

Pesach

1

“It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon were sitting [at a Seder] in Bnei Brak, and were retelling [the story of] the Exodus from Egypt the whole night, until their students came and told them: ‘Our masters! The time has come for reciting the morning Shema’ (Haggadah).”

Many questions have been asked about this passage. It can be explained, however, as follows:

It is known that the Exodus from Egypt was a preparation for the future, ultimate Redemption. This [redemptive energy] is re-aroused ever year. In other words, even during the exile, one can on Pesach elicit the same Divine revelation that occurred at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, and in this way go out of his own personal “exile” as well as hasten the final, ultimate Redemption.

Now our Sages teach us that the exodus of Egypt occurred in the merit of Avraham Avinu.¹ With this in mind, the above passage may be interpreted allegorically, as follows:

“It happened that Rabbi Eliezer... were sitting [at a Seder] in Bnei Brak”: The word Brak (ברק) is a permutation of the word for “morning” (בקר). “Morning” is associated with Avraham.² In other words, the Sages sitting together relied upon the merit of Avraham.³ By so doing —

“... they were retelling [the story of] the exodus from Egypt ...”: The word for “retelling” (מספרים) means also “illuminating,” as in the verse, “their polishing was as of sapphire [ספיר].”⁴ In other words, they were able to elicit the same Divine light that shone at the time of the exodus from Egypt —

“... the whole night ...”: i.e., even during the exile, which is compared to the night.

“... until their students came” and reached this same level, and were able to experience the light of the Redemption —

“... and told them: ‘Our masters! The time has come for reciting the morning Shema,’” i.e., for the experience of G-d’s unity⁵ that will be ours at the time of the new “morning” of the Redemption.

¹ *Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael*, Bo 16.

² *Bemidbar Rabbah* 2:1; *Zohar* 1:182b, 3:204a.

³ The word “Bnei” means “sons of”; thus, these five sages celebrating the Seder together were doing so in full consciousness of their being descendants of Avraham.

⁴ *Eichah* 4:7.

⁵ The *Shema* is the profession of G-d’s unity, i.e., His pervasive Presence throughout all creation.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: "When Moshe ascended on High, the ministering angels said to the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Master of the Universe! What business has one born of woman among us?' He answered, 'He has come to receive the Torah.' They said to Him, 'That secret treasure—which has been hidden by You for 974 generations before the world was created—You want to give to flesh and blood?! "What is man, that You should be mindful of him, or the son of man, that You should respond to him?"⁶ "G-d, our master, How excellent is Your name in all the earth! You should set Your glory [the Torah] in Heaven!"⁷ The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe, 'Answer them!' ... [Moshe] said to Him: 'Master of the Universe! The Torah that You are giving me, what is written therein? "I am G-d, your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt." [Moses] said to [the angels], 'Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why then should the Torah be yours?' ... Straightway they conceded to the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said,⁸ 'G-d, our Lord, How excellent is thy name in all the earth,' but 'who set Your glory in Heaven' is not written"⁹ (Shabbos 88b-89a).

What were the angels initially thinking when they asked that the Torah be given to them?

The answer is that it is known that the Torah's commandments as we understand them are only a garment that the Torah is vested within; the Torah itself is actually just nothing but permutations of G-d's Names, may He be blessed.¹⁰ The Torah as we have received it is garbed in a garment appropriate for us [i.e., the *mitzvos*];¹¹ the ministering angels were asking that it be given to them garbed in a spiritual garment appropriate for them.¹² After Moses' arguments, they conceded that it would be better that the holy Torah be garbed in a physical garment, making it appropriate for human beings.

⁶ *Tehilim* 8:5.

⁷ Ibid. 8:2. These verses from *Tehilim* express the angels' claim that the Torah should remain with them in heaven, rather than be given to mortal, earthbound humans.

⁸ Ibid. 8:10.

⁹ I.e., verse 2 of this psalm is repeated as verse 10, but this time without its second half, which expressed the angel's wish that G-d's "glory," i.e., the Torah, be set in Heaven.

¹⁰ *Zohar* 3:98b.

¹¹ See the Ramban's introduction to his commentary on the Torah.

¹² See *Likutei Torah* (Arizal), *Eikev* (8:1), s.v. *VeEfshar*.

Lech Lecha

1

“And G-d said to Avram: ‘Go you, from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land which I shall show you’” (Bereishis 12:1).

This may be explained allegorically, as follows: G-d addresses the holy soul, here called “Avram”:

“Go you, from your land.” This refers to one’s physical lusts.

“... from your birthplace.” This refers to one’s sexual lusts.

“... and from your father’s house.” This refers to a person’s deficiencies that result from his father’s and mother’s [lack of holiness in marital relations], as it is said: “Behold, I was conceived in sin.”¹³

“... to the land which I shall show you.” This refers to the supernal “land,” the realm of holiness.

