

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXXVII: Shelach (Num. 13:1–15:41)

Essay 4. What would the Egyptians say?

This essay discusses the text in which G-d threatened to destroy the people and start a new nation from Moses. But Moses asked G-d to think of what the Egyptians would say when they heard such news, that they would think G-d lacked the ability to bring the Israelites to Canaan.

"וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֲל־ה' וְשָׁמְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי־הִעֲלִיתָ בְּכַחַד אֶת־הָעַם הַזֶּה מִקְרַבּוֹ". קִשָּׁה שֶׁנִּרְאָה שְׁעָקָר הַטַּעַם תְּלוּי מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהַעֲלָם מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּכַחוֹ הָאֵל הָיָה לֹא הָיָה פֶתַח הַיָּם לְמִצְרַיִם. וְעוֹד "וַאֲמָרוּ" וְכֹי' "שָׁמְעוּ כִי־אָתָּה ה'" וְכֹי' "וַעֲנִנְךָ עִמָּד" וְכֹי' "וְהִמַּתָּה" וְכֹי', נִרְאָה שְׁעָקָר הַפֶּתַח הַיָּם שֶׁיֵּשׁ לְמִצְרַיִם הוּא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהִקְב"ה הֵטִיב לְיִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹכֵן "מִבְּלַתִּי יִכְלַת ה'" וְכֹי'.

“But Moses said to the L-rd, when Egypt, from whose midst You brought up this people by Your might, hears.”¹ A difficulty is that it appears that the main point from this initial verse depends on the fact that [the Israelites] fled from Egypt through His power. If that were not so, there wouldn’t be an opening here in this section for the Egyptians to be critical of G-d’s power.

Scripture continues further: **“they will tell it** to the inhabitants of that land. Now **they have heard that You, L-rd,** are in the midst of this people; that You, L-rd, appear in plain sight **when Your cloud rests** over them and when You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. **If then You slay** this people wholesale, the nations who have heard Your fame will say . . .”²

It appears that the main point of the opening here regarding the Egyptians is because the Holy One, Blessed be He, was good to Israel, and “It must be because the L-rd did not have the ability to bring that people into the land promised them on oath that He slaughtered them in the wilderness.”³

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¹ Num. 14:13.

² Num. 14:14–15.

³ Num. 14:16.

וגיש לומר דפנונת משה היא לומר אתה האל הוצאת את ישראל ממצרים ודלגת את הקץ שלא ברצון המצריים, "ושמעו מצרים פייהעלית בכתף" וכו' שלא בזמנם. "ואמרו אל-ישוב הארץ הזאת" דוקא, שמפני שעדיין לא עבר הזמן אינם יכולים לבא לארץ ישראל. והראיה שעמה ישראל הם טובים וצדיקים שהרי "עין בעין נראה אתה ה' ונענך עמד עליהם" וכו'. ועם כל זה "והמתה" וכו', זה הוא מופת חומה "מבלתי יכלת ה' להביא את העם הזה" וכו', שכן הדין אין לו יכולת להביאם אל הארץ שעדיין הפנעני יושב בה כלומר תושב.

It can be said that Moses meant to say that you, G-d, brought Israel out of Egypt and skipped the end of what was meant to be 400 years of enslavement, doing so against the will of the Egyptians. “When Egypt, from whose midst You brought up this people by Your might, hears” about this, that it was not in their time to be brought up, “they will tell it to the inhabitants of that land” specifically, that because the time had not yet passed, they cannot come to the Land of Israel. The proof is that now Israel is good and righteous, for “You, L-rd, appear in plain sight when Your cloud rests over them and when You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.” But despite all this, “if then You slay this people wholesale, the nations who have heard Your fame will say,” this is a clear-cut proof that “it must be because the L-rd did not have the ability to bring that people into the Land promised them on oath that He slaughtered them in the wilderness,” for according to the law, He didn’t have the ability to bring them to the Land, for the Canaanites were still settled in it, as if to say, settled.

ובפרק ה' דברכות, "מבלתי יכלת ה' ", יכול ה' מיבעי ליה, אמר רבי אלעזר אמר משה עכשיו יאמרו תיש פחו בנקבה, ואינו יכול להצילן. אמר לו הקב"ה והלא ראו הניסים שעשית להם בים, אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם עכשיו יאמרו, לפני מלך אחד יכול לעמוד, לפני שלשים ואחד מלכים אינו יכול לעמוד.

