

Biblical Descriptions of the Exodus

Collected insights from members of the Graduate
Program in Biblical and Talmudic Interpretation at Stern
College

Bemidbar 15:38-41: Serving No One But God

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Is the story of *yetziat Mitzrayim* really about an exodus from slavery to freedom? In the third paragraph of the *Shema*, we find the mitzvah of *tzizit* in conjunction with remembering the Exodus from Egypt:

Speak unto the Children of Israel, and bid them that they make for themselves fringes throughout their generations in the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue. And it shall be for you a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that you not go after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you use to go astray; that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God.

Bemidbar 15:38-41

(Translation from mechon mamre.org)

דָּבַר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם,
וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל-כַּנְּפֵי בְגָדֵיהֶם,
לְדֹרֹתָם; וְנָתַנּוּ עַל-צִיצִית הַכְּנָף, פֶּתִיל
תְּכֵלֶת. וְהָיָה לָכֶם, לְצִיצִית, וּרְאִיתֶם
אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹת ה',
וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם; וְלֹא-תִתּוּרוּ אַחֲרַי
לְבַבְכֶם, וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם, אֲשֶׁר-אֹתָם
זָנִים, אַחֲרֵיהֶם לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ, וַעֲשִׂיתֶם
אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי; וְהֵייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים,
לְאֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם, אֲשֶׁר
הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לְהִיוֹת
לָכֶם, לְאֱלֹקִים: אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם
בַּמִּדְבָּר טו:לח-מא

The *beraita* in BT *Menachot* 43b, famously reads verses 39-40 as a sequence of cause and effect: “... that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord...” Seeing leads to remembrance, and remembrance leads to performance (of mitzvot).” *Yetziat Mitzrayim* is the source of our obligation to perform the mitzvot—Hashem took us out of Egypt in order to be our God, and thus we are commanded to keep the mitzvot. The *tzizit* remind us that we were taken out of Egypt not to be free, but for the purpose of serving God. The Gemara in *Menachot* 43a, in fact, compares the *tzizit* to a *chotam*, a symbol of servitude worn by slaves.

Our slavery to God, however, signifies a broader freedom. On the pasuk “For unto Me the children of Israel are servants; they are My servants” (Vaykira 21:55), the Gemara famously comments, “They are My servants—and not servants to servants” (*Baba Metzia* 10a). In declaring ourselves to be subservient to God, we declared our freedom from anything and to anyone else. The Torah does not want us to be enslaved but to God.

In Hasidic thought, *Mitzrayim* symbolizes a *meitzar*, a narrow, limited perspective, and the Exodus from it, the transition, symbolizes a *merchav*, a broader mindset. The mitzvah to remember the Exodus from Egypt, taken from this psychological perspective, translates into a demand that we cultivate a mentality of freedom. The Gemara in *Masechet Kiddushin* explains that this is the message communicated by the juxtaposition of Matan Torah and the laws of *eved ivri* in the Torah. In explaining why the *eved nirtza* is marked specifically in his ear and specifically by the doorpost, the Gemara picks up on the juxtaposition of the climactic moments at Har Sinai and the *eved nirtza*, and expresses the surprise it engenders:

The ear which heard My voice on Mount Sinai saying “For unto Me the children of Israel are servants; they are My servants,” and not servants of servants—and this individual went and acquired for himself a master?! He will have his ear pierced.

Kiddushin 22b

אזן ששמעה קולי על הר סיני
 בשעה שאמרתי כי לי בני ישראל
 עבדים ולא עבדים לעבדים והלך
 זה וקנה אדון לעצמו ירצע.
 קדושין כב:

The Gemara wonders, how could a person who experienced *yetziat Mitzrayim*, and heard God say that Bnei Yisrael are not to be slaves, possibly say, “I don’t want to go out from servitude”? Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch (Shemot 21:6, s.v. *Va’avado*) explains that the narrow, skewed perspective of the *eved ivri* causes him to think that the security of life in his master’s house is better than the uncertainty of living life as a free man. Rav Hirsch explains that when God commanded Bnei Yisrael to place blood on the *mezuzot* before the plague of the firstborn sons, He was marking Bnei Yisrael as free people, and giving them the responsibility to build homes that would reflect their new God-given freedom. The master therefore pierces his slave’s ear against the *mezuzah*, the same doorpost that God passed over. The doorposts are reminders that when God took us out of Egypt he declared that we would be His slave, and a slave to no other. A slave who chooses servitude over freedom is marked specifically in his ear, which heard but forgot God’s message of freedom at Har Sinai.

