to in Exodus 12:11, "and you shall eat it in haste"? The argument seems to have reached a stalemate when the stunning conclusion is revealed: Abba Hanin says in the name of R. Eliezer, this is the haste of the *Shekhina*, despite the fact that there is no proof for this, there is a hint of this interpretation: "the voice of my beloved, behold he comes...he stands behind our wall (Song of Songs, 2:8-9).

The *Shekhina*, from the root *shakhen*, to dwell, is the (feminine) figure used by the rabbis to describe God's indwelling presence in the world. In this midrash, she is the one whose great haste is being described in the verse from Exodus. Thus, the time of *ge'ula* is portrayed as an event that is being awaited with great alacrity by God. While the Israelites spent their four hundred years of slavery unaware of the freedom that awaited them and unable to ask God for help

⁷⁴ See Lauterbach, 52 note 1

in more articulate terms than a cry of abject despair (Exodus 2:23), the *Shekhina* was waiting impatiently for the moment of *ge'ula* to arrive.

One question that arises from this midrash is "how is the haste of the *Shekhina* hinted at by the verses from Song of Songs?" This question can be answered by looking at a much later variation on this midrash, from Song of Songs Rabba.

Hark, my beloved, behold he comes." R. Judah and R. Nehemiah and the Rabbis gave different explanations of this. "R. Judah said: Hark my beloved, behold he comes." This refers to Moses. When he came and said to Israel, 'In this month you will be delivered,' they said to him, 'Our teacher Moses, how can we be delivered? Did not the holy One say to Abraham, "And they shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years (Gen. 15:13), and so far only two hundred and ten have passed?" He said to them: 'Since God desires to deliver you, He takes no heed of your reckonings, "but leaps over the mountains." The 'mountains, and 'hills' mentioned here refer to the calculations and periods. He leaps over calculations and periods and terminuses and in this month you are to be delivered.⁷⁵

So the Song of Songs verse "hints" at the *Shekhina*'s impatience by stating that God "leaps over mountains," that is to say, leaps over calculations about when the *ge'ula* should come. In this later version of the midrash, God's impatience actually causes the *ge'ula* to arrive one hundred and ninety years early.⁷⁶ This possibility is merely hinted at in the Mekhilta midrash. However,

⁷⁵ Song of Songs Rabba 2:21

⁷⁶ The editors of the Soncino Midrash Rabba explain that this date represents the following mathematic calculation: according to the Rabbis, Yocheved was born as Jacob and his family were leaving Egypt, and she was 130 years old at Moses' birth. Since we also know that Moses came to set the *ge'ula* in motion when he

what is clear in the earlier, Mekhilta version is that God is not an objective observer, waiting patiently for the period of servitude to be over. Rather, God is portrayed as deeply invested in the liberation of the children of Israel. In the Mekhilta's version, however, it is not made explicit that God can actually hasten *ge'ula* because of God's desire for it to come. God merely waits in great haste and wastes not a moment once the time has come. The radical statement that God's haste may lead to overriding the term of the servitude is left for a later midrash.

A question left by this midrash is "why is the *Shekhina* in such haste to have the *ge'ula* come? One possible reason can be inferred from a midrash elsewhere in the Mekhilta. In Pisha 14 we read

בכל מקום שגלו ישראל כביכול גלתה שכינה עמם. גלו למצרים שכינה עמם

Every place where the children of Israel were exiled, it was as if the *Shekhina* was exiled with them. When the children of Israel went down to Egypt, the *Shekhina* went with them.

Perhaps the *Shekhina* didn't like the experience of Egyptian oppression any better than the Israelites did and was eager to get Herself out of such a bad situation as soon as possible.

