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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Ellen Lippmann

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Midrash on the Exodus from Egypt: The People's Liberation as seen through the Eyes of the Rabbis

This thesis is a collection, close analysis and distillation of the extensive midrashic interpretation of the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The author's intent, however, was not merely to catalogue the rabbis' views of the Exodus experience as it was filtered through their own life experience, but to focus on two key elements: how the Israelites themselves experienced slavery and oppression, and how later they responded to God's intervening redemptive presence.

At the very outset, Ms. Lippmann lays out these two foci, emphasizing that they led both to the Jewish emphasis upon social justice and our faith in the ultimate redemption. As the rabbis interpreted the biblical account of the Israelites' liberation from Egypt, they saw in it not only their own liberation from oppression during the first millennium and beyond, but also our need to be sensitive to the outsider, the oppressed and the downtrodden. In addition, the story of the redemption from Egypt is perceived as the story of the redemption of each and every generation. Living through their own "Egypt," they could believe that God would free

them eventually if they, as their ancestors, put their trust in God. The Exodus is a story with which Jews of every generation can identify, including ourselves, because it is focussed on individuals who experience moments of pain, suffering and fear, but who in the end triumph through God's redemptive hand.

The first step in her investigation was a close textual examination of the key verses of the Exodus story. Once she gained a clear sense of the thrust of the biblical portrait of the liberation from Egypt, she proceeded to locate the pertinent rabbinic texts by utilizing the available verse indices and topical anthologies. Though it is quite difficult to gain an overall portrayal from the tremendous number of texts surrounding the Exodus, through her close textural analysis, she began to see key themes emerging. These included the people's responses to oppression, their resistance, their relationship with their leaders, Moses, Aaron, Miriam and the Elders, and their relationship with the God who liberates them.

Having identified several important themes in the multidimensional rabbinic picture of the Exodus from Egypt, the author chose to arrange her data into five basic chapters, all of which help us see the Exodus through the prism of the people's experience of it. In Chapter One, she focusses on how the Israelites experienced slavery in Egypt, with an emphasis on the ongoing bitterness of life under Egyptian rule, the undermining of family structure and future, especially through the degree of the killing of the first born, and

the struggle to remain distinctive while living as strangers in Egypt. The rabbis spend little time on the physical labor imposed on the Israelites by their Egyptian task masters, opting rather to emphasize issues surrounding the survival of the people as a whole. Chapter Two turns to the Israelites' resistance to Egyptian oppression. The role of individual human beings is highlighted in this regard. This material includes traditions about the Israelite midwives, the role of the Israelite foremen who dealt with their fellow Israelites, Moses' dealing with Pharaoh and the theft of Egyptian possessions by the Israelites prior to the Exodus. In Chapter Three, we see the people's reactions to Moses' leadership and that of the Elders. The rabbis stress Moses' worthiness, the fact that he observed the commandments and was a formidable authority figure, even though he himself was very reluctant to serve. On the other hand, it was the Elders who accepted Moses as leader and who provided a continuity from past to future. Chapter Four centers on the Israelites' relationship with God, emphasizing the mutual responsibility of covenant and the efficacy of prayer and God's response to it. God is portrayed in a variety of images as the rabbis interpret the Divine's role in the Exodus; God is pictured as redeemer, parent, suitor, and protector. The final chapter focusses on the actual events of the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea. Much attention is paid to the retribution carried out against the Egyptians, God's protection of the Israelites and the moment of redemption as the sea split.

Though it is obviously very difficult to distill and integrate a

wide range of midrashim on such a large chunk of biblical material, Ms. Lippmann has handled the subject matter in more than merely a competent fashion. She has not only presented the reader with many interesting insights into the rabbis' reading of the Exodus story against the backdrop of their own life situations, but has also integrated the vast corpus of material in a way that underscores key elements of the entire rabbinic world view. A major focus for the author is the underlying tensions obvious in the rabbis' interpretation of the Exodus. This is seen in many different ways: the people's journey towards Sinai but their frequent backsliding, the God of justice who punishes the Egyptians, but is merciful to the innocent, images of darkness and light, and life and death, and the duality of the water which kills but brings life. All these dialectical tensions tie into the multifarious nature of the rabbis' own life situation. Nevertheless, the key emphasis in the rabbinic recreation of the Exodus tradition is God's protection and redemption of Israel, and the fact that the story not only tells of the liberation <u>from</u> Egypt, but also the journey <u>to</u> Sinai.

Ms. Lippmann is to be genuinely praised for her research, close analysis of the biblical and rabbinic texts, and most of all for her creative insights into the textual material. She has shown her ability to analyze as well as creatively integrate diverse material. In addition, she has generally presented the material with great clarity of style. She writes very well, though at times she can be a bit wordy. Of course, more could be done both to test her basic conclusions as well as to see the applicability of this

Exodus material to modern liberation theologies and experiences as she would like to do. Yet, this thesis provides us with an excellent prism though which to view the rabbis' interpretation of biblical material as well as their altitudes towards their own suffering, exile and hope for redemption. The author has succeeded in both highlighting the rabbinic view of the Exodus material and whetting our appetites for new, modern midrashic readings of the Israelites' story of liberation from bondage.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Norman J. Cohen
Professor of Midrash

April 10, 1991

MIDRASH ON THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT:
THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF THE RABBIS

ELLEN LIPPMANN

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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I have been blessed with the greatest of supporters during my years at HUC and during the time of preparing and writing this thesis. To them, I am especially grateful:

* my family, especially Emma, who once told me "you have to have midrash because you can't have a Bible as big as the whole world," and Kathryn, who

planted a rose and an apple tree, and from whom I've learned to see home as sacred space; and

* my advisor, teacher, and guide, Dr. Norman Cohen, who taught me, in the words of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, that Torah is not [just] to interpret, but to be consumed, like a double portion of manna. From him I learned to love midrash and to know that Torah, sometimes smoothly, and sometimes with difficulty, becomes a part of the soul.

And, finally, I remain ever-thankful for the old Friend with Whom I talk, and argue, and find comfort. My understanding of You grows with every midrash I read.

Ellen Lippmann
March, 1991

INTRODUCTION

The story of the Israelites' slavery and liberation comprises less than half of the Biblical book of Exodus. But there are few, if any, events in human history as well-remembered as is the Exodus. All later Jewish experiences of oppression, including the Holocaust, have been compared to it in a variety of symbolic ways. Even the recent wave of Soviet Jewish emigration has come under this umbrella; the UJA's campaign to raise funds for these new Israeli immigrants is not called "Operation Exodus" for nothing. Hearing the name, Jews are immediately transported to Egypt, scene of their first oppression and their first redemption.

African-Americans, too, having been slaves in this country, which Jews are more likely to see as a 'Promised Land,' draw on the Israelite experience as part of their own history. John Lovell, Jr., in his study of Spirituals entitled Black Song: The Forge and the Flame, cites "Go Down Moses" thirty times, and notes that it "is the most common of all the Spirituals" he studied. Charles B. Copher, in his study of Biblical characters and events in Black worship -- songs and sermons -- notes that Moses and his story, from God's call through his viewing of the Promised Land, are by far the most frequently mentioned of 'Old Testament'

characters in the sermons he studied.[1]

Roman Catholic liberation theology, rooted in the experience of Catholic life in Latin America, also focuses on the Exodus. Juan Luis Segundo, a major liberation theologian, notes that "insofar as content is concerned, liberation theology is known to have a preference and a partiality for the Old Testament in general, and for the Exodus event in particular. The reason for this is clear enough...In no other portion of Scripture does God the liberator reveal himself in such close connection with the political plane of human existence."[2]

Modern feminists, too, turn to the Exodus as a possible source of hope, though its masculine language and references to God present an obstacle to their

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[1] Copher's material, including the citation of Lovell's study, are in his "Biblical Characters, Events, Places and Images Remembered and Celebrated in Black Worship," in The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center, Volume XIV (Fall 1986/Spring 1987): "The Black Christian Worship Experience: A Consultation," Edited by Melva Wilson Costen and Darius Leander Swann, pp.75-86.

[2] Juan Luis Segundo. Liberation of Theology. Translated by John Drury. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, c1976, 1979, pp. 110-111.

(our?) complete embracing of it as a model. Carol Christ notes this tension: "Hearing that God had compassion on the Hebrews in their time of slavery, a woman feels hopeful that her time of bondage, too, will be ended. But as she listens further, she hears that the covenantal promises were addressed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob....she rises and cries out, 'What happened to the mothers, the daughters, and the sisters? How can we give our allegiance to a tradition of fathers and sons? Where is the woman of God who could aid our quest?'"[3]

Remembrance of the Exodus is obviously a task both useful and inspiring to many who struggle for liberation from a wide range of 'slaveries.' But for Jews, it is an obligation, begun even before the Exodus itself was complete: As the people were leaving Egypt, Moses said to them, "'Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the Lord freed you

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[3] Carol Christ, "Women's Liberation and the Liberation of God: An Essay in Story Theology," in Koltun, Elizabeth, ed. The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives. New York: Schocken Books, c1976, pp.14-15. I believe that the presence of 'women of God' in the Exodus story is clear; Miriam and the midwives are the most obvious examples. But Christ's is a common and, I believe, accurate complaint about Biblical texts in general.

from it with a mighty hand...'" (Exodus 13:3).[4] Moses' instruction captures the two essential elements of the Exodus: the people's experience, and God's intervention. Emphasis on each of these developed later into Jewish imperatives. The people's experience -- the time of slavery, of life in the house of bondage -- gave rise to the impetus for social justice that serves as the underpinning of Jewish life for so many modern Jews. God's intervention -- the liberation from slavery by God's mighty hand -- developed into the Jewish hope for ultimate redemption; this first redemption came to symbolize that yearning hope. This facet of Jewish life has dimmed in modern life; following the Holocaust, God's mighty hand is hard to see. But for the rabbis of the midrash, ultimate redemption was a real and vivid hope.

The memory that keeps the events of the Exodus vivid even in 1991 or, more to the point, in 5751, precludes the need to answer the question, "Did the Exodus really happen?" Some historians say yes, some archaeologists say no, Biblical scholars say yes and no.

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[4] All Biblical text cited in this thesis, unless otherwise specified, is taken from Tanakh: A New Translation of THE HOLY SCRIPTURES According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

Perhaps there really were Israelite slaves in Egypt at a certain time; perhaps Egypt gained control of Canaan and subjugated its native peoples; perhaps there was an internal struggle; perhaps there was a mass 'exodus' and one can map its route. The hallmarks of Jewish life that developed from interpretation of the Exodus tell us that it doesn't matter. The Exodus is a myth, "a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some superhuman being or some alleged person or event, whether without or with a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation."[5] But more importantly, a myth is real on a variety of religious, emotional, and psychological levels. For Jews throughout the ages, and particularly for the rabbis, the Exodus was real on all these levels. It spoke to them, and they in turn enable it to speak to us. This thesis will discuss the Exodus as though it were real, understanding its reality as did the rabbis. There are several key elements that the rabbis saw in the Exodus story, drawing not only on the narrative in the book of Exodus but on later Biblical references to it, as well. Chief among these are the urge for justice, based on the memory of

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[5] Definition from The American College Dictionary, C.. Barnhart, Editor in Chief. New York: Random House, c1963, page 805.

slavery in Egypt, and the yearning for redemption, based on the experience of the first redemption from Egypt.

Exodus and the Jewish Urge for Justice

Soon after the liberation from Egypt, as the newly-freed Israelites received from their God the laws by which they were to live, the memory that God required of them developed into a communal obligation: never to treat anyone, even (or especially) an outsider, a stranger, as they had been treated in Egypt. Laws regarding humane treatment of slaves were among the first that God enumerated to Moses, along with the first of countless repetitions of a law that governs Jews to this day: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). This law, in only slightly varied versions, permeates the rest of the Bible and later rabbinic teaching, as well. Isaiah was moved by its spirit when he offered a vision of the ideal future: God, the prophet said, "has sent me as a herald of joy to the humble,/To bind up the wounded of heart,/To proclaim release to the captives,/Liberation to the

imprisoned;/...Strangers shall stand and pasture your flocks,/Aliens shall be your plowmen and vine-trimmers; /While you shall be called 'Priests of the Lord,'/And termed 'Servants of our God.'" (Isaiah 61:1,5-6). Hillel adapted this basic law, and one of its adjuncts in Leviticus 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself") when he offered to a potential convert his famous distillation of Jewish teaching: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary. Go and learn" (B.T. Shabbat 31b).

From these expressions, and hundreds more, is born the Jewish urge for justice. It persists into our own day, spurred on by yearly Passover seders that allow Jews everywhere to relive the bitter time of slavery and reenact the experience of liberation.

For some years, for example, it has been my custom to begin our family Passover seder with a brief reading by the writer Grace Paley. Paley tells of her Bronx Jewish childhood, "a world so dense with Jews that I thought we were the great imposing majority..." But Paley soon meets people who are not Jews and learns, among other things, that "down under the Southern Boulevard El, families lived, people in lovely shades of

light and darkest brown. My mother and sister explained that they were treated unkindly; they had in fact been slaves in another part of the country in another time. Like us? I said. Like us, my father said year after year at seders....In this way I began to understand in my own time and place, that we had been slaves in Egypt and brought out of bondage for some reason. One of the reasons, clearly, was to tell the story again and again - that we had been strangers and slaves in Egypt and therefore knew what we were talking about when we cried out against pain and oppression. In fact, we were obligated by knowledge to do so."[6]

Paley connects the Jewish reliving of the Exodus to empathy for the experience of African-American slaves. As noted above, they and other peoples who consider the Hebrew Bible a basis for their history and heritage also draw heavily on the Exodus for inspiration and confirmation. In what is now called western tradition, the Exodus is a commonplace, the basis for almost all discussion of freedom. As Michael Walzer has written, "Wherever people know the Bible, and experience oppression, the Exodus has sustained their spirits and

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[6] Paley, Grace, Preface, in The Shalom Seders: Three Haggadahs. Compiled by New Jewish Agenda. New York: Adama Books, c1984, page 5.

(sometimes) inspired their resistance."[7] The sustenance found in this story lies primarily in the success of the liberation: God did save the people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and forever after anyone who experiences oppression can hope for a repeat performance.

Exodus and Redemption

The redemption of the Exodus story is greater than the liberation from Egypt and greater, too, than the rescue at the Sea of Reeds. It is the sum of those two parts but is greater, too, than the sum, since it is established in our history and our memory as the greatest of God's miracles. The redemption of the Exodus, variously called bringing forth, salvation, or liberation, stands forever in the Jewish consciousness. Like the Jewish urge for justice, it, too, is specified even before the people are freed, in Moses' reminder to the people to remember the event. Even more compelling is its appearance at the beginning of the 10 commandments: At this extraordinary moment, with the people

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[7] Michael Walzer. Exodus and Revolution. New York: Basic Books, Inc., c1985, p.4

gathered and Moses at the ready to hear and record these essential teachings, God offers this self-description in the first of these Divine commands: "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exodus 20:2-3).

The God who redeemed us from Egypt is the only God the Israelites could consider theirs, and the only One with Whom they could consider entering a covenant. Without that first great act of redemption, the covenant would have been one-sided; the people agreeing to a set of commands without any hope for relationship or reward. But with redemption, the people have a God in Whom they can place their trust: Because God once freed us from adversity, we can agree to do God's will, because now we know that God can -- and thus probably will -- free us from all future adversity. God's condition for redeeming us in the future is that we follow the commandments; our condition for following them is that God agree to redeem us in the future, <u>as God has just done</u>. This was the covenant agreed to by generation after generation of Jews who came after the Exodus. Jews lived through adversity many times over, yet -- though no redemption was apparent -- always survived with the

yearning hope for such a redemption intact; in fact, their hope sometimes enabled them to survive.* The redeeming figure of Elijah the Prophet, so familiar to those who open their doors to him at every seder or sing of his presence at the end of every Shabbat, became the embodiment of those hopes.

With Elijah we have expected the Messiah, whose presence would herald the much-trumpeted end-of-days. Presumably, that era would offer us an eternal experience which would closely resemble that of the Israelites crossing the Sea: human courage and Divine action would be joined, all our enemies would be destroyed, and we would be cleansed of all unworthiness as though reborn. Though there were always questioners, it is only in the modern age that wholesale skepticism about a future redemption has set in. The Messiah gave way for a short while to the impersonal "messianic age," signalling the distance some Jews felt between themselves and the possibility of redemption. At present, even that euphemism has all but disappeared. Its replacement is unknown. For some Jews, the possibility of the Mes-

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* It is said that the people whose fight for survival during the Holocaust was strongest were the very religious Jews and the strong socialists; both were groups with a strong hope for the future, for redemption, as it were.

siah's coming is real. For others, that possibility is dead, replaced by a protective cynicism. For others still, the hope remains alive, though the idea of a personal Messiah is untenable. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, for example, when drafting Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective, proffered hope though the majority of the contributors could no longer believe in a personal Messiah: "The existence of the Jew is an argument against despair; Jewish survival is warrant for human hope. We remain God's witnesses that history is not meaningless. We affirm that with God's help people are not powerless to affect their destiny..."[9] The extent to which people can affect their destiny has been endlessly discussed. It is therefore with some interest that we note that the rabbis of the midrash, though stating much more explicitly their reliance on God's commandments and their hope in the Messiah's coming, would have agreed with the idea that 'with God's help people are not powerless to affect their destiny.'

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[9] CCAR, Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective, as presented in Borowitz, Eugene. Reform Judaism Today. New York: Behrman House, Inc., c1983, page xxv.

Exodus: The Emphasis on the People Involved

It is the story of those people, the very real human beings who were enslaved in Egypt and saved at the Sea, that moves us in the telling of the Exodus. For the story of the Exodus resounds for reasons other than the memories it engenders, other than the hopes it fosters. It stays with us because it touches its reader's heart. It moves us with its descriptions of slavery and oppression, and rouses our spirit with its depiction of the varieties of possible resistance. It portrays recognizable human beings, suffering under injustice, fearful at the thought of great change, questioning those who would be their leaders, vengeful against those who did nothing to help, and triumphant at the point when liberation became a reality. It is these human beings that reach across the centuries and pull us into the story once again, for in them we -- all the readers of the story -- see ourselves.

We know that we cannot be Moses, so strong of purpose and charismatic of being. We cannot be Aaron, either, capable of mustering the people and worthy of the priestly robes. And we can't even be Miriam, about

whom we know so little; she is a prophet, after all, and who among us could so describe ourselves?

But maybe -- just maybe -- we might be among the seventy elders. Or we might have been picked as foremen for the slaves, or have a special talent as midwives... Or we might just be ordinary people, suffering, fearful, resentful, resourceful, willing, complaining, brave. We can recognize those ordinary people -- the run of the mill B'Nai Yisrael -- because they respond the way we respond. They are not heroes, but neither are they ever villains. They are fearful, yet capable of great bravery. They suffer, yet are able to feel the thrill of joy and triumph. They can be sullen and unresponsive, yet teach us the skill of being resourceful. In short, they are human...and the story of Exodus is their story.

The Exodus is such a grand story. The numbers of people and animals who left Egypt, and the numbers of Egyptians who chased them, and the numbers of years they lived in Egypt, boggle the mind. Imagine, we are tempted to say, imagine what they looked like, 600,000 people walking into the desert with a few possessions on their shoulders, and their flocks and herds with them. Picture the Sea splitting, we say, visions

by Cecil B. DeMille filling the large screens of our mind. Think of Moses calling the people together, or of that great mass of people waiting to hear God's voice.

But if we stop for a moment, we can think about the individuals that make up that great mass. We can imagine how we would feel, the Sea in front of us, not yet split, and Pharaoh's army behind us. Or we can think of the night when Pharaoh has finally agreed to let us go, and is himself terrified of what may yet befall him. Would we be gleeful at his terror, or sympathetic? Would we rush to leave, or wait to walk out in the dignity of daylight? Would our Egyptian neighbors help us, offering provisions, or might we have to threaten them into giving us the barest of necessities?

With these questions, the story of the Exodus shrinks to human scale. It's not such a grand story, after all. In fact, at heart the Exodus is really the story of a people -- one small and weak, or strong and clever people -- and its God. The leadership is replaceable; had God not found Moses, there would have been another leader. But neither God nor the people could have achieved the liberation from Egypt without the other. The story of the Exodus is the story

of that relationship. As with any strong relationship of great length, it is not an easy connection. The people doubt God's abilities and choices; God doubts the people's fidelity and drive. But at moments of real need, they draw close to one another in the way of parent and child or long-time companions. And like all companions, they call each other by many names.

It is the names that matter, after all, and the people who bear the names that are significant. That is why the story called Exodus [by the Greeks] was originally called Shemot - Names - in Hebrew. For this is a story of people, the story of a people. It is the individual children of Israel who came to Egypt, whose names are recorded at the beginning of the Biblical story. But through their experiences there they are reborn as the people Israel. No longer is our story one of remarkable individuals who speak directly to God. Now we are one people, worshipping one God, soon to speak to God in one place. The future of the people is crucial to our story, as is the past that links us to the very beginnings of the world and to our remarkable forebears. This is another reason the story resounds through history: We who read it are caught up in the drama of a people being born, and we are gripped, some

of us, because we know that it is we who are being born.

Exodus and the Rabbis

The rabbis knew the story as their story. It was their own early history. They, too, like the modern reader, recognized themselves (or their constituents) in the very human, very ordinary Israelites in Egypt. They, much more than the modern American reader, knew oppression first-hand and could add realistic details to the sparsely-told story of Exodus. And they, who prayed to a God Who didn't always respond, knew the joys and frustrations of maintaining a relationship with that changeable God of the Biblical story. And, happily for us, they recorded their joy and frustration, their oppression and hope, their resistance and respect. Over the course of many centuries, living and struggling with many different cultures, the writers of midrash captured the essence of the Exodus. They explained the Biblical text, connected it to later Biblical passages, and filtered it through their own experience; thus, they allowed later readers a chance to read it in a new light. They illuminated their lives, encouraging

commitment when it seemed to wane, offering hope when hope seemed impossible. "But look how God saved the Israelites," they seemed to say, "and Pharaoh was worse than X,Y, or Z in our day." Or they concentrated on the people. "See how resistance is possible," they said, "what glory you get if you take the blows for others. And what glory there will be if you keep together as the people Israel did, not changing their names or their language nor even informing on one another when they could have. That's how people can live if they want to." Admonishing, cajoling, congratulating, yearning --the rabbis read into the story and back out again, creating an Exodus that suits their lives and needs. Never departing completely from the Biblical text nor from their 'Egypt'(which, ironically, was the text's Promised Land), they wove a tale of tension and comfort, of humor and gravity, of faith in God and faith in humanity. It is a particularly Jewish tale, yet one that exemplifies all post-Biblical interpretations.

It may be that the rabbis would have little to say to the early 20th century African-American poet James Weldon Johnson. But when Johnson writes

> And God said to Moses:
> I've seen the awful suffering
> Of my people down in Egypt.
> I've watched their hard oppressors,

Their overseers and drivers;
The groans of my people have filed my ears
And I can't stand it no longer;
So I'm come down to deliver them
Out of the land of Egypt...[10]

his words unwittingly echo those of the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai on God's conversation with Moses. Here God is angry with Moses, who is stalling on going to help the people because of his own fears about his abilities. God says to him, "My people are living in the narrowness [of misery], and you're living here in the open space [of freedom]; I'm asking you to get them out, and you're saying 'Send someone else'?!"[11] In both conversations, God is saying 'I can't bear to know My people is suffering, and I must do something about it.' In both, the Biblical text is indelibly imprinted with the voices of the writer's own circle; in both, the writer is trying to get a message to the reader or listener: hope of God's deliverance, in Johnson's poem, and urging toward responsibility, in the midrash. Both expand our reading of the Biblical text, and both

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[10] James Weldon Johnson. God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse. New York: Penguin, n.d., pp.45-46.

[11] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to Exodus 6:2. I have translated all midrashim cited in this thesis, unless otherwise specified.

offer something new: a piece of literature that speaks to its day.