The Gemara teaches us that while the *mezuzah* “testifies” to God’s taking us out of Egypt, it also testifies to our essential freedom as individuals. “They are My servants”—our status as God’s chosen nation is a calling to embrace freedom from all other servitude. Perhaps the *eved ivri* fears his freedom after having become habituated to his master’s house. He may think that he is actually incapable of making the transition from life in his master’s home to maintaining a home of his own. Seeing the *mezuzah*, the *eved ivri* recalls the transition from slavery to freedom that we made as a nation. He then remembers that he too has made the leap from a familiar reality of servitude to an unknown reality of independence, and that he can do it again.

At times in our lives we take on the mentality of the *eved ivri*. We get stuck in old patterns of behavior or thought and we think change is improbable, or impossible. We get comfortable in the way we are and we fear change, becoming like the *eved ivri* who sees his servitude as ideal. So the

Torah gives us reminders that even though the transition might be risky and frightening, we have been through it in the past, and we can do it again. Seeing the mezuzah, we remember that we have experienced the exodus from slavery to freedom. Tzitzit reminds us that we are servants to God, to the exclusion of everything else. The mitzvah to remember *yetziat Mitzrayim*, on this level, is thus an exhortation to live an intentional life. We must remember that we all have the ability to shape our own perspective. Every moment we remember that, we are not slaves to our actions, but retain the freedom to choose how we think, feel, and act. With this awareness we have the ability to achieve an exodus in our everyday lives, from living in service of our old narratives and habits, to the freedom of choosing to serve God alone. On Pesach, the time of our liberation, may we all take the opportunity to recognize our ability to make the journey from slavery to freedom.

Yirmiyahu 23:7-8: A Meaningless History?

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The Exodus from Egypt is such a focal point of our religious experience that not only do we celebrate a holiday dedicated to bringing it to life, but we are also commanded to remember this unrivaled demonstration of God’s strength and presence in our lives every day and night. The derivation of this commandment, discussed in *Berachot* 12b, is quoted by the Haggadah toward the beginning of the Maggid section. In it, Ben Zoma expounds the source for *zechirat yetziat Mitzrayim*, remembering the Exodus from Egypt, from the verse (Devarim 16:3) “*kol yemei chayecha*, all the days of your life.” “*Yemei chayecha*” teaches us to remember the Exodus during the day, and the superfluous “*kol*” extends the obligation to the night. The Sages, however, understand this verse differently: “*yemei chayecha*” obligates us in the commandment of *zechirah* (mentioning the Exodus) in *olam ha-zeh* (in this world), while the extra “*kol*” includes *olam ha-ba* (the World to Come). The Haggadah ends the discussion at this point. In reality, though, the discussion in the Gemara continues. Ben Zoma challenges the Sages from a verse in Yirmiyahu:

Assuredly, a time is coming—declares the LORD—when it shall no more be said, “As the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt,” but rather, “As the LORD lives, who brought out and led the offspring of the House of Israel from the northland and from all the lands in which I have banished them...”

Yirmiyahu 23:7-8¹

הנה ימים באים נאם ה' ולא יאמרו
 עוד חי ה' אשר העלה את בני ישראל
 מארץ מצרים, כי אם חי ה' אשר
 העלה ואשר הביא את זרע בית
 ישראל מארץ צפונה ומכל הארצות
 אשר הדחתים שם...
 ירמיהו כג:ז-ח

This verse, Ben Zoma points out, strongly indicates that the Exodus from Egypt will not be relevant in the days of Mashiach, thus contradicting the Sages’ explanation of “*kol*.” The Sages, however, respond that *yetziat Mitzrayim* will only be *tafel*, secondary, to the ultimate redemption, but will never be wholly forgotten. Ben Zoma’s understanding of the verse from Yirmiyahu is understandable, being that this is the simple reading of the verse. What, then, is motivating the Sages to disagree with Ben Zoma?