I mentioned earlier the symmetry between and the Israelites and God in relation to oaths. Each has been party to an oath which must be fulfilled before *ge'ula* can come. This leads to another symmetry between the two participants in

was 80 years old, the timing for *gel* is now 210 years after the descent from slavery.

the drama of *ge'ula*. Both God and Israel have the ability to cause *ge'ula* to occur at the earliest possible moment once the time has arrived. However, neither is free to bring it earlier than the appointed time. In Mekhilta, we learn a great deal about the means through which Israel can bring *ge'ula* at its appointed time. Perhaps in keeping with the mysterious nature of God, we learn much less about how God causes *ge'ula* to come the moment the oath is up; instead we simply learn that this is in fact the case.

The line from Pisha 14 about the *Shekhina* in exile is part of a larger midrash which contains perhaps the most surprising observation about God in relation to *ge'ula* in the Mekhilta. In Chapter One, I observed that the root *pada*, which in the Bible is used synonymously with *ga'al*, has in the Mekhilta been limited to use in one particular ritual situation. The verb is used to describe the ceremony in which a first born son or animal, who according to Exodus 13:12 should be offered to God as the "first fruit," can be returned to the family through payment to the priests. In addition, the verb *pada* makes an appearance in the following midrash. Its usage is rather unusual.

וכן אתה מוצא כל זמן שישראל משועבדין כביכול שכינה משועבדת עמהם שני ויראו
את אלהי ישראל ותחת רגליו כמעשה לבנת הספיר... אין לי אלא צרת ציבור צרת יחיד מנין ח"ל
יקראני ואענהו עמו אנכי בצרה... ואומר מפני עמך אשר פדית לך ממצרים גוי ואלהיו
ר' עקיבא אומר אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאמרו כביכול אמרו ישראל לפני הקב"ה עצמך
פדית

And so you find that all the time that Israel was subjugated it was as if the *Shekhina* was oppressed with them as it is written "and they saw the God of Israel and under His legs it was like a brick-work of sapphires" (Exodus 24:10).... I only see how this works regarding the suffering of the community. How do we know this is true for the suffering of the individual? Scripture says: "when he

calls me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him." (Psalm 91:15)⁷⁷

And you can also say "On account of your people, whom you redeemed (פְּדִיתָ לָךְ) from Egypt, the people and its God" (2 Samuel 7:23) ...R. Akiva said "If this wasn't written in a verse of Scripture, it would be impossible to say it: it is as if Israel said to God 'You have redeemed yourself (עצמך פְּדִיתָ).'"

This midrash contains a wealth of material on the subject of God's relationship to the Jewish people during their oppression in Egypt. First of all, the exile of the *Shekhina* is made vivid by a word-play relating to the proof-text from Exodus 24:10, which states of God וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו כַּמְעַשָּׂה לְבִנְתֹּהֶם הַסַּפִּיר -- and under his feet it was like a brick-work of sapphires. The context in the Torah for this comment is the moment when Moses, Aaron and the elders ascend Sinai and have the amazing experience of seeing God's throne, including the Divine feet. However, in the Mekhilta, this verse is used very differently, as Norman Cohen explains in his article, "Shekhinta beGaluta: A Midrashic Response to Destruction and Persecution."

The midrash... plays on the word "livnat" which is very close to the word for brick, "leveinah." The rabbis argue that when Israel came to Sinai, they found bricks under God's throne, which symbolized the mortar and bricks of the Egyptian slavery. God, Himself, suffered the indignity and pain of the Egyptian experience with His people.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Pisha 14; I have edited the midrash, which contains several proof-texts for each proposition, since the content of the proof-texts not included is not relevant to the discussion here.

⁷⁸ Norman Cohen, "Shekhinta Ba-Galuta: A Midrashic Response to Destruction and Persecution," Journal for the Study of Judaism, XIII (1-2), 150

In this powerful evocation, the bricks under God's feet at Sinai are the bricks the *Shekhina* Herself had to make from straw, just as the Israelites did, during the period of Egyptian slavery. It is no wonder that God experiences such haste to have the period of servitude end and the *ge'ula* begin. But the midrash finishes with an even more startling statement. The source of the comment is a statement in 2 Samuel which states עַמְךָ אֲשֶׁר פָּדִיתָ לָךְ, the people, whom you have *pada*. Here, the verb *padita* is followed by *l'kha*, yourself, leaving open to interpretation that whatever it means to be *pada*, this is something that occurred to God at this juncture. So from this midrash we learn that the *ge'ula* had a transformative effect not only on the Israelites, but also on God. What exactly is the nature of this *pada* which happened to God, including why this verb is used here instead of *ga'al*, will be discussed in the final chapter. For now, I want to simply observe that part of God's role in bringing *ge'ula* is as a beneficiary of this action, not merely an actor who affects others.

