



Who Shall Cross? A Talmudic Reimagining of the Passover Narrative

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach is founding director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts. She brings her passion for prayer and teaching to the JTS community. Through her work as director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, she has developed and overseen programs and discussions, as well as prayer services on Shabbat and festivals, for the JTS community and the general public.

Rabbi Uhrbach loves being in the classroom at JTS, where she teaches courses on the meaning of liturgy and a course she created titled The Art of Leading Prayer. She is a religious mentor to many of JTS' rabbinical and cantorial students. She served as Interim Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership for the 2021-2022 school year.

In addition to her role at JTS, Rabbi Uhrbach serves as the founding rabbi of Gesher | The Bridge Shul in Bridgehampton, Long Island, enabling her to mentor many of JTS's rabbinical and cantorial students in a congregational setting. She has played a key role in the acclaimed Lev Shalem prayer book series, as associate editor of Siddur Lev Shalem for Shabbat and Festivals, published by the Rabbinical Assembly in 2016, and currently as associate editor of the forthcoming Siddur Lev Shalem for Weekdays. She also served on the editorial committee for Machzor Lev Shalem.

A distinguished teacher of Torah, she has been a member of the Wexner Heritage faculty, and has taught and served as scholar-in-residence in many synagogues.

Rabbi Uhrbach was ordained at JTS, where she was a Wexner Graduate Fellow. A graduate of Harvard Law School and Yale University, Rabbi Uhrbach served as Law Clerk to Federal District Judge Kimba M. Wood. She then joined the New York law firm of Satterlee Stephens Burke & Burke LLP, where she specialized in media litigation, becoming a partner of the firm in January 1996.

This text study and accompanying notes were included in *The Seder's Call: Moving Beyond the Seder Table*:

- [The JTS Passover Supplement](#)
- ["Who Shall Cross" Text Study](#) with Rabbi Uhrbach's notes

TEXT STUDY: Talmud Bavli, Hullin 7a-b

<p>Once, Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair was on his way to redeem captives, and came to the river Genai. He said to it: "Genai, part your waters for me, that I may pass through you."</p> <p>It said to him: "You are going to do the will of your Maker, and I am going to do the will of my Maker. Regarding you, there is doubt whether you will do it or not. Regarding me, it is certain I will do it."</p> <p>He said, "If you do not part, I will decree that no waters ever flow through you."</p> <p>It parted for him.</p>	<p>דרכי פנחס בן יאיר הוה קאזיל לפדיון שבויין, פגע ביה בגינאי נהרא, אמר ליה: גינאי, חלוק לי מימך ואעבור בך, אמר ליה: אתה הולך לעשות רצון קונך ואני הולך לעשות רצון קוני, אתה ספק עושה ספק אי אתה עושה, אני ודאי עושה אמר ליה: אם אי אתה חולק, גוזרני עליך שלא יעברו בך מים לעולם, חלק ליה.</p>
<p>There was also present a certain man who was carrying wheat for the Passover. He [Rabbi Pinhas] said to it: "Part for this man, too, for he is engaged in a mitzvah." It parted for him.</p>	<p>הוה ההוא גברא דהוה דארי חיטי לפיסחא, אמר ליה: חלוק ליה נמי להאי דבמצוה עסיק, חלק ליה.</p>
<p>There was also an Arab accompanying them. He [Rabbi Pinhas] said to it: "Part for him too, that he not say, 'Is this how they treat a fellow traveler?'" It parted for him.</p>	<p>הוה ההוא טייעא דלווה בהדייהו, אמר ליה: חלוק ליה נמי להאי, דלא לימא: כך עושים לבני לוויה? חלק ליה.</p>
<p>Rav Yosef said: How great is this man! Greater than Moses and the six hundred thousand [who left Egypt]! As there [at the Red Sea], the waters parted one time. Here three times. But perhaps here too one time [and the river began to flow again only after all three of them passed]. Rather, this man was <i>like</i> [as great as] Moses and the six hundred thousand.</p>	<p>אמר רב יוסף כמה נפיש גברא ממשה ושתין רבוון דאילו התם חד זימנא והכא תלתא זימנין ודלמא הכא נמי חדא זימנא אלא כמשה ושתין רבוון</p>