¹ JPS 2000 translation.

Author Eric Weiner indirectly sheds light on this question in his book, *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*. In his pursuit to uncover the causes of happiness, Weiner relates, "I had asked a Swiss man what the glue was that held his country together, given the linguistic, if not ethnic, diversity. Without hesitation he answered: history. Can history really do that? Is it that powerful?"² Perhaps, through their explanation of the verse in Yirmiyahu, the Sages are answering Weiner's question with a resounding "yes." As demonstrated by the numerous references to it in Tanach, *yetziat Mitzrayim* is central to our history as a nation. It represents both God's mighty hand and the beginning of our journey to receive the Torah and enter the Land of Israel. Pesach, which serves as a concentrated period of time to focus on this event, embodies *yetziat Mitzrayim*'s foundational historic importance to the Jewish nation. This may be what inhibits the Sages from foreseeing a time when the Exodus would be forgotten, as Ben Zoma did. Such a central moment in our national history can never be discarded, lest we, as a nation, lose the elements that unite us.

And yet, the importance of the message of the verse in Yirmiyahu, with its vision of a greater future, cannot be underestimated. History is important, but it is not enough. The Jewish people in the days of Yirmiyahu knew their history, but it had no significant relevance to them. It did not motivate them to strive for a higher spiritual level, a closer relationship with God. Aware of this danger, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch relates a novel approach to Shemot 13:8, which instructs parents to educate their children about the Exodus. He warns that dryly relaying our history and laws is insufficient. Instead, parents must act as living role models, instilling in their children a true understanding of their obligations and inspiring them to excitedly embrace their lives as Jews. In this way, we can avoid the dangers that ensnared the people in the days of Yirmiyahu. Only if we convey to future generations that our history is meant to motivate us to strive to even greater heights, that *yetziat Mitzrayim* is just the beginning of our journey to an even greater redemption, can we successfully fulfill the message of Yirmiyahu.

If this actually is the message of the verse, however, one would think it would be a necessary point to highlight in the Haggadah. Why, then, was the argument between Ben Zoma and the Sages cut short? In his commentary to the Haggadah, Rav Shlomo Aviner quotes a comment of Maharal that hints to an answer to this question.³ Maharal explains that, ultimately, the first redemption, *yetziat Mitzrayim*, is the reason for the final redemption. Already at the time of *yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Jewish people possessed the potential to reach the higher spiritual level that would make them worthy of the future redemption. Only when that potential is acted upon will they merit the coming of Mashiach. Thus, while it is necessary to focus on the future—and indeed, references, like *le-shanah ha-ba'ah be-Yerushalyim ha-benuyah*, are made in the Haggadah, ultimately, we must use the seder night as an opportunity to completely focus on *yetziat Mitzrayim*. We need to discuss, examine, and unlock the hidden potential of *yetziat Mitzrayim* waiting to be used. *Be-chol dor va-dor chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo ke-ilu hu yatza me-Mitzrayim*, in every generation, a person

² Eric Weiner, *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World* (New York: Hachette Book Group USA, 2008), 108.

³ Rav Shlomo Aviner, *Haggadah shel Pesach* (Bet El: Sifriyat Chavah, 2001), 34.

must see himself as if he left Egypt. Hopefully this year, we can truly tap into the potential of *yetziat Mitzrayim* in order to reach our true and ultimate redemption.

