

# A Haggadah Lesson in Divine Justice

**Y***etziat Mitzrayim*, the account of our Exodus from Egypt, may be taken as a local story, of interest specifically to Jews. From the plague of blood through the miraculous march out of Egypt, G-d fulfilled His pledge<sup>1</sup> to free Avraham's children from their captivity, to judge their captors and to ensure that the Jews emerged with great wealth.

On a second level, in a narrative which has been adopted by enslaved and suffering populations for centuries, *yetziat Mitzrayim* is a Divine rejection of brutal slavery. Notwithstanding the Torah's own version of slavery, we are commanded to remember the abuses we suffered in Egypt, and to avoid emulating them ourselves.<sup>2</sup> This provides a lesson for mankind.

And on a third level, *yetziat Mitzrayim* is a story of justice, of Divine supervision of our world, and of punishment for the guilty. It is a story not only of human behavior, but also an insight into Divine conduct. This facet of the story is made most clear by an oft-overlooked portion of the Haggadah, as it is explained by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin.

## Haggadah Mathematics

Toward the end of Maggid, after listing the Ten Plagues and before singing Dayyenu, Jews the world over recite the views of three sages who counted how many times the Egyptians were struck in Egypt and at



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the Sea. As the traditional text of the Haggadah reads:<sup>3</sup>

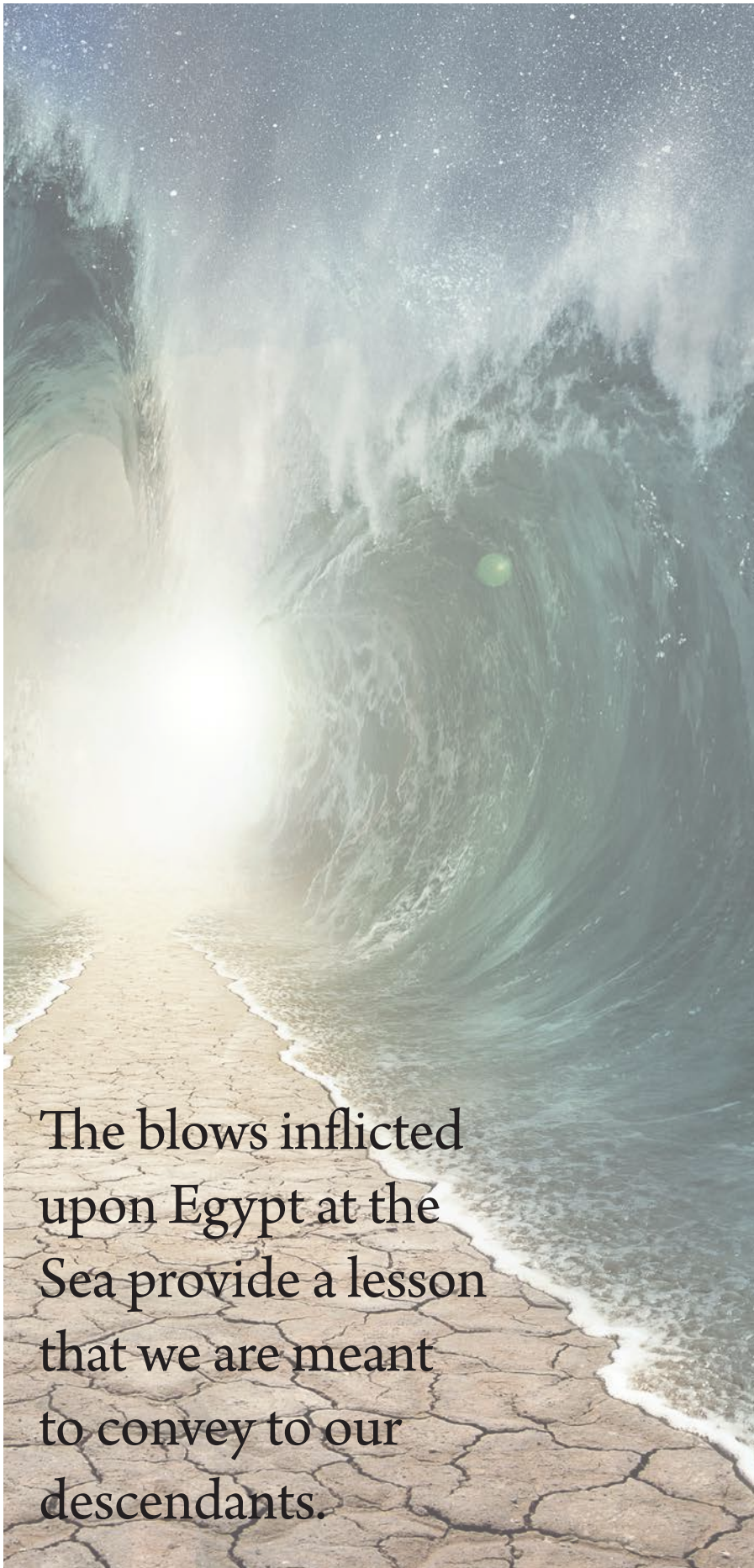
רבי יוסי הגלילי אומר מנין אתה אומר שלקו המצרים במצרים עשר מכות ועל הים לקו חמשים מכות? במצרים מה הוא אומר, "ויאמרו החרטמים אל פרעה אצבע אלקיים היא." ועל הים מה הוא אומר? "וירא ישראל את היד החזקה אשר עשה ד' במצרים וייראו העם את ד' ויאמינו בד' ובמשה עבדו." כמה לקו באצבע? י' מכות. אמור מעתה במצרים לקו עשר מכות ועל הים לקו חמשים מכות. רבי אליעזר אומר מנין שכל מכה ומכה שהביא הקב"ה על המצרים במצרים היתה של ארבע מכות? שנאמר "ישלח בם חרון אפו עברה וזעם וצרה משלחת מלאכי רעים." אפו עברה אחת, וזעם שתיים, וצרה שלש, משלחת מלאכי רעים ארבע. אמור מעתה במצרים לקו ארבעים מכות ועל הים לקו מאתיים מכות. רבי עקיבא אומר מנין שכל מכה ומכה שהביא הקב"ה על המצרים במצרים היתה של חמש מכות? שנאמר "ישלח בם חרון אפו עברה וזעם וצרה משלחת מלאכי רעים." חרון אפו אחת. עברה שתיים. וזעם שלש. וצרה ארבע. משלחת מלאכי רעים חמש. אמור מעתה במצרים לקו חמשים מכות ועל הים לקו חמשים ומאתים מכות

