Lessons from the Exodus in Tanakh

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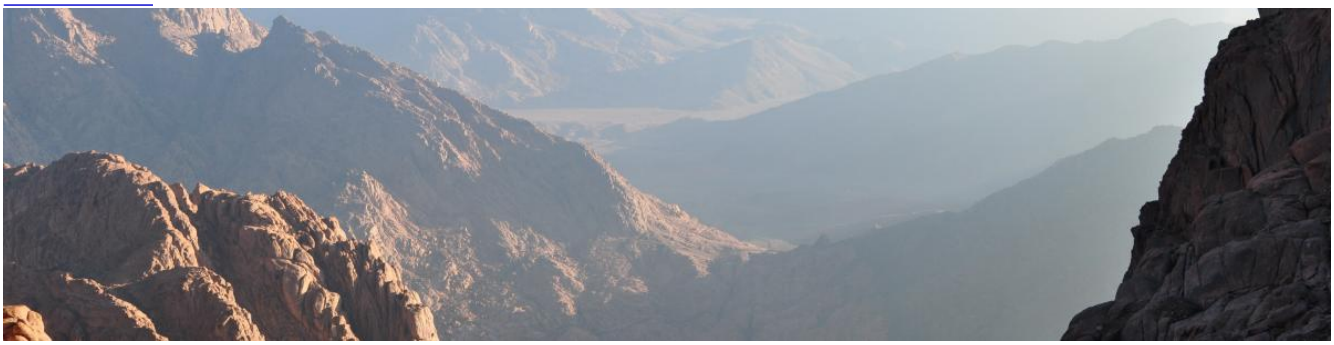

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Learning from and Living our History:

Lessons from the Exodus in Tanakh[1]

Introduction

The Haggadah is a remarkable compilation of texts that helps us relive the exodus from Egypt.[2] While there are several biblical verses and passages cited in the Haggadah, they are subsumed under a larger midrashic framework.

Not surprisingly, many of the central themes in the Haggadah are rooted in biblical thought. Among other teachings, the exodus forms the basis for the singular covenantal relationship between God and Israel; it highlights God's greatness in history; it is central to the religious education of children; it teaches that we must be eternally grateful to God; and it serves as the model for the future redemption. In this essay, we will survey examples from various sections of Tanakh to see how these and related themes are developed. Interested readers

are encouraged to learn the full biblical passages in depth to gain a greater appreciation of their respective contexts.

The Early Prophets

A. *Crossing the Jordan*

The Book of Joshua is replete with parallels to the Torah, as well as parallels between Moses and Joshua. One striking example is the crossing of the Jordan. This miraculous event, where the waters formed a great pile to enable Israel to cross on dry land, established Joshua's credibility as God's agent: "The Lord said to Joshua, 'This day, for the first time, I will exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they shall know that I will be with you as I was with Moses'" (Josh. 3:7). Moses gained similar credibility during the splitting of the Red Sea (Exod. 14:30-31).

The crossing of the Jordan also parallels the exodus by using similar formulations for educating future generations regarding God's greatness and involvement in history:

> …This shall serve as a symbol among you: in time to come, when your children ask [*ki yishalun benekhem mahar*], "What is the meaning of these stones for you [*mah ha-avanim ha-elleh lakhem*]?" you shall tell them, "The waters of the Jordan were cut off because of the Ark of the Lord's Covenant; when it passed through the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off." And so these stones shall serve the people of Israel as a memorial for all time (Josh. 4:6-7).

> In time to come, when your children ask their fathers [*asher yishalun benekhem mahar*], "What is the meaning of those stones [*mah ha-avanim ha-elleh*]?" tell your children: "Here the Israelites crossed the

> Jordan on dry land." For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you crossed, just as the Lord your God did to the Sea of Reeds, which He dried up before us until we crossed. Thus all the peoples of the earth shall know how mighty is the hand of the Lord, and you shall fear the Lord your God always (Josh. 4:21-24).

These passages parallel the verses in the Torah cited in the Haggadah for the education of the four children (Exod. 12:26-27; 13:8-9, 14-16; Deut. 6:20-21).

More generally, the splitting of the Red Sea and crossing of the Jordan illustrate God's power over nature coupled with God's special relationship with Israel. The Hallel reflects this dimension as well:

> When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech, Judah became His holy one, Israel, His dominion. The sea saw them and fled, Jordan ran backward (Ps. 114:1-3).