Yehoshua 24:1-28: A Lesson in Chosenness

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The story of *yetziat Mitzrayim* in Maggid begins with a brief description of the roots of the Jewish family. These pesukim, excerpted from the last perek of Sefer Yehoshua, feature Yehoshua's final speech to the Jewish people before his death, when he gathers the Jews to Shechem and reestablishes the covenant between them and Hashem. Yehoshua begins by describing the early history of the Jews. Terach was the father of Avraham and Nachor, and worshipped *avodah zarah*. Avraham was chosen and brought to the Land of Israel, where Yitzchak was born to him. Yaakov and Eisav were then born to Yitzchak; Eisav was given Mt. Seir, and Yaakov and his family went to Egypt. Yehoshua continues with a description of the salvation from Egypt and the conquest of the Land of Israel. He then tells the people that they could either remove their foreign gods and serve Hashem or worship the foreign gods of their ancestors, but that he himself was going to serve Hashem. The people respond that they would continue to serve Hashem, because He was the one who took them out of Egypt and brought them to Israel. Yehoshua reminds the Jews of the consequences of choosing to serve Hashem, but the Jews are adamant. They then renew the covenant, which Yehoshua writes down in a "book of Hashem's Torah," and then Yehoshua puts up a stone as a monument and sends the people home.

Among the many questions that can be asked on this perek, there are two that stand out in connection to the seder:

1. Why does Yehoshua start his story with Terach? Why not begin at a later point in time, such as the actual descent to Egypt? This question is highlighted by the fact that the Jews do not reference this part of their history in their declaration that they will serve Hashem.
2. Of Yehoshua's whole speech, why does the Haggadah quote specifically this part?

The first of these questions is addressed by *Metzudat David*, Alshich, and Malbim.

Metzudat David says that these pesukim emphasize the kindness that Hashem provided to the Jewish people. Although the Jews had humble beginnings, starting out as idol worshippers, Hashem, in His kindness, brought Avraham to the Land of Israel to remove him from that path.

Alshich explains that these pesukim are about how Avraham was chosen as the start of the Jewish people. Although the Jews technically descended from Terach, the fact that he served idols and we do not, highlights the fact that our true spiritual ancestry begins at Avraham.

Unlike *Metzudat David* and Alshich, Malbim does not explain these pesukim as a contrast between the current Am Yisrael and the idol worshipping forefathers they left behind. Rather, he focuses on the way the pesukim highlight the process necessary for the Jews to develop into the nation they became. He explains that until the time of Avraham, only a select few people were

Godly people, yet there was a necessity for the Jews to develop into a Godly nation of 70. There were three reasons why the Jews were not yet worthy: their location, their ancestry, and their lack of preparedness to serve Hashem. The pesukim describe the process to lose each of these negative attributes. Avraham was sent to Israel, so their place changed. Avraham then had only some descendants who were chosen, in the process weeding out the negative traits which were found among his ancestors. Finally, the descent to Egypt gave the Jews a chance to become accustomed to serving Hashem.

What these three interpretations have in common is that they highlight the chosenness of the Jewish people. In the *Metzudat David's* read, Hashem's special kindness to the Jews signifies that He chose them to be His people, and Avraham to be the one to start them on that path. Alshich also highlights the chosenness of Avraham. The Malbim, by explaining the process needed for the development of the Jewish people, is explaining how Hashem developed the Jewish people so that they would be ready to be chosen on a national level.

This discussion of chosenness is fitting for the renewal of the treaty between the Jewish people and Hashem. Hashem has chosen us even before we became a nation, and so it is proper for us to choose him in return. This also explains why Yehoshua mentioned a choice of serving Hashem or other gods—choosing Him is not a choice if there are no alternatives.

It is also understandable why this section is mentioned in the Haggadah of Pesach. On Pesach, we are celebrating the Exodus from Egypt. Because of our focus on *yetziat Mitzrayim*, when we were already a large group of people, we may think that this marks the point that Hashem chose us. Starting Maggid from here reminds us that in fact, the start of our journey began much earlier. It was because Hashem chose us that we were able to become a nation, and we continue to renew our commitment to Him to this day.

