

# Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778\*

## Chapter XV: Bo (Ex. 10:1–13:16)

### Essay 26. Haggadah: Ancestral sin and Divine compassion

“And we cried out to the L-rd, G-d of our patriarchs, and the L-rd heard our voice, and He saw our plight, and our misery, and our oppression.” – Deut. 26:7. The Haggadah quotes this verse from Deuteronomy, and then quotes five other verses from Exodus to explain it.

”**וַנִּצְעַק** אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ”, כְּמָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר ”וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ” וְכוּ’, ”וַיִּאָּחֲזוּ” וְכוּ’. ”וַיִּשְׁמַע ה’ אֶת־קִלְנוֹ”, כְּמָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר ”וַיִּשְׁמַע [אֱלֹהִים]” וְכוּ’. ”וַיִּרְא אֶת־עֲנָנָו” [זו] וְכוּ’. צָרִיד לְדַקְדָּק מֵה בָּא הַמַּגִּיד לְהוֹדִיעֵנו, וּמֵאֵי קִשְׁיָא לִיָּה בַּפְּסוּק ”וַנִּצְעַק”, שֶׁהֵבִיא כְּמָה פְּסוּקִים לְתַרְץ זֶה הַפְּסוּק.

“And we cried out to the L-rd, G-d of our patriarchs,” as it is said: “It came to be, as a long time passed, that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel **groaned** under the burden of work, and they cried out, and their plea rose to G-d from amid the work.”<sup>1</sup>

“And the L-rd heard our voice,” as it is said: “And G-d heard their groaning, and G-d remembered His covenant with Abraham, and with Isaac, and with Jacob.”<sup>2</sup>

“And He saw our plight,” this was abstention from marital relations, as it is said: “And G-d saw the children of Israel, and G-d knew.”<sup>3</sup>

“And our misery,” these are the sons, as it is said: “Every son that is born you shall cast into the river, and the girls let live.”<sup>4</sup>

“And our oppression,” this is the pressure, as it is said: “I have seen the pressure that Egypt forced upon you.”<sup>5</sup>

- Haggadah, Magid, First Fruits Declaration

Question 1: **It’s necessary to check what the narrator of the Haggadah comes to teach us, and what difficulty he has with the verse “and we cried out,” for which he brings several verses to resolve that verse.**

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 2:23.

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 2:24.

<sup>3</sup> Ex. 2:25.

<sup>4</sup> Ex. 1:22.

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 3:9.

וְנִשְׁלַח לְדַבֵּר אֶת-דְּבָרֵי הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, דָּאֵף לְפִי הָאָמֵת שֶׁהַקַּב"ה הוֹצִיאָם בְּזָכוֹת הָאֲבוֹת כְּדִכְתִּיב "וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת-בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת-אֲבֹתָהֶם אֶת-יִצְחָק וְאֶת-יַעֲקֹב", יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא חָשְׁבוּ עַל זֶה, רַק צָעְקוּ בְּשִׁבִיל הָעֲבוּדָה קִשָּׁה, כְּדִכְתִּיב "וַיִּנְאָחוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן-הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּנְעֻקוּ" וְכוּ'. וְעוֹד דְּמַפְשְׁטִיה דְּקָרָא "וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת-בְּרִיתוֹ" וְכוּ' נִרְאֶה שֶׁהוּא דְּבָר נוֹסֵף שֶׁעָשָׂה הַקַּב"ה בְּעֶצְמוֹ. וְעוֹד דְּאָמְרִינָן: כָּל הַתּוֹלָה בְּזָכוֹת אֲחֵרִים תּוֹלִין לוֹ בְּזָכוֹת עֶצְמוֹ. וְאִם יִשְׂרָאֵל תְּלוּ צָעֲקָתָם בְּזָכוֹת הָאֲבוֹת, אֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁבִּכְאֵן לֹא הָיָה לָהֶם זָכוֹת עֶצְמָם, עִם כָּל זֶה לֹא הָיָה לוֹ לומר אֵלָּא "וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נַאֲקָתָם", דְּפִשְׁטָא הוּא שֶׁעָשָׂה בְּזָכוֹת הָאֲבוֹת, שֶׁהָרִי כִּד הָיְתָה צָעֲקָתָם.