B. *Deborah and Gideon*

As with the crossing of the Jordan, the Deborah story in Judges chapters 4-5 also is modeled after the exodus. Exodus chapter 14 contains the narrative of the splitting of the Red Sea and is followed by Moses' song in chapter 15. Similarly, Judges chapter 4 contains the narrative of Deborah's victory and is followed by her song in chapter 5. There also are literary parallels between the two accounts, most strikingly God's instilling the Egyptians with panic during the splitting of the Red Sea (*va-yahom et mahaneh Mitzrayim*, Exod. 14:24) parallel to God's doing the same to Sisera's camp (Jud. 4:15); and the complete wipeout of the enemy (*lo nishar bahem ad ehad*, not one of them remained, Exod. 14:28; cf. Jud. 4:16). Explicitly modeled after the exodus, the Deborah narrative highlights God's power and intervention in history, and the people's expression of gratitude to God

through song.

During the exodus from Egypt, God acted alone, and the Song at the Sea likewise reflects God's exclusive role. In contrast, Deborah, Barak, Yael, and some 10,000 soldiers helped defeat Sisera and the Canaanites. Therefore, Deborah's song praises God as well as the human heroes of the story. The Haggadah makes this contrast even more dramatic by its near total elimination of Moses' role during the exodus so that God's role becomes even more absolute.[3]

In the generation following Deborah, there was confusion regarding the lessons one should derive from the exodus. The people reverted to their sinfulness, bringing about Midianite oppression. An anonymous prophet came to rebuke the people:

> Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: I brought you up out of Egypt and freed you from the house of bondage. I rescued you from the Egyptians and from all your oppressors; I drove them out before you, and gave you their land. And I said to you, "I the Lord am your God. You must not worship the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell." But you did not obey Me (Jud. 6:8-10).

Although nobody responded directly to the prophet's rebuke in the text, Gideon's response to the angel who subsequently appeared to him seems to address the concerns of the prophet, as well. Gideon defended his nation by shifting the blame to God for not performing any more miracles as He did during the exodus:[4]

> Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all His wondrous deeds about which our fathers told us, saying, "Truly the Lord brought us up from Egypt"? Now the Lord has abandoned us and delivered us into the hands of Midian! (Jud. 6:13).

Gideon's complaint is particularly ironic, given that Deborah's victory *in the previous generation* is modeled after the exodus, as discussed above. Israel's memory of God's beneficence was short-lived indeed.

More fundamentally, Gideon appears to wonder why his generation should be obligated to be faithful to God given that only the generation of the exodus received such overt divine intervention. Yisrael Rozenson explains that Gideon's assumption is theologically incorrect. The exodus forms the basis for Israel's relationship with God for all later generations, and this is how the anonymous prophet refers to the exodus as well. The exodus never was intended as a promise of constant overt divine intervention as Gideon and others evidently expected.[5]

Gideon's question was not lost on the compilers of the Haggadah, who offer an alternative response when they state (in *avadim hayyinu*) that if God did not redeem our ancestors from Egypt, we would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. According to the Haggadah, we benefit directly from the original exodus and therefore owe God our allegiance. Elsewhere (*hi she-amedah*), the Haggadah praises God for the many times God has saved us from our enemies throughout the ages.

C. *The Ark Narrative*

Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas were wicked and helped bring about Israel's downfall (1 Sam. 2:27-36; 3:11-14). Instead of repenting, the Israelites mistakenly believed that simply bringing the Ark into battle would provide victory since God's Presence would be with them (Radak, Malbim). Their error cost the nation thousands of lives, and the Ark was captured as well (1 Samuel chapter 4).

As an ironic contrast to Israel's wickedness and confusion, the pagan Philistines did learn lessons from Israel's history. They stood in awe of God when the Ark approached:

> Woe to us! Who will save us from the power of this mighty God? He is the same God who struck the Egyptians with every kind of plague [*makkah*] in the wilderness! (1 Sam. 4:8).

They also avoided Pharaoh's mistake of hardening his heart after God had plagued them:

> Don't harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts. As you know, when He made a mockery of them, they had to let Israel go, and they departed (1 Sam. 6:6).

After this ironic contrast, the prophet Samuel taught Israel that they needed to improve their behavior and then God would help them. In chapter 7, Samuel led the nation in repentance and prayer, and then God helped Israel defeat the Philistines.