Chapter Five: What is *Ge'ula*? Is it Redemption?

In looking back on the analysis which has made up the bulk of this thesis, we have learned a great deal about when *ge'ula* may come; the conditions under which it will occur; the power, or lack thereof, of beings human and Divine in relation to bringing it. Have we also discovered what *ge'ula* is? Can we now define *ge'ula*? It is my contention that the answer to this question is "yes," and furthermore, that the definition which emerges from the treatment of *ge'ula* in Mekhilta should lead us to the conclusion that "redemption" is not a completely accurate translation of this Hebrew root and Jewish value concept.

To begin with, it is important to understand what is meant by the English word "redemption." To redeem is derived from the Latin verb *redemere*, to buy back.⁷⁹ The primary definition listed in the Oxford English Dictionary is precisely that: to buy back (a thing formerly possessed), to make payment for (a thing held or claimed by another).⁸⁰ In this way, the roots of *ga'al* and the roots of redemption are the same. As mentioned in Chapter Two, one of the most basic meanings of *ga'al* is "to buy back," a meaning used both for buying back land and buying back human beings who have sold themselves into slavery to pay a debt. But here is where the difference begins. If *ga'al*'s root meaning is "to restore," as was argued in Chapter Two, there are many means of restoration. One is through power and force, as could be seen in the example of the *go'el ha*

⁷⁹ "Redemption" in The New Catholic Encyclopedia, New York: McGraw Hill

⁸⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, Compact Edition, 21st Printing

dam. In that case, the strong kinsman of the clan restored the family's blood by shedding the blood of the person who destroyed the family's equilibrium, the one who killed the clan member in the first place. So buying back is only a subcategory of *ge'ula* in the Torah.

In fact, it is clear that when the root *ga'al* is used in the context of the Exodus from Egypt, the type of *ge'ula* being discussed is not restoring through payment, but rather restoring through power and force. In the promise of Exodus 6, God tells the Israelites וְגָאֵלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּזֵרַע נְטוּיָהּ וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים -- the *ge'ula* will take place with an "outstretched arm" and with "extraordinary chastisements."⁸¹ This God of the Israelites is not a *go'el* who uses ransom money to free an enslaved kinsman. Rather, God is portrayed as a *go'el ha dam*, a strong kinsman who effects deliverance by overpowering and punishing the enemy of the clan. The two moments of *ge'ula* which have been the focus of this paper – the midnight escape from Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea – are both demonstrations of God's superior power to Pharaoh, his magicians and his army.

This portrayal of *ge'ula* as an act which occurs through superior power on the part of a protecting God is emphasized even further in the Mekhilta. We see that the Egyptians do not play even as much of a role in *ge'ula* as they did in the Torah's version of the story of Exodus. It is God's power which brings the *ge'ula* at the appointed time, not simply the workings of the human beings who are playing roles in the drama. The Egyptians receive no payment for letting the

⁸¹ JPS translation

Israelites go; in fact, the only "payment" they receive is a negative one – they receive their just rewards for their sinful behavior.

Thus, *ge'ula* cannot be accurately translated as redemption. Its meaning is closer to "restoration through superior power." However, if the overall experience of *ge'ula* is not exactly akin to redemption, it is also true that *ge'ula* contains aspects of redemption. In fact, *ge'ula* as it is portrayed in Mekhilta can be seen as containing two separate acts of redemption. In Mekhilta, the Israelites are portrayed as redeeming themselves and God is seen as redeeming Godself, the *Shekhina*, from exile.