A partial answer to Question 1 leads to a second question. That is, **it may be said that his difficulty is:**

Question 2: **What need is there** in recounting the Exodus in the Book of Deuteronomy to say here, **“the G-d of our patriarchs”**? For even according to the truth, that the Holy One, Blessed be He, took them out by the merit of the patriarchs, as it is written, **“And G-d remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob,”** Israel did not think of this. I.e., Exodus says they cried out, but doesn’t say that they cited the merit of the patriarchs. **Rather, they cried out because of the harsh labor, as it is written, “And the children of Israel groaned under the burden of work and cried out,”** etc.

Furthermore, from the plain meaning of the verse **“And G-d remembered His covenant,”** etc., it appears that this was an additional act that the Holy One, Blessed be He, did on His own initiative.

Moreover, we say in tractate Berakhot: **“Anyone who bases [his prayer] upon his own merit, [when G-d chooses to positively answer his prayer,] it is based upon the merit of others. And anyone who [modestly] bases [his prayer] upon the merit of others, [when G-d chooses to positively answer his prayer,] it is based upon his own merit.”**<sup>6</sup> **If Israel had attached their cry to the merit of the patriarchs, even though here they had no merit of their own, Scripture should have said only, “And G-d heard their groaning.”** For it would have been obvious that **He acted by the merit of the patriarchs, since that would have been the nature of their cry.**

That is, the Book of Exodus does not say that the Israelites appealed to G-d based on their own merit. In fact, they had little merit, having fallen to the 49th level of impurity.<sup>7</sup> It also does not say they appealed based on the Patriarchs’ merit. If they had, then by the rule in Berakhot, any favorable response would be attributed to their own merit, which they lacked. Instead, they did not invoke any merit at all. Their redemption was nevertheless automatically understood to rest on the patriarchs’ merit. Since it wasn’t expressly invoked, there is no tension with the teaching from Berakhot.

Answer to Question 2: Thus, the phrase **“the G-d of our patriarchs”** cannot be understood as an explicit appeal to the merit of the patriarchs. Had Israel invoked such merit, the rule stated in Berakhot would have required that any favorable response be attributed to Israel’s own merit, which they lacked. Scripture therefore avoids framing their cry in terms of merit altogether.

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<sup>6</sup> Berakhot 10b.

<sup>7</sup> There are 50 levels of holiness and 50 levels of impurity. Zohar Chadash, at the beginning of Yitro, explains that Israel had already fallen to the 49th level of impurity in Egypt, and G-d had to rescue us before we fell to the 50th level of impurity, from which there is no return. Therefore, He cut short our time in Egypt.

אֵלָּא נְדָאֵי שְׁפִוּנַת הַכְּתוּב בְּאִמְרוֹ "וַנִּצְעַק אֶל־ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ" אִינוּ בְּמִשְׁמַע שְׁצַעְקוֹ בְּזִכּוֹת הָאֲבוֹת, אֲלֵא כְּפִוְנָה אֶתְרַת הַיְתָה לָהֶם, וְצָרִיד לְפָרֵשׁ מָה הִיא כְּפִוְנָה זֹה. וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי הִבִּיא הַפְּסוּק "נִיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הֵהֵם" וְכוּ'. וְעוֹד קִשְׁיָא לִיה עַל הַפְּסוּק מַהוּ הַכְּפָל שֶׁל "וַיִּרְא אֶת־עַנְיָנוּ וְאֶת־עַמְלָנוּ וְאֶת־לִחְצָנוּ", וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי הִבִּיא הַפְּסוּקִים לְתַרְץ הַכָּל.

