

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XIII: Shemot (Ex. 1:1–6:1)

Essay 17. Moses questions G-d about the long Exile

In Exodus, chapter 5, we read that Moses and Aaron approached Pharaoh and relayed G-d's order to free the Israelites. Pharaoh responded by ordering that the taskmasters withhold the provision of straw, while still requiring the same quota of bricks. The Israelites then cursed Moses and Aaron for making their lives harder. The last four verses of parashat Shemot, and the first verse of parashat Va'era, read:

And they said to him, “May the L-rd look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants—putting a sword in their hands to slay us.” Moses then returned to the L-rd and said: “L-rd, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people.” Then the L-rd 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.” G-d spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the L-rd.”

- Ex. 5:22–6:2

מדרש רבה ר' עקיבא אומר יודע אני שסוף להציל אכל מה תעשה באותם שנתונים בבנין וכו'.

Midrash Rabbah:

What is the meaning of Moses' complaint to G-d]: “and still You have not delivered Your people”? . . . **Rabbi Akiva said** [that Moses was arguing thus]: **I know that You will one day deliver them, but what about those who have been placed in a building** [i.e., those who were already dead]? Then the Attribute of Justice requested to injure Moses, but after the Holy One, Blessed be He, saw that [Moses] only spoke [thus] for the sake of Israel, the Attribute of Justice did not injure him.

- Midrash Ex. Rabbah 5:22

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“Those who have been placed in a building” refers to a Midrash that when the Israelites failed to meet their quota for bricks, the Egyptians buried Israelite children in the gaps in the walls of the buildings.¹

קשה לפי דעת המדרש מה זו תשובה שמשיב לו הקב"ה "ויאמר אליו אני ה' ". ופרש רש"י נאמן לשלם שכר טוב למתהלכים לפני וכו'. ומה תירוץ הוא זה למה שהוקשה למשה מאותם הנתונים תחת הבנין.

A difficulty according to the thinking of the Midrash is what is this answer that the Holy One, Blessed be He, responded to [Moses]: “And He said to him, ‘I am the L-rd.’ ” I.e., the first sentence of parashat Va’era, Ex. 6:2, is interpreted as a continuation of G-d’s response to Moses’ criticism, instead of being interpreted as the beginning of a separate discussion.²

Rashi interpreted:

[I am the L-rd] Who is faithful to grant a good reward to those who walk before Me. Nor have I sent you for no reason; rather to fulfil the words that I spoke to the first patriarchs. In this language we find that [the phrase] is to be explained in many passages. “I am the L-rd” signifies, “I am the L-rd, Who is faithful to exact punishment”—when it is spoken regarding punishment, for example, “And you have profaned the name of your G-d; I am the L-rd.”³ When it is spoken regarding fulfilling the commandments, for example, “You shall keep my commandments and do them; I am the L-rd”⁴—it signifies, “I am the L-rd, Who is faithful to grant a reward.”

- Rashi on Ex. 6:2

How is this a solution to what was questioned by Moses regarding those placed under the building?

ועוד קשה שטענת משה היתה לומר שאם קושי שעבוד הנה הנה ראוי לבוא עליהם, הנה לו להקב"ה לעשות שיבא קודם שליחותו של משה, שאז לא הנה מקום לישאל להתרעם עליו, כמו שעשו דתן ואבירם שאמרו "אשר הבאשמתם את־ריחנו" וכו'. ועוד קשה מה שהאריך רש"י בכאן, אני ה' נאמן ליפרע פשה הוא אמור אצל עונש פגון "וחללת את־שם" וכו', וכשהוא אמור אצל קיום מצות פגון "ושמרתם" וכו' נאמן לשלם שכר. דמה ענין זה עם פשט הכתוב בתשובת הקב"ה למשה. ועוד סיום דבריו של הקב"ה, "לכן אמר לבני־ישאל אני ה' ", ופרש רש"י הנאמן בהבטחתי, קשה כנ"ל דמה זו תשובה לאותם הנתונים תחת הבנין.