It is the rabbis' tale that is of greatest interest here. For nearly ten centuries they wove a tapestry of interpretation and extrapolation. The tapestry's loom is the Biblical text, its threads the experience of each generation of midrashists, its warp and woof the insights they bring to the text and the explanations they offer about their lives. The tension that keeps the tapestry taut on the loom is that of many threads pulling in many directions; almost any midrash on the Exodus has its opposite in another midrash. The people became slaves by persuasion... or by force. They are worthy of being saved... or they are not. Pharaoh deserves the respect due any monarch... or he does not. On and on they go, the opposing arguments in this centuries-long tale. The wonder is that they do not pull the tapestry apart. Rather, they give it its depth. The resulting work is rich and full and multi-dimensional. The rabbis were never monolithic. But certain themes emerge again and again in their work, themes like retribution and compensation, freedom and responsibility, redemption and partnership. Themes and tensions, threads and loom are joined in the

tapestry that is the rabbis' tale of the Exodus from Egypt. That is the tale this thesis will explore.

About the Thesis

The thesis focuses on several aspects of the Exodus story, emphasizing the people's experience and the rabbis' understanding of it. Each chapter explores one such aspect. Chapter I examines the people's experience of slavery and oppression under Pharaoh, focusing on the major causes of their "embittered lives," particularly the decree to kill all newborn Israelite boy babies, and the enforced status of 'stranger.' Chapter II focuses on resistance to that oppression, and takes a close look at the midwives, the Israelite foremen, the people's "stripping" of the Egyptians' gold, silver and clothing, and Moses' refusal to divide the people or allow any compromise. Chapter III examines Moses' role and that of the elders in a look at leadership and the people's response to their leaders. Chapter IV is the center of the thesis, literarily and symbolically. It elaborates the relationship between the Israelite people and God, including

several midrashic interpretations of God's role: Redeemer, rescuing Eagle, Parent, Suitor. And Chapter V describes the Exodus itself, in two phases: the first liberation from Egypt and the second, greater, rescue at the Sea, combining in the first and greatest Redemption. A brief Conclusion summarizes the major themes suggested by the body of the thesis, and recommends future explorations of the Exodus story and its interpretations.

CHAPTER I:

Slavery and Oppression

The story of liberation from Egypt is dramatic precisely because the oppression in Egypt is so graphically drawn. The hard work, the irrational abuse of power, the suffering leap from the page along with the cries of the Israelite people. The experience in Egypt defined oppression for all later sufferers. So it is of some interest to see what that archetypal oppression was all about.

The Biblical description, sparingly told as always, seems to focus on three major elements of the people's oppression. Hard work and the lack of recompense, both traditional elements of slavery, are de-emphasized. The emphasis is rather on 1) the bitterness of life under Egyptian rule, as exemplified in Exodus 1:14: "Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them..."; 2) the destruction of family and future via the murdering of children, as seen in Exodus 1:16, with Pharaoh telling the midwives, "'When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live,'" and in Exodus 1:22, when Pharaoh, his first instruction having been foiled by the midwives, charges "all his people, saying 'Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.'"; and 3) the depiction of the Israelites as

strangers or aliens in Egypt, implied by the fact that the new king who "arose over Egypt did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8) and stated explicitly in dozens of other Biblical passages, such as Exodus 22:20: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." This sense of being strangers includes the reality of having a different 'religion;' part of the oppression by Egypt lay in not allowing the Israelites to go into the desert to worship their God (see Exodus 3:18, 4:23, 7:26,).

The rabbis clearly grasped these Biblical emphases, since they, too, disregarded in large measure the hard physical work and lack of pay imposed on the Israelite slaves. And they, too, focused on the elements the Biblical text seemed to consider central. In their interpretation, they were motivated by the sparseness of the Biblical description and often supplied details and explanations. They were also obviously motivated by concerns uppermost in their minds: survival of the people, for instance, or adherence to the commandments.

A. Embitttered Lives.

The first thing the rabbis wanted to understand was how it was that the people came to be enslaved in the first place. How was it that the good fortune enjoyed by Joseph and his family in Egypt could turn so easily to degradation? Were they -- are we? -- at the unpredictable mercy of changing political fortunes? Things do turn easily from sweet to bitter, they noted, and so it was with the Egyptians and Israel: At first, they were sweet; "Pharaoh said to Joseph, `As regards your father and your brothers who have come to you, the land of Egypt is open before you: settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land...'" (Genesis 47:5-6). But afterwards, they were bitter, embittering the lives of the Israelites (Exodus 1:14).[12]

Perhaps, propose the rabbis, the people were actually volunteers, trusting this new Pharaoh on the basis of their heretofore `sweet' experience in Egypt. Perhaps he spoke to them kindly (with tender speech: peh rakh, a play on the work imposed b'farekh), gathering them together and saying, "Please, all of you, do something nice for me today." With that, Pharaoh

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[12] Genesis Rabbah 95:47

picked up a basket and a trowel and began to make bricks. Anyone who saw him do this had to do the same. So immediately the Israelites hurried to do so, and performed skillfully for him all day according to their strength, because they were strong and heroic. But when it began to get dark,[13] he placed taskmasters over them and told them to tally up the bricks, which they did. He then told them that they would be responsible each day for that same number of bricks. He appointed the taskmasters over the Israelite foremen, and the foremen were appointed over the rest of the people...,[14] and the whole system of slavery was established, once the people were drawn in by Pharaoh's persuasion. They were ruled ruthlessly, or tyrannically -- b'frikha -- once they were persuaded b'peh rakh. Thus an unknown word in the Biblical text gave rise to a whole picture of enslavement, drawn by the rabbis.

The rabbis sometimes symbolized the tension they saw between the Israelites' earlier sweet existence and

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[13] Darkness is associated in many midrashim with enslavement, while light indicates freedom. We will also see that darkness represents this world to the rabbis, while light is the world to come. The rabbis may have been influenced by a Gnostic dualism in making these distinctions.

[14] Tanhuma Buber, BeHaalotkha 29, and cited in Yalkut Shimoni 1, 163.

slavery, and later between slavery and freedom, in the metaphor of water. Looking at the joyful outburst of spring in the Song of Songs (2:11), "For now the winter is past, the rains are over and gone," the midrash comments about the rain, "Those are the days of slavery, which is neither rain nor winter," to which Rabbi Tanhuma responds, "The essential necessity of life is rain." The essence of the enslavement of Israel was only 86 years, from the time of Miriam's birth. Why was she called Miriam? Rabbi Yishmael said, it's the language or term for bitterness, as in the phrase, "...They embittered their lives" (Exodus 1:14).[15]

We are to understand here that slavery is not a natural phenomenon, like a season (winter) or a condition (rain); rather, it is imposed by human beings on one another. Thus, it will not just go away if we wait, as the winter and rains disappear in spring. That is the bitterness of it, exemplified in Miriam's name. But only part of Miriam's name is explained here. The more significant part is the end - the Yam (sea). If slavery is to be dated from Miriam's birth, then we must also get a hint in her name of the end of slavery that will come with the splitting of the sea. The effect of

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[15] Pesikta de Rav Kahana 50

the bitter waters of Egypt -- the Nile into which male newborns are to be thrown -- will be overcome by the triumphant waters of the Red Sea. And a natural phenomenon - the Sea - usually akin to other natural pheonomena, like rain and winter, will take on super-natural qualities to be able to defeat slavery. This same connection of the natural and supernatural is found in Miriam's well, said to travel with the people in the wilderness, until Miriam's death. Its redemptive waters provided the people with a on-going small taste of their experience at the Sea.

The rabbis didn't only look at slavery's genesis, however. They also wondered, as we might, what it actually meant to live embittered lives. One possibility was that the Egyptians enforced a change in what the rabbis would have seen as the natural order of the male and female spheres of activity. What did Exodus 1:14 mean, they asked, when it said, "all their work that Egypt ruthlessly imposed"? Rabbi Shmuel Bar Nahman said that Rabbi Yonatan said: It teaches that they switched men's work to women's work and women's work to men's work. Rabbi Eevya then comments: Rabbi Elazar thanked him [for the understanding that here the interpretation of <u>b'farekh</u>] is <u>befrikha</u>, with

force."[16] This may mean, as the notes to Exodus Rabbah indicate, that people can be worn out by doing work to which they are unaccustomed. But it may also be using 'women's work' euphemistically, to suggest that men were taken sexually and by force by the Egyptians. In either case, the change in the natural order, created by God, would symbolize a whole regime of enslavement.

This possibility was even more clearly described in Tanhuma haNidpas, where it's said that while Israel was enslaved in Egypt, Pharaoh decreed that they could not sleep in their houses nor engage in sexual relations ('use of their beds'). Said Rabbi Shimon Bar Halafta, "And what did the young women of Israel do? They went down to draw water from the Nile, and the Holy One Blessed Be He placed little fish for them in their jugs. They sold them, and cooked some of them, and took wine from them [from the sale money] and went to the fields and fed their husbands there, as it is said, "And with all work in the field," (Exodus 1:14). When they had eaten and drunk, they would take mirrors and glance in them with their husbands; she would say 'I'm suited to you', and he would say 'I'm suited to you,' and this way they caused themselves to desire, and [thus] were

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[16] Exodus Rabbah 1:14.

fruitful and multiplied. And the Holy One Blessed Be He took note of them on the spot [they got pregnant immediately]. A happy ending to enforced change: the Egyptian attempt to dissolve the Israelite family was counteracted by the resourcefulness of the Israelite women, helped by God. Rather than the family being destroyed, it was strengthened by new life.

The midrash continues by telling us that with this new life, the Israelites came once again to be "fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly," as in Exodus 1:7. It also comments that perhaps each woman gave birth to 12, clearly an overt reminder that we are to understand the family here as the family of Israel, which was not to be dissolved; each woman was giving birth to 12 tribes. This proves that "the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out"(Exodus 1:12). It was due to their efforts, continues the midrash, especially to their flirting with mirrors, that the people were later liberated from Egypt, because they helped to strengthen the 'troops'. And when Moses later began to build the Tabernacle, and asked the people for donations, the women asked themselves what they had to contribute, and realized they had those mirrors, which they gave to help

the building. Moses rebuked them, thinking the mirrors items of vanity or little value, but God in turn rebuked him, reminding him that without those mirrors, the people would not have left Egypt in such strong 'troops.' "Take them," God said to Moses, "and make with them a copper basin and its base for the priests, since with it the priests will sanctify themselves, as it is said, "He made the laver of copper and its stand of copper, from the mirrors of the women (tsov'ot) who performed (tsav'u) tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" (Exodus 38:8).[17]

The meaning is clear. The women who resisted Pharaoh's decree became heroes, because they enabled the people to strengthen itself via reproduction. What the rabbis would see as traditional women's methods -- providing food and drink, flirtation -- overcame the disruptions of traditional family life.[18] Their efforts were so crucial to the liberation from slavery that they were rewarded: their mirrors -- their instruments of resistance -- were used to make the priests' basin and

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[17] Tanhuma haNidpas Pikudei 9

[18] In fact, the rabbis even turned women who may have been cult prostitutes (see Exodus 38:8) into virtuous wives, the only women in their understanding who could have acted so heroically.

base, instruments of dedication. Dedication to the people's survival becomes dedication to God's work; if you build up the people, you build up God's house.

B. Male Newborns Put to Death.

The need to build up the people was crucial, because Pharaoh was so afraid of the people's ability to grow even in the face of oppression that he made specific decrees designed to cut down, perhaps destroy, the population. His first attempt was to enlist the help of Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1:15-16), asking them to kill all the male babies they delivered. When they refused,[19] he changed tactics: "Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, 'Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live'" (Exodus 1:22).

Killing of babies is the cruelest symbol of oppression. All depictions of tyranny include a mention of baby-killing, and it appears from the rabbis' portrayal of Pharaoh's decree and its results that they

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[19] Their refusal and its ramifications will be examined in Chapter II, "Resistance"

were no strangers to such tactics. Yet Pharaoh's large-scale murder attempt was so vicious that the rabbis felt a need to explain how he arrived at this level of cruelty.

First, they explain, Pharaoh was one in a long line of evil-doers who each wanted to surpass his predecessor. Noting that "a righteous man knows the needs [even] of his beast, But the compassion of the wicked is cruelty" (Proverbs 12:10), the rabbis offer examples of God ("a righteous man") who extended compassion even to animals, particularly with regard to treatment of their young, as in Leviticus 22:28: "...no animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young." In contrast, "the compassion of the wicked is cruelty" is exemplified by Haman, who wanted to "destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women..."(Esther 3:13). Said Rabbi Levi, "Woe to the evil ones who 'acquire wisdom' with evil plans against Israel, each one saying, 'My plan is better than your plan.' For example, Esau says, 'Cain was stupid, because he killed his brother in his father's lifetime, and didn't realize that his father would [continue to] reproduce (be fruitful and multiply). I'm not going to do the same,

but rather 'Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob'(Genesis 27:41). Pharaoh says, 'Esau was stupid, because he said 'Let but the mourning period of my father come, etc,' but he didn't realize that his brother would reproduce during his father's lifetime. I won't do the same, but rather while the babies are yet under their mothers' delivery chairs, I will kill them, as it is said, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live." Haman said, 'Pharaoh was stupid, beause he said, 'let every girl live,' but didn't realize that the girls would marry men, and reproduce with them. I won't do the same, but rather I will "destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women..." (Esther 3:13).[20]

On and on the list goes, each hated oppressor of the Jews acting more cruelly than his predecessor, with this one-upsmanship helping to explain their extreme cruelty. It is interesting to note that Esau, so often associated in the rabbis' minds with Rome and its cruelty, is seen as somewhat less vicious than Pharaoh. This may have been a deliberate attempt to placate

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[20] Pesikta de Rav Kahana 79, and similarly in Tanhuma haNidpas, Emor 13, and Leviticus Rabbah 27:11

those who may have wanted to rebel against Rome -- or whatever the government was at the particular midrash's time -- or perhaps it was the reverse, seeing Esau in his chronological order only, thus showing increasing cruelty in tyrants up to the rabbis' own day. In either case, these tyrants in general are placed in opposition to God and God's way of life, that requires compassion even for animals and thus, how much the more so for human beings. If animals and their babies are to be treated with compassion, then it can only be obvious that human children must be, as well. The Leviticus passage (22:28) -- and another from Deuteronomy 22:6 -- refer to the killing of animal babies, and the fact that this should be done out of the parents' presence. The midrash thus seems to imply that, if Pharaoh had to kill the Iraelite children, he should have done it away from their parents' presence. This would be the minimalist approach, which also implies that the slaves were Pharaoh's 'beasts.' In fact, the midrash's message is that neither the children nor the parents should be killed, and that either method of stopping reproduction of a people is unacceptable.

The rabbis were quick to notice inconsistencies in the text and so they question the fact that Pharaoh's

decree in Exodus 1:22 is said to all his people and in general terms,"Every boy that is born..." Not every Hebrew or Israelite boy, but every boy. Why would he do thus? the midrash asks, and then answers: Pharaoh's astrologers had said that on that day Israel's redeemer was to be born, but they didn't know whether he would be an Egyptian or not. Pharaoh then gathered all the Egyptians and said to them, "Lend me all your children for one day," as it is said, "Every boy that is born..." 'Of Israel" is not written here, rather 'every boy,' whether Israelite or Egyptian."[21]

This story helps explain Pharaoh's language, but more importantly, it offers an explanation for Moses' mixed background. Born to an Israelite woman, but raised by an Egyptian princess in the palace,[22] he was in some sense a mixture of both, yet became the redeemer of Israel. This fits with the traditional Jewish view of a tinok shenishbah, a baby who has been captured and raised by gentiles, but who retains a feeling of connec-

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[21] Tanhuma Buber, VaYakhel 5, and similarly in Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer 48, and Exodus Rabbah 1:18.

[22] Moses in fact was saved by the very waters that are to be used to kill male newborns. Just as Pharaoh decrees that the Egyptians throw Hebrew babies into the Nile to kill them, Yokheved sends Moses down the Nile for safety, and he is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who in this sequence is Pharaoh's opposite number.

tion to the Jewish people. Though Moses is not generally discussed in those terms, because he was not captured per se, he could be considered the first and greatest tinok shenishbah.[23] The rabbis are usually intent on discouraging Jews from mixing with the surrounding culture. Here, the reality of such mixing may work to their advantage. 'You can't kill us off,' they say to a tyrant, 'unless you kill all your people, too, since our redeemer may seem to be one of you.' To their own people, the message may be one of toleration: 'Even a person who mixes so extensively that he looks like someone from another culture can remember his people, or even redeem them.' And to those who have assimilated, the message is, 'Even though you look like them, you can be one of us. Don't forget where you came from.'

The rabbis also question Pharaoh's methods. Why kill babies by throwing them into the Nile? Why utilize water as a means to death, rather than some other method? Says the midrash, Rabbi Shmuel Bar Nahmani said, the Egyptians came stealthily to the Israelites and said to them, 'If we enslave you via

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[23] Thanks to Dr. Michael Chernick, who discussed with me the idea of the tinok shenishba.

fire, your God could bring fire from above, as He brought it on the Sodomites. But since He swore that He would never again bring a flood, come and we'll enslave you via water. Then the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, 'I swore that I would never again bring a flood. [But] by your lives, the same people who walked into the flood....those same people are trapped and will walk by themselves into the Sea.'[24]

The rabbis clearly believed that the Egyptians not only knew, but already feared God's retributive power, and calculated their methods accordingly. The comparison to Sodom is also instructive: the Sodomites prevented 'natural' reproduction via 'unnatural' sexual practices; the Egyptians are attempting to prevent it by killing the babies at birth. But the rabbis may be sending a sly message to Pharaoh: by letting the girl babies live, you may be allowing us at least a remnant of life. This was, after all, the case with Lot's daughters who, surviving the destruction of Sodom, thought they were the last people alive, and determined to reproduce via intercourse with their father (Genesis 19:31-38). Presumably, the Israelite girl babies, once grown, would do the same if need be.

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[24] Yalkut Shimoni 2: 786

There is also a more obvious joke here: Though God will never again send a flood, 'He' can commandeer the Sea to work for retribution. So the Egyptians' attempt to get around God's power is shown to be impossible. No one can get around God's power.

Finally, the notion that the Egyptians recognize their cruelty enough to compare themselves with Sodom and with the corrupt people who merited destruction by flood, adds weight to their actions. Intent is a strong consideration for the rabbis, who judge a person's actions more harshly or more approvingly if they were intended. Here, the Egyptians clearly walk into oppression knowingly, so they will be punished by walking knowingly into the Sea.

Having explained Pharaoh's cruel decree, the rabbis went on to tell us why it was so devastating to the Israelites. The primary reason is that the Israelite children continue the line of the people begun with Abraham; they are Abraham's children, in effect, and are thus to be the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham to make of his seed a great nation. There is an unbreakable link between them. As the midrash has it, "whatever is written about our father, Abraham, is written about his children." One example given is that,

just as, when Abraham and Sarah went to Egypt, he asked her to pretend to be his sister and said to her, otherwise 'they'll kill me and let you live,' so, too, about his children, the Israelites, it is written that Pharaoh said, 'Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.'[25] The realization here is that 1) what Abraham only predicted about the Egyptians is confirmed by their behavior with the Israelites; 2) that Pharaoh was to be unsuccessful in taking Sarah as a wife and in killing off all the Israelite boy babies, because of the valiant resistance of both Sarah and the midwives. His failure is demonstrated by the midrash's referral to Abraham as 'our father' - without the Israelites's survival, the rabbis would not be alive to continue the line and to see themselves as children of Abraham; 3) that one reason for Pharaoh's keeping the girl babies alive was to marry them off to Egyptians when they grew up, just as an earlier Pharaoh would have wanted to marry Sarah. This idea is made more explicit in Exodus Rabbah 1:18, where the question is asked, "Why would Pharaoh keep the females alive?" to which the answer is that the Egyptians would say, "We'll kill the males and take the

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[25] Genesis Rabbah 40:16

females as wives," because the Egyptians were engaged in lewd sexual practices that led to parental uncertainty (zimah). One way or another, the rabbis are telling us, the Egyptians would have destroyed the people with this decree to kill all the boy babies: either they would have destroyed all the babies who are the link in the chain of Abraham's children, or they would have assimilated the females and thus done away with the distinctive people of Israel.

The message about survival is clear. But the emphasis on Jews being children of Abraham may also have a different polemic value for people encountering early Christians or Moslems who considered themselves children of Abraham and who may have been attracting Jews with this notion of a common heritage.

The rabbis also paid some attention to the realities of Pharaoh's decree: what did it make people do? how did people respond? One response is as sadly familiar today as it was to the rabbis: women were forced to give birth in secret. There was an Israelite woman, says the midrash, who, when she felt that her time of delivery was near, went outside and delivered on a dungheap. Immediately the Holy One Blessed be He came

down and bathed [the baby] and nursed it and clothed it: "I bathed you in water and washed the blood off you... and clothed you with embroidered garments and gave you sandals of tahash leather..."(Ezekiel 16:9-10).[26] God's immediate maternal response is given as an example of what the Psalmist meant with the words "God, You are my God..." supposedly written by David when he was in the wilderness of Judah (Psalm 63:1-2). The baby picked up from the dungheap and cleaned and swaddled is akin to the people picked up from the 'dungheap' that is Egypt, and washed in the water of the Red Sea, where God enacted 'His' judgment against the Egyptians, thus thwarting Pharaoh's hopes. The clothing God provides this 'infant' presages the clothing the Israelites will take from the Egyptians when they leave Egypt; clearly God provides clothing, symbolizing protection, dignity, adornment (especially here, the embroidered garments) for those who are most in need. The sandals God provides will be well used by people walking in the desert. But they may also be meant to remind us of God's words to Moses at the burning bush, in Exodus 3:5: "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." In our midrash, God's

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[26] Pesikta Rabbati 48:2

providing sandals to the needy infant would then reinforce the fact that Egypt, already called a dung-heap, is not holy ground.

The Psalmist's image of God, Who "raises the poor from the dust, [and] lifts up the needy from the refuse heap..."(Psalm 113:7) continues in another midrash from Pesikta Rabbati, which deals with the God Who "sets the childless woman among her household/as a happy mother of children"(Psalm 113:9). The midrash confronts the question of what it means to be barren, which is the question the people as a whole are facing with Pharaoh's decree. It notes that Sarah, who in fact gave birth only to Isaac, was the figurative mother to those she coverted (and perhaps to strangers, as we were in Egypt: gerim). And, says Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman, Yokheved, already mother to Aaron and Miriam, is still called barren because Moses has not yet been born. In fact, there's a possibility he won't be born: When Amram heard Pharaoh's decree to kill all the Israelite boy babies, he, and all the Israelite men following his example,refrained from reproduction and expelled their wives from their houses, [as it is said] (Micah 2:9), "You drive the women of My people away/From their pleasant homes;/You deprive their infants/Of My

glory forever." Therefore they call Yokheved 'barren' (akara), because she was 'uprooted' (nitakra) from her home. Miriam [who clearly echoes God's condemnation in the Micah verse], who at that time was 6 years old, said, "Daddy, daddy, Pharaoh was better to Israel than you are. Why? Pharaoh decreed about the males [only] and you about the males and females. Pharaoh decreed and it's doubtful whether it will come into existence. You decreed and your decree comes into existence." When Amram heard her words, he brought her before the Sanhedrin, and she spoke before them. They said to Amram, "You forbade, so you must permit this thing." He said to them, "What are you saying to me?" "That we will return in secret," they said to him. "And who will let all Israel know?" asked Rabbi Yehuda Bar Zevida. So Amram returned them [her] in a wedding couch, and Aaron here and Miriam there were carrying castanets [for wedding processions] and walking before them, and a holy spirit, shouting, healed the split in the house: "...a happy mother of children" (Psalm 113:9). Why did Amram do this? So that the Israelites would know to return their wives. As soon as they saw, they sang a song to the Holy One Blessed be He; the song was really just,

"Now Moses the Redeemer will be born and we will be redeemed from Egypt. Hallelu!"[27]

This time, the message is clear that the girl babies whom Pharaoh allows to live may grow up and foil his plans; without Miriam's challenge to her father, he and all the Israelite men would have taken Pharaoh's decree even a step further. Her challenge, again -- as with the young women with their mirrors -- put in the mouth of a female character, boils down to this: Do we stop living to avoid the threat of death? "P'ru ur'vu" (be fruitful and multiply) is the first commandment given by God (Genesis 1:28). Before receiving the Torah at Sinai, the Israelites in Egypt must make the choice to follow God's command: be fruitful and multiply, or Pharaoh's command: die out now. Amram reacted to Pharaoh's decree as many people might. He thought to prevent it by his own abstinence; if no babies were created, none could be killed. But Miriam and, by extension, Yokheved, knew that abstention from life was no answer. Pharaoh would likely find other ways to oppress and extinguish the people, or -- as was the case here -- some of the babies born might escape their decreed death. Without continuing to create,

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[27] Pesikta Rabbati 44:4

and thus to resist Pharaoh's rule, redemption could not be born. They were correct, of course, and were able to rejoin their family on that basis. The potential barrenness of the house was now changed by renewed sexual activity; the split in the house was healed by the reconnection and the now-joint goal. This family obviously symbolizes the people as a whole and its diverse opinions. As such, the midrash gives strong advice: You must resist the evil decress of the sovereign of your day. You must continue to live, to reproduce, to continue the Jewish people. And you must be united toward this goal.

