

Derech Hokhma^[1]: A Unifying Theme in the Exodus Narrative

There is within the Torah's narrative of Yetziath Mitzraim a number of thematic patterns that unify the story as a whole and suggest that the purpose of the Exodus was not only to liberate the Jews from Egyptian bondage and fulfill Brit Avot but also to provide a series of lessons designed to transform the theological outlook of both nations.

One of thematic patterns examined in this paper is inspired by Rashbam's (Rabbi Shelomo Ben Meir) commentary on God's initial mandate to Moshe (Shemot 3: 11). There, Rashbam suggests that God instructs Moshe Rabbenu to deceive Pharaoh regarding both the goal and duration of the exodus. By examining the protracted negotiations and the various beliefs, fears and interests that underlay Moshe's confrontation with the Egyptian empire the Biblical Narrative of Yetziath Mitzraim reads as a carefully woven literary unit.

I.

Moshe Rabenu, while tending the flock of Yitro, happened upon the Mountain of God (Har HaElohim). There a strange apparition, a bush that burned without being consumed, arrested his attention. While approaching it he heard the urgent call of his name, which is indicated by the repetition "Moshe Moshe [2]", stopping him before he profanes the sacred ground with his shoes. Moshe at this point does not yet realize the full import of the theophany for only after God's self-introduction (Verse 6) does Moshe cover his face, and his eyes. While this encounter has many of the features of a numinous [3] experience it is the dialogue between God and Moshe Rabbenu that will occupy our attention.

At this point Hashem informs Moshe of His decision to rescue the Jewish people from bondage in Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land, and that Moshe would be His agent.

"And now go, I will dispatch you to Pharaoh, and you shall take my people, the children of Israel out of Egypt."

Moshe reacts to God's proposal by protesting his inadequacy for the task.

“Moses replied, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh (VeChi Otzi) and that I should take the children of Israel out of Egypt.”

The following verses, which make up the main thrust of God’s response, seem to go beyond Moshe’s expression of inadequacy. God introduces a sign [4] possibly for reassurance, and makes reference to Bene Israel’s future worship at the mountain.

“And He said, for I shall be with you – and this is your sign that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.”

From a simple reading of the text one might argue that God is sending Moshe Rabenu on one mission, namely to take the Jewish people out of Egypt. Moshe’s initial response to Hashem’s charge on one level seems evident: *Mi Anochi ki Elech el Paroah*, Who am I that I can go to Pharaoh. However Moshe adds: *VeChi Otzi [5] et Bene Israel MiMitza'im* –how can I [possibly] take Bene Israel out of Egypt? (3:11). While the exact translation of the words *VeChi Otzi* remain problematic [6], Moshe is clearly asking God something about – the feasibility of successfully accomplishing such a mission.

Moshe Rabenu, can actually make a reasonable argument. He has been a fugitive from Egypt for many years. VeChi Otzi might mean - how will he possibly get an audience with Pharaoh? Why would the Jewish people accept Moshe as their leader and messenger from God? How will he successfully lead a nation of close to two million [7] people in the desert? Survive and then conquer the land of Canaan?

The argument Moshe chooses at this stage remains somewhat unclear [8]. From the simple reading of the text God’s answer to Moshe does not seem to address the relevant issues stated above.

“And He said: For I will be with you, and this is the sign that I have sent you – When you take the nation out of Egypt, you shall worship Elokim on this mountain.” (3:12)

God responds with two pieces of important information. 1. I will be with you and if you don't believe here is a sign [9] 2. After the Jewish people are taken out of Egypt they will worship God on this mountain.

Rashbam's Approach

Rashbam's careful reading of Shemoth 3:11 introduces into the initial dialogue between God and Moshe Rabenu a number of elements that afford the student important keys to unfolding the larger narrative of Yetziath Mitzraim. Rashbam recognizes the inadequacy of the way those who preceded him interpreted these verses.

He introduces his comment on Shemoth 3:11 by stating confidently:

"Anyone who would like to understand the primary Peshat of these pesukim should study my interpretation of this pasuk, for those who explained it before me did not understand it at all."

Rashbam concludes his Peshat on the Pasuk by adding:

"Anyone who explains these *Pesukim* in any other manner is totally mistaken." [10]

Rashbam, based on Moshe Rabenu's response, suggests that Hashem is instructing Moshe with two distinct tasks. 1. Confront Pharaoh 2. Take Bene Israel out of Egypt.

Moshe questions both parts of God's instructions. Hashem, in turn, answers each of the two questions respectively.

By dividing each verse into two parts Rashbam outlines the dialogue as follows:

First clause in dialogue:

God Commands Moshe: Go, I have sent you to Pharaoh. (3:10)

Moshe asks: Who am I that I can go to Pharaoh? (3:11)

God Answers: For I will be with you and this (the burning bush) is the sign that I have sent you. (3:12)

Second clause in dialogue:

God commands Moshe: Take Bene Israel out of Egypt. (3:10)

Moshe asks: How can I take them out? (3:11)

God answers: [In order to] take them out of Egypt [tell Pharaoh] this nation must worship their God on this mountain. (3:12)

It seems that Moshe is to a certain extent concerned about getting an audience with Pharaoh if indeed part of God's plan involves accomplishing his mission through Pharaoh and not around Pharaoh. In addition, assuming Pharaoh has to be involved, Rashbam adds, that Moshe wonders *how* he will successfully convince Pharaoh to let the Jewish people out of Egypt.

