

# “*Davar Acher*”: On Dual Narratives in the Haggadah<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Shmuel Hain

Rabbi, Young Israel Ohab Zedek of North Riverdale/Yonkers  
Rosh Beit Midrash, SAR High School and Rosh Kollel, YU/SAR High School Kollel

## On the significance of expounding “*Arami Oved Avi*”

The Pesach Haggadah centers on the exposition of the biblical passage of “*Arami Oved Avi*— My father was a wandering Aramean” (Devarim 26:5-8).<sup>2</sup> This sons-less and song-less section of Maggid is often sped through, unexamined, due to its textual density. Rambam (Laws of Chametz and Matzah 7:4), however, formulates this exegetical exercise in a manner that challenges us to pay careful attention to these verses and their midrashic elucidation:

*One must begin (telling the story of the Exodus) with disgrace and conclude with praise... this requires one to expound from “Arami Oved Avi” until one completes the entire portion. And anyone who adds to and expounds excessively on the exegesis of this portion, this is to be praised.*

וצריך להתחיל בגנות, ולסיים בשבח... והוא שידרוש מ"ארמי אוֹבֵד אָבִי", עד שיגמור כל הפרשה; וכל המוסיף ומאריך בדרש פרשה זו, הרי זה משובח.

<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from a *Shabbat HaGadol drasha* delivered at Young Israel Ohab Zedek on *Shabbat HaGadol* 5773. It was dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Herschel Schacter z"l, who passed away on *erev Shabbat HaGadol*. I would like to acknowledge the many helpful comments and suggestions of YIOZ congregants and the YU/SAR HS Kollel Fellows on an earlier draft, which have been incorporated into this article.

<sup>2</sup> See Mishnah, *Pesachim* 10:4: “He begins with disgrace and ends with praise, and he expounds from ‘My father was a wandering Aramean’ until he finishes the entire section.” Numerous scholarly works and articles have examined this mishnah and its subsequent interpretation, including the question of verse 9 and its original inclusion at the seder. See, among others, the sources cited recently in: Mitchell First, “*Arami Oved Avi*: Uncovering the Interpretation Hidden in the Mishnah,” *Hakirah* 13 (Spring 2012), p. 127 note 1: <http://www.hakirah.org/Vol13First.pdf>. Even more recently, Professor David Henshke has comprehensively examined the relationship between this mishnah and the other mishnayot in *Pesachim* which detail Maggid, as well as the development of both the Haggadah and the seder ritual as a whole. See David Henshke, “On the Strata in the Passover Haggadah in the Mishnah,” (Hebrew) *Tarbiz* 81 (2013) p. 25-45- [http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/upload/\\_FILE\\_1378043981.pdf](http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/upload/_FILE_1378043981.pdf); David Henshke, “*Seudat Leil HaSeder: Bein Hallel L’Haggadah* (Hebrew),” *Shoshannat Yaakov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman*, eds. Shai Secunda and Steven Fine (2012) pp. 1-27 (Hebrew section). This article draws from much of this previous scholarship, especially that of Henshke.

For Rambam, reciting these verses and their exegesis should not be viewed as a pro-forma act to be discharged; rather, it represents an opportunity to analyze and expound upon the central text of the seder, a particularly praiseworthy undertaking not to be overlooked.

Following Rambam's charge, this article will examine the final verse (Devarim 26:8) from the biblical passage cited in the Haggadah:

*The Lord brought us forth from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm, and with awesome power, and by signs, and by portents.*

וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה וּבִמְרָא גָדֹל וּבְאֵתוֹת וּבְמִפְתֵּיִם.

Through an analysis of the Haggadah's unique exegesis of this verse we will:

1. Expand, expound, and explicate a fixed and opaque portion of the Haggadah's text.
2. Understand and appreciate the formula of "begin with disgrace and conclude with praise," as well as how the exegesis of *Arami Oved Avi* advances this narrative device.
3. Uncover and reveal an alternative narrative embedded in Maggid, a narrative that yields a different way of reading, understanding, and experiencing the Exodus from Egypt.