C. Being a Stranger: Maintaining Distinctiveness, Getting Free

Being a stranger has more than one interpretation. One is based on such Biblical references as "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20). We were the oppressed strangers, suffering from being the 'other' in a land not our own. 'Stranger' in this context is almost synonymous with 'slave' - it calls up

the pain, the indignity, the degradation of being a slave. That degradation is embedded in our souls, and must govern our behavior toward all others who are considered strangers.

Yet 'stranger' also has another context for the rabbis, one which implies distinctiveness, solidarity, and -- to use American terminology -- freedom of worship. In this sense, being a stranger is desirable, and should be a goal.

The people always saw themselves as strangers, says Numbes Rabbah, understanding the word vayagar, upset or alarmed, as in "Moab was alarmed..."(Numbers 22:3) as being related to the term for a stranger (ger). They went down to Egypt to dwell (lagur) and took hold of it (the land) and were rewarded with houses, as it is said, [concerning what the people should do after they as they are freed from Egypt] "Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house (mgarat beitah) objects of silver and gold..."(Exodus 3:22).[28] Here we are reminded of how pleasant it can be to settle into a place that is not our own, as it was pleasant for Joseph's brothers to settle in Goshen when they came down to Egypt. They were given houses, and

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[28] Numbers Rabbah 20:3

even had others - strangers? - living in their houses. But the ugly possibility of change was not far from the surface. The people who had lived such a pleasant life could be enslaved, evicted from their houses to build houses for others. They must consider themselves strangers, because if this change could happen in Egypt, where life was so good, how much the more so could it happen elsewhere. The self-imposed label, stranger, was a label of self-preservation.

In some cases, the label was applied to the Egyptians. Psalm 114 speaks of the time "When Israe went forth from Egypt,/the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech (am loeiz)..."(114:1). This term appears nowhere else in the Bible, but Rashi connected it to Isaiah 33:19 (am noaz - "barbarian folk").[29] It might also have a meaning of strength (from the roots 'zz or 'iz), as in Psalm 68:29, thus seeing Egypt as a powerful nation from which the people were to be rescued.

But generally the label of stranger was applied to the Israelites. For the rabbis the label also had its positive side: remaining a stranger meant that Jews

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[29] Rashi's comment cited in Solomon Mandelkern, Concordance, p. 490 (see noaz)

maintained their distinctiveness, often symbolized by their language or their behavior. The major distinction between the Israelites and the Egyptians was the Israelites' connection to their God. The earliest request Moses and Aaron bring to Pharaoh concerns the people's worship of God: "'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me (y'yahogu Li)in the wilderness'"(Exodus 5:1). What God had instructed them to say, however, came much closer to Pharaoh's concerns: "'Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born son. I have said to you, 'Let My son go, that he may worship Me (y'yaavdeini),' yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son'"(Exodus 4:23). This states the case clearly: the people are to serve (laavod) God, rather than working for Pharaoh (laavod) as slaves. They are God's first-born, as Pharaoh himself is said to have a first-born, or even to be a first-born. As Pharaoh wants to kill the Israelite children, literally, and figuratively via prevention of connection with God, so God will now kill Pharaoh, figuratively via the killing of the first-born and literally at the Sea. In Exodus Rabbah 5:7, this message is made overt. With God's instructions to Moses and Aaron, the midrash says,

God revealed to Moses that Pharaoh would not let the people go until he suffered the plague of the first-born, so the text didn't need to publicize it at the end.[30] And to what does [God's phrase] 'Israel is My first-born son (b'khori) refer? To Jacob their ancestor, because he bought the birthright (b'khora) so that he could serve/worship (laavod) God (Makom). [God's instructions continue] 'Let My son go that he may worship Me (vayaavdeini) - [God] said to him [Pharaoh]: 'If you prevent My first-born son from worshipping Me, I will prevent your firstborn from serving you, because I will kill them all.'

But Moses and Aaron choose to present a different version. Why? Says one midrash, they said 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness' in order to incite Pharaoh to chase after them in the wilderness.[31] Presumably they wanted him to give chase because they knew then he would ultimately be drowned in the Sea.

The two preceding midrashim imply that it is Pharaoh who prevents the people from worshipping God, suggesting that they would want to go out to the

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[30] See Exodus 11:1, 4-5

[31] Midrash Sekhel Tov, Shemot 5:2

wilderness to worship if only he would let them. In a sense, this is God's view. God says, 'Let My people go' and assumes that this is what they would do (although of course God has a larger plan of freedom in mind for them, and thus helps by hardening Pharaoh's heart against the people's request). But there is another view, perhaps that of the rabbis, that suggests that the people themselves refrained from worship of God. The major reason given is that the people were involved with Avodah Zarah, 'strange worship,' or worship not their own.

In the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, we note that 'Israel participated in Avodah Zarah in Egypt. And Avodah Zarah is equivalent to all the mitzvot, as can be seen from the expiation that must be offered "if you unwittingly fail to observe any one of the commandments that the Lord has declared to Moses - anything that the Lord has enjoined upon you through Moses - from the day that the Lord gave the commandment and on through the ages..."(Numbers 15:22). Says the midrash, the expiation for all of the commandments teaches what must be done for one commandment, because it is equivalent to all. Just as someone who transgresses all the mitzvot loosens the yoke, breaks the covenant, and misrepresents

the Torah, so too, one who transgresses one mitzvah loosens the yoke, breaks the covenant, and misrepresents the Torah....[So God] said to them, withdraw your hands from Avodah Zarah and hold fast to the commandments. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira said, Look, the text says "...they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed"(Exodus 6:9). It's as though you have a man who receives good news, but isn't happy: "you have a son;" "your master is bringing you out to freedom," but he isn't happy. If so, why does the text say, "...they would not listen to Moses..."(Ex.6:9)? Because it was hard for them to separate from Avodah Zarah, as we can see from God's words in Ezekiel[32]: "On the day that I chose Israel, I gave My oath to the stock of the House of Jacob; when I made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, I gave My oath to them...I also said to them: Cast away, every one of you, the detestable things that you are drawn to, and do not defile yourselves with the fetishes of Egypt...But they defied Me and refused to listen to Me..." But, God continues, "I acted for the sake of My name, that it might not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they were..."

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[32] Ezekiel 20:5,7-8. The midrash itself refers only to Ezek. 20:7, but the other verses are clearly part of the reference, so are given here.

(Ezekiel 20:9). It is said, "So the Lord spoke to both Moses and Aaron...instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt"(Exodus 6:13)...they were to instruct them to separate from Avodah Zarah.[33]

It's a strong message. God saved the people for the sake of God's own name, to protect the image of God in the minds of the other nations that saw the people being saved. But in reality, the people are not themselves worthy of such salvation. They worship other gods or in unacceptable ways and, even though they agreed to take on the responsibility of Torah, which is their covenant with God, they have not entirely done so. Even one breech -- such as worshipping other gods -- is the same as breaking the entire covenant, and this is how they are seen. Thus, they are not able fully to heed Moses, nor -- as we see in the Ezekiel passage -- to heed God. The message is clearly directed at the people the rabbis want to reach. Perhaps they too participated in some later form of Avodah Zarah (Christianity?), or were just less strict about observance of mitzvot than the rabbis hoped they would be. Perhaps they didn't see God's word and command as "good news," even though in the context of the Exodus they "have a

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[33] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha 5

son" - Moses, and their "master is bringing them out to freedom." Or perhaps others were proclaiming their message as good news.[34] Were they then not to be saved? Or did the rabbis believe that God would save them, too, for the sake of God's own name?

Ironically, in another section of this same midrash, these same unworthy people are praised for the preservation of their culture, their reputation and their faith. In a discussion about the actions that God gave Israel to do even before Sinai, in order that they would be worthy of being redeemed, Rabbi Eliezer HaKafar in the name of Rabbi said, 'But didn't the people of Israel have in their hands 4 deeds that no one else in the world had: that they should not be suspected of 1) sexual transgression; 2) informing; 3) changing their names; or 4) changing thir language. Each has a text or two that prove its point: the Israelites did not succumb to the culture around them, which surely tried to seduce them with sexual transgression or offer them rewards for informing on their neighbors, or which proffered greater acceptance if they changed their names or their language. But they did

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[34] See New Testament, Luke 2:10, for example

not, say the rabbis.[35] The rabbis' message mayhave been directed at the people in their own day whom they suspected on breaking these four God-given actions. Or it may rather have encouraged them, suggesting that if they held firm in their resolve to adhere to these actions, salvation would be their reward.

There are two separate ideas here of the way in which God operates. One says God does what God wants to do, primarily for the sake of God's name. If the people observe mitzvot, it's great. If not, God may still save them. It's entirely up to God. The other idea says that the people are responsible for helping to bring about their own salvation. Even before receiving the Torah -- or even beyond the Torah -- the people have responsibilities to one another and to themselves as a group: Their actions make them worthy of being saved. It is, of course, the combination of God, Torah and Israel working together that leads to salvation.

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[35] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha 5, and similarly in Numbers Rabbah 20:22 and elsewhere

CHAPTER II:

Resistance

Human action in the face of oppression is one of the strongest themes of the Exodus story. We have seen it already, in the refusal by the young women of Israel to allow Pharaoh to prevent their reproduction, and in Miriam's challenge to her father to rescind his decree that took Pharaoh's cruelty beyond even its intent.[36] This kind of challenge of tyrannical authority -- what we would call resistance -- is both approved of and encouraged in the Biblical text and in the midrash. As Michael Walzer puts it: "Pharaoh is never explicitly called a tyrant in the Book of Exodus, though he is known ever after in Jewish literature as the first of the tyrants...Nor is the oppression of the Israelites actually called unjust (it is called cruel)...And yet the wrongfulness of Israel's bondage is surely the argument of the text....It is a good thing to stand against oppression. Much of the moral code of the Torah is explained and defended in opposition to Egyptian cruelty."[37]

In fact, in the Exodus story itself, people who 'stand against oppression' aid God in the larger plan for liberation and are thus richly rewarded. Without

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[36] See Chapter I, pages 29 and 44

[37] Walzer, Exodus and Revolution, p.24

their actions, God could not have intervened. This idea is picked up by modern liberation theologians such as the Jesuit Juan Luis Segundo, who, when he writes of political connections to liberation theology, creates these section divisions (in this order): "II. Theology is the Second Step," and III. "Commitment is the First Step." In his terms, "the theology of Jesus derives from the openness of the human heart to man's most urgent problems. Indeed Jesus seems to go so far as to suggest that one cannot recognize Christ, and therefore come to know God, unless he or she is willing to start with a personal commitment to the oppressed... Is it possible to know and recognize the liberation message of the Gospel at all without a prior commitment to liberation?"[38]

The rabbis of the midrashim would obviously not share Segundo's understanding of God. But the bulk of midrashim about the Exodus posit. as he does, the need for human action, sometimes preceding that of God, sometimes seeing the two working in tandem. While there are those midrashim that emphasize God's extraordinary power and God's ability to save regardless of what the people does, most regard very highly those people who

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[38] Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, pp. 75,81

took the risk, challenged the tyranny, and defied those in power. It is for this reason that God gets so angry with Moses in the midrash cited in the Introduction: Moses tries to decline the honor of helping to save the people, and God responds with immediate scorn and rebuke: "My people are living in misery, and you're living in freedom! I'm asking you to get them out, and you're saying `Send someone else'?!"[39] We can only think that the rabbi(s) who created this scene agreed with God, even if they felt like Moses. To take the risk is inordinately difficult and we all have a hundred reasons why we can't do it. The rabbis stress the need to keep the angry voice of God in the back of our minds.

In this chapter we will examine several of the people or groups in the Exodus story who took the risk and challenged Pharaoh. The midwives, the Israelite foremen, Moses himself, and all the Israelites who `borrowed' gold, silver and clothing from their Egyptian neighbors are emblematic of this kind of bravery. As the poet Marge Piercy writes in her poem "Maggid" for the Passover seder, "We honor those who let go of

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[39] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to Exodus 6:2

everything but freedom, who ran, who revolted, who fought, who became other by saving themselves."[40]

A. The Midwives

The midwives are the first people in the Book of Exodus to resist Pharaoh's decrees. Their Biblical story is fully, but succinctly told:

> The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool; if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.' The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?' The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.'
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> And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. (Exodus 1:15-21)

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[40] Marge Piercy, "Maggid," as published in Sarah's Daughters Sing: A Sampler of Poems by Jewish Women. Edited by Henny Wenkart. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, c1990, pp.32-33

There are few midrashim that arise specifically from this story, although there are some which speak of the midwives in other Biblical contexts. Those that do exist on this story are quite late. Perhaps these were legendary stories until they were written down at the time of the compiling of the Talmud. Or perhaps the earlier rabbis had some difficulty with seeing women, out of a known familial role, as heroic figures.[41] In any case, the earliest of them is found in the Babylonian Talmud, Sota 11b:

> "The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives," etc. [An argument between] Rav and Shmuel. One of them said [these were] a woman and her daughter, and one said a bride and her mother-in-law. The one who said a woman and her daughter - Yokheved and Miriam. The one who said a bride and her mother-in-law - Yokheved and Elisheva. The teaching is according to the one who said a woman and her daughter. Shifra - this is Yokheved, and why is she called Shifra? Because she cleaned (m'shaperet) the baby. Another explanation: Shifra - because Israel was fruitful and multiplied (sheh paru v'rabu) in her day. Puah - this is Miriam, and why do is she called Puah? Because she blew (poah) [a charm into the mother's ear] and brought forth the baby. Another explanation: Puah - because she cried out (poah) with holy spirit [that caused her to be able to prophesy] and she said: In the future it is my mother who will bear a son who will save (moshia) Israel.
> "And he said, 'When you deliver the Hebrew women,'" etc. What are 'stones'? [the Hebrew

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[41] This may be why the midrash tries, at the outset, to place them in known familial roles.

avanim is translated 'birthstool.'] Said Rabbi Hanan: He sent a great sign to them. He said to them: At the time that she squats to give birth, her thighs get cold as stones (avanim) [cools off from the throes of giving birth]. And there are those who say: As it's written "I went down to the house of a potter (yotser), and found him working at the wheel (avanim)" (Jeremiah 18:2). Just as this potter is - a leg here and a leg there and the potter's mould between, so is a woman - a leg here and a leg there and the baby between.
"If it's a boy, kill him." Said Rabbi Hanina: He sent a great sign to them; a boy's face [is turned] upward [at birth], a girl's face downward [so they could determine the gender of the baby at the beginning of the birth, and kill them almost before birth].
"The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them..."etc. - The text should have said "to them" ['lhen' as opposed to 'aleihen']. Said Rabbi Yossi in the name of Rabbi Hanina: [this change in language] teaches that he was seeking something sinful, but they didn't submit.
"...they let the boys live." It was learned: The judgment [about the midwives] was not because they didn't kill them [the babies], but because they supplied them with water and food.
"The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women...[they are vigorous (hayyot)]"etc. What is 'hayyot' [usually translated 'animals']? If we say it's actual animals - Do you think an animal doesn't need another animal to give birth? Rather, they said to him [the midwives to Pharaoh], 'This people can be compared to an animal' [and examples are then given from Jacob's blessing of his children, in which he compares them to various animals, and from Moses' similar blessing of the people].

This midrash teaches us, first, that the midwives represent generations of women who -- as we have already

seen -- refuse to allow reproduction to be halted. Since it is men who in Jewish law "are commanded to marry, to procreate, and to perform their conjugal duties at regular times,"[42] it is interesting to note the emphasis in several midrashim on Exodus on the women's role in making sure those commandments are fulfilled. Perhaps, as was noted in Chapter I,[43] one aspect of slavery for the rabbis is the reversal of male and female roles. They may intend us to see this kind of reversal in sexual relations as well as in kinds of work.

The argument over who these midwives really are is also instructive. First, the notion that Yokheved, Miriam and Elisheva are midwives of a sort makes us recognize them as having in various ways "birthed" the Jewish people. Second, the two combinations -- Yokheved and Miriam or Yokheved and Elisheva -- indicate an argument as to whether it is Moses or Aaron who is the most important 'baby' being birthed: Did the midwives give birth to the redeemer or the priest? The Talmud votes for Moses. He is, after all, the only one we see

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[42] Rachel Biale. Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources. New York: Schocken Books, c1984, pp. 121-122

[43] Page 28

in the text as a baby, and his infancy is crucial to later events. In addition, the midrash wants to give credit to Miriam, called a prophet in the text (Exodus 15:20), and so it calls her Puah, for her efforts in bringing forth the baby -- the baby Moses and the 'baby' Israel -- and for her ability to prophesy Moses' birth, which is one midrashic explanation for her title of 'Prophet.' Yokheved is credited with cleaning the baby, reminiscent of the God who rescued the baby from the dungheap and washed and dressed it. She also 'cleaned' the baby by sending him down the Nile, seen at that point in the Biblical story as redemptive water that foreshadows the redemption at the Sea. And, of course, in Yokheved's day, Israel increased in number, due to her and others' efforts and in spite of Pharaoh's decrees to the contrary. Yokheved's cleaning of the baby is related to the midwives' reward toward the end of the midrash, in that it indicates more than usual care. The midwives, the midrash says, were rewarded <u>not</u> for <u>merely</u> not killing the baby boys, but for going beyond that to give them life -- they fed them and gave them water. Thus, not only did they refrain from following Pharaoh's orders, but also openly defied them.

It is for this reason that the midwives (and women

in general) are likened to a potter: they are creators who bring babies to life, with the birthstool being likened to the potter's wheel. As such, they are doing God's work: As God is the Yotser, and the potter is a yotser, so too women are yotsrot. The reference to the Jeremiah passage gives us that connection. Jeremiah goes to the potter's house because God has said, "Go down to the house of a potter, and there I will impart My words to you...Just like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in My hands, O House of Israel!" (Jeremiah 18:2,6). To carry the analogy further, if God will speak at the potter's house, so too God will speak at the women's/midwives' house. It is God's message they are proclaiming, and ensuring through their actions. The midwives, specifically, create by allowing natural creation to take place as it should and even aid its progress; even when Pharaoh offered them the chance to kill the male babies almost before birth, they declined. Such women, say the rabbis, naturally also declined Pharaoh's sinful proposition; why would they say no to one sin and yes to another?

Their method -- pretending that the Hebrew women gave birth too quickly for the midwives to get there -- is just a pretense. Pharaoh could obviously turn around

and intruct them to kill the babies when they got there. But the midwives in this way: 1) give Pharaoh notice that they are not going to comply; 2) let him know that there is a distinction between his people and theirs; and 3) take their places in an honored line that includes Jacob and Moses. When they refer to the Hebrew women as being like 'animals,' they are doing what those two did when they compared the 12 sons and the 12 tribes to animals.

And what was their reward? Another midrash, noting that "because the midwives feared God, He established households (batim)for them,"(Exodus 1:21), suggests that these were the houses of the priesthood and the houses of levitical offices and sovereignty. Continuing the notion that Shifra was really Yokheved and Puah really Miriam, it says that Yokheved chose the priesthood and sovereignty as her reward - meaning Moses and Aaron, who came from Yokheved. And what did Miriam take as her reward? it asks. Wisdom, as it is said, "Fear of the Lord is wisdom." (Job 28:28). The midwives feared God, the Biblical verse says, and thus evidenced wisdom. Miriam's wisdom is clear, the midrash continues, in the fact that Bezalel, who descended from her,

was wise (hakham), "I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill (hakhmah)...."(Exodus 31:3).[44]

The midwives' action was heroic and deserves the honor God gave it. But houses were an honor not frequently given and not to women at all. The rabbis, either not understanding what batim were in this story, or not wanting to believe that God would have rewarded women directly or independently, decided that these women -- midrashically seen as Yokheved and Miriam, who themselves deserve independent reward -- were rewarded by the achievements of their children. It makes a nice touch literarily: the women who saved children's lives are rewarded by their children's lives, the women who saved the people's life are rewarded by the continuity of the people. But it demonstrates the narrowness of the rabbis' view of women. This is particularly clear when we contrast their reward with that of the Israelite foremen, who also defied Pharaoh, albeit less successfully than did the midwives.

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[44] Tanhuma Buber, VaYakhel 5

B. The Foremen

The story of the Israelite foremen, set over the people by the Egyptian taskmasters, is told in a few verses in Exodus 5. We learn about them because of Pharaoh's increasingly harsh demands, made after Moses and Aaron have asked for permission to take the people out to the wilderness for three days to worship God. Says the text, "That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying, 'You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God!'" (Exodus 5:6-8). The taskmasters and foremen then repeat this demand to the people, who begin their search for straw. The taskmasters press them, "and the foremen of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten. 'Why,'they were asked, 'did you not complete the prescribed amount of bricks, either yesterday or today, as you did before?' Then the foremen of the Israelites came to Pharaoh and cried: 'Why do you deal

thus with your servants (avade'kha)? No straw is issued to your servants, yet they demand of us: Make bricks! Thus your servants are being beaten, when the fault is with your own people.' He replied, 'You are shirkers' ...Now the foremen of the Israelites found themselves in trouble because of the order, 'You must not reduce your daily quantity of bricks.' As they left Pharaoh's presence, they came upon Moses and Aaron standing in their path, and they said to them, 'May the Lord look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers - putting a sword in their hands to slay us.'"(Exodus 5:14-17, 19-21).

The story informs us about several aspects of slavery in Egypt. First, we learn that representatives of the enslaved people were selected to have authority over their own people. This is a familiar ploy of oppressive tyrants, used (in modern parlance) to 'co-opt' a segment of the oppressed people, in hope that they will cooperate with the authorities in return for the small amount of power given them. Such selected people often think they can help to make things a bit better, can serve as advocates for their people. It is in part the fact that they did not cooperate in the expected manner that leads the rabbis to bestow on them

significant rewards. Yet they are the 'system players,' wanting to save their people from immediate pain, but unable to imagine the system itself disappearing. Thus, they can only see Moses and Aaron as troublemakers who shake things up and cause more pain.