Psalms 114: 1-3: The day that gave us Hallel

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Hallel Ha'Mitzri, colloquially referred to as “Hallel,” is a compilation of Psalms 113-118. Typically, we recite Hallel on holidays and Rosh Chodesh, between Shacharit and Mussaf, either in its full or abridged form. However, when it comes to Pesach, Hallel takes on a whole new persona, as it is recited at night as an integral part of the Haggadah. Some communities even have the *minhag* (custom) to communally recite Hallel after Maariv. What is it about the intersection between Pesach and Hallel that creates a divergence from the normally prescribed time to say Hallel? Another unique aspect of the Hallel/Pesach relationship is that while most of the pesukim of Hallel extol Hashem, Psalm 114 begins with “*B'tzeit Yisrael mi'Mitzrayim*”—when Bnai Yisrael left Egypt—and then continues on and references *kriyat Yam Suf* (splitting of the Red Sea). Why are *yetziat Mitzrayim* (the Exodus) and *kriyat Yam Suf* mentioned in the middle of Hallel, when no other specific miracles are mentioned?

The Rambam in *Hilchot Chanuka* (3:6) digresses slightly from teaching the laws of Chanuka to briefly discuss Hallel and enumerate the days on which it is said. The *Magid Mishne* there, analyzes whether Hallel is a biblical or rabbinic commandment, and notes the different reasons we say Hallel. On holidays that contain an added *kedushat hayom* (sanctity of the day), there is a rabbinic requirement to incorporate Hallel into our tefilah due to the inherent *kedusha* of the day. However, there is a biblical requirement to recite Hallel after a person witnesses or experiences a miracle. This Hallel is more of a personal recognition of, and demonstration of thanks to G-d.

This comment of the *Magid Mishne* can shed some light onto the distinctive nature of Hallel on Pesach night. Like all other holidays, Pesach is a *moed* and Hallel would therefore be included as part of the morning tefilah. The first night of Pesach, however, ushers in an added dimension. Not only are we celebrating the sanctity of the day, we are also reliving *yetziat Mitzrayim*—our Exodus from Egypt and transformation from slaves to free men as G-d's nation. The Mishna in *Pesachim* (10:5) mentions that every year each person is required to feel like he himself left Egypt. While every day we have the obligation of *zechirat yetziyat Mitzrayim* (recalling the Exodus), on Pesach night we have a special requirement of *sippur yetziyat Mitzrayim*. The mitzvah of *sippur yetziyat Mitzrayim* is to discuss and mention at length all that happened in Egypt and our nation's miraculous exit. This helps to explain the requirement to recite Hallel at the seder. At the seder we do not merely mention the Exodus in passing, we need to completely relive it ourselves. Once we accomplish that through the recitation of Magid at the seder, we break out in song and praise G-d for allowing us to leave Egypt and become free men. We can see this from the continuation of the Mishna in *Pesachim* 10:5. After mentioning that we need to experience the redemption ourselves, the Mishna continues by saying that “we are required to praise, glorify, exalt [...] to the One who did all these miracles for us and our forefathers.” [This idea was developed by Rabbi Yosef D. Soloveitchik and is quoted in *Harerei Kedem* Vol. II no. 101.] The Hallel of the seder accomplishes both the “*sippur*” and the “*zechira*” obligations of the night. By singing songs of praise to G-d we are reliving the feelings of appreciation and jubilation for the Exodus, but by mentioning “*b'tzeit Yisrael m'Mitzrayim*” —we also fulfill the *zechira* aspect by mentioning it.

The Gemara in *Pesachim* (117a) discusses who authored Hallel and who inaugurally recited it. One possibility the Gemara entertains is that after *kriyat Yam Suf*, Moshe and Bnai Yisrael broke out in Hallel, making them both the authors of Hallel and the first ones to have said it. Although this suggestion would conflict the presumption that David HaMelech (who lived many years after the Exodus) wrote Hallel, it would explain the reference within Hallel to the Exodus. When composing a prayer to be said for generations to commemorate miracles, it only makes sense to include the first and most significant miraculous phenomenon that ever occurred in Bnai Yisrael's history.

When we say Hallel at the seder night, it should cause us to pause and take notice. We must understand why exactly we are singing songs of praise for G-d, especially at this specific moment of the seder. We should take stock of all the miracles we have enumerated up until this point in the Haggadah and realize that this demands our recognition and appreciation. While saying the

words of the Hallel, we should specifically focus on the internal reference of “*b’tzeit yisrael m’Mitzrayim*” and recognize that with this we are not only fulfilling the commandments of *zecher l’yetziyat Mitzrayim* and *sippur yetziyat Mitzrayim*, but that we are connecting to the first moment in our nation’s history that necessitated the *shira* (song) of Hallel.