## Two Midrashic traditions

The text of our Haggadah reads as follows:<sup>3</sup>

1. **"With a mighty hand,"** this refers to the **dever** (pestilence) as it is said: "Behold, the hand of the Lord will be upon your livestock in the field, upon the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds and the flocks, a very severe pestilence."
2. **"And with an outstretched arm,"** this refers to the **sword**, as it is said: "His sword was drawn, in his hand, stretched out over Jerusalem."
3. **"And with awesome power,"** this refers to the **revelation of the Divine Presence**, as it is said: "Has any God ever tried to take for himself a nation from the midst of another nation, with trials, signs and wonders, with war and with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and with great manifestations, like all that the Lord your God, did for you in Egypt before your eyes!"
4. **"And with signs,"** this refers to the **staff**, as it is said: "Take into your hand this staff with which you shall

1. בְּיַד חֲזָקָה - זוֹ הַדָּבָר, כְּמָה שְׁנֹאֲמַר: הִנֵּה יָד יְיָ הוֹיָה בְּמִקְנֶה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׂדֶה, בַּסּוּסִים, בַּחֲמֹרִים, בַּגְּמֵלִים, בַּבְּקָר וּבַצֹּאן, דָּבָר כְּבֹד מְאֹד. (שמות ט:ג)
2. וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה - זוֹ הַתְּרֵב, כְּמָה שְׁנֹאֲמַר: וַחֲרַבוּ שְׁלוֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ, נְטוּיָה עַל יְרוּשָׁלַיִם. (דברי הימים א, כא:טז)
3. וּבִמְרָא גָדֹל - זוֹ גְלוּי שְׂכִינָה, כְּמָה שְׁנֹאֲמַר: אוֹ הִנֵּסָה אֱלֹהִים לְבֹא לְקַחַת לוֹ גּוֹי מִקְרֵב גּוֹי בְּמִסַּת בְּאֵתוֹת וּבְמוֹפְתִים, וּבְמִלְחָמָה וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה, וּבְמוֹרָאִים גְּדֹלִים, כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְכֶם יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵיךָ. (דברים ד:לד)
4. וּבְאֵתוֹת - זֶה הַמַּטֵּה, כְּמָה שְׁנֹאֲמַר: וְאֵת הַמַּטֵּה הַזֶּה תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ, אֲשֶׁר

<sup>3</sup> The exegesis immediately preceding this, on the first words of verse 8: "The Lord brought us forth from Egypt," has occupied much scholarly interest, partially due to it not appearing in all early versions of the Haggadah, and primarily because it emphasizes God's role in the Exodus to the exclusion of all agents, including Moshe. See, for example, David Arnov, "The Passover Haggadah: Moses and the Human Role in Redemption" *Judaism* Vol. 55 (2006), pp. 4-27, <http://www.ajcongress.org/site/DocServer/Thepassoverhaggadah.pdf?docID=2122> and David Henshke, "The Lord Brought Us forth From Egypt' On the Absence of Moses in the Passover Haggadah," *AJS Review* 31:1 (April 2007), pp. 61-73.

perform the signs."

5. "And with wonders," this refers to the **blood**, as it is said: "And I shall show wonders in heaven and on earth: blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke."

**Another explanation:** "Strong hand" indicates two [plagues]; "Outstretched arm," another two; "Great manifestation," another two; "Signs," another two; and "Wonders," another two. These are the Ten Plagues which the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians...