The story of the foremen is also one of the few parts of the Exodus story that dwells on details of the labor in which the slaves engaged. From it we know about the process of making bricks, that the slaves had been provided with the materials needed and were now being asked to provide their own.[45] We also see something of the authority hierarchy: Pharaoh commands the taskmasters who in turn command the foremen who in turn command the slaves, though the taskmasters also command the slaves directly. And we see a clear example

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[45] Exodus Rabbah 5:21 enlarges on this glimpse of the physical details and, picking up on the phrase "you made us loathsome to Pharaoh" (hivashtem et reiheinu, which could be translated as 'you caused our scent to decay/ferment'), presents some possibilities: The foremen's wounds from being hit [are infected] and smell; slaves who got stuck and died in the buildings they were making smelled after death. This is like a corpse, covered by dust in a corner, that is suddenly uncovered and smells; so it was when Israel said to Moses, 'Moses, there was a scent (reiah) [in the air] in Egypt that we were to be redeemed in future, and you [plural: Aaron, too] came and stirred it up [thus causing it to stink]. The covert message here, though, is that the slaves in Egypt were doomed to death, and Moses came and kicked the corpse, releasing its odor, but releasing it as well.

of the irrationality that characterizes oppressive leadership at its most horrific, including the stereotypic 'taking it out on the little people.' The people's desire to have a bit of freedom triggers the tyrant's fears, and he in turn punishes those who have the least ability to defend themselves. The foremen challenge him on this tactic, not questioning the fact that it is they who are being beaten, but complaining on behalf of their people. This willingness to stand between the tyrant and their weakened people, too, brings them honor inn the midrash.[46]

Says one midrash, "The foremen were beaten for the rest of the people, but they didn't send them into the hands of the taskmasters. They would say, 'It's better that we be hit, rather than that the people be struck.' Therefore, when the Holy One Blessed be He said to Moses, 'Gather for Me seventy of Israel's elders,' (Numbers 11:16), and Moses responded, 'Master, I don't know who is worthy and who is not worthy,' and God said

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[46] The foremen's ability to use words to defend themselves probably didn't escape the rabbis, either, wordsmiths that they were. When the foremen, complaining to Pharaoh, refer to themselves as 'your servants' (avade'kha), they are clearly being ironic, knowing that the reader/hearer will know that they are truly servants/worshippers (avadim) of God. This word play is implicit throughout the story, but it is the foremen who bring it to the fore.

to him, [the ones] 'of whom you have experience as elders and officers (shotrav) of the people'(Numbers 11:16) -- those same elders and foremen (shotrim) who took on themselves being hit in Egypt for the required amount of bricks -- they should come and partake of this honor.' Because 'He' says, 'of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people,' and because they took on themselves being hit for the community, and because 'they shall share the burden of the people with you' (Numbers 11:17), [therefore] this teaches you that the Holy One Blessed be He equated them with Moses. From this you can learn that anyone who places him/herself [in danger] for Israel deserves honor and greatness and the holy spirit (ruah hakodesh)[47]"

Sifrei BaMidbar sees the foremen's reward as equally honorable. But rather than place the foremen among the seventy elders or consider them prophets, this midrash places them among the chieftains of the tribes that brought offerings to God at the Tabernacle when Moses finished building it (Numbers 7:2). Neither commoners nor inheritors of position, they acquired

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[47] Tanhuma haNidpas, BeHaalotkha 13. Exodus Rabbah 5:20 notes that the phrase about the ruah hakodesh means that the foremen were appointed prophets.

their status because they had already been appointed over the people in Egypt, and had been beaten on their account. Thus, this kind of 'trial by fire' deserves a position of importance and the opportunity to offer the first sacrifices to God in the new Tabernacle.[48]

The foremen were also seen through midrashic eyes as having a role in the revelation of the 'first Messiah.' Ephraim Urbach tells us that the idea of two Messiahs was known to the rabbis: "In the work known as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs two Messiahs are referred to - a Messiah who is a priest and one who is an Israelite...Scholars were amazed by the idea of the two Messiahs...but from the Qumran Scrolls it is clear that this belief in two Messiahs was accepted by the 'Yahad' [Qumran] sect...Influenced by the prophecies of Zechariah, who refers to 'the two anointed ones' (iv 1-2,14), they developed this eschatalogical conception of the Messiah descended from Aaron...and they juxtaposed to him the Israelite Messiah..." [49] Moses, or an amalgam of Moses and Aaron, is considered in several midrashim to have been the first Messiah. Taking one as

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[48] Sifrei BaMidbar, Naso 14:45

[49] Ephraim E. Urbach. The Sages; Their Concepts and Beliefs. Translated by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, c1975, pp. 662-663

a case in point,[50] the first Messiah is likened to a gazelle or a young stag, as described in the Song of Songs 2:9 (and 10): "My beloved is like a gazelle/Or like a young stag./There he stands behind our wall,/ Gazing through the window,/Peering through the lattice./ My beloved spoke thus to me,/Arise, my darling;/My fair one, come away!" Says Rabbi Yitshak, just as this stag reveals himself and returns to cover, so the first Messiah (the beloved of Israel and/or of God), revealed himself to them (the people) and returned to being hidden from them. How long was he hidden from them? Rabbi Yehuda in the name of Rabbi said, `for 3 months,'[51] as it's written, 'they came upon Moses and Aaron" (Exodus 5:20; the rest of the verse says 'standing in their path'. 'Standing' is nitsavim, alluding to the tsvi -- stag -- in the Song of Songs verse, indicating the connection between Moses and the stag; a playful translating might read `they came upon Moses and Aaron, stagging in their path'). The foremen are

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[50] Pesikta de Rav Kahana 49, and see also Pesikta Rabbati 15:10 and Exodus Rabbah 5:20.

[51] Presumably this is the length of time Moses was in the wilderness of Midian before being called by God. Notes to Pesikta de Rav Kahana indicate that most texts says `three months,' but that in Exodus Rabbah it says `six months,' and that perhaps it should be changed to `six months.'

he first to see Moses and Aaron together on their eturn to Egypt, after having been called to free the eople; so Moses as a messianic figure was 'revealed' hen he killed the Egyptian and intervened in the fight etween the Israelites (Exodus 2:11-14), hidden when he scaped to Midian, and revealed again when the foremen et him. Since the foremen, too, demonstrated Moses' ind of bravery, they deserved to be the first to 'come pon' (vayifg'u) Moses and Aaron. The Biblical phrase vayifg'u et...' is an odd one; forms of paga are more sually seen with the preposition 'b', and the rabbis ick up on this oddity, connecting it to a very special coming upon.' Though it uses the preoposition 'b', acob's 'coming upon' (vayifga baMakom) in Genesis 28:10 ay be on their minds; the Makom he came upon was a lace and also (to the rabbis) the God he was to ecognize after his dream. So, too, the foremen came pon Moses and Aaron and, on the one hand, attacked them (yifg'u et Moshe...) and on the other, met their edeemer without their knowing it, just as Jacob said fter his dream, "Surely the Lord is present in this lace (makom), and I did not know it!" (Genesis 28:16).

C. Moses

The people's redeemer, Moses, was of course the advocate for the people being freed. But there were certain moments when, given the possibility of a a lesser degree of freedom or freedom for only some segment of the population, he offered strong resistance. One such moment occurs in Exodus 10 when, after experiencing some of the plagues, Pharaoh still refuses to let the people go, even for three days' time of worship. His courtiers try to get him to change his mind, saying, "'Let the men go to worship the Lord their God! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?' So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, 'Go, worship the Lord your God! Who are the ones to go?" (Exodus 10:7-8). Pharaoh is ready to take his courtiers' advice to offer Moses the possibility of the Israelite men going to worship God. But Moses is not satisfied with the implied offer and, in response to Pharaoh's question, says, "'We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and our daughters, our flocks and our herds....'"(Exodus 10:9), which Pharaoh rejects, and the negotiations move to the next stage.

Exodus Rabbah 13:5 imagines the conversation that took place between Pharaoh and Moses and Aaron after Moses' pronouncement that all the people were to go. Pharaoh said to them: It's the practice of young men and elders to sacrifice, but the children and the babies?! And anyone who says this thing is only thinking about escaping, [and is not interested in going to worship[52]] as you say, 'a distance of three days.' Therefore know that this thing that you're thinking, that it's in your power to escape, it will come back to haunt you, because you will not leave from here, as it is written, 'You menfolk go...' (Exodus 10:11). He said to him: If you say, 'It's not true that our thought is to escape,' then -- if so -- retract your words [and] 'you menfolk go,' because a baby is not a worshipper, so what do you want them for? Rather, 'since that is what you want (atem m'vakshim)'(Exodus 10:11), you are looking (atem m'vakshim) to make trouble, you desire escape, therefore I will not listen to you at all. Immediately he commanded and expelled them from there, as it's written, 'they were expelled from Pharaoh's presence' (Exodus 10:11).

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[52] See Exodus 5:3 and 8:23

Again we see the emphasis on the babies, the young children of the people. Here the rabbis present Pharaoh as wanting to prevent the children and babies from leaving, thus effectively cutting off the people's future. The irony is that Pharaoh is correct here; the people do want to escape, and God has suggested this 'three days in the wilderness' ploy to 'up the ante' in the negotiations. The people cannot be allowed to accept the offer, because it would provide some appeasement and they might not again feel their misery intensely enough to achieve the courage necessary to leave Egypt for good. If they had found Pharaoh the least bit lenient, or their experience in Egypt the least bit pleasant, they might have been tempted to stay. As Michael Walzer notes, "No old regime is merely oppressive; it is attractive, too, else the escape from it would be much easier than it is."[53] So Moses shrewdly gives Pharaoh a clue that the midrash indicates he read correctly: the inclusion of babies in the group of people who were to go and worship indicated that more was at stake.

The Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael[54] comments that

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[53] Walzer. Exodus and Revolution, p.33

[54] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha, 13

Moses is using the smart political strategy of honoring or paying his respects to the king, and suggests that when 'God spoke to Moses and Aaron and commanded them concerning Pharaoh,' that what God commanded them to do was to honor [Pharaoh's] sovereignty; Moses would then be in a long line of worthy figures who did just that, to great success. Rather than seeing Moses as a revolutionary strategist, the rabbis no doubt preferred a more conservative approach that acknowledged oppression but preserved their view that 'the law of the land is the law.'

It is perhaps no surprise that the rabbis did not choose to address the aspect of Moses' statement ('we will all go') that implies an inclusion of women in the 'all.' They were concerned with the future people of Israel, and so noted that Moses' 'all' included children. But it seems clear that when Moses rejected Pharaoh's offer to let the men go to worship, he was excluding women as well as children. Since what Moses was asking for, ostensibly, was permission to go and worship, something the rabbis didn't see women as obligated to do, they would not portray the scene in this manner. But, certainly it was God's intent to have all the people go free, and Moses spoke God's words.

D. Taking Egyptian Goods

The resisters we have spoken of thus far all acted on their own initiative, though Moses' words were never far from what God had instructed him. But there is one major act of resistance undertaken by the Israelite people that is commanded by God. In fact, it is so crucial to God's plans that the Divine commands appear not once, but three times in the story: twice as different versions of the same command and once to let us know the command has been fulfilled. This act is the taking of gold, silver and clothing from the Egyptians. To the rabbis, this act represents several possibilities: it provides the people the dignity of having clothing suitable for travel, as well as other possessions; it is the fulfillment of a previous promise; it is payment for the years of labor without pay; it provides the basis for the Golden Calf; or, alternately, it provides the materials for the Tabernacle.

In Exodus 3:22, as part of telling Moses how the people will be freed, God says, "Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and cothing, and you shall put these on

your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians. In 11:2, while preparing to bring the last plague on Pharaoh and thus to cause him to let the people go, God says to Moses, "Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold." And in 12:35, we learn as the people are leaving Egypt that "the Israelites had done Moses' bidding and borrowed from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, and clothing." In each case, we also learn that "God had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people," thus enabling the 'borrowing' to take place. In this case, when the people are commanded by God to participate in resistance, God also makes sure they know they will succeed. As it says in Exodus 12:36: "And the Lord had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus they stripped the Egyptians."

Two words are key in these passages, and both are ambiguous enough that they raise questions in the rabbis' minds. One is the word 'borrow,' in Hebrew shaalah or yish'alu, which can mean 'ask' or 'beg' or 'borrow.' The other is 'strip,' as in "thus they stripped the Egyptians." In Hebrew the word is nitsal-tem or y'natslu, in binyan Piel, meaning 'strip',

'ransack', 'empty'. In Niphal, the root means 'to be fit for throwing away, to be decayed.' And in Hiphil, it can mean to save or rescue.[55] All of these meanings are used or hinted at in midrashim on these passages.

One midrash that incorporates this kind of word play is found in Leviticus Rabbah. It compares God walking about the people's camp to a priest walking on the road. The priest meets a layman on the way, who says to him, "I'll walk with you on the road (baderekh)." He replies, "My son, I'm a priest, and I'm walking on the road. It's not my way to walk among the graves. If you walk with me, great; if not, done -- I'll leave you and go on my way." So, the midrash says, did Moses say to Israel that "the Lord your God moves about in your camp[56] to protect you (l'hatsilkha) [and to deliver your enemies to you]" (Deuteronomy 23:15). It asks, what does 'l'hatsilkha' mean? Two offered opinions: One said [it means] to defend/

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[55] Definitions from Marcus Jastrow, compiler. A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babi and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature. Printed in Israel. Preface dated May, 1903.

[56] The priest's avoidance of graves is parallel to God's need to avoid impurity in the camp; thus, the people are enjoined to keep the camp pure.

protect you, as it is said [about the gourd plant], "to provide shade (tseil) for his head." And one said, [it means] to empty/ransack all of the property of the nations of the world and give it to you, as you say "thus stripping (nitsaltem) the Egyptians"(Exodus 3:22).[57]

By having the Israelites borrow gold, silver and clothing, God protects them by giving them covering,[58] as was the case with Jonah and the gourd. But the gourd had a teaching role for Jonah; when it disappeared, he was reminded to have sympathy for the people of Nineveh. Are the Israelites, now newly garbed, to remember even so their sympathy for the Egyptians? Or are the Egyptians, by so easily giving of their possessions, demonstrating a kind of repentance, as did the people of Nineveh?

There is a kind of safety in having enough money and enough clothing. There may also be a kind of defiance in showing off your new ownership of what were

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[57] Leviticus Rabbah 24:8

[58] See Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha 13, on the clothing, which, because it was covering, was more important to the Israelites than the gold and silver. The notes to the same section in the 1865 Vienna edition add an additional play, noting that God protected the people by saving them (matsil) from the dumping ground (n'tsulah) that was Egypt.

until recently someone else's possessions. But joy in our possessions must always be tempered by sympathy for the Egyptians or the Ninevites among whom we live. Often they, too, may demonstrate their sympathy for us.

Sympathy between peoples -- the willingness to help and reward one another -- can be a kind of resistance: the refusal to let a tyrant 'divide and conquer.' This kind of mutual helpfulness is captured by a midrash in Genesis Rabbah about Abraham's servant and his encounter with Rebekhah's family. The midrash cites Genesis 24:53: "The servant brought out objects of silver (klei kesef) and gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekhah; and he gave presents to her brother and her mother." There's a brief discussion of what kind of vessels (klei kesef) these were, and the midrash responds, "this teaches you that if a person goes out on on a journey and has no provisions, he/she suffers. And this resembles the verse, "Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing..."(Exodus 3:22). [We might say] clothing was what they appreciated above the rest, but it actually teaches us that if a person goes out on the road and has no covering, he/she suffers. And this resembles the verse, "[So the chiefs of the

clans of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, all whose spirit had been roused by God, got ready to go up to build the House of the Lord that is in Jerusalem.] All their neighbors supported them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with livestock, and with precious objects..."(Ezra 1:[5-]6).[59]

The story from Genesis parallels that from Exodus: Abraham sending gifts by way of a servant to Rebekhah, thus convincing her to come and ultimately become the mother of Jacob/Israel (and of Esau) can be seen also as God providing gifts, by way of the servant Egypt, to the people Israel, now giving birth to a newly-freed nation (and to those who will build the calf). Without Abraham's servant and without the servant Egypt, the motivating gifts would not be given and the ultimate birth would not take place; the people would not have provisions for their journey. Similarly, the neighbors of the tribes provide gifts -- nearly the same kinds of gifts -- to help build the Temple in Jerusalem. Without their help, the people would not be 'giving birth' to a newly-organized nation, and would not find the 'cover' they need in the Temple, shelter for God and for the people, and the symbol of being settled in their land.

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[59] Genesis Rabbah 60:11

Throughout the midrash, there is a discussion about the relative importance of various ritual objects as seen in the mention of gold and silver vessels (maybe it's oil, maybe it's nuts and parched ears of corn) versus the importance of the principal of receiving gifts from one's friends and neighbors. That kind of cooperation, not the strictly ritual practices that mark Judaism as separate and cultic, is what will ultimately lead to survival and continuity.

On the other hand, there are those who see the taking of the gold, silver and clothing as literally 'stripping' the Egyptians, leaving them like a net without fish.[60] A related interpretation says these 'gifts' are really payment due for the time Israel spent as slaves in Egypt. Another midrash in Genesis Rabbah, for example, tells of a conversation between a certain G'vi'a ben Kosem and the Ishmaelites, Canaanites and Egyptians who had come to stir things up against Israel because of the birthright (in this case probably Isaac's birthright over any children of Abraham's concubines). Each group has a complaint to air against Israel, and each follows the others' lead. When the

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[60] See Yalkut Shimoni, 1:154 and Exodus Rabbah, 3:11.

Egyptian king speaks, he says, "600 thousand people left us, demanding silver and gold vessels, as it is written, 'they stripped the Egyptians.' Give us our gold and our silver." G'vi'a ben Kosem said to him, "My lord, the king, 600 thousand people spent 310 years [in slavery].[61] From them come silver and from them gold. Give us a dinar for each day." The philosphers sat and calculated, but didn't reach 100 years 'until it was found by calculation that the entire land of Egypt would be forfeited to the treasury (for its indebtedness to the Jews),'[62]and shame-faced, they were dismissed.[63]

Another group of midrashim see the phrase 'they stripped the Egyptians' as reading something like, 'they stripped the Egyptian away from themselves.' In the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael,[64]for example, it's said that the phrase 'they stripped the Egyptians' teaches that the Israelites' foreign worship -- avodah zarah -- disappeared and returned to whence it came; in essence,

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[61] The amount of time the Israelites spent in Egypt varies greatly depending on interpretation and varied calculation. The Biblical text says it was 430 years (Exodus 12:40)

[62] Translation in single quotes from Jastrow, A Dictionary ...page 539.

[63] Genesis Rabbah 61:7

[64] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha, 13-14

it was stripped away. Similarly, the people's knowledge of God's command to take the gold, silver and clothing (from Exodus 3:22, when they are first instructed so, to 12:35, when we learn that they have done so - a period calculated to be a year of 12 months) indicates a solidarity that defies any attempt to divide the people. For instance, Tanhuma haNidpas notes that one reason for Israel's redemption was that the Israelites didn't tell their secrets...The taking of the gold, etc., was known among them for 12 months, and not one of them told the Egyptians.[65]

Similarly, the fact that the Israelites requested the gold, silver and clothing indicated to some that Israel was blameless as far as theft was concerned. Since there was a period of three days when Egyptians dwelled in darkness, but the Israelites had light in their homes (Exodus 10:22-23), they could easily have snuck into the Egyptian homes and taken what they wanted. Tanhuma-Buber does present a scene in which the Israelites went to the Egyptian houses during those

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[65] Tanhuma haNidpas, Balak 16. Pesikta de Rav Kahana 83, tells a similar story, but gives this as an example of the fact that the Israelites did not engage in slander, since they didn't tell the Egyptians. While keeping secrets indicates solidarity, refraining from slander is more indicative of maintaining respect for one another, even in the face of oppression.

three days to look around and see what they had, so that when God instructed them to borrow the Egyptian possessions, they knew just what they wanted and could ask for specific possessions.[66] Midrash haGadol, on the other hand, tells us that during those three days, when the Israelites were revelling in the light in their homes, not one of them was suspected of [taking] even a pin/hook. This was true even though the Egyptians thought they would take their possessions at any time, darkness or light, since they were going to leave and not return.[67] The fact that they asked, therefore, baffled the Egyptians' expectations; it showed a kind of dignity that was its own defiance: If you expect us to be thieves, we won't be.

E. Summary

It is clear from the midrashim presented in this chapter that resistance takes many forms. While the Israelites gave us examples of straightforward resistance, such as the foremen's complaints, they also

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[66] Tanhuma Buber Bo 20

[67] Midrash haGadol to Exodus 12:36

bequeathed to us the example of the midwives, with their sly use of the truth to obstruct evil decrees; Moses' steadfast refusal to let the people be divided, echoed in the people's refusal to tell their secrets or slander one another; and the people's refusal in general to behave like sneaks or thieves or other 'low life,'and their determination to maintain their dignity. All are worthy models, depending on time and circumstance.

What is important to the rabbis is that the people survive, continue and maintain their distinctiveness, while at times cooperating with other peoples who can offer aid and sustenance. Reputation is important, but inherent dignity more so. Triumph and revenge have their place, but true strength and steadfastness are preeminent.

CHAPTER III:

Leadership and the People's Response

We saw in Chapter II how the resistance offered by the people helped to further their existence and maintain their dignity. What it did not do was gain them their freedom. For that, God had to step in. One of the most important aspects of Divine intervention was God's appointing of leaders who would be messengers to both Pharaoh and the Israelites, and who would in time, serve as the people's political leaders. The leader, of course, is Moses, the quintessential outsider/insider, chosen for his instantaneous reaction to oppression and suffering, and dragged unwillingly into his position. Our interest here is in Moses' assumption of leadership: how did the people react to him? He fears that neither they nor Pharaoh will listen to him, since he is not an effective speaker; is he correct? Others had taken on leadership roles; how do they respond to Moses' arrival on the scene? The rabbis offer us some answers, recognizing Moses' unparalleled contribution to our people, but acknowledging his human failings as well.

They also examine the role the elders play in the Israelite community and in the Exodus specifically. God commands their involvement -- why? How do the rest of the people respond to them? Again the rabbis

give some answers, in the process describing the role elders can play in a community.

A. Moses

The story of Moses' infancy is well known: how his mother hid him for 3 months, then sent him down the river in a basket; how Pharaoh's daughter rescued him, watched and assisted by Miriam; how his mother was retained as a 'nurse.' His very survival defies Pharaoh's decrees: though a male Israelite newborn, he is not killed. Far from being thrown into the Nile, he is instead sent down the Nile and thus rescued. Pharaoh's own daughter rescues him, so he grows up under Pharaoh's nose, as it were. But he is physically raised by his own mother, thus maintaining his connection to the Israelite people.

Moses Kills the Egyptian

After the early part of Moses' life story, we see him again as a young man: "When Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen.

He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, `Why do you strike your fellow?' He retorted, `Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh." (Exodus 2:11-15).

Exodus Rabbah presents a series of opinions on the Hebrew's retort, `Who made you chief and ruler over us?' "Rabbi Yehuda said: Moses was 20 years old at this time, and they said to him: You are not yet worthy to be a chief and ruler over us, because one must be 40 years old to have understanding. Rabbi Nehemiah said: He was 40, and they said to him: You are definitely a man, but you are not worthy to be chief and ruler over us. The sages (rabanan) said: They said to him: Aren't you Yokheved's son? So why do they call you Bitya's [Pharaoh's daughter] son? And you want to be chief and ruler over us?! We're going to let people know about what you did to the Egyptian.

The midrash continues, examining the Hebrew's next statement: 'Do you mean to kill me...' The Hebrew for 'do you mean' is atah omer -- 'you say.' The midrash questions this: 'You want' is not said here, rather [it is] 'you say.' From this you learn that he [Moses] mentioned 'the special Name' and [thus] killed the Egyptian.[68] When He heard this, He was afraid of slander - 'He said, Then the matter is known!'; Rabbi Yehuda bar Rabbi Shalom in the name of Rabbi Hanina the Elder and our rabbis in the name of Rabbi Alexandri said: Moses was thinking to himself and he said: How did Israel sin that they, of all the nations, were enslaved? When He heard his words He said: There's slander among them; how will they be worthy of redemption? Therefore he [Moses] said, 'Then the matter is known' (akhen noda hadavar) - Now I know (yadati) by which word (davar) they were enslaved."[69]

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[68] Urbach, The Sages, pp. 124-124, explains that "the Name...reflects the presence of the Deity and expresses His power and might; and it may be assumed that in the popular consciousness this distinction was not strictly maintained...On behalf of the Tanna R. Nehemiah it is reported that Moses pronounced the Name against the Egyptian and slew him. The same thought is expressed by R. Levi in other words: 'He slew him with Israel's mysteries.'"

[69] Exodus Rabbah 1:30

So what does all this tell us about leadership and community? That to be a leader one needs a combination of experience, worthiness, and clear identification with the group one is to lead. To the rabbis, a person of uncertain parentage -- especially one who may have had a non-Jewish mother -- was questionable in terms of leadership potential. Would he identify with the Israelites or the Egyptians, having in a sense a mother from each? And, having been raised as a prince in the palace, how could he turn against Pharaoh to lead this rebellion?

In addition, we learn again a lesson we have seen before: that slander (lashon hara) is a sin of a severity that will prevent redemption. It divides people, destroying a solid group; it diverts blame from the true oppressor to the victim; and, ultimately, it is a kind of enslaver from which people must be freed.

The rabbis also want to preserve Moses' reputation, particularly as an observer of the commandments: No great leader should disregard the commandment 'You shall not murder.' So rather than portraying Moses as having murdered the Egyptian with his own hands, they tell us that Moses killed by using the special Name of God.

Avot de Rabbi Natan 20:1 presents a similar idea: It notes that before Moses killed the Egyptian, he turned this way and that and saw no one about (ki ain ish). Why does the text say 'ki ain ish'? It teaches that Moses gathered a council of ministering angels [who are 'ain ish' - not human] and said to them: Shall I kill this one? They said to him: Kill! And did he kill him with a sword or wasn't it with a word? As it is said, "Do you mean to (atah omer) kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" [as if saying, 'Will you kill me as you speak as you killed the Egyptian?']. This teaches that he killed him with the Name.