Another difficulty is that the claim of Moses was to say that even if the difficulty of this servitude was proper to befall them, the Holy One, Blessed be He, should have arranged

¹ Midrash Ex. Rabbah 2:5, 5:21.

² The Masoretic division of the Torah into parashot frequently indicate a break in topic and time. There are cases, though where a conversation considers across two parashot, for example, between Mikeitz and Vayigash.

³ Lev. 19:12.

⁴ Lev. 22:31.

to come before the sending of Moses. If He had, there would have been no grounds for Israel to be angry with [Moses], as Datan and Aviram were, who said, “May the L-rd look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants.”⁵

Another difficulty is why did Rashi [write] at length here, “I am the L-rd, Who is faithful to exact punishment”—when it is spoken regarding punishment, for example, “And you have profaned the name of your G-d; I am the L-rd.” When it is spoken regarding fulfilling the commandments, for example, “You shall keep my commandments and do them; I am the L-rd”—it signifies, “I am the L-rd, Who is faithful to grant a reward.” For what is the relationship of Rashi’s long interpretation to the plain meaning in the answer of the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Moses, “I am the L-rd”?

Also, regarding the conclusion of the words of the Holy One, Blessed be He, “Therefore, say to the children of Israel: I am the L-rd. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage; I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements.”⁶ Rashi explained, “I am faithful in my promise.” A difficulty, as above, is how is this an answer to Moses’ question, “what about those who have been placed in a building.”

וְיִשׂרָאֵל לֹא הָיוּ רוֹצִים לְצֵאתָא, כְּמוֹ שְׁאָמְרוּ ז' ל' עַל פְּסוּק "וְנִחַמְשִׁים עָלוּ" אֶחָד מִחַמְשֵׁי יִצְאוּ, וְיָדוּעַ שְׁהָעוֹלָם נִידוּן אַחַר רֹבוֹ. וְלִפִּי זֶה לֹא הָיָה אֶפְשָׁר לְגָאוֹל אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, לִפִּי שְׁהָרֹב לֹא הָיוּ רְאוּיִם לְגָאוֹלָה, וְאִם הִמְיָעוּט עֲצָמוֹ אִם עַל פִּי שְׁהָיוּ רוֹצִים לְצֵאתָא לֹא הָיָה בְיָדָם נְכוּת פְּדָאֵי לְהַגְאָל, וְלֹא נִגְאָלוּ אֶלָּא בְּזִכוּת הַחַמּוּשָׁה כְּפִדְאִיתָא בְּמִדְרָשׁ.

It can be said that the majority of Israel had not wanted to leave, as [the rabbis] of blessed memory said on the verse, “But G-d led the people about, by the way of the wilderness by the Red Sea; and the children of Israel went up armed [חַמְשִׁים] [*ve'chamushim*] out of the land of Egypt.”⁷ *Chamushim* typically means “fifty,” though it is typically translated here to mean “armed” or “arrayed for combat.” But in the Mechilta de’ Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai on that verse, it is interpreted as: “One in fifty went out,” and it is known that the world is judged according to the majority. Because of this, it wasn’t possible to redeem Israel, because the majority was not suitable for redemption. Even the minority themselves, even though they did want to exit, they didn’t have sufficient merit to be redeemed. They were only redeemed in the merit of the faith, as it is written in the midrash.⁸

⁵ Scripture does not identify those who cursed Moses, but Rashi on Ex. 5:20 identifies them as Datan and Aviram.

⁶ Ex. 6:6.

⁷ Ex. 13:18.

⁸ Yalkut Shimoni, Beshalach, remez 240:2: “R. Nechemiah says, ‘Why do you say that anyone who accepts one commandment upon him on faith should have the Divine Spirit bless him, as we found for our ancestors that it was a reward for faith, that they believed [in G-d]. [Thus,] you find that our father Abraham did not inherit this world and the World-to-Come except by merit of faith, for he believed what was said, [as it is written,] ‘and he put his trust [in the L-rd, who reckoned it to his merit]’ (Gen. 15:6). You also find that our ancestors were not redeemed from Egypt except by virtue of faith, for they believed what was said, [as it is written,] ‘and the people were convinced’ (Ex. 4:3).”