5. תַּעֲשֶׂה בּוֹ אֶת הָאֵתוֹת. (שמות ד:יז)  
וּבְמִפְתָּיִם - זֶה הַדָּם, כְּמָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:  
וְנִתְּתִי מוֹפְתִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ, דָּם  
וְאֵשׁ וְתִימְרוֹת עֶשֶׂן. (יואל ג:ג)  
דָּבָר אַחֵר: בְּיַד חֲזָקָה - שְׁתִּים,  
וּבְזְרַע נְטוּיָה - שְׁתִּים, וּבְמֶרְא גְדֹל -  
שְׁתִּים, וּבְאֵתוֹת - שְׁתִּים, וּבְמִפְתָּיִם  
- שְׁתִּים. אֵלּוּ עֶשֶׂר מִכּוֹת שֶׁהֵבִיא  
הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עַל הַמִּצְרִים  
בְּמִצְרַיִם, ...

Note that this passage is distinguished by being the only section for which the Haggadah offers two different exegeses, as indicated by the phrase "davar acher." This *sui generis* phenomenon is perplexing. Why did the compiler of the Haggadah not choose one *drasha* in this case? Indeed, some early versions of the Haggadah contain only the second *drasha*.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the second exposition, at first glance, should be the preferred *drasha* as it is straightforward, while the first is highly problematic. According to the *davar acher*, the verse describing the manner in which the Israelites were brought out of Egypt is alluding to the ten plagues. While the count of ten is midrashic (5 x 2, leading to a host of other multiples of plagues in the Haggadah), understanding the verse as referring to the plagues corresponds with the simple meaning of the text and is attested to by other biblical verses.<sup>5</sup>

The first exegesis, by contrast, is puzzling from start to finish for several reasons. First, what makes the plagues of *dever*/pestilence and *dam*/blood (numbers 1 and 5 above) worthy of being singled out from the other plagues and specifically mentioned at the beginning and end of the exposition? Second, why is "the sword" (#2) relevant when it is not mentioned anywhere in the biblical description of the plagues? Third, what is the significance of the term "giluy Shekhina/Divine Revelation" (#3) and how does it contribute to the exegesis of the verse?<sup>6</sup> Fourth, the connection between the *matteh*/staff and "the signs" (#4) is tenuous, at best, since the staff was only involved in a few of the plagues. Furthermore, understanding "the signs" as

<sup>4</sup> See Shmuel and Zev Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal* (Hebrew) (1998) p. 143; Jay Rovner, "A New Version of the Eres Israel Haggadah Liturgy and the Evolution of the Eres Israel *Miqra Bikkurim* Midrash," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 92:3,4 (2002) p. 427.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Devarim 6:21-22: "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord wrought marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and his entire household before our eyes."

<sup>6</sup> An additional problem with the exegesis of "u've'mora gadol—and with awesome power" is that the derivation of *mora* from *mareh* (understood to be the "revelation of the Shekhinah") instead of from *yirah* (awe), is unsupported by the verse cited as a proof text from Devarim 4:34 which merely repeats the wording of "mora." This problem is beyond the scope of this article as it touches upon the two different midrashic genres present and intermingled throughout the exegesis of this passage in the Haggadah: explanatory exegesis and mere citation of parallel verses. See E. E. Urbach's review of Goldschmidt, "The Passover Haggadah: Its Sources and History (Hebrew)," *Kiryat Sefer* 36 (1961) pp. 145-146; David Henshke, "The Midrash of Arami Oved Avi (Hebrew)," *Sidra* 4 (1988) pp. 33-52; and, most relevant to this particular exegesis, see David Henshke, "'By a Mighty Hand': an explication of the exegesis of the Passover Haggadah," *Kenishta* 4 (2010), pp. 11-27, and especially pages 22-27.

referring to the staff is strange since the staff was merely the instrument which brought about several plagues and not “the signs” themselves!<sup>7</sup>

## Proposed solutions in the Rishonim<sup>8</sup>

These questions on the first midrash are based on an important assumption, shared by nearly all of the Rishonim in their commentaries on the Haggadah. These commentators viewed the first and second midrashim as fundamentally similar:

*Until now (the first midrash, prior to *davar acher*) the verse was interpreted and it proved a few of the plagues that the Egyptians suffered; and now, it (the *davar acher* in the midrash) wishes to prove all ten plagues that afflicted the Egyptians...*