This midrash also picks up on Moses' mixed parentage. It cites Song of Songs 1:6, "My mother's sons quarreled with me,/They made me guard the vineyards; My own vineyard I did not guard," and says "This ['my mother's sons quarreled with me'] is Moses who killed the Egyptian, as it is said (Exodus 2:11), 'Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors.'" Are his kinsfolk the ones referred to in 'my mother's sons quarreled with me,' as they will do after he kills the Egyptian and, in a larger sense, throughout the time of his leadership? Or is the Egyptian his 'mother's son,'

who quarrels? Clearly, since Moses has two 'mothers,' his mother's sons can be both Israelite and Egyptian. And are the vineyards he guarded meant to represent Egypt, while his 'own vineyard' represents Israel? Or is it simpler: is he guarding the vineyard of the Hebrews while his own reputation is unwatched and harmed?

Tanhuma haNidpas discusses the three things into which Moses poured his soul and which therefore are called by his name: Torah, Israel, and pursuit of justice. Tanhuma tells us that his killing of the Egyptian falls into the category of pursuing justice: he poured his soul into it, by killing the Egyptian even though he would be reviled by his people ('Who made you chieftain and ruler over us); these people are called by his name, as it is said, "He chose for himself the best,/For there is the portion of the revered chieftain,/ Where the heads of the people come./He executed the. Lord's judgments/And His decisions for Israel." (Deuteronomy 33:21).[70] A leader acts on principle, not popularity; on God's laws, not those of human beings; and in some cases, on universal standards, not those of one people only. If we think of the three-fold descrip-

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[70] Tanhuma haNidpas, Shoftim 5

tion of Jewish history -- God, Torah and Israel -- then this midrash is telling us that God's provenance is the pursuit of justice, and that even killing in its pursuit is to do the will of God.

Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer focuses on Moses' encounter with the two Hebrews he finds fighting. It adds a note of prophecy by equating them with Datan and Abiram, two of those who later joined with Korah to rebel against Moses (Numbers 16:1, 12-14). Just as here, one of the men asks Moses 'Who made you chief and ruler over us?', so in the Numbers passage Datan and Abiram challenge Moses, asking, 'Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us?' The midrash, seeing one of the Hebrews as Datan, has him asking, 'Are you going to kill me with the sword of your tongue (mouth) as you killed the Egyptian?', again emphasizing the word or Name that killed the Egyptian. In light of the Numbers passage, this question is all the more ironic. There, Moses tells Datan and Abiram and the community that they may well die for their rebelliousness, and the text continues, "Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder, and the earth

opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households.."(Numbers 16:31-32).[71] To the midrash, Moses' killing of the Egyptian, while somewhat problematic, is far less serious than the challenge of the authority of the man they dubbed "rabbeinu - our teacher". Seeing themselves in Moses, they want to ensure that anyone who questions his authority is to be swallowed up and sent to Sheol.

Moses as an Authority Figure

Though the rabbis endow him with enormous authority, Moses himself questions his own worthiness as an authority figure, saying several times that God should send someone else to free the people. God overcomes his initial reluctance, and gives Moses a message to deliver to the people: "I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage....."(Exodus 6:6+). However, "when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage"(Exodus 6:9) We have already noted the inter-

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[71] Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer 48

pretations of the people's 'crushed spirits' in the context of slavery.[72] But their response also crushes Moses' spirit. When God tells him to go to Pharaoh and tell him "to let the Israelites depart from his land" (-Exodus 6:11), Moses "appealed to the Lord, saying, 'The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!'"(Exodus 6:12). We, the readers, know that the people cannot listen due to their 'crushed spirits,' but Moses sees their inability as his own, seeing the mute leading the deaf, as it were. It's a touching moment of leadership misled; the outsider not understanding the heart of the people he is to lead, but blaming himself for their failure. The gap between them is fodder for the rabbis, who also see the tension inherent between Moses' self-description and his obvious success as a leader. It is a tension that continues throughout the rest of Moses' life; he is challenged, enraged, overly-proud, but also humble, incisive, charismatic. The tension begins here, with his beginning as a leader.

Much of Moses' reluctance has to do with his alck of speaking ability. But Tanhuma-Buber notes that Moses, who says he is a man of impeded speech, is also

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[72] See Chapter I, page 52

the man who spoke (diber) all the words (d'varim) of Deuteronomy. It thus compares him to those people whose disabilities will change in the end of days, when "the ransomed of the Lord shall return,/And come with shouting to Zion" (Isaiah 35:10). At that time -- as Moses' 'affliction' changed to eloquence -- "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, /And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped./Then the lame shall leap like a deer,/And the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud..." (Isaiah 35:5-6). Says the midrash, "Come and see what the Holy One said to Moses, 'Come...I will send you to Pharaoh' (Exodus 3:10). Moses said to 'Him,' 'You're doing me a great wrong. I have never been a man of words.'(Exodus 4:10). He continued, 'There are 70 languages spoken in the palace of Pharaoh, so that if an ambassador comes from a different place (makom aher) they can speak to him in his language. Now I'm going to go on your mission, and they will examine me, saying that I am a messenger of God (Makom). And when it is clear to them that I don't know how to speak with them, won't they tease me, saying 'Look at the messenger of the One who created the world: of all the languages, he can't hear or respond to any of them.' Woe is me, "I have never been a man of words."

"I am a man of impeded speech." (Exodus 6:12). The Holy One said to him, 'Look at the first man (adam harishon) who never knew [any other] creature. So where did he learn 70 languages, as it's said "And the man gave [them] names..."(Genesis 2:20). 'A name for each animal' is not written here, rather 'names.'[Who placed a speech in Adam that he was able to give names there to each, from the 70 languages?] The mouth that said, "I have never been a man of words (d'varim), [also] said, "These are the words" (Deuteronomy 1:1). And the prophet cried out and said, "Then the lame shall leap like a deer,/And the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud." Why? "For waters shall burst forth in the desert,/Streams in the wilderness." (Isaiah 35:6). That's why it is said, "These are the words."[73]

Moses is transformed by God's instruction, just as Adam was, and by God's redemption, in which waters splitting for Israel and covering the Egyptians lead to outbursts of joy like waters bursting forth in the desert. Serving as God's spokesman, this man who could never speak is able to speak volumes; he who had a 'tongue of the dumb' is able to 'shout aloud,' for this redemption is the first step on the journey that will

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[73] Tanhuma Buber, D'varim 2:1

see 'the ransomed of the Lord' return, 'and come with shouting to Zion.' It is so for the first descendants of those who left Egypt and, in a more far-reaching way, for all the rest of us who still see our return possible in the miracle of the redemption from Egypt. If Moses' tongue can turn to shouting, all our afflictions can disappear.

But we must always remember that Moses is merely God's 'ambassador,' sent from the Place (haMakom), rather than from 'a different place.' It is his relationship with God that gives him his power. We must not be tempted to see god-like power in him. Sifrei BaMidbar on Pinhas emphasizes this lesson, telling us of several places where the term 'laymor' is used to describe Moses' addressing God. This is usually a term used to describe God's speech, so the midrash lets us know that when the text uses it to refer to God, it means to say that Moses is asking God for an answer to a question.. So, for example, when the text says, "...Moses appealed to the Lord, saying (laymor), 'The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!'"(Exodus 6:12), the midrash understands him to be speaking before God: 'Let me know, please, if you will redeem them or not,' while

God is answering his question, as it is said, "...the Lord said to Moses, 'You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land."(Exodus 6:1)[74]

The term '<u>laymor</u>' indicates to the reader that God is still speaking, even though Moses is also asking his question by way of his own reluctance to serve. It is an eloquent reminder of how our personal concerns can sometimes block out God's voice. While God speaks, our minds are elsewhere, and we later ask a question that God has already answered, if only we had been listening. It's a mirror image of the problem Moses had understanding the people, who in turn could not heed him due to <u>their</u> personal concerns. 'Crushed spirits' of many kinds prevent us from hearing what another/the Other is saying to us. Moses earns his authority, then, by being able to go beyond his personal worries to serve as an eloquent advocate for his people. In fact, he comes to hear both God and the people so well that he is able to mediate between them. Ambassador, messenger, advocate, pursuer of justice, mediator, servant of God: Moses was

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[74] Sifrei BaMidbar 138. This same midrash, with a slightly different order of examples, can also be found in Sifrei BaMidbar 105-106.

all these things, and more, yet always remained a recognizable human being, worried about his abilities, not always listening, asking questions that have already been answered. This Moses we can recognize in the mirror and, seeing our face in his, learn from him to move beyond our personal concerns to a plae where we can hear, and thus be heard.

It is this Moses who needs to gain the wisdom of age and experience. Not yet having acquired it himself, he must work with the elders to ensure that wisdom is at hand in his dealings with Pharaoh and with the people.

B. The Elders

God says to Moses at the burning bush, "Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, `I have taken note of you and what is being done to you in Egypt...'...They will listen to you; then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt..." (Exodus 3:16,18). The elders are the first of the Israelites that Moses must convince; they represent

the people, and will no doubt help to convince them. When Moses asks, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?"(Exodus 4:1), he is asking about the elders, but the question also refers to the people as a whole. Once again, of course, he has not been listening, for God had just said, "They will listen to you..." (Exodus 3:18). Worse than that, he has tried to sully the Israelites' reputation; God responds, They believe..., as it is said, "...the people believed."(Exodus 4:31). Moses is punished for his slander by having his rod turn into a snake, since it was the snake that first slandered its Creator (Genesis 3:5); as Moses appropriated the snake's action, so God showed him the snake formed from his rod.[75] The irony is that both are right: God is right that the people will eventually believe, but Moses is right that they won't believe right away and will need signs to convince them. In fact, the Jewish Publication Society translation of Exodus 4:31 is "...the people were convinced."

The elders need no convincing; they are the people who 'will listen' to Moses immediately and aid him in the leadership of the people, from conveying

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[75] Exodus Rabbah 3:12

God's messages to Pharaoh to making judgements for the community. They become indispensable: Elders always and forever preserve Israel, says a midrash in Exodus Rabbah, as the text says, "All Israel...with their elders, officials and magistrates, stood on either side of the Ark..."(Joshua 8:33, when Joshua built an altar to God and inscribed on stone "a copy of the Teaching that Moses had written for the Israelites.")[76] When will Israel stand? When they have elders. Why, when the sanctuary was established, were they to ask the elders, as it is said, [Remember the days of old,/ Consider the years of ages past;] "Ask your father, he will inform you,/Your elders, they will tell you"(Deuteronomy 32:7)? Because anyone who takes advice from the elders will not fail. In fact, the Israelites were redeemed only on the merit of the elders, since the people themselves had no deeds worthy of redemption.[77]

The elders, then, are those who remember the past and can learn from it and teach its lessons. They ensure continuity and cohesion; they would know, for instance, if what Joshua inscribed was in fact Moses' Teaching. Without them, there is no history, no memory

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[76] Ibid., 3:8

[77] Exodus Rabbah 15:4

of experience; how, then, can life go on? As Rabbi Akiva said, noting the elders' presence at important sacrifices (Leviticus 9:1), 'Israel can be likened to a bird. Just as a bird cannot fly without wings, so Israel cannot do a thing without their elders.' But must 'elders' be old? Or can anyone who has acquired wisdom be considered an elder? Said Rabbi Yossi bar Halafta, Old age is better. If they are old, they are happy. But if they are youths, childhood [still] clings to them.[78] With old age preferred, but either way, elders deserve respect, and get it even from God. Leviticus Rabbah continues: Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai taught, 'Not in [only] one place nor [only] in two places do we find that God pays honor to the elders. At the bush, it's written "Go and assemble the elders of Israel."(Exodus 3:16) In Egypt, "...you shall go with the elders of Israel..."(Exodus 3:18) At Sinai, "Come up to the Lord...and seventy elders of Israel..."'(Exodus 24:1).

The list continues, even indicating the honor God will give to the elders in the days to come: "...the Lord of Hosts will reign/On Mount Zion and in Jeru-

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[78] Leviticus Rabbah 11:8, and see also Tanhuma haNidpas Shemini 11. Tanhuma's version says if the 'elders' are youths, God springs old age on them.

salem,/And the Presence will be revealed to His elders." (Isaiah 24:23) To the rabbis, this meant that God would appoint an academy of his elders, the highest of honors in their eyes. Sifrei BaMidbar notes that any place where you find mention of the elders, God gives them honor. And if The One-Who-Spoke-and-the-World-Came-to-Be will give such honor to the elders in the future, then how much the more so should human beings give them honor in the future. In fact, you find that God grieves over one elder as much as over the whole people Israel, as it's said [regarding exile in Babylonia]: "I was angry at My people,/I defiled My heritage;/I put them into your hands,/But you showed them no mercy./Even upon the aged you made/Your yoke exceedingly heavy..."(Isaiah 47:11).[79]

We can act like God, or we can act like the Babylonians - the choice is clearly ours. God's yoke on the elders is one of honor, carried proudly but without difficulty. On the other hand, human beings -- not only Babylonians, but Jews -- impose heavy burdens on our elders without giving them the honor due them. It may be that we care little about preserving our history, or about attending to our affairs equipped with the wisdom

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[79] Sifrei BaMidbar 92

elders can offer. But we must remember Akiva's analogy, or we will be as a bird without wings, limited, prey to every predator, never soaring free. Taking the advice of elders, we cannot fail; without it, the consequences may be dire. Even Moses required their wisdom, their perspective, and their skill; with them at his side, he was better able to meet his people, and better able to challenge his enemy.

C. Summary

Leadership, then, is not one-dimensional. There is only one Moses, but Moses is human, growing and changing and developing into the archetypal leader he will become. He is never perfect: he isn't much of a speaker -- until he has a message of crucial importance; he doesn't listen well -- until he becomes a messenger who must listen closely to all parties concerned; he doesn't believe in the people he is to lead -- until God assures him of their faithfulness (and God's message convinces them that they are to be redeemed). And Moses rarely acts alone: Aaron is his mouthpiece, and the elders offer wisdom and experience that he lacks. They

can remind him of the people's history and of their current concerns, particularly since he is the quintessential outsider who has never been enslaved. The elders have borne the yoke of slavery, yet are ready to accept God's yoke of responsibility. They carry the heritage of history, linking the current generation to those of the past, and reminding them of history's lessons. Moses, unsure on many counts, needs their assistance. For their willingness and participation in all the significant events in the life of the Israelite people, they will be richly rewarded in the world to come. This is true, in part, because the elders always recognize that God is the ultimate Leader, calling on those who are trustworthy and effective to share in the Divine task of leading a skeptical, shrewd, proud and dignified people from slavery to redemption.

CHAPTER IV:

God and God's People

The book of Genesis is the story of God's relationship(s) with the ancestors of the people Israel. From Adam to Joseph, our ancestors talked with God, walked with God, dreamed of God and, beginning with Abraham, dedicated their lives to this primary relationship. Theirs was a journey that began when Abraham left home, guided only by faith, and ended when Joseph died in Egypt. Our ancestors sought God out, confronted God's wrath, recognized God's presence, made vows to God, and entered into covenants with God. But when Joseph died, the relationship seemed to die. Joseph's brothers (and sister?) and their families -- literally the children of Israel -- came under the tyranny of the new king "who did not know Joseph"(Exodus 1:8) and who, fearing the people's strength, enslaved and oppressed them. And God was nowhere to be seen. The midwives are the first people mentioned in the book of Exodus who have some kind of connection with God: the midwives defy Pharaoh, the text says, because they fear God (Exodus 1:17,21). And because they fear God, God rewards them.

But God's relationship with the people as a whole is not established until the people, "groaning under the bondage...cried out; and their cry for help from the

bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them"(Exodus 2:23-25).

At this moment God's relationship with the people Israel is reestablished, not to be severed again during any part of the long journey that comprises the Torah. Sometimes arousing God's great wrath, sometimes needing the intervention of Moses, the people remains connected to its God. Though at the end of their Torah journey Moses can speak of the possibility that the people, forsaking God, would be spurned in return, he stil begins his famous poem by saying, "Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;...For the name of the Lord I proclaim; Give glory to our God!" The poem ends with the glory of the people: "O nations, acclaim His people!" (Deuteronomy 32:15,19-20,1,3,43). The journey is that of the people and their God, of God and God's people, a journey both frought with danger for their relationship and full of the joy of its loving connection.

The symbol of the relationship is covenant, here meaning the broad understanding that each partner in a relationship must agree to take responsibility for the other: God, remembering the historic relationship with

this 'family,' decides to bring them out of Egypt; the people, seeing God's might displayed in that rescue, decide to leave with God, just as Abraham had done so many years before. Egypt was, after all, the people's birthplace, which they left to go to 'a land that God would show them.' The parallels with Abraham's story abound, and Abraham is ever-present in the rabbis' reading of the Exodus. For it was the merit of Abraham that convinced God to save the sometimes unworthy people, and the promise God made to Abraham that helps to ensure the people's future: "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, 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 shall go free with great wealth...And they shall return here in the fourth generation..."(Genesis 15:13-16). The past, represented by Abraham, and the future, represented by the promise of the land, converge in the Exodus: God remembers the covenant and acts on it.

'Remember' is never just an intellectual verb; rather, it combines thought and action: Genesis Rabbah reminds us that "God remembered Noah" (Genesis 8:1) after 150 days of the flood, and caused the waters to subside.

"God remembered Rachel"(Genesis 30:25), and caused her to bear a son, Joseph.[80] It was via Joseph, of course, that the people came to Egypt in the first place, and they will leave carrying his bones. And just as Noah survived the flood for his relative righteousness, while the other inhabitants of the earth are drowned for their wickedness, so the Israelites -- though not always entirely worthy -- will survive the crossing of the Red Sea, while the Egyptians will drown for their wickedness.

For the wicked, continues the midrash in Genesis Rabbah,[81] God can turn from merciful to judging, while for the righteous, the reverse is true. God's mercy is demonstrated by the Divine act of remembrance, and by different uses of the divine names Elohim and 'Adonai.' In Exodus 2:23-24, the name Elohim, though usually associated with the divine aspect of judgment, is said twice and thus presents a special case.[82] This doubling embodies the people's call, reminiscent as it is of God's own doubled calls to our ancestors: "Abraham, Abraham" (Genesis 22:11), "Jacob, Jacob" (Genesis 46:2),

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[80] Genesis Rabbah 33:3

[81] Ibid.

[82] See also Genesis Rabbah 73:4

etc. Here Elohim is the God of mercy, the One who, in effect, is answering "Here I am" to the people of Israel as Abraham, Jacob and others had so responded to God.

COMMUNICATION WITH GOD

A. Prayer of the People

God does not take note of the people until they first approach God. Their approach is their cry: "...they cried out...and their cry for help rose up to God"(Exodus 2:23). Says the Sifrei, "There are ten terms by which prayer is known....[one is] za'akah in Egypt, as it is said, "...The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out (vayiz'aku)..."(Exodus 2:23). [One is] na'akah. From where [do we get this]? "God heard their moaning (na'akatam)..."(Exodus 2:24).[83] As covenant is the sign of the relationship between God and the people, so prayer is the outward expression of that relationship. Prayer is the people's cry which God can hear.

This theme arises again as the people are leaving Egypt. Pharaoh has a change of heart, and chases after them. "As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught

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[83] Sifrei Devarim, Piska 26

sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out (vayits'aku) to the Lord" (Exodus 14:10). Says a midrash in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, [this cry indicates that]

> immediately the faith of their ancestors took hold of them, the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. About Abraham [the text] says, "(The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'I will assign this land to your offspring.' And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country, east of Bethel and pitched his tent,)with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name."(Genesis 12:7-8), [and at the well, after Abraham and Abimelech make their pact, and just before God requests the sacrifice of Isaac] "[Abraham] planted a tamarisk at Beer-Sheba [and invoked there the name of the Lord...]"(Genesis 21:33). About Isaac it says, [just before he meets Rebekhah] "Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi," (Genesis 24:62), and it's written, "And Isaac went out walking (lasuah) in the field..."(Genesis 24:63). There is no `siha' which doesn't mean `prayer,' as it is said, "Evening, morning, and noon,/I complain (asiha) and moan,/and He hears my voice" (Psalms 55:18)[84]. And it's written, "I pour out my complaint (sihi) before Him;/ I lay my trouble before Him..."(Psalms 142:3), and it's written, "A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours forth his plea (siho) before the Lord. About Jacob what does it say? [After Jacob leaves Beer-sheba and just before his dream] "He came upon a certain place (vayifga b'makom)and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set."

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[84] The phrase "evening, morning, and noon" in the Psalm evokes the rabbinic explanation that Abraham created morning prayer, Isaac afternoon prayer, and Jacob evening prayer, which served to infuse fixed prayers with a Biblical base and with an element of spontaneity. See Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 26b.

> Genesis 28:11). There is no 'pgi'ah' that doesn't mean prayer, as it is said, "As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry of prayer on their behalf, do not plead with Me (tifqa Bi); for I will not listen to you." (Jeremiah 7:16), and it is written, [regarding false prophets] "If they are really prophets...let them intercede with (yifg'u b') the Lord of Hosts not to let the vessels remaining in the House of the Lord...go to Babylon!"(Jeremiah 27:18).[85]

So the people of Israel, facing the sea on the one hand and the Egyptians on the other, looked for help in the only direction they could - up to God: "the Israelites lifted up their eyes.." (Exodus 14:10, translation mine). They prayed to God as their ancestors had, in expectation that God would hear their prayers. They prayed at this stage of their journey, as Abraham had done at almost every stage of his journey; and they prayed beside the water, symbol of redemption, as Abraham did by the well at Beer Sheva. Isaac, too, visited the 'Well of the living One who sees me' just before he entered into the marriage that would produce Jacob/Israel.[86] And he went out to the field to walk

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[85] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet de Vayehi 2

[86] The well was named by Hagar, the Egyptian stranger who dwelled with Isaac's family, and who would later find an Egyptian wife for her son. Thus, ironically, the midrash's inclusion of it here presages the people's both happy and painful connections to Egypt.

and reflect, and perhaps to complain to God, as the people of Israel would do on their difficult journey; yet even complaining to God is prayer, say the rabbis, because it indicates a faith that God is there to hear and respond, even to the lowliest among us. Lowly places, too, can surprise with their possibilities for prayer: Jacob literally 'hit' on a place (Place/Makom) to sleep on his journey. Such a form of prayer can be positive or negative: God may say, as to Jeremiah, "...do not plead with Me..."(Jeremiah 7:16) or, more literally, 'do not bump up against Me.' It is clear that only those who already have faith in God can plead with God in this special manner; false prophets are characterized, in part, by their inability to intervene effectively with God.

Thus, the rabbis find a world of prayer in the cry of the people of Israel. Their cry connects them to their ancestors who established the relationship with God that they are reestablishing. It connects them with the future of that relationship, seen in the references to the prophets and the Temple, and in the use of Psalms, presumed to have begun as sung prayers in the Temple, or perhaps earlier. And, most important, their cry gets them moving. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all prayed when

engaged in moving: Abraham at stages on his journey into the land of Canaan and back to it from Egypt, the journey the Israelites are repeating; Isaac walking out in the field and back from the well to begin his personal and communal life's journey; and Jacob on his journey toward independent life and new identity. Prayer requires movement, figurative or literal; prayer indicates movement. The people are stopped -- perhaps a better word is stuck -- in Egypt; with their cry, they begin to move again, and their movement enables their communication with God. Now they can resume the journey that Abraham began, and begin the journey toward redemption in which Jews forever after will be engaged.

B. God's Response

But there is another side to their renewed communication with God. The frequent and direct conversations that our ancestors had with God are no longer. By having stopped speaking with the people for the unnamed period of time until they cry out for help, God has shown that distance and unresponsiveness are possibilities. The people are more likely than were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to doubt God's presence or to turn away

from God in their impatience for a quick response.[87] On the other hand, God does not always provide for the people as quick a response as for our ancestors, and may even deliberately hide from the people as a kind of punishment for their rejection.[88] Therefore, counsels Pesikta de Rav Kahana, we must continue to seek God, knowing that God may not always be found. Our actions, including our praise of God, will demonstrate our seeking; our memory of the wonders God has performed for us will enable us to continue seeking:

> "Seek (dirshu)the Lord while He can be found,/[Call to Him while He is near./Let the wicked give up his ways,/The sinful man his plans; /Let him turn back to the Lord,/And He will pardon him...]"(Isaiah 55:6-7), and David said, "Exult in His holy name;/ let all who seek the Lord rejoice./Turn (dirshu)to the Lord, to His might;/seek His presence constantly."(I Chronicles 16:10-11). Why does it say "seek His presence constantly"? To teach you that the Holy One is sometimes seen and sometimes is not seen, sometimes hears and sometimes does not hear, sometimes is sought and sometimes is not/cannot be sought, sometimes is found and sometimes is not found, sometimes is near and sometimes is not near.