The second definition of "to redeem" in the OED is "to free or recover by payment (of the amount due) or by fulfilling some obligation." It is in this way that the Israelites can be seen as redeeming themselves. In Mekhilta, the Israelites are the initiators of *ge'ula*. In the vision of *ge'ula* contained in Mekhilta, the Israelites have to fulfill certain obligations to God regarding changes in action, or achieving a certain transformation of inner state, for *ge'ula* to occur at its appointed time. As God explains in Pisha 5, "the time had come for The Holy One to fulfill the Oath to Abraham that his descendants would be *nig'al*; *but they did not have any mitzvot to perform in order to be nig'al.*" The Israelites must begin the action of *ge'ula* by redeeming themselves, or the opportunity for *ge'ula* will be missed. Similarly, in Pisha 17, we learn of the wicked son that "had you been there, you would not have been *nig'al*." Because of his attitude, separating himself from the community of faith, the wicked son would not have fulfilled his end of the obligation to God, and therefore would not have been *nig'al*.

Once the Israelites have taken on their redemptive role in *ge'ula*, they set the stage for an even more arresting aspect of *ge'ula*, as portrayed by Mekhilta. To return to a midrash from Chapter Four, Mekhilta asserts that the *Shekhina* has gone into exile with the Israelites. When both they and the *Shekhina* are recovered, Mekhilta quotes a Biblical text to support the following conclusion about God: עצמך פדית.

My contention is that this phrase can be translated as "you have redeemed yourself." First of all, as mentioned previously, all the other instances of *pada* in Mekhilta deal with actual moments of redemption. *Pada* is used to describe the action of giving money to the priest to have a first-born son or animal returned to a family. And if we examine the usage in the midrash about the *Shekhina*, God's action is in fact a redemption. If the *Shekhina*, God's indwelling presence in the world is living in exile, it can certainly be stated that God has made a dear payment, having the *Shekhina* undergo the Egyptian oppression.

The interesting twist is that in Mekhilta, God is seen as having redeemed, not the Israelites, but Godself. When the term of payment on the *Shekhina*'s exile is up, a part of God goes free. Just as the Children of Israel undergo a transformation as part of *ge'ula*, so too does God. God fulfills an obligation, makes the payment of difficult sacrifice and in doing so undergoes a transformation, a return to wholeness from a fractured state. So God joins the Israelites in experiencing redemption as part of the action of *ge'ula*.

There is one other aspect of redemption woven into the Mekhilta story. I have already alluded to the fact that Mekhilta was being written at a time when a

religious sect, an offshoot of Judaism, was gaining adherents. One aspect of this new sect, which would soon be known as Christianity, is that its master story is a powerful tale of redemption. While it is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to present thoroughly the Christian concept of redemption, a very basic understanding is instructive for the purposes of comparison. The New Catholic Encyclopedia states that redemption "can be briefly described as the deliverance of man, through the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, from [a] state of estrangement from God....Jesus [dies] in obedience to the will of the Father and to offer Him a sacrifice on behalf of all men, and in this sense His life might be said to be paid to God."⁸² Thus, it seems that one important element of the Christian redemption is a sacrifice on the part of God, offering God's only son, which constitutes metaphorically a kind of "payment" to redeem humanity from sin or estrangement. Unlike the Jewish tale of *ge'ula*, in which God delivers through strength and power, a form of payment or ransom is central to the understanding of Christian redemption.