“... and I shall make you [there] into a great nation.” The numerical equivalent of the word for “into a nation” (לְגוֹי) is forty-nine, meaning that by doing all the above, you will merit to enter the forty-nine gates of understanding.¹⁴

2

“And I will bless those that bless you” (Bereishis 12:3).

It is known that all G-d’s material and spiritual beneficence flows to the Jewish people via the tzaddik.

This is the meaning of “and I will bless those that bless you.” Whoever blesses you with a material blessing, I will bless him first. As our Sages have said: “Whoever prays on behalf of his fellow and requires the same thing he does, will be answered first.”¹⁵ Thus, the one who blesses you becomes both a recipient and a bestower [of blessing].

“...and those who curse you.” The word for “curse” (מְקַלְלֶיךָ) may be understood to mean “refine,” as in the phrase “polished [קָלֵל] brass.”¹⁶ The refinement here referred to is the elevation of [the sparks of] spirituality, as is explained in the holy book *Noam Elimelech*.¹⁷ This phrase may then be understood to mean: “... and those who bless you with a spiritual blessing,” for the elevation of the soul.

¹³ *Tehillim* 51:7.

¹⁴ *Rosh Hashanah* 21b. MG: Cf. *Sifrei Tzaddikim, Lech Lecha*, quoting Rabbi Z who explained the verse similarly.

¹⁵ *Bava Kama* 92a.

¹⁶ *Yechezkel* 1:7; *Daniel* 10:6.

¹⁷ *Noach*, on the verse “...to see if the water had abated.”

“... I shall curse.” The word for “I shall curse” (אַאָר) can be interpreted as deriving from the word for “light” (אָר). This therefore means that “I will enlighten him with a supernal light, such that he is able to benefit his fellow.”

3

“And the king of Sodom said to Avram: ‘Give me the people, and take for yourself the spoils.’ And Avram said to the king of Sodom: ‘I have lifted up my hand to G-d that I shall take nothing of yours, so that you not say: “I made Avram wealthy”” (Bereishis 14:21-23).

The king of Sodom signifies the evil inclination. This may be seen from the fact that the initials of the words “king of Sodom” (מֶלֶךְ סְדוֹם) spell the abbreviation for the angel of evil (ס”ם).¹⁸ Avram signifies the Jew.

The evil inclination addresses the Jew, attempting to seduce him: “Give me the people.” The word used here for “people” (נַפֶּשׁ) also means “soul.” Thus, the evil inclination wishes the Jew’s soul to be devoted to the realm of evil, the “other side,” G-d forbid.

“... and take for yourself the spoils”: i.e., pursue and indulge yourself in your physical lust.

“And Avram said to the king of Sodom: ‘I have lifted up my hand to G-d’”—that is, I have sworn—*“‘that I shall take nothing of yours’”*: i.e., that I shall not pursue any physical lust, which belongs to the realm of evil.

“‘... so that you not say: “I made Avram wealthy”””: i.e., that nothing of my wealth shall be yours, deriving from and devoted to evil. For in truth, “it is G-d’s blessing that brings wealth.”¹⁹

4

“After these things the word of G-d came to Avram in a vision, saying: ‘Do not fear, Avram, I will protect you’” (Bereishis 15:1).

The word for “protect” in Hebrew (מָגֵן) is pronounced *mogen* [in the Ashkenazic tradition].

In this light, this verse may be interpreted wittily, as follows:

Avraham is known for having fulfilled the commandment of hospitality—and he certainly did it properly, eating a lot together with each guest in order that the guest not be embarrassed to eat his full. He was therefore afraid of getting sick, as people do when they overeat. G-d therefore promised him that He would protect his stomach, which in Yiddish is called *mogen* (מאָגן). As it is written: “He who is particular in the performing a mitzvah will know no evil.”²⁰

¹⁸ MG: See *Akeidas Yitzchak*, end of gate 16.

¹⁹ *Mishlei* 10:22.

²⁰ *Koheles* 8:5.

“And Avram was ninety-nine years old. And G-d appeared to Avram and said to him: ‘I am G-d Al-mighty; walk before Me, and be sincere’” (Bereishis 17:1).

It is well known that a person cannot ascend higher than his intrinsic spiritual level. But despite this, through sincerity one can merit to cling to G-d Himself. Thus, it is written: “You shall be sincere *with* G-d, your G-d.”²¹ In this way, one can indeed ascend higher than his own intrinsic capacities allow him to.

This is alluded to in this verse, in which G-d tells Avraham: “Walk *before* Me,” i.e., beyond the capacity that I have implanted in you. “And be sincere,” i.e., the way to accomplish this is through sincerity.

²¹ *DevarimDevarim* 18:13.