In response to his concerns about his own credentials, God tells Moshe not to worry "I will be with you". Regarding how he could possibly achieve God's intended goal of taking the Jewish people out of Egypt without sounding at best naïve, at worst ridiculous and suicidal, Rashbam suggests that God instructs Moshe Rabenu to deceive Pharaoh. The plan is simple: just tell Pharaoh that the only thing Bene Israel is requesting is an opportunity to worship God in the desert. Once out of Egypt Moshe will lead the Jewish people into the Promised Land! Rashbam calls this *Derekh Chomah* and actually gives another example of Divine deception found in Sefer Shemuel. When God instructs Shemuel Hanavi to anoint David as king of Israel – Shemuel expresses concern that Shaul will kill him. God responds to the prophet by recommending an alibi or cover-up story namely that he is going to Bet-Lechem to offer up a public sacrifice. Once there the prophet will secretly anoint David as king.

Rashbam supports his Peshat based on the details mentioned in Pasuk 18. In the same theophany God issues more specific instruction to Moshe Rabenu regarding his meeting with Pharaoh. God says:

"... Then you and the elders shall go to the King of Egypt and tell him: 'The God of the Hebrews had come and told us that we must go **for a three-day journey into the desert [to har Chorev] to offer sacrifices to our Lord**'."

If indeed Rashbam is correct - Moshe Rabenu never really asks Pharaoh to free the Jews from slavery, rather, he only asks for a three day respite from work in order to worship their God in the desert.

Rashbam's theory and the Narrative as a whole

At this point it makes sense to put Rashbam's theory to the test and see how it reads in terms of the narrative as a whole.

As was stated above in verse 3:18 Hashem tells Moshe that what he asks of Pharaoh is a three-day journey in the desert in order to worship Hashem. There is no mention of a permanent freedom from slavery. This is precisely what Moshe asks of Pharaoh at their first encounter:

"...Moshe and Aharon came and said to Pharaoh; thus said the God of Israel, Let my people go and worship me in the desert. ... And they answered the God of the Hebrews has called upon us to take a **three-day journey into the desert in order that we may sacrifice to our God, lest he strike us with Dever & Cherev**" (5: 1-3).

Moshe repeats to Pharaoh almost verbatim God's words from 3:18. The impression Pharaoh is given at this early stage is that Moshe's intent is only a three-day journey to worship God in the desert and then to return back to work. In verse 5:3 Moshe's warning to Pharaoh: "lest He strike us with Dever & Cherev" may explain God's intentions in 3:12: "Ta'avdun et HaElohim al Hahar Haze". The warning is clear – if Pharaoh does not let the Jewish people journey into the desert and worship the Lord, a severe divine punishment will ensue and many people, including Egyptians, may die. It seems that Moshe is suggesting that it is in Egypt's best interest to allow the Jews this three-day journey to worship their God [11].

The Warnings

Rashbam is one of the first to observe the well-known patterns that form the structure of the ten plagues [12]. For example they are arranged in three sets with three calamities in each set while the tenth plague lies outside the scope of the structure. Within each series the first two plagues of each set is preceded by a warning while the third plague in each set strikes each time unheralded. The pattern indicates that the narrative of the Makkoth is conscientiously articulated and a tightly knit composition. Each of the warnings is identical with the exception of the first. They each contain the words: *Shelach et ami VeYa'avduni*. The first warning includes the location, BaMidbar, in the desert, is added. One can argue that the first warning "Let my people go so that they can worship me in the desert" is what Pharaoh understands to be the extent of Moshe's goal. Again, never does Moshe hint to the possibility of Bene Israel leaving for good.

Pharaoh's Concessions

After Makkat Arov, the fourth plague, Pharaoh finally grants Bene Israel permission to go and worship their God. Initially, Pharaoh concedes to let them worship within the land of Egypt.

"...Go he said [you have permission to] sacrifice to your God [here] in the land of Egypt" 8:21

Moshe here rejects Pharaoh's compromise on potentially dangerous grounds namely that if they offer up their sacrifices in Egypt the local population will stone them:

"Could we sacrifice the sacred animal of the Egyptians before their eyes and have them stone us?" (8:22)

Moshe continues with this line of thinking and argues:

"What we must do is make a three day journey into the desert. There we will be able to sacrifice to God our Lord, just as he told us." 8:23

Pharaoh, assuming all Moshe is requesting is a three-day interruption from work in order to exercise "freedom of religion", agrees to allow a short journey into the desert but not a three-day distance:

"I will let you leave as long as you do not go far away. You can sacrifice to God your Lord in the desert, but pray for me." (8:24)

Moshe seems to agree to this concession but rebukes Pharaoh by saying:

"When I leave your presence, I will pray to God. Tomorrow the Creatures will go away from Pharaoh [13] his servants and his people. But let Pharaoh never again deceive us, refusing to allow the people to sacrifice to God." 8:25

The plague ends and Pharaoh's heart (see below) is hardened [14] and once again he reneges on his promise (8:26).

Moshe never mentions the possibility of an exodus from Egypt. In fact it seems that Moshe was willing to go ahead with Pharaoh's concession. While Pharaoh is worried about giving them permission to leave he never accuses Moshe of planning an exodus.

Later in the narrative after Moshe warns Egypt of the impending plague of locust, Pharaoh's own servants demand some sort of concession.