I raise this issue because it seems very relevant to one aspect of Mekhilta. As discussed in Chapter Four, Mekhilta includes a rabbinic tradition that Isaac was successfully sacrificed on the altar by Abraham. As Geza Vermes observes in an article about the role of the Isaac's Aqedah in the rabbinic understanding of redemption (sic.), "The Aqedah was considered a sacrifice of redemption, the

⁸² New Catholic Encyclopedia

source of pardon, salvation, and eternal life... principally through the merits of Isaac, who offered his life voluntarily to his Creator." ⁸³

Thus, in the Aqedah, a willing sacrifice is made, a son is offered, and this action is, according to Vermes, a "sacrifice of redemption." In Mekhilta, this redemptive sacrifice is inextricably linked to Passover – it is the blood of Isaac's sacrifice which is the sign to God that the Children of Israel are ready for *ge'ula*. There seems to be an effort to link an act of true redemption to the Passover story of *ge'ula*: it is through the merit of Abraham and Isaac's sacrifice to God that *ge'ula* takes place. We, the Jewish people, are redeemed by Isaac's sacrifice. The parallels to the Christian paradigm are clear. In fact, Philip Davies suggests that "Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael... supports the suggestion that bringing the figure of Isaac into a Passover context is a late Tannaitic or early Amoraic response to Christian paschal preaching." ⁸⁴

Thus it is possible that the Mekhilta includes an attempt to build into the Jewish understanding of the *ge'ula* from Egypt a subtext of redemption, perhaps as a way of competing with a powerful new master story being offered by a competing religious sect.

In conclusion, it can be seen that there are several aspects of redemption contained in the act of *ge'ula* as recounted in the Mekhilta. the overarching action

⁸³ Geza Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis XXII" in Scripture and Tradition in Judaism. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961, 220

⁸⁴ Philip Davies, "Passover and the Dating of the Aqedah." Journal of Jewish Studies, XXX (1), Spring 1979, 63

of *ge'ula* is not redemption. It is rescue, restoration and transformation of state,
but it does not conform to the basic definition of redemption through payment.

Conclusion

It is a Jewish tradition to end by returning to the beginning. Thus, this exploration of Mekhilta ends where it began, with the questions posed in the Introduction. This thesis began with two questions:

- (1) Given that *ge'ula* is a situation which we pray for and look towards with great devotion, what, if anything, does our tradition teach us about when it will come, to what extent its arrival can be predicted and what factors, if any, will influence its timing?
- (2) What exactly is this *ge'ula* that we are wishing for? Does it truly mean redemption, as translated, or is this mapping of English to Hebrew a modern attempt to join Jewish theological perspectives to Christian ones in the Christian world in which we live? What is its actual meaning?

Having traveled on a journey through the commentaries of the Mekhilta, we can now offer some answers to these questions.

The first question, what does our tradition teach us about when *ge'ula* will come, was revealed upon closer examination to have three parts: (1) when will *ge'ula* come; (2) can its timing be predicted; and (3) what factors might influence its arrival. For all three of these queries, Mekhilta offers strong responses.

At the most basic level, Mekhilta's commentaries strongly suggest that the arrival of *ge'ula* cannot be predicted by human beings. Calculations, it counsels,

are fruitless. This perspective can be seen in the use of imagery to describe the arrival of *ge'ula* – for example, it is only God who understands exactly when midnight, the moment when *ge'ula* begins, will arrive. Mekhilta's anti-calculation point of view can also be seen in its presentation of the contradictions within the different Biblical texts that predict the timing of *ge'ula*. Mekhilta presents these contradictions without harmonizing their positions. In this way, Mekhilta seems to alert the reader to the fact that there is no way of knowing which date is correct.

In its consideration of whether we can know when *ge'ula* will come, Mekhilta also raises the question of whether *ge'ula* is a process or an instantaneous change. Different commentaries take different positions, leading to the conclusion that *ge'ula* is both. It is a process which contains within it moments of instantaneous and dramatic change.

By contrast to the position taken on human knowledge of *ge'ula*, Mekhilta affirms that the time of *ge'ula*'s arrival is well understood by God. *Ge'ula* will come, according to the Mekhilta, when the oath made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is complete. Interestingly, God's perfect knowledge of when *ge'ula* will come is not seen in the Mekhilta as being of benefit to God. Rather, God's knowledge is perceived as a hindrance. God is portrayed as bound by the timing He dictated to Abraham, God is unable to bring *ge'ula* early. God's power is checked when it comes to *ge'ula*, according to the Mekhilta, because there are processes which God Himself set in motion which He cannot reverse.