Mikra Bikkurim: Lessons from the Maggid’s Source for the Exodus Story

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Class of 2014

On Passover night, one might expect that the book of Shemot, which details the journey of the Israelites from bondage to divine redemption, would play a central role in the telling of the Exodus story. Instead, however, the text expounded upon during Maggid is a recap of these events from “*mikra bikkurim*” (Devarim 26:5-9), the proclamation made by bearers of first fruits in the Temple. While one could argue that the selection of *mikra bikkurim* was made for practical reasons, noting that the passage describes in five sentences what spans several chapters in Shemot, I wish to argue that the purpose of this selection is not simply a matter of brevity; rather, it reflects deeply on the purpose of Passover night itself.

One similarity between *mikra bikkurim* and our experience on Passover night is the act of *retelling*. Unlike the generation described in Shemot, which lived through slavery and redemption, the Israelites bringing first fruits knew of those miraculous events only secondhand. Yet, despite this historical distance, subsequent generations were guided to consciously engage the narrative of their history through the proclamation of *mikra bikkurim*.

On Passover night, we too seek to personalize crucial events of generations past. Indeed, the Mishnah *Pesachim* (10:5) dictates that in every generation one must see oneself as if he or she personally left Egypt. Famously, Rambam (*Hilchot Chametz’ U’Matzah* 7:6) translates the word “*lirot*” —to see—into “*li’harot*” —to present oneself, as though he or she experienced the Exodus. Thus, *mikra bikkurim* reminds us of the need to integrate ourselves into our nation’s past and to internalize its lessons.

A further parallel between *mikra bikkurim* and the process of Passover night is the element of generational continuity. Since those reciting *mikra bikkurim* would not have lived through the actual Exodus, they actively connected themselves to the tale of their forefathers by beginning their proclamation with “*Arami oved avi*” —*my father was a wandering Aramean*.

Similarly, on Passover night, the focus is not solely on stating a historical narrative or on establishing a personal relationship to it, but also on passing on a legacy to the next generation. Indeed, the Torah repeats the injunction to transmit the Exodus story to our children four times. Interestingly, the act of passing on the Exodus story was deemed so critical to the divine plan, that Hashem stated it explicitly as a purpose of His actions, even before the Exodus took place. As Hashem tells Moshe, the wonders of the Exodus are (Shemot 10:1-2) “*li’maan*” —*so that*— we should tell *bincha u’ben bincha*—*your children and your children’s children* of Hashem’s

greatness that was witnessed in Egypt. In this way, *mikra bikkurim* highlights a primary purpose of recounting the Exodus story – to connect the next generation to the story of our national redemption.

Beyond modeling the way in which we should transmit the Passover story, *mikra bikkurim* hints to us the instinctive response that the retelling of the miracles of Exodus is supposed to elicit—that of abundant praise and gratitude to Hashem. The mitzvah of *mikra bikkurim*, as Rambam writes in *Sefer Ha’Mitzvot (Mitzvat Aseh 132)*, is not simply to tell the story of how Hashem saved us from the brutality of Egypt, but to be actively grateful for all of the goodness that He has granted us by means of our redemption and subsequent nationhood.

Similarly, the Rambam writes in *Sefer Ha’Mitzvot (Mitzvat Aseh 157)*, that the mitzvah of reciting the Exodus story on Passover night is not just to recall our historic journey to freedom, but also to offer praise for the kindness Hashem has demonstrated by redeeming us. Thus, the reading of *mikra bikkurim* guides us to the ultimate goal of our recitation of the Exodus story—to feel compelled to give thanks to Hashem for the kindnesses he bestowed on us and to burst forth in the songs of Hallel that follow.