"Pharaoh's officials said to him: How long will this [man] continue to be a menace to us? Let them go, and let them serve God their Lord. Don't you realize that Egypt is being destroyed?" (10:7)

In response to his advisors Pharaoh summons Moshe and enters into a new round of negotiations. This time the issue is not where to worship Hashem but rather who may go and worship God. Pharaoh permits the men to go while Moshe insists that the women and children must come along. (10:8-11)

It is quite telling when one notices the reason for Moshe's insistence that women and children participate. He does not suggest that they must join the men because they are planning an exodus from Egypt. Rather Moshe says:

"It is a festival to God for all of us [15]." (10:9)

It seems from the simple reading of the text that Moshe Rabenu consistently gives Pharaoh the impression that Bene Israel is only interested in a three day journey to worship their God and return back to the land of Egypt.

There is a third round of negotiations that shed light on the questions of what Moshe presented to Pharaoh. After the ninth plague of *Choshech* Pharaoh is willing to grant permission even to the women and children to leave but not their livestock.

“Pharaoh summoned Moshe. Go! He said worship God! Even your children can go with you. Just leave your sheep and cattle behind.”

Again Moshe rejects Pharaoh’s concession based on a logistical reason claiming:

“Our livestock must go along with us. Not a single hoof can be left behind. We must take them to serve God our Lord, since we do not know what we will need to worship God until we get there.”
(10:26)

Even after the tenth and last plague against Pharaoh and Egypt Bene Israel is granted permission to leave but only to worship God in the desert. There is no suggestion of an permanent exodus from Egypt.

“...Get moving! He said. Get out from among my people – you and the Israelites. **Go worship God just as you demanded** [16]. Take your sheep and cattle, just as you said. Go [and] bless me too.” (10:31)

One may suggest that the request “*Uberachtem Gan Oti*” Bless me too (10:31) further implies that all Pharaoh was agreeing to was the Jewish people paying tribute to their God. Indeed a humbling concession considering the fact that the Pharaoh is regarded as divine within Egypt.

In summary, it seems that at every stage of the negotiations Moshe is presented with ample opportunities to inform Pharaoh that the Jewish people are planning to immigrate to the land of Canaan and never return to Egypt. Yet that aspect of the mission is omitted. The Biblical text affords us enough information suggesting that Pharaoh would have little reason to suspect that Bene Israel are leaving for good.

Borrowed Goods

Another well-known difficult passage can be easily explained with Rashbam's reading of Sefer Shemoth. The Torah states in verses 12:35-36 as follows:

"The Egyptians were also urging the people to hurry and leave the land.... The Israelites did as Moshe had said. They requested (*VaYishalu*) silver and gold articles and clothing from the Egyptians. God made the Egyptians respect the people and they lent (*VaYashilum*) [them] and they [the Israelites] despoiled Egypt."

Through the ages these verses have been the alleged basis for the supposed thievery conducted by Bene Israel as they left Egypt. This had to be fraudulent, as the "borrowed" gold, and silver objects as well as the garments, which they had taken, could not possibly have been returned. Worst of all, this was not done voluntarily, but at God's behest, and as a result this entire episode cast a blemish on the Jewish people's concept of religion and morality [17]. Luzzato and others [18] argued that, indeed, as it was God's command, the Jewish people had to restrain themselves from demanding more from the Egyptians. On this single occasion they were the tools of Hashem's punishment and from it they were suppose to learn not to oppress the stranger.

Rashbam's *Peshat*, in a non-apologetic fashion, affords us a solution to this exegetical and moral problem. The Egyptians, according to Rashbam, were eager to give the Jewish people their finest wares. After all Bene Israel are only taking a short vacation. The assumption is that the Bene Israel will come back to Egypt after they pay tribute to their God and return their goods. Pharaoh, however, declares war on Bene Israel shortly after they take leave (see Below) and once war is declared all agreements become null and void. That which was borrowed now becomes spoils of war.

Pharaoh Declares War

How are we to understand the sequence of events that follow Pharaoh's permitting the Jewish people to leave Egypt? Bene Israel initially leave Egypt and journey towards the desert as is recorded in verses 12:37 & 13:17-20:

"The children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot outside children." (12:37)

"They journeyed from Succoth, and encamped in Etham, at the edge of the wilderness" (13:20)

Then, what seems to be, in the middle of the journey God commands Moshe Rabenu to make an about face and return towards the land of Egypt.

"And God told Moshe, tell Bene Israel to turn around and set up camp ...near the red sea. [in order that] Pharaoh will say they are wandering in the land [of Egypt], for the desert has closed them in" (14:1-4)

It becomes clear to Pharaoh at this point that he had been deceived. He granted Bene Israel permission to temporarily go worship their God and return to Egypt under his rule. Now he realizes the Jewish people have declared some sort of political independence. After all if they are not headed towards the desert and they are not returning back to Egypt they must be up to something. Verse 14:5 states:

"And it was told to the King of Egypt that the people had run away... What have we done, for we have set Bene Israel free from their slave labor."

Pharaoh, for the sake of national security, declares war on this rebellious nation of slaves (14:6-10). He assumes that if he does not attack them first, they will surely attack him. The Jewish people are numerous and armed "*Chamushim Alu Bene Israel*" (3:18). This indeed was Pharaoh's fear and the reason for his conspiracy against Bene Israel early on in the narrative (1:10). Namely, that one day they would take over Egypt.