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[87] The building of the Golden Calf was the people's clearest expression of impatience: substituting Aaron for Moses and the calf for God, they participate in this event of rejection of God that will be known in rabbinic literature as "that deed," with no other explanation necessary. It is only Moses' intervention that keeps God from destroying them, and Moses bases his arguments on God's own reputation and the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. See Exodus 32:1-6, 9-14.

[88] See, in this regard, Moses' description of God in Deuteronomy 32:19-21.

> How so? ....[with regard to God sometimes hearing and sometimes not] When Israel was in Egypt, it's written, "And God heard their moaning..."(Exodus 2:24), but when they sinned [by disbelief in God's power, about which Moses says, "I spoke to you, but you would not listen; you flouted the Lord's command....Again you wept before the Lord"(Deuteronomy 1:43,45)] "...but the Lord would not heed your cry or give ear to you"(Deuteronomy 1:45).[89]

God's presence or absence, then, is not whimsical. If the people is sinned against, God hears their cry; if they are the sinners, they can cry out for God, but God deliberately will not hear then. Sin is defined here as turning away from God, 'flouting God's commands,' and giving up faith in God. Repentance is always possible; it is the intentional return to God, seen in renewed 'seeking' of God.[90] Seeking could be demonstrated by following God's commands, or by interpreting them.

For the rabbis, 'dirshu' - seek - could also be translated 'interpret' or 'expound,' thus allowing them the possibility of connection with God via their interpretations of God's laws. They might read Isaiah 55:6 in a new light: 'Interpret God and He will be

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[89] Pesikta de Rav Kahana 24, and see also Tanhuma Defus Haazinu 4

[90] Though Exodus Rabbah 1:34 tells us that 'even if the people repented/returned, they were liberated from Egypt only on the merit of the ancestors, because judgment was pronounced on them for the calf they would make in the future.'

found, Read Him (kra'uhu) and He will be near.' For them, crying out as a form of prayer was replaced by study of text -- reading and interpreting -- as a form of prayer. It is significant that both were group forms: the people as a whole crying out to God, the rabbis in groups reading and interpreting texts. Structured prayer, developed by the rabbis, also required a group: Ten people at the least comprised a group that was large enough to praise God and exalt God's name. To recite certain words that are particularly holy (devarim shebikdusha), the minyan of ten was necessary. And just as the rabbis defined prayer, as was stated above (p. 115), as a call or cry to God and God's response, so these holiest of words are recited in formulas consisting of a call and a response. Sifrei Devarim tells us that the model for these formulae can be found in Moses' words to the people of Israel soon before they are to enter the land of Israel: "For the name of the Lord I proclaim;/Give glory to our God."(Deuteronomy 32:3). The midrash sees Moses' first-person singular statement as the call(I proclaim), followed by the first-person plural response by the people (our God). It also emphasizes the proclaiming of God's name as a necessary component of the communication

between God and the people, saying that God performed miracles and heroic acts, and punished Pharaoh with the plagues, in order to sanctify His name. Our ancestors went down to Egypt in order to help God to sanctify His name via miracles and mighty acts, as it is said, "A long time after that...God listened (vayishma) to the people's moaning [and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob]" (Exodus 2:23-24). Because Pharaoh did not honor God's great name in the world, but asked, "Who is the Lord that I should heed (eshma') Him?" (Exodus 5:2), God sent the plagues; toward the end of the plagues, Pharaoh came to honor God's name, saying "The Lord is in the right (hitsdik or hatsadik)and I and my people are in the wrong" (Exodus 9:27).[91] The midrash continues with examples of those who helped to sanctify God's great name in the world, noting especially that they did so by listening to God, and God listened to them in return.

The Mekhilta. de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai describes the reverse: Rabbi Yossi haGalili said, 'God spoke to Moses and said to him, My children are doomed to destruction in Egypt, as it is said, "I...said to them: Cast away, every one of you, the detestable things that you are

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[91] Sifrei Devarim Piska 306

drawn to, and do not defile yourselves with the fetishes of Egypt...But they defied Me and refused to listen to me"(Ezekiel 20:7-8). So I will act for them for the sake of My great name, that it not be degraded, as it is said, "I acted for the sake of My name that it might not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they were. For it was before their eyes that I had made Myself known to Israel to bring them out of the land of Egypt." (Ezekiel 20:9).[92]

As was true with the term 'remember,' noted above, 'listening' is an action verb: It combines hearing and heeding, on the people's side and on God's side and on the side of the rabbis and those to whom they spoke. This double meaning is expressed in the phrase naaseh v'nishma (Exodus 24:7), literally 'we will do and we will listen,' but more accurately translated 'we will faithfully do,' with the listening and the doing inseparable. This phrase, to be used by the people after their liberation and after receiving the commandments on Sinai, is one reason God heeded/listened to their cry in Egypt: 'God knew' (Exodus 2:25) that the

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[92] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to Exodus 6:2

people would combine action with listening, would in fact place action before listening.[33]

Who was this God Who demanded fidelity in order to be faithful in return, Who listened to those who listened back, Who sometimes appeared, but sometimes hid ? We have seen the Doer of great deeds that make 'His' name great all over the world. But the God of the Exodus has many other appellations as well, again confirming the appropriateness of the Biblical book's name "Shemot."

THE MANY IMAGES OF GOD

A. The Redeemer Who works at Night

In Exodus 11:4-5, Moses tells the people, "Thus says the Lord: Toward midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians, and every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die..." In 12:29, we learn that "in the middle of the night the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt..." It was in the night that Pharaoh finally says, "Up, depart from among my people..."(Exodus 12:31) And, finally, when "all the ranks of the Lord departed from the Egypt, that was for the Lord a night of vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that

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[33] Exodus Rabbah 1:36

same night is the Lord's, one of vigil for all the children of Israel throughout the ages" (Exodus 12:41-42).

Why night? Genesis Rabbah tells us that Abraham went to rescue Lot from the hands of the enemy kings: "At night (vayeihaleik aleihem lailah), he and his servants (avadav) deployed against them and defeated them...He brought back all the possessions; he also brought back his kinsman Lot and his possessions, and the women and the rest of the people"(Genesis 14:15-16). Rabbi Binyamin ben Yafet in the name of Rabbi Yohanan said: The night (lailah) was divided (nehelak) before him [he controlled or conquered the night.] The rabbis said, His creator was his portion (helko). The Holy One said, Abraham worked with Me at midnight, so I work with his children at midnight. When? In Egypt, as it is said, "In the middle of the night [the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt]"(Exodus 12:29).[94]

Just as Abraham went after enemy kings to rescue his people, so God went after an enemy king to rescue 'His' people, who are the children of Abraham. Just as Abraham, God's servant, took his servants (avadav)with him to fight, so God took 'His' servant (avado), Moses,

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[94] Genesis Rabbah 42:15

to help free 'His' servants (avadim), who were slaves (avadim) to Pharaoh. Just as Abraham got back all the people and their possessions, so God got all the people and their possessions (the gold, silver and clothing 'borrowed' from the Egyptians). And both fought their battles at night. In a sense, God learned from Abraham the value of fighting at night. Abraham's battle was the first of many redemptive battles.

The Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai tells us that the night of vigil (leil sh'murim) teaches us that this first redemption guarded (nishtamrah) the people for the generations, the jubilee years, the sabbatical years, the single years, the months, the sabbaths, the days, the hours, the minutes and the moments...This redemption is mentioned ('they are redeemed') twice in this verse [Exodus 12:42]; they are redeemed twice in one verse, and similarly the text says (Isaiah 21:11), "[A call comes to me from Seir:] 'Watchman (shomer), what of the night?/Watchman, what of the night?'/The watchman replied,/'Morning came, and so did night.'" What was He guarding (meshamer) [in the night of vigil]? That nation would not go against nation, nor kingdom against kingdom, by even [so much as] a single hair (khut sei'arah). And who is the Watchman? This is the Holy

One Who is called Watchman (Shomer), as it is said (Psalms 121:4), "See, the guardian of Israel (Shomer Yisrael) neither slumbers nor sleeps!, [what has just been said are] the words of Rabbi Eliezer.[95]

God is our Guardian, then, Who can work at night because this Guardian never sleeps, but guarantees that morning -- redemption -- will come for the people Israel. This redemption is the guarantor of redemptions to come, for all time, and in even the smallest amount of time. It enables the people to live in its land, in which they can measure time by their calendar, and in which even the land itself is free: The people and the land have sabbaths and sabbatical years and even jubilee years. Both are redeemed from slavery.

Redemption implies a rescue from, as well as to. Tanhuma haNidpas teaches us that 'all the miracles that were done for Israel to bring retribution against evil ones were done at night.' God came to Balaam at night, to intervene in Balaak's instructions (Numbers 22:20), to Laban the Aramean in a dream to warn him against interfering with Jacob (Genesis 31:24), to Abimelech in

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[95] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai to Exodus 12:29.

a dream at night to get him to return Sarah to Abraham (Genesis 20:3), and to Pharaoh, killing all the first-born in Egypt (Exodus 12:29). This is what the text means, the midrash says, when it is written, "That was for the Lord a night of vigil..."[96]

It is interesting to note that most of those considered evil here are in fact men who had both good and bad relationships with Israel: Balaam spoke words describing Israel that we read to this day as part of prayer; Laban was Rebekhah's brother and thus Isaac's brother-in-law; Abimelech and Abraham were able to agree on a pact concerning a well. Pharaoh, of course, was more clearly evil, but it was an earlier Pharaoh who raised Joseph to high position and provided for his family by having them settle on a choice piece of land. The midrash's covert message, then, is that vigilance is needed most with those who are closest, who seem to be with you, but are not your people. They are the ones who may at any moment betray you, though you think they are friends, or have even considered them family. Without God's constant vigilance, and nighttime inter-

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[96] Tanhuma haNidpas, Balaak:8, and similarly, regarding the nights of Gideon, Sennacherib, Achashuerus, Haman, see Pesikta de Rav Kahana 17:5

vention, their betrayal might succeed. Thanks for this nighttime Redeemer come from the Psalmist, who says, "The Lord is my portion...I arise at midnight to praise You..."(Psalm 119:57,62).

This night of redemption, of God's vigil, is one of happiness for all Israel, says Exodus Rabbah. In this world, God made a miracle for the people at night, because it was a temporary miracle (or a miracle of passage: nes over). But in the future/days to come, the night will be made day, as it is said: (Isaiah 30:26), "...the light of the moon shall become like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall become sevenfold, [like the light of the seven days, when the Lord binds up His people's wounds and heals the injuries it has suffered.]" -- like the light that the Holy One created and stored in the Garden of Eden.[97] God gave a hint of the light Israel was to enjoy with the plague of darkness over all Egypt, during which "all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings."(Exodus 10:23). Just as in the Garden of Eden, the world to come will be always light, with the darkness lit by a brightened moon and the day by an even-brighter sun; the reference to Eden implies that redemption was part of God's plan

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[97] Exodus Rabbah 18:11

from the earliest days of creation. Having healed the injuries the people suffered in Egypt, God will attend in the end of days to all the injuries they suffered thereafter. Since this midrash originated with the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael (3rd century) and is included in Exodus Rabbah (c.11th century), there are many centuries of injuries to take into account; the need for hope of redemption grows with the distance from the Exodus.

Though night was still night, Jews continued to hope for even a passing miracle, a sign from their Redeemer.

B. Bird Imagery for God and the People

The redeeming God is powerful, able to work miracles and change even the known order of nature. Sometimes the miracle of redemption took its metaphors from nature, from scenes the rabbis had seen or could imagine. One metaphor that is frequently employed is that of the bird: small, caged birds or mighty eagles.

Exodus Rabbah, musing on the people of Israel at the moment of liberation, recalls Psalm 124 which praises God for having ensured victory and not dreadful defeat: "Blessed is the Lord, who did not let us/be ripped apart by their teeth./We are like a bird escaped from the

fowler's trap;/the trap broke and we escaped" (Psalm 124:6-7). This is like a dove that was sitting on her nest, when an evil snake saw her, and asked to come up to her. She escaped from him to a different place, and he went and sat in her nest. Fire fell on the nest and and burned the snake, and the bird flew and sat on the roof. Since the snake and her nest were burned, they said to the bird: How long are you going to fly from place to place? She went and found for herself a lovely, extraordinary nest and sat herself down in it. Thus was Israel in Egypt, and Pharaoh was the snake plotting against them...Israel escaped from him, as it is said (Hosea 11:11), "They shall flutter from Egypt like sparrows,/[From the land of Assyria like doves;/And I will settle them in their homes/--declares the Lord]."...And when Israel came to Israel they found themselves a nest, as it is said: (Psalms 84:4), "Even the sparrow has found a home,/[and the swallow a nest for herself/in which to set her young,/near Your altar, O Lord of hosts,/my king and my God]."[98]

Israel is a frightened bird, flying from place to place to escape evil snakes, searching for a place to settle for herself and her young. Again, the future of

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[98] Exodus Rabbah 20:6

the people is in danger, and must be secured; the land of Israel and specifically the Temple become the secure nest for her. Just as Noah's dove helped him and his family to find a place to settle after the flood, so the dove that is Israel will find a place to settle after the Sea floods the Egyptians.

But 'she' can only find a new nest with God's help. And God, too, appears in the midrash as a bird. The Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael takes note of the Israelites journey out of Egypt: "The Israelites journeyed from Raamses to Succoth..." (Exodus 12:37). From Raamses to Succoth is a distance of 120 parasangs (Persian miles). Moses' voice traveled 4000 parasangs, a distance [covered in] 40 days. But don't be amazed, because it is written, "Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Each of you take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw it toward the sky...It shall become a fine dust all over the land of Egypt..."(Exodus 9:8-9). And so, how much the more so, if dust, whose practice is not to travel, could travel 40 days, how much more so could a voice, whose practice <u>is</u> to travel. In the blink of an eye, the people of Israel traveled from Raamses to Succoth, to confirm what is said, "[You have

seen what I did to the Egyptians,] how I bore you on eagles' wings [and brought you to Me]." (Exodus 19:4).[99]

God's carrying the people on eagles' wings is part of the miraculous nature of their escape, seen even in the great distances they were able to travel. The midrash comments on how quickly this distance seems to pass in the Biblical text, but there is also wonder at the possibility that a people just released from slavery, weak and unused to walking freely, could travel so quickly over such a distance. It reflects the many miracles God has performed for the people, from the supernatural plagues to the semi-divine aspect of Moses's voice (and leadership). For God, of course, the miracles are all prelude to requesting that the people obey God's laws and keep the Covenant. God reminds the people of how they were borne on eagles' wings just before giving them the Ten Commandments on Sinai. God has brought them to God's temporary dwelling place, and intends to bring them to the Land of Israel, where they -- the dove, the swallow -- will find a new and permanent nest. What they must do is agree to their part of the covenant. After God reminds them of having brought them on eagles' wings and asks them to keep the Cove-

[99] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet de Pisha 14

nant, they are eager and ready to comply: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" (Exodus 19:8). But it is not long until they forget their part of the agreement, and build the calf as a substitute. Perhaps they have also forgotten the miracle of redemption...or perhaps they, as a people, are too young to know better.

C. God as Protective Suitor of Adolescent Israel

Israel in Egypt is often portrayed in the midrash as a young person, innocent, needing protection. We saw, above,[100] Israel portrayed as an abandoned infant, rescued by a maternal God, as seen in the words of Ezekiel: "When you were born your navel cord was not cut, and you were not bathed in water to smooth you; you were not rubbed with salt, nor were you swaddled. No one pitied you enough to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; on the day you were born, you were left lying, rejected, in the open field" (Ezekiel 16:4-5).

But Israel grew up during the time spent in Egypt: "I let you grow like the plants of the field; and you continued to grow up until you attained to womanhood, until your breasts became form and your hair sprouted."

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[100] See Chapter I, page 42

(Ezekiel 16:7) And as Israel nears the time to leave Egypt, she is this adolescent girl, just attaining puberty, but "still naked and bare"(ibid). Says the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, this means naked of any commandments, the observance of which would provide merit to be redeemed. So God gives them two commandments to keep until they receive all the others -- the blood of the Pesach sacrifice and the blood of circumcision -- symbolizing the covenant which God entered "with you by oath...thus you became Mine..."(Ezekiel 16:8). The oath, says the midrash, was the oath God had made to Abraham to redeem his children. The two commandments symbolize the blood of life, clearly referring -- in this portrayal of Israel as an adolescent girl -- to menstrual blood: God says to the girl, "I passed you by (again) and saw that your time for love had arrived" (Ezekiel 16:8). As the loved one in Jewish tradition is set apart by the lover, and can be thus set apart by sexual intercourse, so the commandments that God gives in this metaphoric 'covenant by intercourse' are meant to set Israel apart.

Both the pascal sacrifice and circumcision were also used by early Christians, who saw Jesus as their pascal sacrificial lamb and some of whom rejected the

need for circumcision as a sign of covenant. And both are symbols of patience: one has a son 8 days before his circumcision, and one acquires a pascal lamb 4 days before slaughtering it. Patience is an adult trait, proving to God Israel's readiness to take on other adult responsibilities.[101] Those other responsibilities -- symbolized by the commandments given at Sinai -- will serve as the foundation for the 'marriage' of God and Israel.

Midrash ha Gadol describes the wedding procession, in a comment about the people Israel traveling from Raamses to Succoth. Is Succoth an actual Sukkah, or just a place name, the interpreters wonder. Rabbi Eliezer says, "It's sukkot of clouds of glory that came and settled over Raamses. His example: To what can this be compared? To a bridegroom that brings a litter [for a wedding procession] to the door of the bride's house, so that she will let him enter immediately."[102] So God came and brought a sukkah of clouds to protect and honor Israel, who was then convinced to let God enter into her

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[101] From the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet de Pisha 5, but somewhat differently arranged by me, and including some inferences (especially about menstrual blood) that do not appear in the midrash.

[102] Midrash ha Gadol to Exodus 12:37

covenantal house immediately. The engagement sealed by the early intercourse symbolized by acceptance of two mitzvot, the marriage is now consummated with the giving and receiving of Torah.

SUMMARY

The picture the midrashim painted includes many images of God, images that enable us to experience the relationship between God and the people. There are God the Redeemer, rescuing the people from Egyptian night as they expect to be rescued at the end of days; God the mighty Eagle, carrying the dove that is Israel in a miraculous overturning of natural forces; God the Suitor and Bridegroom, setting aside the newly adolescent Israel for 'Himself' and bringing her luxurious gifts to convince her to marry 'Him' immediately: These and others are the images of the God of the Exodus, combining to form a picture of a richly multi-faceted God, with whom a lifelong relationship is more than possible. That relationship is a journey, paralleling and intertwining with the journey of the Israelites from Egypt. It begins long before, with the covenant with Abraham, and continues as God renews 'His' vows, as it were, with Isaac and with Jacob. In the midrashic context of

marriage, then, Israel is Jacob's daughter, remembered by God, taken note of by God ("the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, 'I have taken note of you...--pakod pakadti -- " Exodus 3:16) as God took note of her mothers Sarah (Genesis 1:1) and Rachel (30:22), entering into covenant with God in her generation and ensuring the continued life of the people. God hears the baby Israel cry and comes down to rescue her; God sees the naked child Israel and covers her with the blanket of mitzvot; and God notes the young woman Israel and asks her to join with 'Him' in marriage, bringing the marriage litter to bear her to the wedding. That procession will take her out of Egypt, hands held high, and through the parted salvific waters of the Red Sea.

CHAPTER V:

Liberation and Redemption

Liberation finally comes, made possible by the multi-dimensional God we saw in the previous chapter. Liberation is what the people have waited for since they first cried out to God from their suffering in slavery. Liberation is what Moses and Aaron have pressed Pharaoh to allow since they and the elders first went to his palace to negotiate. The people may not always have known that they wanted to be liberated; with their spirits crushed by slavery, they may only have permitted themselves to want respite from their labors and their pains. But if they had received only a respite, they would not have been free. In particular, the whole people could not have worshipped their God as they needed, nor could they have imagined entering into covenant with that God. They needed their freedom. But it was not to be a freedom that they acquired by force; they would no doubt have lost any physical battle. Rather, Pharaoh had to be persuaded to let them leave Egypt. This was, as we know, no easy task: he needed the Israelite labor force, and he feared their freedom ("in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us ..."Exodus 1:10), in part because of their numbers. The risk of freeing them was too great for Pharaoh...until he encountered a greater risk to his

own and his people's survival. Then, he agreed, but still only reluctantly. The people's leaving then was hurried and relatively quiet: there was no shouting, no singing, no gloating -- only raised hands and the carrying of a few possessions.

The quiet may have been prescient, for Pharaoh soon changed his mind, spurred on by God, Who understood: 1) that true liberation could only take place when the oppressor was destroyed; 2) that true freedom could only be experienced in the people's own land; 3) that the people would only accept God's covenant if they were convinced of God's might; and 4) that the Israelite people would only be convinced of God's might by a greater show of power than they had seen thus far. So Pharaoh chased after the people, trapping them between his army and the Red Sea, with no apparent way out. The people cried to God again, using the form of prayer that had worked once before for them, and God -- with Moses' help -- parted the Sea for them, allowing them a miraculous escape. The Egyptians, thinking to make use of the opportunity, followed after them, only to find the waters rejoined. The combination of their escape and the Egyptians' drowning convinced the Israelites

that God was indeed their mighty Redeemer, and they sang to God the glorious Song at the Sea.

The two-phased liberation -- leaving Egypt and going through the sea -- is the Exodus. It is the first of three great events in the journey of the people Israel and its God; the other two are the giving and receiving of the Torah at Sinai and the entering of the Promised Land of Israel. The Exodus enables the others, by providing a basis of faith for the people. Both its phases are vital to the journey: the people must first agree to leave, without knowing how or the direction they will travel; and God must demonstrate a power far greater than that of Pharaoh's magicians, to show that there is no god like the Israelites' God. When both phases are complete, and the people are not only liberated but redeemed, they are on the road toward Sinai and will not turn back.

A. Preparing to Leave

The Biblical passages that describe this first leaving are brief, perhaps in recognition of the fact that the happiness found therein is only temporary:

> 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! Take also your flocks and your herds, as you said, and begone! And may you bring a blessing upon me also.'

The Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the country, for they said, 'We shall all be dead.' So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders. The Israelites had done Moses' bidding and borrowed from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, and clothing. And the Lord had disposed the Egyptians favoraby toward the peope, and they let them have their request; thus they stripped the Egyptians.

The Israelites journeyed from Raamses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children. Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds. 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 decay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

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. That was for the Lord a night of vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that same night is the Lord's, one of vigil for all the children of Israel throughout the ages...That very day the Lord freed the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop...(Exodus 12:29-42,51)

The last plague -- killing the Egyptian first-born -- is planned by God early on in the negotiations with Pharaoh: "Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born

son. I have said to you, `Let My son go, that he may worship Me,' yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son"(Exodus 4:22-23). Says Exodus Rabbah, God means to bring this plague first. But when Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should heed Him...?"(Exodus 5:2), God said, `If I bring the plague against the first-born first, he'll let them go. Instead, I'll bring the other plagues first, and as a consequence of this (Pharaoh's questioning) I'll bring all of them (all the plagues), as it is said, "God struck down all the first born" (Exodus 12:29). Therefore, David offered praise [to God]: (Psalms 90:11, titled "A prayer of Moses, the man of God"), "Who can know Your furious anger?/[Your wrath matches the fear of You]"...[103] Pharaoh's refusal to allow the people to worship God, combined with Pharaoh's own blatant denial of God, leads God to increase the punishment planned for Pharaoh. It also intensifies God's desire to bring the people out of Egypt, as opposed to allowing them the possibility of a period of worship from which they would return.