To summarize: The crossing of the Jordan in the Book of Joshua is a direct parallel to the exodus. It glorified God to Israel and to the nations, created another model for the religious education of children, and established Joshua as God's agent. The Deborah narrative in the Book of Judges also is modeled after the splitting of the Red Sea, illustrating God's intervention in history and the people's religious gratitude. Gideon misunderstood the purpose of the exodus and thought God should miraculously intervene in each generation. In the Ark narrative in the Book of Samuel, the Israelites believed in God's power but misunderstood their covenantal relationship with God until Samuel corrected them. As an ironic contrast, the Philistines learned proper lessons from the exodus.

The Latter Prophets

The prophets frequently modeled prophecies after the exodus. Sometimes God promises that the redemption will be like the exodus (Mic. 7:15). On other occasions the redemption will even eclipse the exodus (Jer. 16:14-15; 23:7-8).

There are times when prophets model their prophecies after the exodus from Egypt with greater detail and literary allusions. We will briefly consider three such examples: Isaiah chapters 11-12, Jeremiah chapter 2, and Ezekiel chapter 20.

A. *Isaiah Chapters 11-12*

> The Lord will dry up the tongue of the Egyptian sea. He will raise His hand over the Euphrates with the might of His wind and break it into seven wadis, so that it can be trodden dry-shod. Thus there shall be a highway for the other part of His people out of Assyria, such as there was for Israel when it left the land of Egypt. In that day, you shall say: "I give thanks to You, O Lord! Although You were wroth with me, Your wrath has turned back and You comfort me. Behold the God who gives me triumph! I am confident, unafraid; for Y-ah the Lord is my strength and might, and He has been my deliverance [*ozzi ve-zimrat Y-ah Hashem vayhi li li-yeshuah*]" (Isa. 11:15-16, 12:1-2).

In his celebrated prophecy of redemption, Isaiah predicts a return of the exiles. Like the original exodus, the future redemption will involve the splitting of bodies of water so that the exiles can return. The people also will sing out of religious gratitude, paralleling the Song at the Sea. The expression *ozzi ve-zimrat Y-ah Hashem vayhi li li-yeshuah* (Isa. 12:2) is drawn from the Song at the Sea, *ozzi ve-zimrat Y-ah vayhi li li-yeshuah* (Exod. 15:2)—but Isaiah adds God's full name, *Hashem*.

Rashi interprets this discrepancy in light of the battle against Amalek that followed the exodus (Exod. 17:8-16). There, God declared ongoing war against Amalek: "*ki yad al kes Y-ah milhamah la-Hashem ba-Amalek mi-dor dor*, hand upon the throne of Y-ah…." Rashi there explains that God's name and throne will be incomplete as long as Amalek exists, hence the abridged words *kes* instead of *kissei* and *Y-ah* representing the first half of God's full name. Applying this concept to Isaiah's prophecy, Rashi (on Isa. 12:2) explains that in the messianic future, human evil finally will be eradicated. Therefore, those singing the religious song of gratitude will be able to use God's full name, which at long last will be complete. Similarly, Amos Hakham (*Da'at Mikra*) suggests that God's Presence will be manifest even more overtly than it was during the original exodus.

In the Haggadah, this theme is manifest most directly following the Grace after Meals. By reading the verses "pour out Your wrath" (Ps. 79:6–7), we express the truism that we cannot fully praise God with Hallel until we sigh from enemy oppression and recognize contemporary suffering. Many communities customarily open the door at this point for Elijah the Prophet, also expressing hope for redemption.

B. *Jeremiah Chapter 2*

> Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said the Lord: I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride—how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of His harvest. All who ate of it were held guilty; disaster befell them—declares the Lord (Jer. 2:2-3).
>
> What wrong did your fathers find in Me that they abandoned Me and went after delusion and were deluded? They never asked themselves, "Where is the Lord, Who brought us up from the land of Egypt, Who

led us through the wilderness…" (2:5-6).

In his first recorded prophecy to the people, Jeremiah offers a prophecy reminiscing about God's beautiful relationship with Israel at the time of the exodus. Israel lovingly trusted God and entered the wilderness, but then sullied the relationship when they began to sin.

To correct this problem, they needed to circumcise their hearts, that is, to remove their outer layer of sin to recover their underlying pure and loving heart and restore the original relationship: "Circumcise your hearts to the Lord, remove the thickening about your hearts…" (4:4). Jeremiah draws this terminology from the Torah's description of repentance (Deut. 10:16; 30:6). In Jeremiah's prophecy, Israel's trust in God during the exodus represented a pristine moment in the relationship.