The above is the backdrop for the narrative of Yetziat Mitzraim. While Rashbam's Peshat reads well into the text a number of questions remain. 1. What does Moshe Rabenu (Hashem) gain by not telling the true intent of the people of Israel? 2. How can we justify what Rashbam calls *Derekh Chochmah* when in reality it is deception? 3. Why does Yetziath Mitzraim have to occur through Pharaoh. One could conceive of a more direct and simple Exodus.

Political and Logistical Reality

Clearly Moshe led Pharaoh to believe that the only thing Bene Israel were interested in was to go into the desert for a three-day journey to worship God. In order to better understand the underlying purpose of God's plan and answer the above stated questions we need to ask what exactly did Bene Israel believe Moshe's mission was about? Were they also being deceived? Or did they know about Moshe's strategy and God's *Derekh Chochmah*. It seems from Verse 3:17 that Moshe gathers the elders of Israel and states the plan:

"...I will bring you out of the wretchedness of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, ... to a land flowing with milk and honey."

The plan is eagerly endorsed by the elders and the people of Israel as is stated in Verse 4:29-31:

"...The people believed. They accepted the message that God had granted special providence to the Israelites, and that He had seen their misery..."

Yet just a short few verses later the hopes and promise of freedom and independence fizzles out. In verse 5:20 the people encounter Moshe and accuse him of hurting them:

"Let God look at you and be your judge they said to him. You have destroyed our reputation with Pharaoh and his advisors. You have placed a sword to kill us in their hands."

What is it that makes the possibility of an en-masse exodus from Egypt and emigration to the land of Canaan so fragile a possibility?

When we read Sefer Shemoth the initial impression we are given is that the only obstacle preventing Bene Israel from leaving Egypt and immigrating to Eretz Israel is their enslavement to Pharaoh. Yehezkel offers a more complicated and theologically significant picture in Chapter 20 of his book:

“...Say to them, the Lord God says: On the day I chose Israel, I took an oath to the seed of Jacob’s house and revealed Myself to them in the land of Egypt. I swore to them saying: I am God your Lord. On that day I swore to take them out of the land of Egypt, to a land which I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands. I said to them: Let each man throw away the detestable things which you see. Don’t defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am God your Lord. But they rebelled against me and did not want to obey me. None of them threw away the detestable things they saw, and they did not abandon the idols of Egypt. I decided to pour out my anger upon them and drain my wrath against them in the land of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of my name, so it would not be profaned in the eyes of the nations among whom they dwelled for I revealed Myself to the Israelites by taking them out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations.”

One cannot, however, overlook the political and logistical reality of the Jewish people. Did Bene Israel have an alternative other than remaining in Egypt? Consider the following. As per the census taken in Sefer Bemidbar: Bene Israel number some 600,000 men over the age of twenty. If we factor in an equal number of women and a high birth rate the population was in excess of 2 million. What is the reality of providing food and water for a population of that size? Egypt survived as an oasis nurtured by the Nile River. However the survival of a people of this size in the desert for even a few days would seem impossible and require the miraculous. Even if this group of ex-slaves could muster the ingenuity to make it to Canaan would they have the ability and resources to conquer the land and settle it? Canaan, as the Meraglim inform us (Bemidbar 13-14), was fortified with formidable armies and walled cities. I suggest here that without a profound belief in God, Bene Israel have no option other than staying in Egypt. Not to

mention the fact that they have been there for some 200 years [19] and are a part of Egyptian culture and society.

From Pharaoh's perspective Bene Israel became too numerous and indeed posed a threat to the Egyptians. Egypt had been taken over and ruled by numerous enemies from within as well as other external powers. Pharaoh enslaves the people of Israel out of fear that they will one day become too powerful within Egyptian society and overtake control of the country.

When Israel initially cries out to God their prayer is for a lighter work load not for religious or national independence:

"... the Israelites groaned because of their subjugation (Min Ha'Avodah)" (2:24) [20].

The possibility of freedom from Egyptian rule and dominion is simply unfathomable. Short of some dramatic miracle, the idea of leaving Egypt could not possibly enter into their consciousness. Leaving Egypt would be suicidal.

With the above background one better understands why Moshe Rabenu had to go to Pharaoh with Derech Hochmah. Had Moshe suggested an en-masse national exodus emigration to Canaan Pharaoh would have dismissed Moshe as totally insane. Moshe would have lost credibility in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the Jewish people. Instead, God instructs Moshe to make a reasonable request. Allow the Jewish people a three-day journey into the desert to worship God. One can argue that Derech Hochma is not deception, but rather a petition for national religious freedom. While this request is much more reasonable it also poses a threat to Pharaoh's leadership and despotic control of his people.

Of course Pharaoh never suspects that the people want to leave Egypt – it is simply not a realistic option. His primary fear is that they return to Egypt with a renewed sense of independence and rebel against his leadership. This may indeed be Peshat in verse 1:8-9 "Hava Nithakema loVeAla Min Ha'aretz"

Pharaoh's concessions, while liberal in his situation, keep him in control. By not allowing the women and cattle to go with the men he has political and

economic control over this band of slaves. If they all leave, Pharaoh is certain they will return. His fear, however, is that they return not as servants but as an independent people. Indeed, when Bene Israel do leave Egypt, Pharaoh's greatest fear becomes a reality. The Jewish people leave armed (13:8) with their women, cattle and a significant amount of borrowed gold and silver and do not go toward the desert. Instead they return towards Egypt. As soon as Pharaoh realizes this he concludes that he has a rebellion on his hands and launches a pre-emptive attack:

“Meanwhile the king of Egypt received news that the people were escaping. Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds regarding the people, and said what have we done? How could we have released Israel from slave labor?” (14:5)

One can argue that Rashbam's Peshat does not suggest a form of divine deception rather a politically astute means of achieving a dramatic end.