*Rabbi Yosi HaGlili said: How do you know that the Egyptians were struck with ten plagues in Egypt, and fifty upon the sea? In Egypt it says, "And the chartumim said to Pharaoh: It is*

*the finger of G-d." Upon the sea it says, "And Israel saw the strong hand G-d had performed to the Egyptians, and the nation feared G-d, and they trusted G-d and Moshe His servant." How many times were they struck with the "finger"? Ten blows. Then in Egypt they were struck ten times, and upon the sea they were struck fifty times.*

*Rabbi Eliezer said: How do you know that each blow G-d brought upon Egypt was of four blows? Tehillim 78:49 says, "He sent upon them the ferocity of His anger: Evrah, za'am, tzarah, harmful angels." 'Evrah' is one, 'za'am' is two, 'tzarah' is three, 'harmful angels' is four. Then in Egypt they were struck forty times, and upon the sea they were struck two hundred times.*

*Rabbi Akiva said: How do you know that each blow G-d brought upon Egypt was of five blows? Tehillim 78:49 says, "He sent upon them the ferocity of His anger, evrah, za'am, tzarah, harmful angels." 'The ferocity of His anger' is one, 'evrah' is two, 'za'am' is three, 'tzarah' is four, 'harmful angels' is five. Then in Egypt they were struck fifty times, and upon the sea they were struck two hundred and fifty times.*



The blows inflicted upon Egypt at the Sea provide a lesson that we are meant to convey to our descendants.

Like much of the Haggadah, this passage originates in a midrashic explanation of Tehillim 78:49;<sup>4</sup> indeed, at first blush it seems to say far more about that verse than about *yetziat Mitzrayim*. How do the descriptions of Divine punishment recorded in Tehillim contribute to the retelling of our departure from Egypt? And the intent of Rabbi Yosi haGlili, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva is opaque; in what way were the Egyptians struck fifty, two hundred or two hundred and fifty times at the Sea?

### Understanding our Passage

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin<sup>5</sup> offered insight into this midrash. Rabbi Berlin, also known as Netziv, contended that when the sages said that the Egyptians were struck multiple times, they meant that members of the Egyptian nation suffered a great variety of punishments. Each type of punishment was targeted to a particular element of the Egyptian population, based on its conduct toward their Jewish slaves. He wrote:<sup>6</sup>

הגיע לכל א' מרודפי ישראל מיתה משונה לפי מעשיו שהרעו לישראל בהיותם בקרבם. ועל זה אנו אומרים בברכת ק"ש "את רודפיהם ואת שונאיהם בתהומות טבע." היינו חיל המלוכה נקראו "רודפיהם" שלא משנאה עשו אלא בעבודת המלוכה, אבל שאר המון מצרים מכונים "שונאיהם", ומי שנתחייב על פי רשעו נטבע וגם מת בהשגחה במיתה הראויה לעונשו.