ועקר הגאולה היתה טביעת המצרים בים כדכתיב "ויושע ה' ביום" וכו', וכמו שכתב התוספות יום טוב בפירוש בתרא דפסחים (משנה ו') ועיי"ש. וזאת ה[ט]ביעה לא היה אפשר להתקיים אלא מתמת שגרמו לישראל למעוץ את ילדיהם בבגנו, לפי שהיו שרי האומות מקטרגים ואומרים תושיע את ישראל ולא תאבד המצרים, עד שפס גבריאל ושפט לבינה ותינוק מאותם שנתמעכו וכו', כדאיתא בילקוט על פסוק "פירגאה גאה" ועיי"ש.

The principal of the redemption was the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea, as it is written, "Thus the L-rd delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians; Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea."⁹ This is as the author of the *Tosefot Yom-Tov* wrote in the last chapter of tractate Pesachim, Mishnah 6, and see there.¹⁰

This drowning wouldn't have been possible if they hadn't caused the children of Israel to be crushed in the building. Therefore, the ministering angels of the nations were prosecuting and saying, "Save Israel, but do not let the Egyptians perish." Then the angel Gabriel flew to Egypt and then returned to G-d and dropped a brick and a baby from those who were mashed into the wall of the building, saying, "Thus the Egyptians would do to your children." Then G-d decided to drown the Egyptians, as is brought in Yalkut Shimoni¹¹ on the verse, "I will sing to the L-rd, for He has triumphed gloriously; horse and driver He has hurled into the sea."¹²

ומעתה קודם שילך משה לישראל צדיין לא היה נודע שום זכות לישראל להגאל אפילו המיעוט שבהם, אמנם לאחר ש"ויאמן העם" אז דוקא צריך לעשות בענין שישארו הראויים וימותו הבלתי ראויים, ולכן שלח אז משה לפרעה כדי שיכביד עליהם השעבוד ויתמעכו בבגנו הבלתי ראויים, כנודע שהיו פלם נשמות עשוקות ורשעים, כדאיתא במדרש שמשוה רצה להציל אחד מהם והיה מיכה שעשה הפסל, שפינון שהיה רוצה הקב"ה להציל הטובים שהיו ראויים לגאולה, היה מוכרח להמית קודם הרשעים שאינם ראויים, וכמו שעשה בימי החשד.

Now, before Moses went to Israel, there was still no merit known for Israel for which to redeem even the minority of them. However, after Aaron told the elders all that G-d had told Moses, and showed them the various signs that G-d had commanded, "the people were convinced,"¹³ then especially it was necessary to ensure that the worthy would remain and the unworthy would die. Therefore, [G-d] then sent Moses to Pharaoh, in order that the servitude would be heavy on them, and the unworthy would be crushed in a building, as it is known that they were all souls of oppressors and wicked people.

This is as it brought in the Midrash, that Moses wanted to rescue one of them, and it was Micah, who later made the statue. Tanchuma says that Micah was one of the crushed children in Egypt, and that he was restored to life by Moses.¹⁴ Sanhedrin 101b homiletically derives his

⁹ Ex. 14:30.

¹⁰ Gershon Shaul Yom-Tov Lipmann (c. 1579–1654), Czech rabbi and Talmudist, best known for his commentary on the Mishnah, *Tosefet Yom-Tov* (1614–1617). *Tosefet Yom-Tov*, Pesachim, chapter 10:6: "Israel was not saved from the hand of Egypt until the sea was torn apart for them and the Egyptians were drowned."

¹¹ Yalkut Shimoni, Beshalach, remez 243:1.

¹² Ex. 15:1.

¹³ Ex. 4:31.