Through Pharaoh

Up until this point we have seen a consistent thematic pattern within the narrative of Yetziath Mitzraim which illuminates the various concerns that underlay the negotiations between Pharaoh and Moshe Rabbenu. We can safely conclude, based on the dramatic confrontation between Moshe and Pharaoh that the fulfillment of God's promise to the forefathers, the Brit Avot of Yishuv Eretz Israel, is not the only goal of Yetziath Mitzraim. If this were the case Hashem could have accomplished an exodus from Egypt in a much simpler fashion. As was observed by Rashbam and stated earlier the Pesukim clearly emphasize Hashem's insistence on Moshe accomplishing his goal of taking the Jewish people out of Mitzraim by confronting Pharaoh (and Egypt).

“Now go, I have sent you to **Pharaoh**” while Moshe responds,
“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”

Indeed there is clearly a secondary objective to Yetziath Mitzraim, namely a didactic purpose – to instill knowledge of God in those who have been unwilling to acknowledge him [21]. Abravanel echoes this Peshat by

suggesting that the Makkoth are a response to Pharaoh's initial rejection of Moshe's plea to release Bene Israel:

"Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice to send Israel out? I do not know Hashem" (Exodus 5:2) [22].

In other words, Pharaoh's rejection of Hashem is a submission to the gods of Egypt for protection and direction. The Makkoth were specifically directed against Egyptian gods whom the Egyptians believed were personified in nature [23]. Furthermore, Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, ruled the land as god. He was considered the reincarnation and Son of Amon-Re or as Horus or as a combination of the gods of Upper and Lower Egypt. A stela from the Middle Kingdom describes the divinity of a deceased pharaoh named Ni-Maat-Re, also known as Amenemhet III and exhorts the reader:

"Worship Pharaoh Ni-Maat-Re, living forever, within our bodies. And associate with his majesty many hearts ... He is Re, by whose beams one sees, He is the one who illumines the Two Lands more than the sun disc." [24]

Indeed the Makkoth that follow this initial dialogue should be understood as a series of attacks against the Egyptian pantheon of gods. This is Peshat in Bemidbar 33:4 where we are told that the Egyptians buried those who had died by the tenth plague, by which, Hashem "executed judgments against their gods."

Based on this, one realizes that Dam, the Makkah of blood, was directed against the god Khnum, creator of water and life, or against Hapi, the Nile god, or against Osiris, whose bloodstream was the Nile. While Tzefardeah, Frogs, was directed against Heket, the goddess of childbirth who was represented as a frog. Pestilence against the cattle was directed against Hathor, the mother and sky goddess represented in the form of the cow or against Apis the symbol of fertility represented by the bull. Arbeh, locust according to this explanation may have been directed against Seth who manifests himself in the wind and storms and /or against Isis, goddess of life, who grinds, spins flax and weaves clothes and / or against Min who was

worshiped as a god of vegetation and protector of crops. Min is an especially likely candidate for this plague as is stated in 9:31 that the plague came as the flax and barley were about to be harvested but before the wheat and the spelt had ripened. Indeed the "Coming of Min" was widely celebrated in ancient Egypt at the beginning of the harvest season [25]. One can see how this plague devastated the coming-out party of Min.

Darkness of course was directed against the various gods associated with the sun – Amon-Re, Aten, Atum, or Horus. Additionally regarding Hoshekh, darkness the Torah states:

"People could not see one another and for three days no one could get up from where he was, but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings" (Shemoth 10:21-23)

What is being described is not simply the absence of light. The darkness is almost physical in nature, as though it could be touched (Shemoth 10:21). The alternation of light and darkness, day and night ceased. Yet darkness and light exist side by side in geographically distinct places. Bene Israel had light while the Egyptian had darkness. In short Hashem had reverted creation to a state prior to Ma'aseh Bereshit when light and darkness existed side by side (Bereshit 1:4-5).

Finally Makkat Bekhorot, the death of the first-born was directed against the patron-piety of Pharaoh and the judge of the dead Osiris [26].

Through the Makkoth and the various miracles and wonders associated with them, God repudiates all the many beliefs in the world. Especially if they are foretold, these miracles demonstrate the truth of the central articles of Jewish faith [27].

This according to Ramban is the central theme of the entire narrative. Not only a physical redemption but a spiritual awareness lies at the heart of the Makkoth.

"When idolatry first appeared in the world, in the days of Enosh, opinions became confused. Some denied the existence of God, saying the world predated everything while some denied His knowledge of details of this world, saying, "how could He know? Is there knowledge with the most High?" (Psalm 73:11) Some

acknowledged His knowledge but denied His providence, saying "He has made mankind like the fish of the sea" (Habbakuk 1:14) for which He has no care, and no punishment or reward – "They say God does not see us; God has abandoned the country." (Yehezkel 8:12) But when God singles out a group or an individual and does marvels for them, changing the normal course of nature, then the repudiation of all these opinions becomes clear to all. For it shows that there is a God in the world, who constantly renews the world, and knows and responds and is omnipotent. And this marvel is announced by a prophet beforehand, the truth of prophecy, too, becomes evident... All these essential beliefs were denied, or doubted by the Egyptians, so that the great signs and wonders testified powerfully to the belief in the creator and in the whole Torah." [28]

The text itself provides considerable support for the idea that the Makkoth are to convey knowledge of God to all who witness them and hear about them. The didactic purpose presented in the text is threefold and progresses through the narrative. The initial references suggest a transmission of God's existence and identity as one purpose of the Makkoth. This is clearly stated before the onset of the plagues.