In the 5th chapter of tractate Berachot, regarding the verse, “The L-rd did not have the ability,” the Gemara questions the use of the feminine noun יכלת [yecholet] [“ability”], stating that:

It should have said: “The Lord [was not] able [יכול] [yachol]” [using a masculine verb]. Rabbi Elazar said: Moses [selected the feminine noun because he] said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, now the nations of the world will say that His strength weakened like a female, and He is unable to rescue them. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: And didn’t they already see the miracles and the mighty acts that I performed for them at the [Red] Sea? [Moses] said before Him: Master of the Universe, now they will say: Before a single king [like Pharaoh], He is able to stand, [but] before 31 kings [in the Land of Canaan], He is unable to stand.

- Berachot 32a

וקושה למה נקט ניסים שעשה להם בנים ולא הניסים של יציאת מצרים, ומכל שכן לפי פרוש רש"י על פסוק "כִּי־הוֹצִיא ה' אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם", זו גדולה על כלם. וכן הכתוב אומר "או הנסה אלהים לבוא לקחת לו גוי מקרב גוי במסת" וכו'. ועוד קשה דלא הנה ליה למימר אלא האומות תשש פחו ותו לא, ומהו "כִּנְקָבָה" דמה ענגו נקבה לכאן. ויש לומר דכוננת מלשה היתה שהאומות יאמרו שהקב"ה אינו יכול לעשות דבר הקפד ממה שגזררים הבית דין של מעלה ואין לו יכולת בידו כמלה.

A question is why did He choose the words the miracles that He did at [the Red] Sea and not “the miracles of the Exodus from Egypt”? In any case, according to the interpretation of Rashi on the verse, “Jethro priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel, G-d’s people, how the L-rd had brought Israel out of Egypt,”⁴ “this was greater than all other things.”⁵

Similarly, Scripture says, “Or has any deity ventured to go and take one nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and awesome power, as the L-rd your G-d did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?”⁶ Another difficulty is that Moses] should have only said, “the nations will now say that His strength weakened,” and nothing else. What is the meaning of “like a female,” for how is a female relevant here? It can be said that the intent of Moses was that the nations would say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is not able to do anything opposite from what the celestial court has decreed, and He has no power in His hand as a king.

ואם תאמר והלא הוא עצמו ברא הבית דין של מעלה והוא אדון עליהם ואיך אפשר שלא יהיה בידו יכולת לעשות דבר אף נגד רצונם. יש לומר שמצינו דוגמא לזה באשה שפסולה לדון היא בעצמה אבל יכולה היא להעמיד דיינים ואותם הדיינים שתעמיד יהיה להם יותר פח ממנה, כמו שתירצו על פסוק "היא שפטה את־ישראל בעת ההיא", שהטור (חושן משפט סימן ז') כתב שהיתה מלמדת להם הדיינים. ומפרשים אחרים כתבו שהיתה מעמדת דיינים, לפי ש"היא שפטה את־ישראל" אינו יכול להיות כפשוטו שהרי היתה פסולה לדון.

Perhaps you will say, but He Himself created the celestial court and He is Master over them. How is it possible that He does not have the ability to do something even if it’s against their will? It can be said that we found an example of this in a woman who is herself not allowed to judge, but she can appoint judges. and those judges that she appoints will have more power than her. This is as they explained on the verse, “Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet; she led Israel at that time,”⁷ that the Tur writes that she was teaching them the laws.⁸ Other commentators wrote that she established judges, for as “she led [שפטה] [*shofta*] Israel at that time,” it cannot be that she was as simple as that, to say that she was ineligible to judge.⁹

⁴ Ex. 18:1.

⁵ Rashi on Ex. 18:1.

⁶ Deut. 4:34.

⁷ Judges 4:4.

⁸ Tur, Choshen Mishpat, siman 7:5: “A woman is not allowed to judge, and Deborah was not judging; rather, she was teaching the judges of Israel.”

⁹ The word “*shofta*” can mean “judge” or “leader,” and obviously the English title of the Book is “Judges.” Many translate as “leader” because of the belief that Deborah would have been disqualified from serving as an actual judge in court cases, while other commentators believed that she was an exception and did serve as a judge.