A) FULFILLING THE WILL OF ONE'S MAKER

Context --Talmud Bavli, Hullin 7a-b

<p>[Rabbi Ze'ira said]: The Holy Blessed One does not generate mishaps through the animals of the righteous, and all the more so through the righteous themselves... What does "the animals of the righteous" [refer to]? The incident where Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir was going to engage in the redemption of captives, and he encountered the River Genai. Once, Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair was on his way to redeem captives, and came to the river Genai....</p> <p>[After crossing the river, Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir] happened to come to a certain inn. His hosts cast barley before his donkey. It did not eat. They sifted the barley with a utensil. It did not eat. They separated the chaff from the barley by hand. It did not eat. He [Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir] said: Perhaps [the barley] is not tithed. They tithed it and it ate. He [Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir] said: This poor animal is going to perform the will of its Maker, and you are feeding it untithed produce?</p>	<p>בהמתן של צדיקים אין הקב"ה מביא תקלה על ידן צדיקים עצמן לא כל שכן מאי בהמתן של צדיקים דרבי פנחס בן יאיר הוה קאזיל לפדיון שבויין פגע ביה בגינאי נהרא דרבי פנחס בן יאיר הוה קאזיל לפדיון שבויין, פגע ביה בגינאי נהרא, ... אקלע להווא אושפיזא רמו ליה שיערי לחמריה לא אכל חבטינהו לא אכל נקרינהו לא אכל אמר להו דלמא לא מעשרן עשרינהו ואכל אמר ענייה זו הולכת לעשות רצון קונה ואתם מאכילין אותה טבלים</p>
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B) IS THIS HOW THEY TREAT A FELLOW TRAVELLER?

Parallel Text --Talmud Yerushalmi, Demai, 1:3, 22a

<p>Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair went to the House of Assembly when the Ginai overflowed. He said to it: Genai, Genai, why do you prevent me from going to the House of Assembly? It split before him and he crossed it. His students asked him, may we cross also? He said to them, one who knows of himself that he never mistreated a fellow Jew in his life may cross without being harmed.</p>	<p>רבי פינחס בן יאיר הוה אָזיל לְבֵית וועד וְהוה גִּינַי גָּבִיר. אָמַר לִיה גִּינַי גִּינַי מַה אַתְּ מַנֵּעַ לִי מִבֵּית וועדָה וּפְלַג קוּמוי וְעֵבֶר. אָמַר לִיה תִּלְמִידִיו יְכָלִין אֲנִן עֵבְרִין. אָמַר לֹון מֵאן דִּידַע בְּנַפְשִׁיה דְּלֹא אָקִיל לְבַר נֶשׁ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל מִן יוּמוי יַעְבּוּר וְלֹא מִנְכָּה</p>
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Talmud Bavli, Gittin 61a

Our Rabbis have taught: We support the poor of the other nations along with the poor of Israel, and visit their sick along with the sick of Israel, and bury their dead along with the dead of Israel, <i>mipnei darkhei shalom</i> /in the interests of peace.	תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן: מִפְּרֻסִּים עֲנִי גוֹיִם עִם עֲנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּמִבְּקָרִין חוֹלֵי גוֹיִם עִם חוֹלֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְקוֹבְרִין מֵתֵי גוֹיִם עִם מֵתֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִפְּנֵי דַרְכֵי שְׁלוֹם.
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Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Kings 10:12

Even with respect to heathens, the sages commanded us to visit their sick, and to bury their dead with the dead of Israel, and to maintain their poor with the poor of Israel, in the interests of peace, as it is written: "Adonai is good to all; and [God's] mercies are over all [God's] works" (Ps. 145:9). And it is written, "Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace" (Prov. 3:17).	אָפְלוּ הָעֶכָּז"ם צוֹו חֻכְמִים לְבַקֵּר חוֹלֵיהֶם וּלְקַבֵּר מֵתֵיהֶם עִם מֵתֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְפָרֹס עֲנִיֵּיהֶם בְּכָל עֲנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִפְּנֵי דַרְכֵי שְׁלוֹם. הָרִי נֶאֱמַר (תהילים קמה, ט) "טוֹב ה' לְכָל וְרַחֲמָיו עַל כָּל מַעֲשָׁיו". וְנֶאֱמַר (משלי ג, יז) "דַּרְכֶּיהָ דַּרְכֵי נֵעַם וְכָל נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם":
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C) GENAI AND GENUT

On the Haggadah -- Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 116a

GEMARA:... "One begins with disgrace/ <i>g'nut</i> and concludes with praise." What is the meaning "with disgrace"? Rav said: "At first our forefathers were idol worshippers." Shmuel said: "We were slaves."	גַּמ'...מֵתָחִיל בְּגִנוּת וּמִסִּיִּים בְּשִׁבַּח. מַאי בְּגִנוּת? רַב אָמַר: "מֵתָחִלָּה עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה הָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ". [ושמואל] אָמַר: "עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ".
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