דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

"We Were Slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt"

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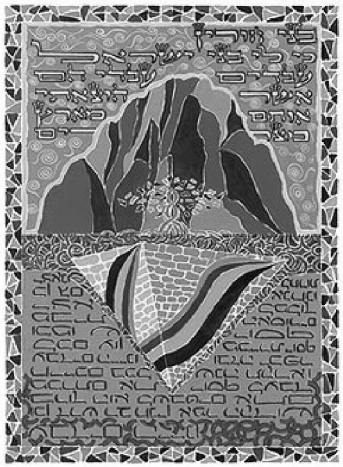
Rav Hanina explained, "God said to the tribes, 'You have sold Joseph into slavery. By your lives, every year you will declare, 'We were slaves to Pharaoh,' and thereby atone for the sin of selling Joseph. And just as Joseph went forth from imprisonment to royalty, so we too have gone forth from slavery to freedom" — Midrash Tehillim, Mizmor X



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Mount Sinai and a pyramid mirror each other, two halves of a whole. The pyramid is upside down, demonstrating that slavery is unnatural. Servitude distorts reality and ambition. This distortion comes not only from slavery to a human master, but also from when we become enslaved to our own drives—lacking the ability to envision an alternative or to hold fast to hope.

The midrash about Joseph and his brothers above is inscribed in the background set against the pyramid. The pyramid is draped with Joseph's striped coat; the colors carry over into the border, a mosaic of multicolored glass, reflecting the shattered love of his family—torn apart by favoritism and hatred.

Mount Sinai is upright, indicating that learning Torah is a natural state, the very purpose for which we were created. Calligraphed in the sky, one sees Leviticus 25:55, "For it is to Me (God) that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt." Thus, freedom manifests itself in becoming a servant of God rather than a servant to Pharaoh.

True liberation comes from the observance of Torah, which "inverts the pyramid of Egypt."

TORAH FROM JTS

JTS Community Learning

Parashat Bo 5775 **פרשת בא תשע"ה**

Where Does Midrash Begin?

Professor Benjamin D. Sommer, Professor of Bible, JTS

In this week's parashah we find the first legal passage in the Torah, Exodus 12, which contains laws concerning Passover. Torah as a type of literature is best defined as a combination of law and narrative. In Torah we read not only some laws here and some narratives there, but laws that are authenticated and explained by the narrative, and narrative whose purpose is to motivate us to observe the laws. Since we first encounter law in this week's parashah, in a significant way it is here that the Torah begins in earnest.

But it is not only Torah in its full sense that emerges in Parashat Bo. Something else that is just as essential to Judaism appears in the commands concerning Passover in chapter 12. This becomes clear when we read the opening verses of the chapter very closely.

The opening verses of Exodus 12 are somewhat uneven, because at times they refer to the Israelites in the third person, while at others, they refer to them in the second person. A fascinating pattern emerges when we separate the second-person verses from the third-person verses in this passage. (At the outset of the passage, I will treat one second-person phrase as part of the third-person section; there are several reasons to believe that the phrase there was not originally worded in the second person). Here's how the passage reads:

> [1]God said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: [2]This month shall be the head of your months.
>
> *It shall be the first of the months of the year for you.*
>
> [3]Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth of this month each of them should take a lamb for a family, a lamb for a household. [4]But if the household is too small for a lamb, it should share one with a neighbor dwelling nearby.
>
> *You should contribute for the lamb according to what each household will eat, in proportion to the number of persons.*

[5]Your lamb should be without blemish, a male one year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. [6]You should keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month.
The whole assembled congregation of the Israelites should slaughter it at twilight. [7]They should take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. [8]They should eat the flesh that very night; they should eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs.
[9]You may not eat any of it raw, or boiled with water, but roasted--head, legs, and entrails--over the fire. [10]You may not leave any of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you should burn it. [11]This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, with sandals on your feet, and with your staff in your hand. You should eat it hurriedly.
It is a passover offering to God.

In a recent book, the biblical scholar Shimon Gesundheit from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem points out how significant the differences between this passage's third-person and second-person verses are. The sections that use the third person (in roman type above) read perfectly well on their own, and it is likely that they constitute the original text of an ancient Israelite law of Passover. The verses using the second person (in *italic* type above) provide additional information that explains or clarifies the very terse directions from the original text. A reader of the original version of this ritual law might have wondered what the phrase "the head of the months" meant. A later sage in biblical times who was copying the original version inserted some material that paraphrased this potentially ambiguous phrase. The brief addition tells us that the phrase "the head of the months" means "the first of the months of the year."

Similarly, one might wonder how to work things out when sharing the lamb with a neighbor's family. The later sage inserted new material to explain that the amounts contributed to the meal should be proportional to the size of the two families involved, rather than a 50-50 split that ignores the relative size of the two groups. The original text instructs the audience to roast the offering. The later sage, however, knew that some other authorities claimed the offering had to be boiled. (Those authorities authored the Passover law known to us from Deuteronomy 16:1–8.) The sage who composed the second-person verses from Exodus 12 decided to reinforce the older law found in the third-person verses in Exodus. This later sage insists, against the law formulated by the Deuteronomic authorities, "You may not eat any of it raw, or boiled with water, but roasted . . . over the fire."

The biblical text, as I lay it out above, will look and sound very familiar to a person who has studied the midrashic commentaries of the classical rabbis. (A well-known example of such a midrash is the Passover Haggadah's discussion of Deuteronomy 26:5). After each older passage we find a brief comment that clarifies the base text, expands on it, or provides additional detail necessary for applying it with confidence that one is conducting the ritual properly. Even the disagreement between our passage from Parashat Bo and the law in Deuteronomy 16 will seem familiar to someone who has studied rabbinic literature; here we find one of the earliest cases of *mahloket* (dispute) between sages who agree on the importance of a law but disagree about its precise details.

From this example, and from hundreds of additional examples found throughout the Bible, we learn that the process of interpreting and arguing about the Bible is as old as the Bible itself. Indeed, it is older, because the process of interpreting, paraphrasing, and supplementing the original law of Passover helped to create our biblical text in Exodus 12. Biblical texts such as these often contain an older layer along with supplements that explain, reinforce, or revise the oldest layer. The Rabbis of the Talmud did not invent midrash; they inherited the idea of commentary's great importance from the biblical authors whose work they interpret. Before the Bible had even crystallized into the form in which we know it, biblical texts were already sacred, authoritative, and subject to the close readings of the biblical authors who were the Jewish people's first sages.

In Judaism, the very act of interpretation is considered holy, for it is through grappling with these ancient texts that we embrace them as our own. Anyone familiar with traditional Judaism knows how important it is for Jewish sages to devote time to clarifying the Bible's commands, applying them to new situations, and understanding their implications more fully. What Exodus 12 shows us is how deeply loyal these activities are to the biblical text, because the process of clarifying, applying, and updating the Bible began in the Bible itself.

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