**Rather, it is certain that the intent of the verse in saying “and we cried out to the L-rd, the G-d of our patriarchs” does not mean that they cried out by the merit of the patriarchs. Rather, they had another intention.**

Question 3: **It is necessary to explain what that intention was.** This explanation will emerge later in this essay, once the historical and moral context of Israel’s suffering in Egypt has been fully developed.

**For this reason,** as a textual doorway to the answer, **he brings the verse “It came to be, as a long time passed,** that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel groaned under the burden of work, and they cried out, and their plea rose to G-d from amid the work.” We will arrive at the answer later in this essay.

Question 4: **Furthermore, he has difficulty with the verse concerning the repetition: “and He saw our plight, and our misery, and our oppression,” and therefore he brings verses to resolve everything.** As will become clear, the answer to Question 4 is inseparable from the answer to Question 3, and both will be resolved together beginning with the next paragraph, which cites the teaching of *Megaleh Amukot* concerning the four primordial generations.

וְהִינּוּ דְאִיתָא בְּמַגְלָה עֲמוּקוֹת, שְׁיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם הָיָה לָהֶם לְתַקַּן כְּנֶגֶד מַה שְׁפָגְמוּ אַרְבָּעָה דוּרוֹת, שְׁסִימָנָם אִמְסָה, אֲנוּשׁ, מִבּוּל, סְדוּם, הַפְּלָגָה. וְזֶהוּ הָרְאִישֵׁי תְבוּת "הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סְבִלוֹת מִצְרַיִם", וְלָכֵן סְבִלוֹת אַרְבָּעָה עֲנָשִׁים. דְּהִינּוּ "כָּל־הַבֵּן הַיּוֹדֵד הַיָּאֲרָה תִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ", כְּנֶגֶד דּוֹר אֲנוּשׁ, שְׁנַיִם אוֹקֵינּוּס הַצִּיף שְׁלִישׁוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם. מְנִיעַת תְּשׁוּבָה, דְּהִינּוּ פְרִישׁוֹת דְּרָד אַרְץ, כְּנֶגֶד דּוֹר הַמִּבּוּל שְׁחֻטָּאוּ בְּזַנוּת, וְלֹא הָיְתָה כְּפִוְנָתָם לְהוֹלִיד בְּנִים לְקִיּוּם הַמִּיּוֹן, רַק כְּפִוְנָתָם לְמַטְעַת פְּרָמִים, כְּדִאִיתָא בְּמִדְרַשׁ רַבָּה. "וַיִּפֶּז הָעָם בְּכָל־אַרְץ מִצְרַיִם" כְּנֶגֶד דּוֹר הַפְּלָגָה. וְכְנֶגֶד סְדוּם שְׁנֵהֶפְכוּ הָעָרִים עַל יוֹשְׁבֵיהֶּ, גַּם כָּאֵן שְׁקִעוּ בְּגִיהָם בְּבִנְיָן, כְּמוֹ שְׁאִמְרוּ ז"ל.

**This resolution to Questions 3 and 4, the deeper intention behind Israel’s cry, and the meaning of the threefold description of suffering, is what is found in *Megaleh Amukot* (236:1): that Israel in Egypt needed to rectify corresponding to what four generations had corrupted, whose mnemonic is AMSeH [אִמְסָה],<sup>8</sup> representing Enosh [אֲנוּשׁ], the Flood [מִבּוּל], Sodom [סְדוּם], the Dispersion [הַפְּלָגָה].<sup>9</sup> This is also the acronym of “the One who brings you out [הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם] from under [מִתַּחַת] the burdens [סְבִלוֹת] of Egypt.”<sup>10</sup>**

**Therefore they suffered four punishments. Namely: (1) “Every son that is born you shall cast into the river,” corresponding to the generation of Enosh, for then the Ocean Sea flooded a third of the world.**

<sup>8</sup> Ps. 6:7, “I am weary with groaning; every night I drench my bed, I melt [אִמְסָה] [amseh] my couch in tears.”