ועָשׂוּ יֹאמְרוּ תִשָּׁשׁ פָּחוּ פְּנֵמְכָה דְּנֻקָּא, אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁהוּא עֲצָמוּ בְּרָא הַבַּיִת דִּין שֶׁל מַעֲלָה אַף עַל פִּי כֵן אֵינּוּ יָכוֹל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּה פְּנוּנָתָם. וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי הַזֶּה הַזֶּה לֹא הָקֵב "הַ נְסִי הַיָּם וְלֹא נְסִי מִצְרַיִם, שֶׁבְּנְסֵי מִצְרַיִם הָיָה בְּהִסְפָּמַת הַבַּיִת דִּין שֶׁל מַעֲלָה כְּמוֹ שֶׁפָּרַשׁ רַשִׁ"י "וְנִיחֵי בְּחֻצֵי הַלַּיְלָה נִהַ הִכָּה כָּל־בְּכוֹר", "וְנִהַ" הוּא וּבֵית דִּינּוּ, וְכֵן אָמְרוּ בְּמִדְרָשׁ אָמַר הַקַּב"ה לְמַלְאָכָיִם רְאוּנֵיִם הַמִּצְרַיִים לְלִקּוֹת בְּחֻשָׁד, מִיָּד הִסְפִּימוּ בָּלָם "וְלֹא־מְרוּ אֶת־דְּבָרוֹ", לְפִי שֶׁהִדִּין הָיָה נוֹתֵן לְהַצִּיל אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲבָל בְּנְסֵי הַיָּם הָיָה מִתְּלוּקָת גְּדוּל לְמַעֲלָה, כְּנִרְאָה מִהַמִּדְרָשׁ לְלִקּוֹט פְּרִישֶׁת בְּשֵׁלַח שֶׁשָּׂרָן שֶׁל מִצְרַיִים הָיָה טוֹעֵן לְהַצִּיל אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא לְאַבֵּד הַמִּצְרַיִים.

Now they will say that His power weakened specifically like a female, even though He Himself created the celestial court, nevertheless, He cannot do the opposite of their intention. Because of that, the Holy One, Blessed be He, reminded him of the miracles of the Red Sea and not of the miracles of Egypt, i.e., the Ten Plagues, for the miracles of Egypt occurred with the approval of the celestial court, as Rashi explained on the verse, “It was the middle of the night, and the L-rd struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt,¹⁰ ‘and the L-rd’ means He and His celestial court.”¹¹ Similarly, [the rabbis] said in a Midrash, “the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to his angels: It is fitting for the Egyptians to be struck with darkness, and immediately they all agreed,”¹² “and they did not defy His word.”¹³ For according to the law, Israel was allowed to be saved, but at the miracles of the Red Sea there was a huge dispute above, as it appears from the Midrash, Yalkut Shimoni, parashat Beshalach, remez 241, that the guardian angel of the Egyptians was pleading to save Israel and not to destroy the Egyptians.

וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי הַשֵּׁיב הַקַּב"ה וְהֵלֵא רְאוּ הַנְּיָסִים שֶׁעָשִׂיתִי לָהֶם בְּיָם אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁהַבַּיִת דִּין שֶׁל מַעֲלָה לֹא הָיוּ מְסַכְּמִים. וְאָמַר לְפָנָיו עָשׂוּ יֹאמְרוּ לְפָנָיו מֶלֶךְ אֶחָד וְכוּ' לְפָנָיו שְׁלוּשִׁים וְאַחַד מְלָכִים וְכוּ', כְּלוּמַר לְפָנָיו מֶלֶךְ אֶחָד לֹא רָצוּ הַבַּיִת דִּין לַעֲבֹב עַל יָדוֹ מִלַּעֲשׂוֹת וְשָׂמָא הִסְפִּימוּ עִמּוֹ לְכַבּוֹדוֹ, וְעוֹד שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה שָׁם אֶלָּא מְקַטְרֵג אֶחָד, אֲבָל נִגַּד שְׁלוּשִׁים וְאַחַד מְלָכִים בְּנֻדָּא לֹא יָהִי וְכוּלָּת בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּה הַדִּין, שֶׁיְהִי שָׁם הַרְבֵּה קְטִיגוֹרִים וַיַּעֲבֹבוּ בְּיָדוֹ. עַד שֶׁאָמַר לִיָּה "סְלַחְתִּי כְּדָבָרְךָ".

Because of that, the Holy One, Blessed be He, answered: “Didn’t you see the miracles that I performed for them at the Red Sea, even though the celestial court did not agree?” [Moses] said before Him: Master of the Universe, now they will say: Before a single king [like Pharaoh], He is able to stand, [but] against 31 kings [in the Land of Canaan], He is unable to stand. That is as if to say, before one king, the court didn’t want to prevent Him from acting, and perhaps they agreed with Him for His honor. Also, there was only one accuser, but for 31 kings, He will certainly not have the ability to do the opposite, for there will be many accusers there and they will stay His hand. At that point, He said to [Moses], “I have forgiven, as you said.”¹⁴

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¹⁰ Ex. 12:29.

¹¹ Rashi on Ex. 12:29.

¹² Midrash Ex. Rabbah 14:1.

¹³ Ps. 105:28.

¹⁴ Num. 14:20.