"And Egypt ***shall know that I am Hashem***, when I stretch out my hand over Egypt... (7:5)

"You shall say to Pharaoh, Hashem, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to you saying: Send out My people that they may serve Me in the wilderness – but behold, you have not heeded up to now. So Says Hashem, ***'through this shall you know that I am Hashem'***" (7:16-17)

While the above references allude to an awareness that there is a God the next four references in chronological order suggest a deeper understanding of God's nature. Specifically God's uniqueness, immanence and dominion:

"For Tomorrow ... as you say – so that ***you will know that there is none like Hashem our God ...***" (8:6)

"And on that day I shall set apart the land of Goshen upon which my people stands, and there shall be no swarm there; ***so that***

***you will know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land.”
(8:18)***

“For this time I shall send all my plagues against your heart, and upon your servants, and your people, ***so that you shall know that there is none like Me in all the world.*** For now I could have sent My hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence and you would have been obliterated from the earth. However, for this have I let you endure, ***in order to show you My strength and so that My Name may be declared throughout the world.***” (9:14)

“When I leave the city I shall spread out my hands to Hahem; the thunder will cease and the hail will no longer be, ***so that you shall know that the earth is Hashem’s***” (9:29)

The repetition of the words “So that you shall know” and “none like Hashem our God” indicate a deeper understanding of God’s dominion and omnipotence within the natural order of creation.

The final two didactic references function to emphasize a third kind of knowledge of God. This knowledge is even more specific and suggests a God who has a special relationship with the Jewish people and thus a purpose for the course of events. In the first instance the information is directed towards Bene Israel while in the second it is directed at Pharaoh.

“Come to Pharaoh, for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst; ***and so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son’s son that I made a mockery of Egypt*** and My signs that I placed among them – ***that you may know that I am Hashem.***” (10:1-2)

“But against the children of Israel, no dog shall wet its tongue, against man nor beast, ***so that you shall know that Hashem will have differentiated between Egypt and Israel***” (11:7)

The text itself provides sufficient evidence that Moshe’s confrontation with Pharaoh had a purpose in itself, namely to educate Pharaoh, Egypt and, in addition, Bene Israel. The fact that the Makkoth also served to enlighten the Jewish people should not be underscored. Indeed, Sefer Devarim begins with

precisely this message which is later reiterated by Hosea in chapter 11 of his book. Moshe warns Bene Israel:

“Only beware for yourself and beware for your soul lest you forget the things your eyes have seen and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life and make them known to your children and children’s children” [29]. (Devarim 4:9)

Hardening Pharaoh’s Heart

The drama of the Makkoth is heightened by the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Here too the narrative speaks on multiple levels. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart can of course be simply a poetic way of describing Pharaoh’s stubbornness. But it actually takes on a much deeper significance if seen against the background of ancient Egyptian culture and its mythology.

In ancient Egypt the heart (IB) represents the essence of a person. Egyptologist E.A. Wallis Budge defined Ib as the “heart, middle, interior, sense, wisdom, understanding, intelligence, attention, intention, disposition, manner, will, wish, desire, mind, courage, lust self, and thoughts” of a person. [30] The Ib is distinguished from the Ba (soul, spirit) and the Ka (some sort of vital energy) both ill-defined concepts. The Ib is arguably the most important part of the human in ancient Egypt.

After a person died, in ancient Egypt, the heart was weighed in the balance of truth to determine the kind of afterlife the deceased would receive. On one side of the balance was placed the heart of the deceased and on the other side was placed a feather. If the heart outweighed the feather the deceased was in trouble. [31] When the Torah tells us that Hashem hardened Pharaoh’s heart this is a polemic against Pharaoh’s pure and untainted character.

We now read the various verses that speak of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart with a unique insight. Take for example verse 9:7:

“Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and he did not send out the people.”

Peshat is based on an understanding of the historical/ cultural context in which Sefer Shemoth is written. The ultimate purpose of hardening Pharaoh's heart is to glorify Hashem and to demonstrate His control over the entire universe. This too is stated explicitly in the text:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart ... so that I gain Kavod (glory/ honor) for Myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am Lord" (Shemoth 14:4 also 14:17-18)

There is an interesting pun in the two pesukim mentioned above. Both refer to the glory Hashem will gain from hardening Pharaoh's heart. The root of the word Kavod (KVD) is the same as the root of the word Kaved (heavy/ hard) as is used in 10:1, "Because I have made his heart heavy (Hikhdadeti et Libo)". Indeed the words are related. Honor lends a certain weightiness to a person. When the root is applied to the heart it is made heavy. In Egyptian culture that means sinful. As a result KVD (honor/ glory) is Hashem's while KVD (sinfulness/ heaviness) is Pharaoh's. And, that, of course is central to the didactic message related in the story while being true to the cultural context of Ancient Egypt.