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Natan Nota Spira (1585–1633), chief Rabbi of Kraków, *Megaleh Amukot* (Krakow 1637).

<sup>10</sup> Ex. 6:7.

(2) **The prevention of marital relations, that is, abstention from normal conjugal life, corresponding to the generation of the Flood, who sinned through immorality. Their intention was not to beget children for the continuation of the species, rather their intent was solely monetary, to plant vineyards, as stated in Midrash Rabbah.**<sup>11</sup>

(3) **“And the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt,”**<sup>12</sup> corresponding to the generation of the Dispersion.

(4) **Corresponding to Sodom, whose cities were overturned upon her inhabitants, here too their children were sunk into the buildings, as [the rabbis] of blessed memory said.**<sup>13</sup>

Interim conclusion: All of Israel’s suffering in Egypt up to this point corresponded precisely to the rectification of the sins of these four generations. As long as the decrees fit within that framework, Israel accepted them without protest.

ובכל אלו הגזירות היו סובלים ישראל, שהרי יודעים שיש להם לתקן קלקולם של אלו, ואין מקום להם לצעוק, שהרי עד שלא נשלם התיקון אי אפשר שיגאלו. אמנם פשראו גזירה זו של "נימת מלך מצרים", שהיה שוחט מאה וחמשים ילדים בבקר ומאה וחמשים ילדים בערב, כמו שאמרו רז"ל, וזו אין לה שייכות עם הדורות הראשונים, אז צעקו אלה' לומר: מה שייכות יש בגזירה זו, "ונצעק אלה' אלהי אבותינו", כלומר: בנדקנו בקלקול אבותינו, דהיינו ארבעה דורות הראשונים, ולא מצינו רמז לזו הגזירה, ולמה הביאה עלינו.

**In all these decrees, Israel endured, for they knew that they had to repair the corruption of those four generations, and there was no place for them to cry out, since until the rectification was completed, it was impossible for them to be redeemed.**

However, when they saw this decree of “that the king of Egypt died,” that he was ill and based upon guidance from his magicians, he would slaughter one hundred and fifty children in the morning and one hundred and fifty children in the evening, and bathe in their blood twice a day, as our sages said.<sup>14</sup> This murder of children had no connection with the four earlier generations, then they cried out to the L-rd, saying: what connection is there in this decree? “And we cried out to the L-rd, the G-d of our patriarchs [*avoteinu*],” that is, we examined the corruption of our forebears [*avoteinu*],<sup>15</sup> namely the first four generations, and we found no hint of this decree, so why was it brought upon us?

Israel’s cry was not a plea for merit—neither their own nor that of the patriarchs. Rather, it was a protest grounded in moral structure: having examined the sins of the earlier generations, they found no justification for this decree. “The G-d of our patriarchs” refers to the G-d who governs history through justice across generations, and before whom this decree could not be justified.

<sup>11</sup> Gen. Rabbah 30:2.

<sup>12</sup> Ex. 5:12.

<sup>13</sup> Ex. Rabbah 2:5: “After they would drown [the Hebrew children] in the river, they would then crush them under the construction.”

<sup>14</sup> Ex. Rabbah 1:34.

<sup>15</sup> The Hebrew אבות [*avot*] can refer either to the patriarchs or to earlier generations generally. The Zera Shimshon is deliberately using the same word to make a contrast. The patriarchs are sources of merit, while the forebears are sources of inherited corruption.