The beginning of this process of intensifying punishment dates back to Joseph, as does the people's journey

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[103] Exodus Rabbah 18:5

into Egypt. In Exodus 12:23, Moses describes God's upcoming destruction of the first-born: "For when the Lord goes through (avar Adonai) to smite the Egyp-
ians..." Rabbi Levi asks, What does 'avar Adonai' mean? [It means] The Holy One said to them, I am going back (avar ani) on the thing I said. It's like the fable of a king whose son went to Barbaria, and the Barbarians stood and welcomed him and made him king over them. The king heard and said: What honor I will give to them who elevated my son and made him king over them; I'll name that country for my son. [But] they changed after many days and cursed the king's son, and enslaved him, so the king said: I am going back on my honoring of them. I'm going out and wage war on them and save my son. Thus Joseph went down to Egypt and they welcomed him and made him king over them, as it is said: (Genesis 42:6) "Now Joseph was the vizier of the land..." They honored Jacob, as it is said: (Genesis 50:3) [after Jacob's death] "the Egyptians bewailed him seventy days." Said the Holy One: And what honor can I bestow on Egypt? I will name it after the Garden of Eden, as it is said: (Genesis 13:10) [as Abraham and Lot are dividing the land between them: "Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan..."]

"...like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt." But when they changed and enslaved them, the Holy One said: (Exodus 12:12) "I will go through (<u>v'avarti</u>) the land of Egypt -- I will go back on that honor and make it (Egypt) desolate, as it is said: (Joel 4:19) "Egypt shall be a desolation..."[104]

Beware of those who welcome you so enthusiastically, the midrash tells us, and who promote you to high office. Even God was fooled by the Egyptians, so how much the more so can human beings be so fooled. We cannot blame Joseph, then, for having accepted high office in Egypt, nor for having brought his family to live with him there. Rather, it is Egypt which is to blame. The same Egypt that welcomed Joseph enslaved his descendants; it was not merely the presence of a new king that changed the welcome to oppression.

Joseph, being the seer that he was, may have known what would come to pass, when he "exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying 'God will be sure to take notice of you; then you shall carry up my bones from here with you...And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph" (Exodus 13:19; and see also Genesis 50:24-25). And how did Moses know where Joseph was buried? They

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[104] Exodus Rabbah 18:6

said [to him], Serah the daughter of Asher has survived from that same generation. Moses went to her. He said to her, "Do you know anything about where Joseph is buried?" She said, "The Egyptians made him a metal coffin and sank him in the Nile River so that its waters would be blessed. Moses went and stood on the bank of the Nile, and spoke to him: "Joseph, Joseph. The moment has arrived that God had sworn, to redeem Israel. And so has the oath that you made Israel swear. If you show your bones, good; if not, we are free of the oath." Immediately Joseph's coffin floated [to the surface]...

Rabbi Natan said, "He was buried in a royal cemetery. Moses went and stood there and repeated, 'Joseph, Joseph, etc.' Immediately, Joseph's coffin moved. Moses took it and brought it with him"....It is written, "The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem..." (Joshua 24:32).[105] Thus, the journey comes full circle: Joseph, who brought the people into Egypt, is brought out of Egypt by the people. From the beginning of <u>their</u> journey they carry an <u>aron</u> that holds Joseph's bones, a symbol of their history and heritage, a foreshadowing of

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[105] Yalkut Shimoni 1:327

the later aron they will carry, containing the tablets of the covenant. In fact, it is also said that Moses carried not only Joseph's bones, but vessels for the Tabernacle that Jacob had made.[106] The people's ability to remember and fulfill their oath to Joseph is an indication that they will remember and fulfill their promises to God.

Their willingness begins with God's fulfillment of the promise to kill all the Egyptian first-borns. Did this mean all? the midrashim asked. Why the "first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon"? What was their sin, that they deserved to die? Didn't the captives say, "Their (the Israelites') fear/pain brought them compensation. Our fear/pain is worse; it stands by itself, it doesn't bring us compensation." This teaches you that every decree that Pharaoh imposed on the Israelites made the captives happy. It's about them that the Bible says, "He who rejoices over another's misfortune will not go unpunished" (Proverbs 17:5), and it says, "If your enemy falls, do not exult" (Proverbs 24:17).[107] Even the animals' first-born babies were

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[106] Exodus Rabbah 18:10

[107] Yalkut Shimoni 1:308

included, because they symbolize all the Egyptians, who acted like beasts and echoed the captives' self-concern.[108]

But some of the Egyptians feared God's decree; those that did brought their first-born children to the Israelites and said: Please take this one and let him stay with you. When midnight came, the Holy One killed all the first-born. With regard to those that had been given over to the Israelites, the Holy One skipped among the Israelites and the Egyptians and took the lives of the Egyptians but spared the lives of the Israelites. The Jew would then arise and find the Egyptians dead, one here and one there, as it is said, "I will pass over you , so that no plague will destroy you..."(Exodus 12:13).[109]

There was no escape for the Egyptians. In part this was true because they were all first-born: First-born to a husband, first-born to a wife, first-born to a man, first-born to a woman. How could this be? One man might come to ten women, and they would bear ten sons...Thus I fullfill "there was no house where there was not someone dead"(Exodus 12:30). But death was

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Exodus Rabbah 18:2

not the end of their punishment. Rabbi Natan taught, "On the day that the first-born of one of them died, he (the father) would place his statue within his house. That very day it was smashed and ground up to powder, and it was as hard on him as if it were the day of his burial." Rabbi Yudan said, "Because the Egyptians buried within their houses, the dogs would enter by way of small openings and dig up the first-born from between the cracks and play with them. It was as hard for them (the parents) as if they had buried him (the first-born) that day.[110] This vengeful scene fulfills God's prediction of what will happen with this final plague: "...there shall be a loud cry in in all the land of Egypt...but not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites...in order that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel."(Exodus 11:6-7) The inclusion of the dogs here also makes it clear that this is an enemy people: dogs in the midrash often refer to others, especially unfriendly others.[111] Another distinction between the two is also clear to the reader: Jews bury their dead quickly and thus do not run the risk of having dogs play with or eat the

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[110] Pesikta Rabbati 17:5

[111] According to Dr. Norman Cohen

corpses, which would intensify the grief. Neither do they have statues or other icons of the dead in their homes to add the grief of constant memory to their own grief.

God's decree against <u>all</u> the first-born appears to include Pharaoh (<u>mibkhor par'oh</u>). Pesikta Rabbati says from this phrase we know that Pharaoh was a first-born.[112] The loud cry in Egypt or his own fear awakened him. He was walking around that night and passed from market to market, asking "Where is Moses? Where does he live?" The Israelite children were teasing him, saying, "Pharaoh, where are you going?" He said to them, "I'm looking for Moses." They said, "He lives here," [repeating and] teasing him until he got to him. He said, "Up, depart from among my people"(Exodus 12:31). Moses said to him, "Are we thieves, then? The Holy One said to us, "None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning." (Exodus 12:23).[113]

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[112] Pesikta Rabbati 17:5

[113] Avot de Rabbi Natan A, Chapter 29, expands on this conversation: After Moses asks, "Are we thieves then, that we would leave by night?" he continues, "Rather, we will wait until the Holy One brings us seven clouds of glory (<u>annanei kh'vod</u>), and we will leave amidst them, in joy and with uncovered heads, as it is said, (Numbers 33:3), "It was on the morrow of the passover offering that the Israelites started out defiantly [with raised hand], in plain view of all the

He (Pharaoh) said to him, "Please - Up and depart." Moses said to him, "Why are you so upset?" He said to him, "Because I am a first-born and I'm afraid that I may die." Moses said to him, "Don't be afraid. You are destined for something greater than this." And do not think that only Pharaoh was in a hurry; all of the Egyptians were in a rush, as it is said, "The Egyptians urged the people on..."(Exodus 12:33). The Holy One said to them, "On your lives! You're not all going to die here, but in the Sea."[114]

Thus not only the Egyptians, but the reader, as well, is given to understand that the destruction of the Egyptians is to take place in two stages. The two stages bring retribution against Pharaoh for both stages of his decree against the Israelite children: first, to kill every male newborn; and second, to throw them into the Nile. God's killing of the first-born is the first stage of the divine retribution, to wreak vengence for the killing of Israelite newborns. The drowning of

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Egyptians." The departure in plain view may explain the leaving with uncovered heads. Dr. Richard White explains that the people were also thus ready to receive the crown of Torah. Exodus Rabbah 18:10 echoes this thought, portraying God as asking Moses, "Are you taking my people out during the night?! They should leave with bare heads in the middle of the day."

[114] Yalkut Shimoni 1:308

the Egyptians in the sea, hinted at by Moses above, and announced by God, is the second stage: revenge for the throwing of Israelite babies into the Nile. The two stages also provide the Israelites with two steps on their journey: the first allows them liberation from Egypt; the second, freedom to journey toward Sinai and the land of Israel. Liberation from and freedom to: they combine to form the complete redemption.

B. Leaving Egypt

So the people left Egypt, urged on by Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. How many went? The Bible says, "...about six hundred thousand men, apart from children" (Exodus 12:37). Says the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, It means a little less or a little more, but for [exact] detail what does it say? (Exodus 38:26) "Six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty." Rabbi says, It says (in Joshua 7:5, regarding a battle against Ai), "The men of Ai killed about thirty-six of them..." And if it were thirty-seven, would they have to say? If thirty-five, would they have to say? When the text says about thirty-six, it teaches that they were equivalent to (or represented) all of Israel...

[And so, too, with about six hundred thousand]...[115]

The midrash continues to determine who exactly were included in the 600,000. "On foot (raglei)"(Exodus 12:37) - soldiers. "Men" (ibid) - not including women. "Aside from children" - This teaches that 'children' under the age of twenty went up with them.[116] What we learn is that the numbers really mean that the whole people went out from Egypt, including men, women and children. The Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael makes special note of the elders, too, saying "aside from children" means aside from women, children, and elders.[117]

The Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael also comments on the "mixed multitude (erev rav)"(Exodus 12:38) who went with the people. According to Rabbi Yishmael, it says, there

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[115] Other midrashim note that this count is one of ten times that the people of Israel are counted. The most interesting difference in numbers is that between the 70 who went down to Egypt with Jacob (Exodus 1:5) and the 600,000 or so who left with Moses. In addition, God says, "In this world, human beings count the people, but in the world to come, I will bless them and no one will be able to count them, as it is said (Hosea 2:1), "The number of the people of Israel shall be like that of the sands of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted..." See Pesikta de Rav Kahana Shekalim 18, for example.

[116] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to Exodus 12:37

[117] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha 14

were 120,000 of them, but Rabbi Akiva said 240,000, and Rabbi Natan said 360,000.[118] The Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai says that they numbered a third of those who left, and were strangers (or converts) and slaves.[119]

From Leviticus Rabbah we learn that Israel was saved from that deed [of building the Golden Calf], because if Israel had made the Calf, they would have had to say 'This is our god, O Israel.' Rather, the strangers that came up with Israel from Egypt -- "Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them"(Exodus 12:38) -- they built the Calf, and they called them and said to them, "This is your god, O Israel..."(Exodus 32:8).[120]. Since the building of the Calf is generally considered Israel's great sin against God, there is comfort in the idea that someone else built it. But there may also be a warning here, against 'mixing' with those who are not of your people, even if they share with you a desire to leave a common oppressor. This view is reinforced by the proof text chosen by Leviticus Rabbah: (Hosea 7:3)

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai to Exodus 12:38

[120] Leviticus Rabbah 27:8

"In malice they make a king merry,/And officials in treachery." Perhaps Aaron was the official betrayed by these 'outsiders.'

It is interesting to note, then, the contrast presented by Exodus Rabbah, which says that the 'mixed multitude' were the k'sherim among the Egyptians, who came and offered the pascal sacrifice with the Israelites, and then left with them; this is compared to people participating in a party the king is throwing for his son.[121] Perhaps by the late date of Exodus Rabbah, it was possible to imagine people who might be categorized as a kind of 'geirei toshav' among the Jews, without being official converts.

The people also took with them many provisions, though they had not prepared anything specifically for this purpose.(See Exodus 12:39) They took "very much livestock, both flocks and herds"(Exodus 12:38). The Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael tells us that these were what God promised to Abraham, in the promise about his offspring's future (Genesis 15:14), "...In the end they shall go free with great wealth," [and] when they leave

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[121] Exodus Rabbah 18:10

Egypt I will fill their [hands] with silver and gold.[122] The Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai notes that the livestock was to eat, so that it is puzzling when later on (Numbers 11:18), the people "have kept whining before the Lord and saying, 'If only we had meat to eat!" Wasn't it up to them [given all their livestock] to eat or not to eat? Rather, the text teaches that they wanted to eat a gift food (akhilah shel hinam).[123]

But the midrashic message is clear: they had to provide for themselves before receiving gifts from God. Just as Elijah said to the widow at Zarephath, "Go and do as you have said; but first make me a small cake from what you have there..." (I Kings 17:13),[124] so the Israelites had to make cakes from what they had brought, before God would provide. In addition, they had to bring offerings to God before eating themselves, as the widow and her son gave cake to Elijah before they ate. Elijah is the symbol of redemption, a 'man of God.'

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[122] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha, 14. See Chapter II, pp. 79-88 for a lengthy discussion of the gold, silver and clothing that the people took with them.

[123] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai to Exodus 12:38

[124] See Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha 14

Both he and God, the great Redeemer, must be provided for if redemption is to take place. The people were also rewarded for having taken very little from Egypt, merely carrying their kneading bowls in their cloaks on their shoulders: A blessing entered the dough they carried, and they ate from it for 31 days; it was as good as manna to them.[125]

Helping themselves, then, and with protection and direction from God, the people of Israel set out from Egypt, "troop by troop" (Exodus 12:51) Their route is of interest to the rabbis:

> The Israelites journeyed from Raamses to Succoth.
> ..when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds...They set out from Succoth, and encamped at Etham, at the edge of the wilderness (Exodus 12:37, 13:17-18,20).

The rabbis first questioned the name `Succoth.' According to the words of Rabbi Eliezer, it means actual <u>sukkot</u> -- booths, as it is written, "Jacob journeyed on to Succoth, [and built a house for himself and made stalls for his cattle; that is why the place

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[125] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to Exodus 12:34. Others say that they were able to eat of the cakes they baked until God sent them the manna.

was called Succoth]" (Genesis 33:17). The sages said Succoth is a place, as it is said [in a recap of the Israelites' journey] "They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham" (Numbers 33:6). Just as Etham is a place, so, too, Succoth is a place. Rabbi Akiva said, Succoth are clouds of glory, as it is said, "the Lord will create over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion a cloud by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory (or "over His whole shrine) shall hang a canopy..."(Isaiah 4:5).[126]

These are in the past. Where can we read about the future? The text says, "[the canopy] which shall serve as a pavilion for shade from heat by day [and a shelter for protection against drenching rain]" (Isaiah 4:6) and it says, "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,/And come with shouting to Zion,/ Crowned with joy everlasting..." (Isaiah 35:10). [Therefore,] Rabbi Nehemiah says, 'To Succoth,' because it needs to teach from the beginning what will be at the end.[127]

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[126] See also Tanhuma haNidpas, T'tsaveh: 1, where the 'clouds of glory' are equated with the "the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night [which] did not depart from before the people" on their journey (Exodus 13:22).

[127] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet d'Pisha 14

Thus, the people can learn from their route to Succoth that at the end of days they will be sheltered under God's pavilion, and return with joy to Zion. Not only are they leaving Egypt, but they are truly on their way to the land of Israel, as God had told them. The joy in this realization, of course, belongs to the rabbis who, reading this verse in their various ways, find a hope for a joyous future and a renewed belief in God's protecting shade in the present.

God's protection and comfort are clear in the rest of this first part of their journey, as well. "God did not lead (naham) them by way of the land of the Philistines..." (Exodus 13:17) Why? Because the tribe of Ephraim had erred, and left Egypt thirty years before the [declared] end, and 30,000 of them were killed by the Philistines. God did not want the rest of the people to see their bones piled up along the way, so God took them a roundabout way.

Another explanation is that, even though Pharaoh had let the people go, God could not be comforted (nitnahem). To what can this be compared? To a king whose son has been captured; the father goes and saves him from the kidnappers and kills them. Then the son says to his father: They did this and this to me, they

hit me like this and this, and oppressed me. Even though he (the King) killed them, he can't be comforted. Instead, he says, This and this they did to my son! Thus the Egyptians did, oppressing and enslaving Israel... Even though the Holy One brought ten plagues and redeemed 'His' children, He said, I can't be comforted until I kill them all...[at the sea].[128]

God looks forward to the Sea and even beyond, to the giving of the Torah, which 'He' hopes the people will accept. The Holy One said, If I take them on a simple route now, they will take hold of fields and vineyards [in Israel], but reject the Torah. But, if I take them around the desert for forty years, and they eat manna and drink well water, then the Torah will settle within them. From this, Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai would say, The Torah wasn't given to interpret, but rather for eating [as a] double portion of manna, as a gift for eating.[129]

Again the responsibilities on both sides - God's and the people's - are clear: The people must provide for themselves, showing the ability to do so, before God

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[128] Both midrashim are taken from Exodus Rabbah 20:11,12

[129] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to Exodus 13:17

will provide for them. And they must have patience to stay with God, albeit fed and given drink, until they are involved in a defacto covenant so strong that the Torah will become part of their being. The Torah must be as much a part of their daily lives and needs as is food and drink, while at the same time they will know that it is as miraculous as God-given food and water in the desert. Without this understanding, the Land of Israel would be just another beautiful land, providing just the ordinary needs for food and drink. One reason the people will be willing to enter this long-term covenant, agreeing to let the Torah enter their souls, is that they will have seen the Sea part for them, and thus seen God rescuing them forever from Pharaoh and his army.

C. Moving Toward the Sea

God wants to be sure that the people of Israel and the people of Egypt, including Pharaoh, "shall know that I am the Lord." (Exodus 14:4) So God tells Moses to have the people camp "before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baalzephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, 'They are astray in the land...Then I will stiffen Pharaoh's

heart and he will pursue them..." (Exodus 14:2-4). And, indeed, Pharaoh "had a change of heart." (Exodus 14:5) He took chariots, including "six hundred of his picked chariots... with officers in all of them...[and he] gave chase to the Israelites...as they were departing defiantly, boldly (with raised hand)..."(Exodus 14:7-8). The Israelites, seeing Pharaoh coming near, were frightened and cried out to God; they also complained to Moses: "Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?' But Moses said to the people, 'Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again" (Exodus 14:10-13).

The rabbis pick up on several aspects of this changing scene. First, they note that it was "as the Israelites were departing, defiantly, boldly (b'yad ramah)" that the Egyptians gave chase. The Israelites were providing tangible proof, says the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, that "His hand was raised against Egypt." But they were also providing clear proof of the difference between themselves and the Egyptians, for their hands

were raised in praise of God. "As the Egyptians were hasing after the Israelites, they were blaspheming and reviling and reproaching [God], whereas the Israelites were glorifying and exalting and praising and extolling, and singing a song of great praise and glory to the One for Whom there is War (Mi ShehaMilhamah Shelo), as in the matter of which it is said, "[Let the faithful exult in glory;/let them shout for joy upon their couches,/]with paeans to God in their throats/and two-edged swords in their hands," (Psalms 149:5-6), and it says, "Exalt Yourself in over the heavens, O God,/let Your glory be over all the earth!" (Psalms 57:6). And it says, "O Lord, You are my God;/I will extol You, I will praise Your name./ For You planned graciousness [or wonders] of old,/Counsels of steadfast faithfulness." (Isaiah 25:1).[130] The Israelites' raised hands, then, are just one part of the larger choreography of praise they offer to God, belying the apparent quietude of the Biblical version of their leaving of Egypt. In fact, the midrash presents a scene of praise that nearly parallels the praise the people offer at the Sea. But they are yet to come to the Sea. At this

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[130] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to Exodus 14:8

point, they praise God while carrying double-edged swords, perhaps to use against Egypt, on the one hand, and on the other, to split the Sea.

The Israelites' praise of God stands in direct contrast to the behavior of Pharaoh, who offers sacrifices to his own god(s) as he chases after the Israelites. The rabbis note the ambiguous phrase, 'UFar'oh hikriv' -- Pharaoh drew near, or Pharaoh sacrificed. (Exodus 14:10). Says the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, he drew near [unwittingly] to the retribution that was to come upon him. When he saw that they were still at Baal-zephon (Pharaoh and his army overtook the Israelites "encamped by the sea, near Pi-hahiroth, before Baal-zephon" Exodus 14:9), he said, "Baal-zephon agreed with my decree. I was thinking to destroy them in water, and Baal-zephon agreed with my decree. He began to sacrifice and burn incense and bow to his foreign worship. Thus it is said, "UFar'oh hikriv": he 'drew near' to offer sacrifices.[121] Interpreting 'Baal-zephon' as a god (related to 'Baal,' perhaps), the rabbis see Pharaoh, quite naturally, as praying to his god before the potential battle before him. Seeing the

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[121] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet de Vayehi 2

Israelites encamped at the water's edge, he thinks his god has helped to carry out his decree. Not having succeeded at destroying the people by throwing their babies into the Nile, Pharaoh now thinks he will destroy them at the Sea; the irony is that we the readers know that it is he who will be destroyed there, thus also destroying any belief in the power of his gods.

But it may also be that 'UFar'oh hikriv' refers to his fast pace, which allows him to 'draw near.' The Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael continues, The distance that Israel traveled in three days, the officers traveled in a day and a half. And the distance the officers traveled in a day and a half, Pharaoh traveled in one day. That is why it says, "As Pharaoh drew near"...And Pharaoh's army is particularly frightening as it draws near, because it is so unified that it appears as one. The text says, "The Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing (nosei'a) upon them" (Exodus 14:10). The midrash notes that the verb nosei'a is singular: Nos'im (the plural form) is not written here, rather nosei'a, which tells that all of them were formed into squadron after squadron, like one man. It

is from this that a sovereign learns to advance with squadron after squadron.[132]

So it is this advancing, unified army that the Israelites face, as they realize that they are trapped between the Egyptians and the Sea. Asks the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, What did Israel resemble at that moment? A dove that was fleeing a hawk. She entered the cleft in a rock, [only to find] a snake lying in wait for her inside. She could not enter because of the snake and she could not leave because of the hawk. She cried out and beat her wings so that the Owner of the dove-cote would come. Thus, when Israel saw the Sea closed and the enemy giving chase, they raised their eyes in prayer, and the text is interpreted about them them (Song of Songs 2:14), "O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks,/Hidden by the cliff,/Let me see your face,/Let me hear your voice;/ For your voice is sweet [in prayer]/And your face is comely [with good deeds]."[133] Once again we see Israel portrayed as a

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[132] This midrash and the preceding one are from the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet de Vayehi 2.

[133] Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to Exodus 14:13

dove.[134] Here, rather than looking to the God who can carry her off on wings of eagles, the dove is searching for the God Who is the Owner (or the Husband) of the dove-cote. The dove-cote, a safe and settled place, sometimes symbolizes the Tabernacle, a safe and settled place for the people of Israel. Once the people are freed from the difficult spot in which they find themselves (almost literally in this midrash 'between a rock and a hard place'), they will be moving toward the building of the Tabernacle. But they must free themselves not only from the hawk that is Egypt, but from the snake that is their own evil inclination. It is the 'snake' within them that will lead them to build the Calf, just as it was the snake in the Garden of Eden who helped Adam and Eve defy God's will. True freedom will see the people removed from Egypt and from their own sinful natures, and thus able to fly like a dove, without distraction, toward Sinai and the Tabernacle. The dove's beauty lies in her prayers and her good deeds; so, too, with the people Israel.

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[134] See Chapter IV, page 132. And see also the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet deVayehi 6, in which Israel here is compared to a bird in a person's hand; if the person squeezes even a bit, the bird will be choked.

But there are times when action must take precedence over prayer, and the Israelites' difficult situation may be one of those times. From Exodus Rabbah we learn that God knows that the faith with which the people Israel believes in God is worthy of the splitting of the Sea, because the people have not suggested to Moses that they turn back. Rabbi Eliezer said, The Holy One said to Moses: "There's a time for brevity and a time for expounding. My children are dwelling in distress -- the Sea is closed and the enemy gives chase -- and you are standing there and extending your prayer?!" [Rather], "Tell the Israelites to go forward" (Exodus 14:15). Rabbi Joshua said: The Holy One said to Moses, "The Israelites can do nothing but move forward -- pick up their feet from the dry land (on the shore) into the Sea, and you will see the miracles that I will make for them."[135] Thus the Israelites stand ready at the shore of the Sea, shoring up their courage to move into the Sea, wondering how God can save them from the Egyptians.