The drama, the suffering, and final jubilation is an important part of the greater goal of Yetziat Mitzraim. Ramban alludes to this in his Perush by suggesting that the miracles that will be done on behalf of Bene Israel's deliverance will also function as a means of bringing justice to the Egyptians [32].

"He informed Moses that he is being sent to the them with the attribute of justice which is within the attribute of mercy."

In other words the miracles, which will be done in order to deliver them from the bondage of Egypt, will at the same time be acts of justice against the Egyptians.

Conclusion:

Sforno [33] draws a basic distinction between the miracles done in the time of the Avot - in the name of God as "El Shaddai" - which are by nature "hidden miracles", and those done for Israel in Egypt, which were "visible miracles". The purpose of the miracles done by Moshe in Egypt were not only intended to convince Pharaoh but to also initiate a complex chain of events, which would reach their climax at the foot of Mount Sinai. At that point Israel would come to know Hashem. In this light we should understand the letter-conjunction "vav" in the word "V'yada'atem ki ani ..." (And you will know that I am the Lord, your God) (Exodus 6,7) as being causative. The passage then, means: Through these miracles you will finally come to know the Lord. The continuation "who freed you from the sufferings of Egypt" refers to the first passage in the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (Exodus 20,2).

We must point out that according to Rambam: "the signs done by Moshe in the wilderness - were done out of necessity" (Yesodey Hatorah 8:1). Not so the miracles performed in Egypt, whose purpose, in the words of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, was to transform each individual in Israel into "a servant loving the object of his servitude and willing to sacrifice his life for the one whom he loves". [34] It was therefore essential to perform the miracles in Egypt, the land of magicians and sorcerers, whose expertise, according to Ran [35], is "one of the branches of science," for only there would they recognize that the signs performed by Moshe and Aharon did not follow the laws of science or nature. This reasoning is already intimated in the Midrash: (B.T., *Men.* 85a; Sh. R. 9.4) when Pharaoh mocked Aharon, saying that turning his staff into a serpent was nothing extraordinary, Moshe answered, that on the contrary, in a country where such matters are well understood one knows how to distinguish the counterfeit from the true.

In this light, we can understand why the magicians play a central part in the narratives of the miracles. In the first two plagues they are able to bring about pseudo-plagues resembling what Hashem brought on Egypt --

turning the water into blood and bringing up frogs over all of Egypt. However, with respect to the frogs, Pharaoh knew that only Moshe, and not his magicians, had the power to remove them. By the third plague, the magicians no longer succeeded in imitating Aharon's deed to raise up the lice. They have to admit to Pharaoh it is the "finger of Hashem," i.e. that it is above and beyond the laws of nature known to them. This is what Rashi means when he says, "Spirits do not rule over creations smaller than a grain of barley." (Rashi, 8:12, *s.v. ve-lo yakhlu*). In other words, the sorcerers had no control over such tiny objects. Finally, in the subsequent plague, the magicians are presented as so weak, that they themselves are stricken with boils along with the rest of Egypt.

The objective of future redemption is also to bring the entire world to acknowledge the sovereignty of Hashem, as stated in many prophetic passages on redemption, such as Ezekiel 38-39 (the Haftara for Vaera). One of the ways to acknowledge the sovereignty of Hashem is stated at the end of Micah (7:15-16): "I will show him wondrous deeds as in the days when You came forth from the land of Egypt. Let nations behold and be ashamed ... to the Lord our God; let them fear and dread You!" Just as in the first redemption from Egypt it was necessary to recognize that "what is impossible according to the laws of nature is not impossible according to the laws of the Lord," so too, this must be recognized in the ultimate redemption.

End Notes

1. See Rashbam 3:11
2. See also Genesis 22:11
3. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1923, coined the term *Numinosum* (numinous) to express a special kind of experience. Otto describes the main feature of this experience as a bold awareness of one's humanity, in the face of something that can only be

expressed as a *mysterium tremendum*. The experience contains the elements of *awefulnes*, of fear, of a sense of *overpoweringness*, energy and / or urgency. The numinous includes the feeling that one is confronting the incomprehensible, the wholly other. The response to such an experience is both fascination and retreat.

4. see note #9

5. Rashi Understands *Vechi Otzi* to mean Why Bene Israel, while Ramban suggests it means how will they defeat the inhabitants of the land of Canaan.

6. See Daat Mikra on the Pasuk

7. &&&&

8. **Ibn Ezra** keeps the dialogue between Hashem and Moshe Rabenu simple. Moshe is actually asking just one question, namely, how will he, "a shepherd" go and see a king like Pharaoh. God not only assures Moshe that He will be with him but also offers Moshe a reason for the Exodus, namely that the Jewish people will gather at this mountain and enter into a covenant with God.

Rashi and Seforno reinterpret Moshe's question to fit God's answer.

Rashi^[1] suggests that when Moshe asks: *Vechi Otzi* he is not concerned with the countless challenges he might face as the redeemer and leader of a nation of slaves and the numerous logistical and tactical hurdles involved, but rather he asked God for what purpose does God wish to free Bene Israel. According to Rashi, Moshe is bothered with whether or not Bene Israel are indeed worthy of being taken out of Egypt. In response to this question God tells Moshe that after they leave Egypt they will come to this mountain and receive the Torah "Ta'avdun Et HaElohim Al HaHar Haze". Through this merit the people of Israel retroactively become worthy of redemption.