**Commentary of *Shibolei HaLeket* on the Haggadah  
(R. Tzidkiyah b. Avraham HaRofei, 13<sup>th</sup> c. Italy)**

דבר אחר ביד חזקה שתיים כו'. עד הנה פי' הפסוקין בענין אחד והוכיח מהן קצת מהמכות שלקו ועתה רוצה להוכיח מהם כל עשר מכות שלקו במצרים ביד חזקה שתיים. ובזרוע נטויה שתיים. ובמורא גדול שתיים. ובאותות שתיים. ובמופתים שתיים. פירושו של בעל שבולי הלקט (ר' צדקיה בן אברהם הרופא) להגדה, סדר פסח סימן ריח

Given the central premise that the first midrash, like the *davar acher*, refers to the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians, Rishonim brought to bear all of their creative ingenuity and extensive knowledge of midrashic literature to tackle each of the difficulties raised above. The *Shibolei HaLeket*, for example, quotes his brother who employed *gematria* to explain why the plagues of blood and pestilence (דם and דבר equal 250, the total number of plagues at the Splitting of the Sea, according to one opinion cited later in the Haggadah) are singled out in the midrash. Additionally, he cites an Amoraic midrash (*Tehillim Rabbah* 78:16, see parallels cited in *Torah Shleimah Shemot* 7:105), which states that each plague was accompanied by *dever*, thus justifying its special mentioning (but not the singling out of blood).

As to the relevance of “the sword,” *Shibolei HaLeket* offers two explanations. The first posits that *cherev* refers not to an actual sword, but rather to the *Shem haMeforash* (the Tetragrammaton), which Moshe invoked as his verbal weapon to perform the plagues. A second explanation, citing another late midrashic tradition, advances the eye-opening view that an actual plague of swords was visited upon Egypt by their own firstborn children. According to this legend, the first-born

<sup>7</sup> Scholars have focused on two midrashic texts to try to resolve some of the difficulties in the Haggadah’s exegesis. 1. Several scholars have proposed that that the compiler of the Haggadah transferred some of this exegesis (specifically *dever* and *cherev*) from the *Sifre* in *Bamidbar* (paragraph 115). See, for example, E. D. Goldschmidt, *The Passover Haggadah: its sources and history* (Hebrew), (1960) p. 46 and Safrai and Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal*, p. 141, and, most recently, Joshua Kulp, *The Schechter Haggadah: Art, History, and Commentary* (2009). However, in addition to not solving all of the difficulties in our midrash, it is more likely, as David Henshke explains (“By a Mighty Hand”, pp. 15-18), that the *Sifre* transferred these citations from the Haggadah! 2. Two of the difficulties raised in the Haggadah’s midrash are resolved by *Midrash Tannaim* (*Devraim* 26:5) via two changes to the text. First, a different verse for “*mora*,” which references ‘seeing’ God’s hand at the Splitting of the Sea (*Shemot* 14:31), is substituted for *Devarim* 4:34. Second, the exegesis for “and with wonders,” does not refer just to the plague of Blood but to all ten plagues. However, as noted by Henshke (*ibid.* notes 8-10), these emendations implicitly attest to the difficulties of our original version of the midrash and do not appear in any versions of the Haggadah.

<sup>8</sup> All of the commentaries of the Rishonim to the Haggadah cited herein can be found in Mordekhai Leib Katzenelenbogen, *Haggadah shel Pesach: Torat Chayyim* (1998), pp. 110-125.

used swords to kill their own family members on the night of the Exodus for refusing to let the Israelites out. The Raavan (R' Eliezer ben Natan, 12<sup>th</sup> c. Mainz) suggests a third possibility, that the sword is a reference to the actual plague of the firstborn who were struck down by swords.