Not all were faithful. It's said that there were four divisions of Israelites at the Sea. One said to fall into the Sea, one said to return to Egypt, one said to wage war against them, and one said, let's shout

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[135] Exodus Rabbah 20:8

against them. To the one who said to fall into the Sea, it is said, "Stand by and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today" (Exodus 14:13). To the one who said, Let's return to Egypt, it's said, "for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again!" (ibid.) To the one who said, Let's wage war against them, it is said, "The Lord will battle for you" (Exodus 14:14). To the one who said, Let's shout against them, it is said, "You hold your peace!" (ibid.).[136]

God will take care of you, fighting your battles, destroying your enemy, delivering you from harm. Not only will God fight your battles at one given time, but will always fight your enemies. But once again, you have a corresponding responsibility. Says the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Rabbi Meir said, "The Lord will battle for you"(Exodus 14:14) when you are standing there silent; how much more so, then, when you give 'Him' praise.[137] Though not all the midrashim agree that the people have been standing there silent, all do

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[136] There are also descriptions of the Israelites insisting on a variety of signs and conditions before they will walk into the Sea. See, for example, Avot de Rabbi Natan, Chapter 33:2

[137] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet de Vayehi 2

agree that the greatest praise of God will be seen and heard after the people witness the splitting of the Sea.

D. The Splitting of the Sea

The splitting of the Sea is one of the greatest miracles the people of Israel had seen or would see again. With might and miracles God splits the Sea, allowing the people to go through on dry land, but trapping and drowning the Egyptians who chase after them. Some midrashim say God first split the Sea, while others insist that the people had to take the first steps that indicate faith and hope. Some say the Sea was given a heart, so that it could act humanely and save the Israelites, in contrast to Pharaoh, whose heart was so hardened that he could only plan the people's destruction. Others see a more fantastical scene, as in Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer:

Rabban Gamliel described this scene:

> The Egyptians chased after the children of Israel to the Sea of Reeds, so the Israelites were between the Egyptians and the sea; the sea before them and the enemy behind them. And the Israelites saw the Egyptians and were extremely frightened. There they threw off every Egyptian abomination and made a great repentance, and called to God, as it is said, "And Pharaoh drew near and the children of Israel lifted their eyes...[Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Lord]" (Exodus 14:10, translation of the first line is mine).

Moses saw the Israelites' trouble and stood and prayed on their behalf. The Holy One said to him, "Tell the Israelites to go forward." (Exodus 14:15) Moses said before the Holy One, 'The enemies are behind them and the sea is before them. In which direction should they go forward?'

What did the Holy One do? 'He' sent Michael, the highest sar, and he became a wall of fire between Israel and the Egyptians. The Egyptians wanted to go after the Israelites, but couldn't, because of the fire. The elyonim (heavenly beings) saw the distress of the Israelites all night, so they didn't praise and give thanks to their Creator. The Holy One said to Moses,

'Moses, "hold out your arm over the sea and split it." (Exodus 14:16).[138]

And Moses held out his arm over the sea, but it didn't accept him [as the agent] for splitting. He showed it his circumcision, and Joseph's coffin, and the rod on which the special Name was incised, but it wouldn't accept him.[139] So Moses returned to the Holy One and said, Master of all the Worlds, The sea won't listen to me.

Immediately God revealed 'Himself' in 'His' glory at the sea, and the sea fled and the waters trembled and shook and quaked and descended to the deep, as it is said, "The waters saw You, O God,/the waters saw You and were convulsed;/the very deep quaked as well." (Psalms 77:17)...

Rabbi Akiva said, the Israelites went to enter the Sea of Reeds, but turned around and went back, fearful lest the waters return over them. The tribe of Benjamin wanted to enter there, as it is said, "There is little Benjamin who rules them..."(Psalms 68:28), and the Sea went down. The tribe of Judah began to command them, as it is said, "the princes of Judah who command them," (Ibid.). Then Nahshon jumped first into the Sea and sanctified His great name before them all. And by the ruling hand (memshelet yad)of the Judah-ites,

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[138] Just as the people left Egypt with raised hands indicating defiance and praise of God, so Moses now raises his arm as a sign of faith in God's power, which has worked through him so often in the past.

[139] Symbols of, respectively, covenant, historical link, and God's power

all of Israel followed into the Sea, as it is said, "Judah became His holy one,/Israel, His dominion (mamsh'lotav)."(Psalm 114:2)...

The Egyptians wanted to follow the Israelites, but turned and went backward, fearful lest the waters close over them. What did the Holy One do? 'He' appeared on the water as a man riding a mare," as it is said, "I have likened you, my darling,/To a mare in Pharaoh's chariots" (Song of Songs 1:9). And the horse that Pharaoh was riding saw the mare and ran and neighed and entered the Sea after them. The Egyptians saw that Pharaoh had entered the Sea, and they all went in after him, as it is said, "The Egyptians came in pursuit after them into the sea." (Exodus 14:23). Immediately the waters closed and covered them, as it is said, "The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen" (Exodus 14:28).[140]

The magnificent rescue here has a human tone, albeit with supernatural touches.[141] Human beings must take the first step, from Moses trying first to split the sea to Nahshon jumping first into the water. Just as they

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[140] Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 42

[141] God's riding of the mare accomplishes two goals, beyond the luring of the Egyptians into the Sea. First, it demonstrates once again that, although God and Pharaoh may resemble one another in the accoutrements of power, such as horses or chariots, God's power is far superior and will always emerge victorious. Second, God uses a natural phenomenon -- the attraction of a male horse for a female one -- to lure the Egyptians, who tyrannized the Israelites with their perversions of natural ways of life. Life in Egypt meant male and female were separated, and men's and women's work was reversed. So it is fitting that the Egyptians should be destroyed by the use of a 'natural' male-female attraction.

had to make their own food before God would give them manna, so here Moses must first raise his hand over the sea and the people must take the first plunge before God will part the sea. Again, the 'lover' of Israel requires expressions of faith before he will ride his mare onto the sea.

Some midrashim declare that it is because of their faith that the Israelites were redeemed: The Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael asks, "What caused us to come into such happiness as this?" It's the reward for the faith that our ancestors exhibited in this world, that is all night...Therefore, we merited the world to come that is all day (morning). Therefore, it is said, "[It is good to praise the Lord,/to sing praises to Your name, O Most High,/]To proclaim Your steadfast love at daybreak,/Your faithfulness each night..." (Psalms 92:2-3). And because of their faith, the Holy Spirit (ruah hakodesh) came upon them and they sang the Song.[142]

Says Tanhuma Buber, this was because "when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and His servant Moses" (Exodus

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[142] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet de Vayehi, 6

14:31). But Rabbi Nehemiah said, Why did the people merit singing the Song? By virtue of athe faith that they exhibited from the beginning, as it is said, "...The people were convinced (believed). When they heard that the Lord had taken note of the Israelites and that He had seen their plight, they bowed low in homage" (Exodus 4:31). [It is said: "From Lebanon come with me;/From Lebanon, my bride, with me!] Trip down (tashuri) from Amana's peak (merosh amana)..."(Song of Songs 4:8) -- by virtue of the faith (haamana) they deserved to sing the Song, as it is said, "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord" (Exodus 15:1).[143]

It was their faith, expressed from the beginning of the Exodus story all the way to the shores of the Sea, that allowed the people to take the steps they had to take, to come to God so completely that they were like a bride come to join her husband-to-be, expressing the heights of faith ('merosh amana'). It was this faith, which they felt so deeply, that arose from within them in song, as though bidden by a holy spirit.

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[143] Tanhuma Buber BeShallah 29

E. The Song at the Sea

A midrash in Exodus Rabbah tells us that from the day on which God created the world, until the time that Israel stood on the shore of the Sea, no one had sung to the Holy One -- until Israel. The first person (adam harishon) was created, but didn't sing a song. Abraham was saved from the fiery furnace and from the kings, but didn't sing a song. Isaac was saved from the knife and didn't sing a song, and Jacob was saved from the angel and from Esau and from the men of Shekhem, but didn't sing a song. But when Israel came to the Sea and it split for them, immediately they sang a song before the Holy One, as it is said, "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord" (Exodus 15:1).[144] This was the great redemption, in part because to accomplish it God had to save one people from another, as opposed to saving one person from another or from a group. Perhaps a group is required to express praise in the form of a song, in the same way that a minyan is required to speak certain holy words (devarim shebikdusha). Certainly this song consists of a call and a response, as do those particular holy words, for we see that Moses and the people

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[144] Exodus Rabbah 23:4

sang the song and Miriam 'answered them' (ta'an l'hem - also translated "chanted for them": Exodus 15:21). The group here is so unified, though, that they speak as one: Then Moses and the Israelites sang (yashir - a singular verb, indicating that they sang as one)...and they sang, "I will sing to the Lord..." (Exodus 15:1). Just as Pharaoh's army appeared as one, coming after the Israelites in troop after troop, so now the Israelites appear as one in tne joy of their redemption. And so, again, do Pharaoh's troops appear: Says Sifrei Devarim, When Israel did God's will, all the nations before them became as one horse, as it is said, "Horse and driver [singular forms] He has hurled into the sea" (Exodus 15:1), and they were [in the sea] as one horse.[145]

The joy of revenge over Pharaoh is hard to avoid, for the modern reader or for the rabbis. The Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael cites this line in the Song at the Sea: "You put out Your right hand,/The earth swallowed them" (Exodus 15:12), and suggests that it tells us that the Sea threw them (the Egyptians) to the land, and the land threw them to the Sea. Then the land said, "And what about the time that I received the blood of Abel,

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[145] Sifrei Devarim, Piska'ot 190-193

which was the only time it was said of me, 'the ground is cursed,' etc. (Genesis 4:11. God speaks to Cain and says, "You shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand"). How can I now receive the blood of those Alexandrians?" The Holy One swore to her, "I will not hold you responsible, as it is said, "You put out Your right hand,/ The earth swallowed them" (Exodus 15:12)."[146] It is God who directs the power of the natural elements at the Sea, including both the Sea and the ground. When Cain killed Abel, by contrast, the ground 'opened its mouth' to receive Abel's blood of its own accord. Since the ground will not be held responsible, it participates in the redemption: Here, it swallows up the Egyptians, though we know that they drowned in the Sea; earlier, it served to save the Israelite people, who "had marched through the sea on dry ground" (Exodus 14:29).

In spite of its thoughts of revenge, the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael wonders why "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea." It offers four reasons: 1) So the Israelites wouldn't say, 'Just as we came up through the sea on this side, so the Egyptians [must

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[146] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet de Shira 9

have] come up from the sea on a different side'; 2) So the Egyptians wouldn't say, 'Just as we were destroyed in the sea, so Israel must have been destroued in the sea'; 3) So that the Israelites would take the loot that the Egyptians were carrying: silver and gold and precious stones and pearls; and 4) So that Israel would keep their eyes on them and recognize them[147] and reprove them, as it is said, "[If I failed to act when you did these things,/you would fancy that I was like you;/]so I censure you and confront you ('before your eyes') with charges" (Psalms 50:21). And it is said, "When my enemy sees it,/She shall be covered with shame,/[She who taunts me with, 'Where is He,/The Lord Your God?'/My eyes shall behold her [downfall]" (Micah 7:10).[148]

God wants to be sure that both sides know that Israel has been redeemed and that Egypt has been destroyed. In addition, Israel should receive some compensation for its suffering, in the form of Egyptian loot, and the Egyptians should be publicly shamed for having caused that suffering and for having doubted God's power. How

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[147] Or make them strange, i.e., keep them distinct, from the root n-kh-r)

[148] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet deVayehi 6

can Egypt be shamed, we might ask, if they are dead in the sea? The text reads, "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea" (Exodus 14:30). Aren't they dead, asks the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, perhaps echoing our question. They are dead and not dead, it responds, as was the case with Rahel, of whom it is said, "...She breathed her last -- for she was dying..." (Genesis 35:18). Was she dead? She was dead and not dead.[149] Rachel was dying, but with her last breath managed to give a name to her brand-new son. And the Egyptians had drowned in the sea, but had apparently been able to drag themselves out to the shore before they actually died. And more than that, Rachel lived on in her sons' lives and in her husbands' memory. So, too, the Egyptians will reappear in Jewish history and in the memory of the people. Thus, they are not dead.

So thoughts of revenge mingle with joy and praise for God in the people's minds and hearts, impelling them to sing all of these thoughts in the great Song at the Sea. But it is said that the people, not used to singing and perhaps unsure of how to offer praise, needed a push to begin the song. Rabbi said...HaMakom does miracles and wonders for you and you just stand there silently?! The

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[149] Ibid.

Israelites said to Moshe Rabbeinu (our teacher), 'Moses, what are we supposed to do?' He said to them, 'You should glorify and exalt and give song and praise and grandeur and honor to the One for Whom are all wars," as in the matter of which it is said, "with paeans to God in their throats..."(Psalms 149:6), and the text says, "Exalt Yourself over the heavens, O God,/let Your glory be over all the earth!" (Psams 57:5), and it says, "O Lord, You are my God;/I will extol You, I will praise Your name./For You planned graciousness of old,/Counsels of steadfast faithfulness." (Isaiah 25:1).

At that moment, Israel opened their mouths and said, A Song: "I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously." (Exodus 15:1).[150]

Moses is the good shepherd, leading his flock where they should go, into song and music before the Holy One, as it is said, "Then sang Moses, and the children of Israel..."(Exodus 15:1). And Miriam began to play and sing, and all the women followed after her, as it is said, "Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went after her in dance with timbrels."(Exodus 15:20).[151]

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[150] Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhet deVayehi 2

[151] Pirkei de Rabbi Eiezer, Chapter 42

The redemption was complete. No longer the silent walk away from Egypt, now there is the singing, dancing, shouting people on the shore of the sea. Their enemy is destroyed, their God has convinced them of 'His' might, they have left Egypt behind,[152] and they will agree to follow Moses into the wilderness of Sinai. Their reputation is strengthened: When the kings of all the world heard about the Exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, they trembled and shook and fled from their places, as it is said, "The peoples hear, they tremble..."(Exodus 15:14)...Moses said before the Holy One, Master of all the worlds..."You will bring them and plant them in Your own mountain,/The place You made to dwell in, O Lord"(Exodus 15:17)...Said the Holy One to Moses: Moses, you didn't say bring <u>us</u> and plant <u>us</u>, but bring <u>them</u> and plant <u>them</u>...The One who brings is the One who takes out. 'He' said, According to your words is how it will be. In this world, you bring them. And in the future, I will plant them, a plant of truth, so they are not uprooted from

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[152] Though there are midrashim that indicate that the people may yet return, in a sign of disgrace, though they have been warned not to.

their land[153]...And he (Moses) said, "The Lord will reign forever and ever!"

The One Who brings is the One Who takes out. God brought the people Israel to Egypt, accompanying Jacob and Joseph. And God took the people Israel out of Egypt, rescuing them from their enemy, developing a covenant with them, redeeming them at the Sea. The people had their part of the covenant to fulfill, and God had a part, the major part. The people cried out to their God in their pain and suffering and God, with Moses as God's messenger, saved them from slavery and oppression. That salvation will serve as the basis for Jewish hopes from the day the people move on from the shore of the Sea, and God the Redeemer will be the people's yearning. The Lord will reign forever and ever! Again and again Jews pray, hoping for a glimpse of the God of the Exodus, longing for the Sea they face to split and let them cross. Again and again they sing with Moses and Miriam, dance and play and rejoice as they relive the first redemption.

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[153] Moses will only see their land from afar, of course, but will never enter it, which is another reason God points out his use of <u>them</u> and not <u>us</u>, and notes that things will go according to Moses' words.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is the distillation of dozens of midrashim about the Exodus which I read and analyzed as part of the preparation for writing it. I hope that it presents a portrait the rabbis would recognize for its content and its method. For I have tried to take the rabbis' midrashic methods as my own, while analyzing and commenting on their many and varied works. I said in the Introduction to this thesis that "the rabbis knew the story [of the Exodus] as <u>their</u> story." The truth of this statement became clearer and clearer to me with every new midrash that I read. What was less expected, but has become equally true, is that the Exodus is <u>my</u> story, too. I conclude, therefore, with a brief summary of the story as I have come to know it, and with a few thoughts about continuing my engagement with it.

The story of the Exodus is complete. It began when Joseph went down to Egypt as a captive, but there attained high position and settled his family in the most fertile parts of a famine-stricken land. There they prospered, increasing their possessions and adding to their numbers. But Joseph, visionary that he was, and experienced as he was with Egyptian jails, hinted that all might not go well for them there, and reminded

his brothers that they belonged in their own land. Near death, he said to them, "'God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here.'"(Genesis 50:24-25).

And they did. And God did take notice of them. as God had taken notice of our foremothers when they were unable to bear children. The time the people Israel spent in slavery paralleled those 'barren' times: the people were kept from bearing or raising their children. But they found ways to help themselves and, like our foremothers, called to God for help. And the fact that God responded turned their cry of pain to a cry of prayer. God enacted a plan -- a bold, far-reaching plan -- to set the people free. While the people continued to raise protests with Pharaoh, their oppressor, God planned to free them from him, and eventually to destroy him. To put the plan into action, God selected a reluctant outsider, half-Egyptian, half-Israelite. Though reluctant, Moses was born to the role: when Israelite baby boys were being killed, he was saved by his mother's and sister's ingenuity; when Israelite baby

boys were being thrown into the Nile, he was sent down the Nile to be saved by Pharaoh's own daughter.

Women are the savers in our story: When Pharaoh decreed that men and women should be separated, to avoid a population increase, the women refused to comply and came out to their men in the fields. When Amram wanted to take Pharaoh's decrees a step further, and expel his wife from their home, Miriam challenged him, and Yokheved returned, there to bear the baby Moses. When Pharaoh wanted the midwives' cooperation in killing the babies, they refused, slyly reminding Pharaoh of the great strength of the Israelite women. Women are the creators in this story, akin to potters working at the wheel, akin to the Creator of all life. It is the women who create life here, who insist that life be preserved, who demand that life be continued. By so doing, they preserve the life of the entire people and are justly rewarded. The midwives receive houses, meaning long-lived dynasties of their own. The women who went to the fields add to the building of God's House. Yokheved and Miriam are honored by the very life they gave: their children go on to serve the people with wisdom, dignity and skill. And Miriam herself remains known as a prophet, in part because she prophesied her brother's

redemptive role. She, too, is a redeemer, changing the bitterness of the people's time in slavery to the redemption found in the Sea and in the well that is her gift to the people for their journey.

As with her name - Mir-yam - the waters of the Exodus tell its story. From the waters of the Nile that killed babies but saved Moses and sent up Joseph's bones; to the waters of the Sea of Reeds that posed a great obstacle to the people's escape but was given a heart to split and save them; to the rains of slavery's winter that are over and gone but will enable new growth in the new land; to Miriam's well that provides drink to go with the manna God provides, until her death -- Water is the symbol of death and life, slavery and redemption, winter and summer. Just as the darkness of slavery, the darkness of this world, gives way to the light of freedom and of the world to come, so the water of death gives way to the water of life. And just as the women of Israel were crucial in continuing the life of the people, so the redemption preserves their imagery. For just as the Nile was the birth canal for Moses, so the splitting Sea is the birth-waters breaking, the Israelites able to come through <u>this</u> birth canal to new

life in freedom. Their harsh labor is transformed into labor pains, decrees to kill into cries of birth.

This tension - death/life, darkness/light, Nile/Sea, Pharaoh/Moses, Bitya/Yokheved - is reflective of the Exodus story as a whole. Indeed, the story of the Israelite people is replete with examples of it. Jacob's sons, prospering at home, kidnap Joseph and sell him into slavery; Joseph's high office turns to enslavement for his descendants; their slavery turns to redemption; the people whose bricks go into buildings for Pharaoh will later help to build the Tabernacle; their time in the wilderness leads to the revelation at Sinai; the Golden Calf is obliterated and the Tabernacle is built; the forty years of wandering leads them to the land of Israel; the Temple is built, only to be destroyed. On and on their journey goes, struggle and resolution following one another in a cycle that is as regular and as unexpected as the waves of the Sea. The tide comes in, the tide goes out, wave follows wave...yet it is always possible that the Sea will split, that the Torah will be given, that the land of Israel will appear just across the river.

All journeys, individual and collective, share this tension. We all move ahead, only to fall back. We all

despair, only to see our way to the light. It is the way of journeys, and Jewish history is a journey. But our history has something more, something that takes us beyond the regular rise and fall, in and out of the journey. For we have our God. And so our journey, with all its ins and outs, remains at heart the journey of the relationship between us and our God. It is already a relationship of some length by the time of the Exodus: Long before, God entered into a covenant with Abraham and the promises they made are not forgotten. "Abraham! Abraham!" God called, long ago, to prevent him from killing his favorite son. And "Jacob! Jacob!" God called in a vision, to help him go down to Egypt to live with his favorite son. So, too, God calls, "Moses! Moses!" at the burning bush, to send Moses to save God's favorite son, the people Israel. God's name, too, is called twice: "God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob," the doubling signalling God's mercy put into action.

God's mercy is what the people found when they called out, the mercy of a mother swaddling and feeding a sick baby; the mercy of a swooping eagle saving a dove threatened by a hawk or a snake; the mercy of a protec-

tive suitor bringing the wedding procession to the bride's very door. God's mercy is matched by God's judgment, the Sea parting for the Israelites but drowning the Egyptians. The people are not only freed, but the enemy is destroyed. He is destroyed not only for his evil intentions, but for the insidious way God's people were drawn to him: they are freed from Pharaoh and freed from their own base desires.

"Remember that you were a stranger" takes on new meaning: Remembering the oppression of slavery is linked with the need for distinctiveness: Remember to be a stranger. Remember to maintain your language, keep your names, support unity, behave morally. And above all, remember to worship your God. Moses wasn't lying when he asked Pharaoh to let the people go that they might worship God. He never meant it to a trip of only three days time, but the people were to go free to worship God. Freedom from slavery was also freedom from other forms of worship, freedom <u>from</u> Pharaoh was freedom <u>to</u> God. God's mighty hand convinced the people of that. Witnessing God's power at the Sea, they were ready to continue their journey. Without redemption, there would be no revelation. Without redemption, the people would not continue their journey. Without God, they could not

go on. And with God, they could not turn back. Thus ends the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

This thesis explored the Exodus from Egypt through the eyes of the rabbis of the midrash. It was their experience, their understanding that formed the portrait of the Exodus that emerged through these pages. But there are many other views of the Exodus, as well, and these would be of interest for further study. I have mentioned modern liberation theologians. Their work draws on the themes of the Exodus; it would be interesting to see how they combine those themes with Christian theology and the specifics of modern oppression, be it in the poor and disenfranchised countries of Latin America or in the ravaged neighborhoods of African--Americans in the United States. James Cone, for example, is the foremost thinker about liberation theology as it applies to African-Americans.[154] His work, and a historical/liturgical exploration of African-Americans in this land would lend a new slant to the Exodus. Nancy Kassell, to be invested Cantor from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in

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[154] See, among other works, For My People: Black Theology of the Black Church. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.

1991, has written a Master's in Sacred Music Thesis about Jewish and African-American music of the Exodus; her insights would add to this kind of exploration.

Passover is often seen as a time to shore up the fraying connections between Jews and African-Americans, based on our common utilization of the Exodus as a metaphor for liberation and redemption. More exploration of joint Seders and other Passover-related activities would also be of interest. I did not include in this thesis any of the Biblical material about Passover, thinking that it could be another thesis in itself. The connections between the Exodus story and the obligations of an already existing festival (or festivals), and how they were joined by the rabbis and later Haggadah-makers, would be (perhaps already has been) a fascinating thesis.

Passover is also a time when Jewish and non-Jewish feminists join to celebrate women's freedoms and to reinvigorate the continuing struggle. Though some feminists write off the Biblical Exodus story for reasons of its male-bias and its warrior God, I think there is room to reexamine the story, especially for its heroic women and its many and varied images of God. There are modern Haggadot to be written and modern

midrashim as well, telling the story of Pharaoh's daughter, of Serakh bat Asher, of Shifra and Puah, of Yokheved and Miriam and Elisheva, of the women with mirrors working at the door of the Tabernacle, of the women singing and dancing at the shores of the Sea, and of the God who cares for needy babies as a tender Mother.

For it is still God Who stands at the center, the God of many names and many faces, the God with Whom we still struggle to enter into covenant. As we remember the Exodus story, we must look to God's example and see 'remember' as an active verb, requiring noticing and heeding and acting. As we remember the midwives' action, we must recall that they acted out of fear of God. As we relive the liberation from Egypt, we must remember that it was God Who made it happen, after remembering and taking note. "Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the Lord freed you from it with a mighty hand."

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