Ramban does not reject Rashi's reading outright, however instead of putting words into Moshe's mouth as does Rashi, Ramban prefers to interpret Hashem's response in a way consistent with the kinds of issues we raised above. Ramban suggest that Moshe not only questions his credentials to have an audience with Pharaoh, but how he will possibly take a nation of

slaves and conquer the land of Canaan. To this Hashem says I will be with you and following the Exodus the people will come to this mountain, worship God, and walk in His ways. As a result they will believe in Hashem and in Moshe and fearlessly conquer the land of Canaan.

A fourth interpretation is that of Rambam. In Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah Maimonides rearranges the sequence of events to fit into a philosophical concern on the part of Moshe Rabenu. **Rambam** writes as follows:

“Moses, our teacher, knew that one who believes [in another person] because of signs has apprehension in his heart, and that he has doubts and suspicions. Therefore, he sought to be released from the mission, saying: “They will not believe in me” [Exodus 4: 1], until the Holy One Blessed be He informed him that these wonders [were intended only as a temporary measure,] until they left Egypt. After they would leave, they would stand on this mountain and all doubts which they had about him [Moshe] would be removed. Here I will give you a sign so that they will know that I truly sent you from the outset, and thus no doubts will remain in their hearts. This is what is meant by “this will be your sign that I sent you; When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.” [Exodus 3: 12]

In other words Moshe is concerned with whether or not he will successfully convince Bene Israel to believe in him and in Hashem. God answers Moshe that the miracles He will perform are simply a means of getting the Jewish People to the Mountain. Once at Har Sinai the people will become covenanted and believers.

9. For a careful study of the various possibilities in the useage of the “sign” in the Pasuk see Tammar Verdiger “Ve Zeh Lekha Ha’Ot” Megidim 12, 5751

10. For other such remarks on the part of Rashbam regarding his predecessor's comments see GN. 37:2, 45:28, 49:8-9 Ex. 17:15, 33:14, 43:29.

11. This reasoning is actually consistent with Ancient Near Eastern theology in that the Gods are angered when they are not served at their request.

12. Rashbam 7:26. One might argue that Rabbi Yehuda in the Hagadah was the first to notice the patterns with his mnemonic device for the 10 plagues. Also see Rabbenu Bahya Ben Asher on 10:1 and Abarbanel on 7:26

13. Since Pharaoh had shown respect to God Moshe uses the third person

14. For a discussion on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart see Nehama Leibowitz Studies in Shemoth Vol. 1 also see Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 6:3

15. Ibn Ezra

16. Kedaberchem as you originally demanded in 5:3

17. This accusation was first made by Marcion, the second Century Christian heretic and enemy of the Old Testament. It was repeated by the Manicheans, for whom the God of the old Testament was the devil. Tertullian, one of the early Church Fathers wrote an elaborate work called *Against Marcion* (II,20) in defense of the "Old Testament". Hints of these accusation may pre-date Marcion see Book of Wisdom 10:17, also Jubilees 48:18 and Philo Life of Moses I, 103. For the Philosopher of the anti-semites Eugen Duhring these verses were decisive and an accurate description of the character of the Jewish people.

18. Shadal on 3:21, also see Ibn Ezra and Augustine.

19. See Rashi & Ibn Ezra on 12:34

20. See also 14:12

21. See Rashi 7:17 who quotes the Midrash Tanchuma; also Midrash Rabba 9:8

22. see Abravanel on this pasuk

23. The literature on this issue is quite extensive. See Da'at Miqra Humash Sefer Shemoth, also Beno Jacob the book of Exodus; Nahum Sarna Understanding Exodus; Ziony Zevit, Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues,

Bible Review June 1990; George A.F. Knight, *Theology as Narration* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1976) Jack Finigan, *Let My People Go* (New York, Harper & Row) and others.

24. James Pritchard *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, (Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press 1955) page 431.

25. M. Gilula "The Smitting of the First Born – An Egyptian Myth Tel Aviv 4 (1977), page 94

26. For more on this line of thinking see Zevit Ziony, "Three ways to look at the Ten Plagues" Bible Review 6,3 (1990) pages 16-23

27. Rambam *Yesodie HaTorah*; *Moreh Nevuchim*

28. Ramban 13:16. See also *Yerushalmi Pesachim* 5:5

29. *Yerushlami Berakhot* 5:1 interprets the Pasuk "One who internalizes his learning does not quickly forget".

30. E.A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (London, John Murray 1920)

31. See Currid, John D. "Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart" Bible Review 9, 6 (1993) pages 45-51

32. Ramban 3:13 *Eheyeh Asher Eheyeh* I will be in Judgment that which I will be in mercy.

33. 6:3

34. A key to better understanding this idea can be found in the **Sermons of the Ran** (Nissim ben Reuben Gerondi) [*Derashot ha-Ran*, third sermon]. He explains that one of the main objectives of the miracles associated with *Yetziat Mitzraim* was to show the entire world, especially the children of Israel, that the Holy One, blessed be He, is the omnipotent Lord of the Universe, providentially overseeing all that happens. The plagues in Egypt were aimed at achieving this objective, as Ran put it: "The Lord, bless His Name, wished to perform miracles at that redemption ... so that it be known that what is impossible according to the laws of nature is not impossible according to the laws of the Lord."

35. According to *Derashot ha-Ran*, fourth sermon, their sorcery had real substance, for were this not the case the masses would not have believed in

them. Apparently the sorcerers were extremely learned in the laws of nature and used these laws to perform their tricks, while pretending to be using super-natural powers. This is the only way to understand Ran