While Mekhilta's commentaries take the position that human beings are literally in the dark when it comes to predicting the arrival of *ge'ula*, in considering what factors might influence *ge'ula*'s arrival, Mekhilta places a great deal of power in human hands (specifically in the hands of the Jewish people). Whereas in the Biblical text the Israelites are seen chiefly as the recipients of *ge'ula*, in Mekhilta they become active participants in the process of bringing *ge'ula*. The Israelites play a pivotal role, according to Mekhilta, in determining if *ge'ula* actually happens at the appointed time. Mekhilta offers several different modes of participation in *ge'ula*: through deeds, particularly through the performance of *mitzvot*; through a transformation of inner state; and through establishing a connection to righteous ancestors. In each of these categories, the Israelites are seen as playing a key role in making *ge'ula* happen, or as having the ability to sabotage its arrival. Their "success" in each of these categories is a necessary pre-condition to *ge'ula* occurring at its appointed time. There is, however, one kind of power which is not given to the Jewish people in relation to *ge'ula* in Mekhilta, and that is the power to hasten its arrival.

Thus, in Mekhilta, the Israelites are given a greater measure of control in making *ge'ula* happen than they were in the Exodus story in the Bible. The opposite can be said for the other players in the drama: the Egyptians and God.

While in the book of Exodus, the Egyptians play a role in the arrival of *ge'ula*, the Mekhilta's commentaries go to great pains to de-emphasize their participation. For instance, in the story of the Exodus in the Torah, it is the pressure of the Egyptians which launches the Israelites on their journey in the

middle of the night. In Mekhilta, this situation is amended – the reason the Israelites left in the middle of the night was not in response to the Egyptians, but rather in response to the fact that the moment of *ge'ula* had arrived. Thus, in Mekhilta, aspects of *ge'ula* which in the Exodus story are seen as being brought on by the Egyptians are rewritten to have occurred for reasons unrelated to Egyptian pressure or participation.

Mekhilta also emphasizes the limits of God's power in relation to *ge'ula*. God is portrayed as yearning deeply for the coming of *ge'ula*. Certain commentaries even describe God's own participation in the Egyptian exile, evoking a God who is suffering along with the Israelites and so has a vested interest in bringing *ge'ula*. However, Mekhilta is unequivocal in stating that God is unable to shorten *ge'ula*'s prescribed term. God is bound by God's own earlier promise and therefore limited in what God can do regarding bringing *ge'ula*.

There is another way in which God's power in relation to *ge'ula* is seen as limited in Mekhilta. Given the Mekhilta's overall perspective on the participation of the Israelites in bringing *ge'ula*, an important corollary emerges. In Mekhilta, God depends on the Jewish people to work with Him in bringing *ge'ula*. In the Mekhilta's vision of *ge'ula*, if the Jewish people do not make certain changes, God cannot bring *ge'ula*, despite the fact that God has a strong desire for it to come. *Ge'ula*, Mekhilta implies, will come as a result of a partnership between the Jewish people and God

The second question asked in the Introduction was "what is *ge'ula*?" In considering this question, my conclusion is that *ge'ula* as presented in Mekhilta is not redemption.

As discussed in the section on Biblical antecedents, the core meaning of the root *ga'al* in the Bible is "to restore." Several means of restoration can be seen in the Bible. One is redemption through payment; another is rescue by *the go'el ha dam*, the strong kinsman.

In Mekhilta, the aspect of *ge'ula* that is taken up is not the concept of restoration through payment, but rather, restoration through power by the ultimate *go'el ha dam*, God. However, it is true that in Mekhilta, a concept of *ge'ula* emerges which, while not limited to redemption, *includes* the concept of redemption. In Mekhilta, *ge'ula* is seen as a two part process, whereby the Jewish people redeems itself, and God redeems Godself by rescuing them. According to the Mekhilta, both parts of the process must occur, and the former must precede the latter, for *ge'ula* to be completely accomplished.

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