Book Review: Joshua Berman on the Haggadah

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Joshua Berman, *Echoes of Egypt: A Haggada* (Koren, 2026), 138pp.

by Rabbi Hayyim Angel

The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel has just published the next volume in its ongoing series. Professor Joshua Berman presents a visual commentary on the slavery and exodus narratives, featuring ancient Egyptian images. Like the Shemot commentary of this excellent series, the vivid images with scholarly explanations bring the Egyptian setting of the Pesah story to life. This pedagogical technique distinguishes this Haggadah and will enhance the Seder experience for a wide variety of readers.

Several pictures simply enable readers to see artifacts and wall reliefs that provide vivid depictions of our slavery. A photograph of a vast ancient Egyptian mudbrick storage facility (p. 38), a detailed Egyptian tomb illustration of the backbreaking labor of brickmaking (pp. 64-65), and a relief of a pharaoh in a chariot (105) bring the experience of our slavery and redemption to our Seder table.

Berman's introductory essays provide meaningful background to the Torah's narratives in Exodus. He outlines how the Torah broke with ancient political thought and the many political and economic ramifications of the Torah's revolutionary ideology. He then discusses Egyptian royal propaganda, and how the Torah ironically turns those terms on their head as God overwhelms the helpless pharaoh and his nation.

On other occasions, we gain greater insight into the meaning of the Torah. God repeats the phraseology that He will redeem Israel with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Clearly, these terms refer to God's power. However, Berman observes that these expressions—used throughout Tanakh—appear only in association with the exodus from Egypt and not other narratives where God displays His power. Berman explains this seeming anomaly by noting that these terms appear in Egyptian writings, particularly in the zenith of Egypt's power from 1550-1100 BCE. A relief showing Seti I holding his captives down with his left hand while wielding a mace (p. 14) illustrates the Egyptian propaganda regarding their pharaohs. Berman explains that the Torah thereby uses Egyptian propaganda against Egypt—now, God will devastate them as He frees a slave nation from their grip. The visual medium makes the propaganda argument tangible at the Seder table — tying archaeology to lived ritual.

Several of Berman's comments present interesting tidbits. He observes (23) that Egyptians refer to their own country in Arabic as Misr. We would intuitively conclude that the Hebrew Mitzrayim and the Arabic name derive from the ancient Egyptian name for their land. However, this is not so. When the ancient Coptic Christians translated the Torah into Coptic, they transliterated the Torah's Mitzrayim directly into Coptic. After the Muslim conquest in the 7th century, Muslims adopted the Coptic form of the name into Arabic. Therefore, Egyptians refer to their land as Misr because of the Torah's transmission of that name into Coptic.

Occasionally, the connections between our Seder and ancient Egypt remain unclear. Not every element of the rabbinic Seder requires Egyptian background; some reflect later Greco-Roman cultural adaptation. For example, we eat *maror*, bitter herbs. However, the Torah itself does not prescribe which species of vegetation qualify for this commandment. By the Mishnah, the preferred vegetable is romaine lettuce (Mishnah Pesahim 10:3). The Talmud goes on to describe several other options that qualify for fulfillment of the *maror*. Berman observes (8) that depictions of the Egyptian god of fertility, Min, frequently include offerings of romaine lettuce. He suggests that romaine may symbolize fertility and growth.

However, it may be overly speculative to connect romaine lettuce to ancient Egypt, given that the Torah does not specify any vegetable for *maror*. Scholars such as Joseph Tabory (*JPS Commentary on the Haggadah*, 2008) outline the similarities between the prescribed rabbinic Seder rituals and the Greco-Roman symposium. In the latter, intellectuals gathered to share wine, food, and stimulating discourse. A common appetizer before the main course was romaine lettuce dipped in a sauce. Since *maror* is a required commandment for our Seder, the rabbinic Sages moved that practice to the *maror* section of our Seder, while

substituting *karpas*, or a non-*maror* vegetable such as celery, to the earlier appetizer stage of our Seder. In this instance, it is unclear that we should link romaine lettuce as the preferred *maror* of the Mishnah with ancient Egyptian rituals.

The Haggadah exhorts all of us: “Generation by generation, each person must see himself as if he himself came out of Egypt.” By presenting Egypt in its historical and cultural setting, Berman demonstrates how contextual scholarship can illuminate and sharpen the Torah’s message. When used with care, archaeology and comparative study clarify the polemical and theological force of the Exodus narrative. In this way, *Echoes of Egypt* models how serious scholarship can deepen and enrich religious experience at the Seder table.