In discussing the exegesis of “and with signs” as referring to the staff, several commentators (see *Torat Chayyim* pp. 116-117) explain the association as based on the fact that through the staff, the plagues were performed. This explanation just reinforces the question of why the instrument is singled out as opposed to the actual signs themselves. A number of other commentators (ibid.) explain, based on an Amoraic midrash, that the staff had the mnemonic of all ten plagues written on it thus explaining the exegesis.

Each of the suggestions raised by the Rishonim is intriguing and requires further research.<sup>9</sup> Yet each explanation remains problematic for a variety of reasons, including the fact that many are rooted in midrashim which post-date the composition of the Tannaitic midrash found in the Haggadah. Moreover, each suggestion on its own fails to account for all of the difficulties we have raised. Most significant, even were we to combine all of the answers together to resolve each difficulty with the five elements of the first midrash, they would offer no coherent explanation for the first midrash as a whole. Set opposite the more comprehensive and straightforward *davar acher*, the first midrash appears to be an unnecessary exegetical hodgepodge. Why, then, did the compiler of the Haggadah include this midrash in the first place?

## A new approach to the first midrash

In order to explicate each of the parts of the first midrash, as well as to appreciate its underlying message and its reason for inclusion in the Haggadah, we need to reassess its relationship with the second midrash. Is the *davar acher* merely an alternative take on the same general idea as the first midrash, as assumed thus far, or does it perhaps signal a fundamentally different reading of the verse? If so, what is this other focus of the first midrash?

A clue to a whole new understanding of the first midrash's exegesis can be found in a comment of R' Aharon haKohen (14<sup>th</sup> c. Provence) in his *Orchot Chayyim*, on the very last piece of the midrash (p. 117 in *Haggadat Torat Chayyim*):

**"And with wonders," this refers to the blood, to explain: this does not refer to the plague of blood visited upon the river; rather it refers to the blood on the land when he (Moshe) performed the signs before (lit. in the eyes of) the people. For through that very sign, all of Israel believed in him.**

"ובמופתים- זה הדם": פירוש לא  
ממכת היאור קאמר אלא מאשר היו  
לדם ביבשת כאשר עשה האותות  
לעיני העם שעל ידי אותו האות  
האמינו בו כל ישראל.

According to *Orchot Chayyim*, the midrash regarding *dam* is not referring to the plague visited upon the Egyptians, but to one of the signs that Moshe was commanded to perform for Bnei Yisrael so that they would believe in him and in the mission to fulfill their covenantal destiny by

<sup>9</sup> See *Torat Chayyim* p. 115-116 for an explanation suggested by several Rishonim to the “*giluy Shekhina*” exegesis. The commentaries point to the end of the verse (Devarim 4:34) not cited in the Haggadah, which includes the word “*le’ainekha*—before your eyes” to find a connection to sight, or “*mora'im*.” See David Henshke (ibid. note 10) for the problematic nature of this suggestion.

leaving Egypt. Indeed, a verse in Shemot (4:9), well before the account of the plague of blood, describes this gambit:

*And if they will not believe even these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land; and the water which thou take out of the river shall become blood upon dry land.*

והיה אם לא יאמינו גם לשני האותות האלה ולא ישמעון לקלך ולקחת ממימי היאר ושפכת היבשה, והיו המים אשר תקח מן היאר והיו לדם ביבשת.

Later on in the chapter (4:30-31), the Torah attests to the fact that Moshe carried out these instructions and that the Israelites, for the moment, were galvanized to believe in him and in their imminent redemption.

Following through with this insight of *Orchot Chayyim* is the key to unlocking the seemingly puzzling and disjointed elements of the entire midrash. We will examine each piece in reverse order from “the blood” exegesis. The preceding line associates “the signs” with the staff of Moshe. Once we have suggested, as per *Orchot Chayyim*, that the midrash is not referring to the plagues visited upon the Egyptians, but to the ingredients needed to convince the Israelites of the veracity of Moshe’s prophecy, the staff is not a peripheral instrument but constitutes “the signs” themselves! Recall, the staff was used by Moshe to perform the signs for the Israelites, long before any plague brought on Egypt was commanded.<sup>10</sup> As the proof text (Shemot 4:17) cited in the midrash states:

*And take with you this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.*<sup>11</sup>

ואת המטה הזה תקח בידך אשר תעשה בו את האותות.