C. *Ezekiel Chapter 20*

In his scathing rebuke in chapter 20, Ezekiel addresses a generation that wanted to assimilate into Babylonian culture. He surveys history to demonstrate that Israel had been sinful throughout its history but God saved them to avoid the desecration of His name. There never was a romantic layer of purity as described by Jeremiah. Rather, God redeemed the Israelites from Egypt despite their idolatry in order to avoid the desecration of God's name (Ezek. 20:7-9).

Ezekiel then presents a frightening prediction of redemption from the Babylonian exile. Even if the Jews wish to assimilate into the dominant Babylonian culture, God will forcibly redeem them. Strikingly, this prophecy casts Israel's redemption as a punishment:

> As I live—declares the Lord God—I will reign over you with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with overflowing fury [*be-*

yad hazakah u-be-zeroa netuyah u-be-hemah shefukhah]. With a strong hand and an outstretched arm and overflowing fury [*be-yad hazakah u-be-zeroa netuyah u-be-hemah shefukhah*] I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered, and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples; and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face.… I will remove from you those who rebel and transgress against Me; I will take them out of the countries where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord (Ezek. 20:33-38).

In addition to the shockingly negative description of the redemption, Ezekiel also does not refer to a Babylonian downfall in this prophecy. In his introduction to the book, Abarbanel submits that since Ezekiel lived in Babylonia, it would be dangerous to prophesy the demise of his host nation. Therefore God did not reveal to Ezekiel prophecies about Babylonia's downfall.

Beyond this utilitarian reason, there also appears to be a more fundamental purpose for Ezekiel's omission of Babylonia. Babylonia is not the new Pharaoh in this exile-redemption model. Israel has replaced Pharaoh, and God therefore must rescue Israel from itself and its own hardened heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26). Consequently, Israel will be plagued and some even killed in the "wilderness of the peoples." Some then will be redeemed "with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and overflowing fury"—similar language as that used to describe the exodus from Egypt (Deut. 5:14; 26:8; Ps. 136:12). Just as the Torah repeats the expression "and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord" (e.g., Exod. 7:5; 10:2; 14:4, 18), a refrain of the Book of Ezekiel is "and they shall know that I am the Lord" (approx. sixty times).

Additionally, Jeremiah and Ezekiel employ different heart imagery to illustrate their respective lessons derived from the exodus. Jeremiah depicts Israel's relationship with God at the time of the exodus as pure, and then Israel's sins

created a barrier with God. If they would repent and circumcise their hearts, they could restore the underlying pristine state of the relationship. For Ezekiel, however, Israel always was sinful, so her heart was stone with no underlying healthy layer. Therefore, Ezekiel describes God's giving Israel a heart transplant in the future and providing them with a healthy heart of flesh so that they finally may serve God properly.

To summarize: Isaiah models his prophecy of redemption after the exodus. He refers to bodies of water splitting, Israel will sing a song of gratitude, and God's complete name will be fully manifest in the messianic era. In contrast, Ezekiel shockingly employs exodus terminology to describe a forcible process whereby Israel must be redeemed from itself rather than from an external enemy. Jeremiah appeals to Israel's pristine faith at the time of the exodus that began a beautiful relationship with God that later was corrupted by Israel's sins. He laments Israel's forgetfulness of the covenant, but appeals to God's enduring love of Israel and desire that they circumcise their hearts in repentance to restore the original relationship. In contrast, Ezekiel describes Israel as sinful from Egypt until his time. Their deadened hearts were of stone, and therefore they needed a divine heart transplant to serve God properly.

Psalms 78, 105-107

> He established a decree in Jacob, ordained a teaching in Israel, charging our fathers to make them known to their children, that a future generation might know—children yet to be born—and in turn tell their children that they might put their confidence in God, and not forget God's great deeds, but observe His commandments, and not be like their fathers, a wayward and defiant generation, a generation whose heart was inconstant, whose spirit was not true to God (Ps. 78:5-8).

> Our forefathers in Egypt did not perceive Your wonders; they did not remember Your abundant love, but rebelled at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds (Ps. 106:7).

Psalm 78 focuses on Israel's past lack of gratitude to God for all the goodness bestowed upon Israel and the desire to learn from and correct that error. Psalm 105 surveys history to teach that God always has protected Israel while in exile, and Israel in turn should serve God. Psalm 106 again focuses on Israel's sins and ingratitude to God despite God's goodness, and shows how God saved Israel whenever they prayed. These psalms draw heavily from the exodus account as a paradigm of God's goodness to Israel and demonstrate Israel's obligation to be grateful and faithful to God in return.