A final reason why *mikra bikkurim* rightly serves as our central text on Passover night is that it highlights a crucial plot point which is missing from our modern Maggid—that of the arrival of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. The text of *mikra bikkurim* culminates in a statement of gratitude for having been brought to the Land of Israel:

And you brought us to this place and gave this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Devarim 26:9

וַיְבִאֵנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲרָץ
זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ.
דְּבָרִים כו:ט

Despite the fact that this declaration would have served as the climax of *mikra bikkurim*, our Haggadah texts stop short of this sentence. This glaring omission forces us to grapple with the discomfort that we no longer have the ability to celebrate Passover in all of its grandeur, with the Paschal lamb and Temple services that were once its central components. As a result, the Maggid of our Haggadah keeps us yearning, longing for a time when we will be able to celebrate not only our Exodus from Egypt, but also our return as a people to our Jewish homeland.

Ezekiel 16: The Bloods of Redemption

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In chapter 16 of Ezekiel, the prophet presents a provocative metaphor for the relationship between the Jewish people and G-d in an effort to highlight the treacherous behavior of the nation. The metaphor begins with G-d finding a newborn girl who has been abandoned, and is covered with the blood of her birth. G-d tells the baby, “Live in your blood; live in your blood. (בדמיה חיי, בדמיה חיי)” He causes her to physically mature, she remains naked, and she becomes beautiful. He then “clothes” (marries) her and enters into a covenant with her, finally washing away her blood. After He showers her with gifts, she betrays Him by committing adultery. The Israelites have betrayed G-d in a similar fashion.

In the context of the metaphor, the blood left on the baby symbolizes the pain of the birthing process and is understood by many medieval commentators as symbolizing the hardship of the slavery in Egypt. The Midrash, however, in *Shemot Rabba* (17:3), and a parallel Midrash cited by Rashi (Ex. 12:6), explain the symbolism of the blood, as well as the doubling of the phrase, “Live in your blood” as follows: G-d saw that the Jews were “naked” of mitzvot and gives them two blood-related mitzvot, *brit milah* and the *korban Pesach*, as a way for them to accrue merit. What in the text prompts the authors of the Midrash to make this claim?

Looking at the metaphor story itself, what motivates G-d to invest in and marry this woman? There are two possibilities. G-d may have been moved to take care of this helpless baby out of mercy. The infant has no hope to live if not taken care of. In fact, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 129b) learns from these verses which activities are permissible on Shabbat in order to ensure a newborn’s survival. The second possible reason is that the woman is beautiful. While G-d helps the baby grow before it has become beautiful, investing effort into the baby for other reasons, what ultimately causes the commitment of marriage may be the woman’s beauty.

What exactly does G-d mean when he tells the baby to “live in her blood”? Radak explains that G-d is encouraging the baby, by telling her that despite her challenges, (namely the slavery of Egypt), she should persevere. However, as Rabbi Alex Israel⁴ points out, it is possible that the prefix “כּ” does not mean *in*, but *through*. The phrase then means, “Live through your blood,” i.e. live on account of, or because of, your blood.

This is why the Midrash believes that the Jewish people were redeemed because of two bloods. According to the Midrash, G-d redeemed the Jewish people at first only because of His promise to our forefathers, specifically Abraham, that He would take us out of the foreign land in which we were enslaved and bring us to Israel. Initially, this promise was the only motivation; the Jews themselves were in no way deserving of redemption. The Midrash believes that the Jews had completely assimilated into the surrounding pagan culture, and many Midrashim posit that the Jews were at the lowest levels of impurity. This initial motivation is symbolized in the Midrash by “*dam milah*,” the blood of the covenant with Abraham. In its merit, the Jews were redeemed.

Though the Jews were lacking any of their own merit at first, they were commanded to bring a Passover offering while in Egypt. There is seemingly little reason for this commandment—G-d can easily pass over the Jews’ homes without any markers and there is no other obvious reason for why this ritual must be done now, on the eve of their departure. The Midrash therefore posits that the commandment to eat the Paschal lamb, eat matza, and observe Passover is a way of enabling the Jews to have merits of their own to make them worthy of redemption. G-d essentially commands the Israelites to celebrate the Exodus before it happens, and tells them to eat unleavened bread, whose significance as a symbol of the hurried departure from Egypt is still pending. By performing these mitzvot, the Jews show G-d that they trust Him and are committed to following Him, further motivating G-d to commit Himself to the Jews as well and redeem them.