¹⁴ Tanchuma, parashat Ki Tisa 69.

name: “Micah [מיכה], who was crushed [נתמכך] [*nitmachmech*] in the building.” Micah appears in Judges 17–18 as a man who made an idol with stolen, consecrated silver, thus showing that he was wicked and thus had been deserving of death in Egypt. Rashi comments on Sanhedrin 101b: “Crushed in the building [means that] the Egyptians put him into the building in the place of a brick, as is explained in the Aggadah. Moses said to the Holy One, Blessed be He, ‘You have done evil to this people! Now if they don't have bricks, they place the children of Israel into the building!’ The Holy One, Blessed be He, replied to him, ‘They are wiping out the thorns, because it is revealed before Me that had these children lived, they would be completely wicked. If you want, make a test and remove one.’ Moshe went and removed Micah [who became a thief and idolator].”

The Holy One, Blessed be He, wanted to save the good ones, who were worthy of redemption, and thus He was compelled to first kill the wicked ones, who were not worthy, and thus He did in the days of darkness.

וְנָהוּ הַטַּעַם שֶׁדָּוִד הַמֶּלֶךְ ע"ה הַקְּדוּשָׁה לְכָל הַמַּכּוֹת, כְּמוֹ שֶׁנִּכְתָּב לְקַמֵּן בְּפָרְשַׁת בֹּא עַל פְּסוּק "וַיִּמַּשׁ הַשָּׁדָי" וְעַי"ש. וְלָכֵן תִּירָץ לוֹ הַקַּב"ה "וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה'" נֶאֱמָן לְשָׁלֵם שְׂכָר טוֹב לַמַּתְהַלְכִים לְפָנָי, כְּלוּמַר לְפִי שֶׁאֲנִי רוֹצֵה לְהַצִּיל הַרְאוּיִים, מוֹכֵרֵח אֲנִי לְהַמִּית תְּחִלָּה הַרּוֹב שֶׁהֵם הַרְשָׁעִים, וּבְכַלְלֵם יֵשׁ אוֹתָם הַנְּתוּנִים בְּבִגְדֵי שֶׁהֵם נִשְׁמוֹת רְשָׁעִים.

This is the reason why King David advanced the plague of darkness to the beginning of his list of all the plagues,¹⁵ as we have written below for parashat Bo¹⁶ on the verse, “a darkness that can be touched,”¹⁷ and see there. Therefore, the Holy One, Blessed be He, answered [Moses], “He said to him, ‘I am the L-rd,’ ” as if to say, “Who is faithful to grant a good reward to those who walk before Me.” That is, as if to say, “Because I want to save the worthy, I am forced to first kill the majority, who are wicked, and among them are those who are placed in the building, who are all wicked souls.”

וְנָהוּ אֲנִי ה' נֶאֱמָן לְיַפְרַע וְנֶאֱמָן לִיתֵן שְׂכָר, כְּמוֹ שֶׁפִּירֵשׁ רַש"י ז"ל, וְסוּיִים "לָכֵן אָמַר לְבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל", דְּהֵינּוּ לְאוֹתָם שֶׁרְאוּיִים לְגִאוּלָּה שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, תֹּאמַר לָהֶם אֲנִי ה' הַנֶּאֱמָן בְּהַבְטָחָתִי, וּבְשִׁבִיל זֶה יִרְאוּ מִיַּת הַרְשָׁעִים וְהַצִּלַּת הַצְּדִיקִים.

This is the meaning of, “I am the L-rd, Who is faithful to exact punishment,” as Rashi of blessed memory interpreted. He concludes, “Therefore, say to the children of Israel: I am the L-rd,” which is to say: “To those who are worthy of redemption—who are called ‘the children of Israel’—say to them, ‘I am the L-rd, I am faithful in my promise.’ Because of this, you will see the death of the wicked, and the saving of the righteous.”

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¹⁵ Ps. 105:28.

¹⁶ *Zera Shimshon*, Chapter XV: Bo, Essay 2.

¹⁷ Ex. 10:21.