The puzzling third piece of the midrash: “and awesome power”—this refers to the revelation of the *Shekhina*,” can now be understood given the different focus of the exegesis. The midrash is not stating that God revealed his *Shekhina* to the Egyptians via the plagues; the subject of the midrash, rather, is the Jewish people themselves—or at the very least their leaders—to whom the Divine Presence was revealed in Egypt.<sup>12</sup> As the verse in Shmuel (I Shmuel 2:27) explicitly states:

*And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him: 'Thus saith the LORD: Did I reveal Myself unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house?'*<sup>13</sup>

ויבא איש אלקים אל עלי ויאמר אליו כה אמר ה' הנגלה נגליתי אל בית אביך בהיותם במצרים לבית פרעה.

<sup>10</sup> This, in fact, is the explanation of the *Peirush Kadmon* in the *Torat Chayyim Haggadah*, pp. 116-117. On the identity of the author of this commentary, see the editor’s introduction pp. 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the midrash does not mention the other sign given to Moshe to convince the people, namely the *tsara’at* on his hand. This fits with both the specific formulation of the proof text (the staff was not involved in the sign of *tsara’at*) and with the Haggadah’s aim to totally exclude mention of Moshe (see note 3 above).

<sup>12</sup> This is consistent with the assumption of *Mekhilta* (Shemot 12:1), which questions whether the *Shekhina* can be revealed outside of Israel, to prophets like Moshe and Aharon. The midrash does not contemplate the *Shekhina* being revealed to the Egyptians! See also *Sifre Zuta* on *Bamidbar* 10:35 and *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai* on *Shemot* 3:8.

<sup>13</sup> One could also suggest that the revelation referred to by the midrash is not limited to the house of Eli (namely Moshe and Aharon), but to the fact that God makes Himself known, albeit through Moshe, to all of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt by a new name, as per *Shemot* 6:3-4.

The crux of the first midrash, that the Jewish people required proofs and other coercive measures to be redeemed from Egypt, is most dramatically attested to by the first two pieces of the midrash. *Dever* and *cherev* in this reading are not plagues brought on the Egyptians, but threats needed to induce the Jewish people to leave to serve God. Remarkably, before any of the ten plagues, there is an explicit verse in the Torah which states this (Shemot 5:3):

*And they said: 'The God of the Hebrews hath met with us. Let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice unto the LORD our God; lest He strike us with pestilence, or with the sword.'*<sup>14</sup>

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹקֵי הָעִבְרִים נִקְרָא עֲלֵינוּ  
נִלְכָה נָא דֶרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָר  
וְנִזְבַּחַהּ לַיהוָה אֱלֹקֵינוּ כִּן יִפְגַּעֵנוּ  
בַדָּבָר אוֹ בַחֶרֶב.

This verse serves as the basis for the entire midrash: without “a mighty hand”—namely pestilence that would have stricken the Jewish people, and “an outstretched arm”—the threat of the sword—we may never have left Egypt. These threats, coupled with the awesome power, signs, and wonders (the revelation of the *Shekhina*, the staff, and the sign of blood, respectively) ensured their redemption. According to this midrash, the Jewish people, left to its own devices, may never have gone out from Egypt.