ומשום הכי אָמר המגיד "ונצעק אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ", כְּמָה שְׁנֹאמַר "וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הַרְבִּימִים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת" וְכוּ', שְׁבִפְסוּק זֶה שֶׁל "וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם" אָנוּ מְבִינִים מֵהַ רִצָּה לֹאמַר "אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ". וְהַקֵּב"ה שָׁמַע לְקוֹלָם וְהוֹצִיאָם מִמִּצְרַיִם, כְּדָכְתִּיב "וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת־קוֹלָנוּ", קוֹלָנוּ בְּנֹקָא, שְׁפִינֵן שְׂרָאָה שֶׁהֵיוּ מִצְדִּיקִים עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הַדִּין, וּבְרִצּוֹן נִפְשָׁם הָיוּ סוֹבְלִים הַשְׁעָבוּד כְּדִי לְמַקֵּן עֲוֹן אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם, נִכְמְרוּ רַחֲמָיו עֲלֵיהֶם, אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁעֲדִיין הָיָה לָהֶם לְגִמּוֹר הַתִּיקוּן.

Therefore, the complete answer to Question 1 is as follows: **The narrator said, “And we cried out to the L-rd, the G-d of our patriarchs,” as it is said: “It came to be, as a long time passed, that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel groaned under the burden of work, and they cried out, and their plea rose to G-d from amid the work.” For from this verse, “that the king of Egypt died,” we understand what was meant by “the G-d of our patriarchs.” The Holy One, Blessed be He, heard their voice and brought them out of Egypt, as it is written, “And the L-rd heard our voice,” our voice specifically. For when He saw that they justified upon themselves the Divine judgment, and willingly endured the servitude in order to repair the sin of their forebears, His compassion was aroused for them, even though they still had to complete the rectification.**

Thus, the multiple verses cited by the narrator are necessary to reveal the full meaning of “and we cried out,” which otherwise would remain opaque.

וְזֶהוּ "וַיָּרֵא אֶת־עַנְיָנוּ", זֶה פְּרִישׁוֹת דְּרָד אֶרֶץ, שֶׁהִיא כְּנֶגֶד דּוֹר הַמַּבּוּל. "וַאֲת־עַמְלָנוּ", אֱלוֹ הַבָּנִים, "כָּל־הַבֵּן הַיְלֹוֹד", כְּנֶגֶד דּוֹר אֲנוּשׁ. "וַאֲת־לַחֲצָנוּ", זֶה הַדַּחֲק, שֶׁמִּחְמַת הַלַּחֲץ וְהַדַּחֲק הָיוּ נְפוּצִים בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּמִשְׁקִיעִים בְּנִיָּהֶם בַּבְּנָן, כְּנֶגֶד סְדוֹם וְהַפְּלִגָּה. וְלִפִּי שְׂאֵלוֹ הַשְּׂתִים לֹא הָיוּ גְזִירוֹת שֶׁל מִצְרַיִם, אֲלָא שֶׁמִּחְמַת גְּזִירוֹת[יָה]ם גָּרְמוּ לַיִשְׂרָאֵל אֱלוֹ הַשְּׂתִים, מִשׁוּם הֵכִי מְנַאֵן כְּאַחַת וְאָמַר זֶה הַדַּחֲק, דְּלִפִּי הַפְּשׁוּט אֵין לוֹ הַבְּנָה מֵהוּ זֶה הַדַּחֲק, וְהוֹצִיאָם בְּחֶסֶדוֹ הַגָּדוֹל.

**This is “And He saw our plight,” this was abstention from marital relations, corresponding to the generation of the Flood.**

**“And our misery,” these are the sons, as it is said: “Every son that is born you shall cast into the river, and the girls let live,” corresponding to the generation of Enosh.**

**“And our oppression,” this is the pressure, for because of the pressure and the oppression they were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt and sank their children into the building, corresponding to Sodom and the Dispersion. Since these two were not decrees of Egypt in and of themselves, but rather that as a result of their decrees, these two befell Israel. Therefore, he counted them together and called it “the oppression,” for according to the plain meaning there is no understanding of what this “oppression” is, and He brought them out by His great kindness.**

The final resolution of Question 4, is that the three expressions, plight, misery, and oppression, correspond to distinct historical corruptions. Their grouping reflects how certain decrees arose indirectly from Egyptian oppression rather than as independent punishments.

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