*Each of the pursuers of Israel met an unusual death, according to the way he had harmed Israel when they had lived in Egypt. Thus we say in the blessings of Shema, "He drowned their pursuers and their enemies in the depths." The king's forces are termed "pursuers" because they acted not out of hatred but out of service to the king; the rest of the Egyptians are called "enemies." One who was liable for his wickedness drowned, but also*



died under Divine supervision, with an appropriate punishment.

In other words, Rabbi Yosi haGlili, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva were not only justifying the wording of Tehillim 78:49; they were also demonstrating that the Egyptians were punished for their crimes, measure-for-measure, at the Sea.

Netziv's read is consistent with the introduction to this passage in *Shemot Rabbah*, which invokes Tehillim 9:17, "G-d is known, He has performed justice." It also matches the introduction to this passage in *Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael*, "And Israel saw Egypt, dead' — abnormal deaths, each death harsher than the next, for He brought many blows upon them at the sea."

The explanation offered by Netziv also matches a related midrash on the experience of the Egyptians in the waters of the Sea:<sup>7</sup>

ירדו במצולות כמו אבן. זו כת בינונית שבהן  
כשרים שבהן מיטרפין כקש. בינוניים כאבן.  
...רשעים צללו כעופרת.  
"They descended in the depths like stone"  
— this was the intermediate group. The  
kosher among them were thrown about  
as straw, the intermediate as stone, the  
wicked sank like lead.<sup>8</sup>

The message of this midrash, then, is not only a commentary to Tehillim 78:49 or an exercise in "Can you top this?" mathematics. Rabbi Yosi haGlili, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva want the student to understand that Divine justice is highly attuned to the actions of the individual, as was displayed at the Sea.<sup>9</sup>

### "You Shall Tell your Child"

Rambam omitted this passage from his Haggadah, consistent with his statement in *Mishneh Torah*<sup>10</sup> that the

mitzvah of Pesach night is to speak of the miracles performed on the night of the fifteenth of Nisan, specifically. As Rabbi Hershel Schachter has explained,<sup>11</sup> this narrow focus is a function of the Torah's instruction<sup>12</sup> to tell our children and grandchildren of G-d's actions "in Egypt."

However, with Netziv's explanation, we may suggest that this passage does fit with the events in Egypt, even though it describes events which took place a week later. G-d promised Avraham, "I will judge the nation whom [the Jews] will serve." In that light, the events at the Sea are a necessary part of the Exodus itself, and not a separate story: they illustrate the promised Divine justice, and so they form an integral part of the story.

To return to our opening remarks, Rabbi Yosi haGlili, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva highlight the lesson in Divine conduct embodied in *yetziat Mitzrayim*. Beyond serving as the coda for our personal Egypt experience and the Divine rejection of abusive slavery, the blows inflicted upon Egypt at the Sea provide a lesson that we are meant to convey to our descendants. The Torah commands us, "And you shall tell your children on that day" of the miracles G-d performed on our behalf, and you shall also tell them of the justice G-d executed.

This lesson in justice remains important in our own day. Our children perceive a world in which the innocent are abused, and their abusers often seem to escape penalty. Here, our sages offer an alternative look at the world. There are many means at Divine disposal, and G-d is watching the deeds of humanity. The denouement will not always be visible, but at least once in our history we were able to witness the hand of

Divine justice as it delivered to each person that which he deserved.

May we merit to see the day when not only is Divine punishment visibly inflicted, but when Divine reward will be likewise demonstrated before the eyes of the world.

### Notes

1. Bereishit 15:13-14.
2. See Devarim 24:17-22.
3. Rambam omits this in the edition of the Haggadah appearing in *Mishneh Torah*; we will return to this point later.
4. Varying editions appear in *Shemot Rabbah* 23:9, *Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach* 6, *Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 14:31 and *Midrash Tehillim* 78:15.
5. *Birkat haNetziv, Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael Beshalach* 6.
6. Ibid.
7. *Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 15:5.
8. It is worth noting that Rashi to Shemot 15:5, reverses this midrash, claiming that the better Egyptians died more quickly.
9. Netziv also uses this explanation to analyze Shemot 14:31, "And Israel saw that mighty Hand G-d had wielded against Egypt, and the nation feared G-d, and they believed in G-d and in Moshe, His servant." Per Netziv, the Jews were impressed by the degree to which the punishment of the Egyptians aligned with their crimes. This broadcast a message: G-d watches the deeds of each individual, and He punishes wrongdoing based on its specific character. This was more impressive than the broad miracles performed when we left Egypt; the range of sentences testified to Divine attention on an individual level. As impressive as our salvation was, the destruction of the Egyptians was still more striking. This approach is similar to the view of Rabbi Elazar in *Sotah* 11a, that Yitro was most impressed by the way Egypt was destroyed in a measure-for-measure manner consistent with their crimes.
10. *Hilchot Chametz uMatzah* 7:1.
11. *Masorah* 3 (Nisan 5750), pg. 27-28.
12. Shemot 10:2.