We now can appreciate the fundamentally different (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) points of view projected by the two sets of exegesis. The first midrash is no longer a partial list of calamities that befell the Egyptians, but a more sobering catalog of what we needed imposed on us in order to get out. While both midrashim engender thanks for salvation, the first midrash zeroes in on the shortcomings of the Israelites and the forces marshaled against them, while the *davar acher* focuses on what was done to the Egyptians in the course of redemption.<sup>15</sup>

## Narratives at the Seder

Now that two essentially dissimilar midrashic traditions have been uncovered within the Haggadah’s dual (and, perhaps, dueling) exegesis of the final verse of *Arami Oved Avi*, we may contemplate the significance of this phenomenon and its inclusion in the canonical ritual of the seder. Our understanding of the first midrash highlights an “unpleasant truth” about the Exodus. Basically, the first midrash maligns the Jewish people. This harsh reality may seem incongruous with the festive atmosphere of the seder. Indeed, this may be one reason why the commentators

<sup>14</sup> One commentator (R’ Shimon ben Tzemach Duran (Algiers 14<sup>th</sup> c.) cites this verse in his commentary (*Torat Chayyim* p. 112), but in line with Amoraic midrashim (see *Torah Shleimah* on Shemot 5:3, paragraph 30) he explains that this verse refers to Pharaoh: “We do not find amongst the plagues in Egypt any mention of **sword**. And it appears that it is mentioned in what they said to Pharaoh, ‘lest He fall upon **us** with pestilence, or with the sword.’ What they meant to say, ‘lest He fall upon **you**’, but because of respect for royalty they said fall upon us. Therefore, we see in the plagues of Egypt that they were scared with the sword.”

<sup>15</sup> There are two textual reasons why this compelling explication of the first midrash was overlooked. 1. The very first *drasha* regarding the “mighty hand” of *dever* cites the verse of the plague *dever* as its proof text. Though the text is merely cited to link the phrase “*yad chazaka*” with *dever*, and not to posit that *dever* refers to the plague, the proof text misdirects the reader. 2. This explication of the midrash is further obscured by the midrashic material preceding it (which refers to God’s exclusive role in the plague of the firstborn) and succeeding it (about the ten plagues as a whole). Both of these pieces of exegesis focus on what God did to the Egyptians through the plagues, leading to the midrash in between being misunderstood. The body of the article will suggest a third, more conceptual, reason for overlooking this compelling interpretation of the midrash.

assumed the midrash to be referring to the plagues of the Egyptians.<sup>16</sup> However, much biblical and rabbinic evidence supports the alternative narrative of our midrash. The verse in Shemot (6:9) expresses that the Israelites did not listen to Moshe, following the initial setback when he first appeared before Pharaoh. While commentators debate the root cause and precise definition of the “*kotzer ruach*—weakness of spirit” which plagued the Jewish people at the time, the prophet Yechezkel (20:8) explicitly states that God sought to wipe out all of Israel in Egypt due to their refusal to serve God and sever their connection with Egypt’s idols:

*But they rebelled against Me, and would not hearken unto Me; they did not every man cast away the detestable things of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt; then I said I would pour out My fury upon them, to spend My anger upon them in the midst of the land of Egypt.*

וַיִּמְרוּ-בִי, וְלֹא אָבוּ לְשָׁמַע אֵלַי--אִישׁ  
 אֶת-שְׁקוּצֵי עֵינֵיהֶם לֹא הִשְׁלִיכוּ, וְאֶת-  
 גְּלוּלֵי מִצְרַיִם לֹא עָזְבוּ; וְאָמַר לְשָׁפֹךְ  
 חֲמָתִי עֲלֵיהֶם, לְכַלּוֹת אֶפְי כָּהֶם,  
 בְּתוֹךְ, אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

Early midrashic literature goes even further. According to *Mekhilta* (*petichata to Vayehi*), much of the Israelite population (with estimates ranging from four-fifths to 499/500) was wiped out while still in Egypt! *Mekhilta* (*Mesikta d’Pischa*, paragraph 5) also dramatically records that it was only at the final, fateful moment that the remaining fraction summoned the spiritual fortitude to finally reject Egyptian paganism and merit the redemption via the *korban Pesach*.<sup>17</sup>