Rabbi Elhanan Samet explains that Psalm 107 is a universal prayer that teaches gratitude to God for all kindnesses and forms the basis for the *ha-gomel* blessing. However, in the context of following Psalm 106, it also corrects the errors of the past. In the future redemption, when there is ingathering of the exiles, Israel will finally thank God:

> "Praise the Lord, for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal!" Thus let the redeemed of the Lord say, those He redeemed from adversity, whom He gathered in from the lands, from east and west, from the north and from the sea (Ps. 107:1-3).

This prediction follows the account in Psalm 106 of the failure of previous generations to express gratitude to God. These psalms teach that unfaithfulness and ingratitude are fundamentally linked, and with proper gratitude to God comes faithfulness.[6]

In a similar vein, the Haggadah draws from *Midrash Psalms* on Psalm 78, citing opinions that God brought 50, 200, or 250 plagues onto the Egyptians at the Red Sea. When one understands the context of the psalm as referring to

Israel's ingratitude despite God's acts on their behalf, this section in the Haggadah rectifies that ingratitude. The Haggadah follows this midrashic selection with the *Dayyenu*, expressing gratitude to God for every step of the redemption.

Loving the Stranger

As we have seen, many biblical references to the exodus highlight God's greatness and intervention in history; the foundation for Israel's eternal covenant with God which includes faithfulness, gratitude, and education of children; the template for the future redemption; and the opportunity to learn from and correct mistakes of previous generations. These themes all are central to the Haggadah. Their common denominator is Israel's unique covenantal relationship with God.

One element we have not considered, and that also is not featured as prominently in the Haggadah, is the universalistic lesson of the exodus. Many Torah laws require us to be particularly sensitive to downtrodden members of society and to love the stranger:

> When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God (Lev. 19:33-34).
>
> You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment (Deut. 24:17-18).[7]

Israel's experience of slavery should teach them humility and the sensitivity to be ethical to all humanity. While the Haggadah focuses on our special relationship with God, a broader consideration of the biblical picture reminds us of our universal obligations to the underprivileged as well.

To some extent, the invitation of the hungry to our Seder in the *ha lahma anya* echoes this theme. For the most part, however, the Haggadah focuses on Israel's particularistic story and halakhah, creating an inward vision for the Seder night. When contemplating the exodus, however, it also is critical to remember the many halakhot in the Torah that shape our religious-moral vision directly from our experience as slaves in Egypt.

All of these themes have profoundly impacted on rabbinic teachings, which stress that we are a living part of this ongoing story of the relationship between God and Israel, and that we must view ourselves as having left Egypt. Our moral responsibility, religious experience, transmission of our tradition to the next generation, and longing for the messianic era similarly manifest themselves as extensions of the foundational event of the exodus.

NOTES

[1] This article appeared in *A Pesach Haggadah: A Collection of Divrei Torah from the Rabbis and Students of Yeshiva University* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2014), pp. 43-50.

[2] For an overview of the structure of the Haggadah and its lessons, see Hayyim Angel, "Our Journey in the Haggadah: How Its Narratives and Observances Enable Us to Experience the Exodus," *Pesah Reader* (New York: Tebah, 2010), pp. 17-29; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 218-229.

[3] See further discussion in David Henshke, "'The Lord Brought Us Forth from Egypt': On the Absence of Moses in the Passover Haggadah," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 31 (2007), pp. 61-73.

[4] Although Gideon's argument is flawed (see discussion below), he still receives rabbinic praise for defending the honor of his people. See, for example, *Tanhuma Shofetim* 4, Rashi and Abarbanel on Jud. 6:13-14.

[5] Yisrael Rozenson, *Shefot ha-Shofetim* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2003), p. 62.

[6] R. Elhanan Samet, at http://vbm-torah.org/archive/tehillim70/57tehillim.htm.

[7] Several other laws in the Torah are rooted in Israel's remembering that they too were slaves in Egypt. See Exod. 22:20; 23:9 (not oppressing the stranger); Deut. 5:14 (Shabbat); 10:19 (loving the convert); 15:15 (providing for the released Hebrew servant); 16:12 (celebrating Shavuot with one's family and oppressed members of society); 24:22 (treating the widow and orphan equitably).