⁴ <http://www.alexisrael.org/#!pesach--blood-on-the-doorposts/c13a>

It is now clear why the text from Ezekiel prompts the comments of the Midrash. The two reasons for the Exodus—originally G-d’s promise to Abraham, followed by the display of commitment to G-d shown by the Israelites—align with the two reasons G-d saves and marries the abandoned child in Ezekiel. G-d was first compelled for a reason external to the baby (i.e. His mercy, paralleling G-d being bound by His promise) and was subsequently motivated because of something intrinsic to the woman (i.e. her beauty, paralleling the merit of the Jews).

This explanation resolves another issue in the text of Ezekiel. Why does G-d not wash off the blood of the childbirth until after the marriage? If washing off the blood symbolizes that the purpose of the blood has been fulfilled, the blood of circumcision cannot be “washed away” until G-d’s promise to Abraham has been fulfilled, which occurs only after the Jews enter the Land of Israel. The blood of the Passover offering, which represented the one set of merits the Jews had to reflect their commitment to G-d, can be “washed away” once a full covenant is in motion, and Passover takes its place as only one of many mitzvot.

This Pesach let us remember the commitment that G-d has kept to the Jewish people and let us recommit ourselves to G-d in return.

Kings I 9:9 The Exodus from Egypt: An Active People

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Class of 2014

In the ninth perek of Kings I, the Exodus from Egypt is mentioned in reference to God’s promise to Shlomo, subsequent to the completion of the building of the Beit Hamikdash. God tells Shlomo that if he should uphold the Torah and all its commandments, He will preserve the Davidic dynasty. However, if he or the Jewish people should fail to uphold the Torah, God will destroy the Temple and the Land of Israel, such that when other nations pass by, they will wonder to themselves why the Jewish people suffered such misfortune. Ultimately, they will conclude that such has happened to the people of Israel because they abandoned their God, who brought their ancestors out of Egypt. God specifically uses the Exodus from Egypt to demonstrate His close relationship to the Jewish people. Granted, the Exodus from Egypt is a defining feature of the Jewish people’s relationship with God, but it would seem that God should have used the Torah as the singular defining feature of His relationship with the Jewish people. Ultimately, the fact that we, as the Jewish people, exclusively, were given the Torah is what makes us special; therefore, it seems odd that God chose to recount the Exodus from Egypt as the most salient feature of our relationship. This question becomes stronger given the fact that Amos, one of the later prophets, tells us (Amos 9:7) explicitly that we are not the only people who were redeemed by God. God also redeemed the Plishtim from Caphtor and Aram from Kir.

One explanation for God’s decision to invoke the Exodus from Egypt is that in a sense, the Exodus from Egypt is itself an allusion to Matan Torah but with an important new perspective. Though God’s decision to present the Jewish people with the Torah ultimately implies their active participation, namely their keeping of its commandments, the actual giving of the Torah and a reference to it implies a passive people, a people that simply received a document, possibly

even against their will. Though the Exodus from Egypt would also seem to suggest a similar level of passivity, it is clear that a reference to the Exodus from Egypt does not exclusively refer to itself. Rather it reflects the reason the Jewish people were redeemed. The Jewish people are not special because they were redeemed; other nations were also redeemed. The Jewish people attain their uniqueness through the Torah; the Jewish people were redeemed for a purpose. The significance of recounting the Exodus from Egypt stems from the fact that it is the beginning of the process leading to Matan Torah and implies an active people. They did not simply receive it; they accepted it. Furthermore, it goes without saying that the Exodus also successfully exhibits an instance of God's love for the Jewish people. The Exodus from Egypt thus captures and demonstrates the true relationship between God and the Jewish people. Simultaneously, it expresses God's active commitment to the Jewish people and His love for them, while also expressing their active role in receiving the Torah, their acceptance of the Torah.