With the two distinct narratives of midrash *Arami Oved Avi* explicated and clearly necessary, we can now more fully appreciate the richness of the seder’s storytelling device encapsulated in the Mishnah’s phrase *matchil b’genut u’msayyem b’shevach*. Upon closer examination, the disgrace/shame and praise/glory at the seder are not presented in a linear or fairy-tale fashion. Instead, the story is imparted in a manner matching reality. It is told in a complex, nuanced, and oscillating fashion, moving between moments of ignominy and triumph. Within Maggid we detail how we were slaves and then redeemed. We then shift gears to describe our lowly lineage of paganism followed by the spiritual apex of receiving the Torah and worshiping God at Sinai. And finally, embedded at the very end of the *Arami Oved Avi* exegesis are two midrashim which are themselves a microcosm of the first shame (the first midrash) and then praise (the *davar acher* midrash) movement and dialectic. Together, the two sets of exegesis on the last verse underscore the “warts and all,” multi-dimensional, and non-monochromatic narrative of the birth of the Jewish people.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> A similar phenomenon may be traced in the interpretation of *arami oved avi* as referring to Lavan, rather than the more straightforward reading that it refers to our forefathers. See sources in note 2 at length.

<sup>17</sup> It is even possible to suggest that the purpose of the first nine plagues was not merely to punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians while making God known to them, but also to restore and fortify *Bnei Yisrael’s* faith. Note the verses in Shemot 4:21-24, which reference the final plague of the firstborn prior to any of the other plagues. While some commentators interpreted this as mere foreshadowing, the simple reading of the verses suggests that had *Bnei Yisrael* been up to the challenge, the commandment of *korban Pesach* and the events of the night of the Exodus could have taken place much earlier. According to this view, the narrative of *davar acher* detailing the ten plagues also constitutes a critique, albeit an almost imperceptible one, of *Bnei Yisrael*.

<sup>18</sup> There are additional hints to other sources of *genut* in the *haggadah* which further enrich the story. See Gilad J. Gevaryahu & Michael Wise, “[Why Does the Seder Begin with Karpas?](#)” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* vol. 27, no. 2 (1999), pp. 104-110. The article proposes the interesting theory that the dipping of the *karpas* originally alluded to the

Ultimately, the seder and its accompanying text—the Haggadah—is the finest rabbinic example of an orchestrated, oscillating narrative. It is a story that through its telling and retelling by families for over two millennia, has perpetuated the Jewish story. In the words of Rambam, all who expand and expound upon the passage of *Arami Oved Avi* and its exegesis are indeed praiseworthy.<sup>19</sup>

---

dipping of Yosef's *ketonet passim* in blood, the event that led to the slavery in Egypt. For other allusions to the rift between the brothers and Yosef at the seder see that article and the commentary of the Rashbat"z on the Haggadah (*Torat Chayyim* p. 44): "And now, the answer to the question *Mah Nishtanah* is 'we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.' And our Rabbis taught that one should begin with disgrace and the disgrace is based on what the midrash states: You sold your brother Joseph as a slave, by your lives you will have to recite each year 'we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.' And the glory is that just like Joseph became King, so too we are freed..." Many other narratives in Breishit enhance the story of the seder. See, for example, the commentaries of Ramban (Breishit 12:10) and Radak (Breishit 16:6). For further study along these lines, see Yair Zakovich, "*And You Shall Tell Your Son...*" *The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible* (Jerusalem: 1991) and David Silber, *A Passover Haggadah: Go Forth and Learn* (Philadelphia: 2011).

<sup>19</sup> When delivering this *drasha*, I developed two additional themes. 1. Oscillating movement is not only characteristic of the Haggadah's recounting of the Jewish national story, recent research of social scientists has demonstrated the critical importance of a strong family narrative, and especially an oscillating (non fairy-tale) one, for the development of strong, resilient children. For a summary of this research, see Bruce Feiler, "The Stories that Bind Us," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) 2. The value of transmitting even the unpleasant truths regarding our national history at the seder is relevant to the larger question of truth, memory and history. See, R' Dr. J. J. Schachter, "Facing the Truths of History," *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, vol. 8, pp. 200-276, for an important overview of this topic.