

D'var Torah, Pesach day 7 – April 29, 2024

By Neal Green

Ezekiel and the Haggadah – Why?

Chag Sameach – Neal Green

I want to take a deep dive into two p'sukim that appear in some traditional Haggadot. Due to the “R-rated” nature of the verses (contains nudity and violence), these verses are not found, for example, in the Maxwell House Haggadah and certainly not in the family oriented “A Different Night”.

These two verses that I'll reveal in a minute, come in the Magid section, after we read about the four children, during what could be considered a third answer to the four questions. It starts out “tzay oolmad” (Go and Learn what Lavan the Aramean tried to do to Jacob...) What the text is trying to do here is expand on the idea that we, as parents, should inform or describe what God did for us and why we perform the seder (or in the time of the Temple, the Pesach sacrifice) and to sing God's praises. After the Haggadah introduces tzay oolmad, it follows with:

Va'yered mitriymah... – went down to Egypt (Genesis)

Va'yagor sham bintay m'at... – and dwelt there, few in number (Deut)

Va'yihe sham l'goi... – There became a great nation

Gadol Atzoom... – Great and mighty, they filled the land (Exodus)

But then, in a few traditional Haggadot, there are these two lines:

רַבְּבָה כְּצֶמַח הַשָּׂדֶה נִתְתִּיךָ וְתַרְבִּי וְתַגְדְּלִי וְתִבְאִי בְעֵדֵי עֲדָיִים שְׂדֵיִם
נִבְנִי וְשִׁעְרֶךָ צִמָּח וְאֶת עֵרְם וְעִרְיָה:

I caused you to grow like plants of the field, and you grew and developed and became a woman. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, but you were naked and bare.

וְאֶעֱבֹר עָלֶיךָ וְאֶרְאֶךָ מִתְבֹּסֶסֶת בְּדַמֶּיךָ וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי וְאָמַר לְךָ
בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי

And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said “from your blood, draw life”, I said “from your blood, draw life.”

These two lines are from Ezekiel 16:7 and 16:6, in that reverse order. So, the first thing to wonder about is why are they there amongst prooftexts from Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy, and why are they reversed?

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נִבְנִי וְשִׁעְרֶךָ צִמָּח וְאֶת עֵרְם וְעִרְיָה:

In an explanation from the talmud Sotah11b:

“As the reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation, were the Israelites delivered from Egypt. They carried (water and food) to their husbands in the field, and washed, anointed, fed, gave them to drink and had intercourse with them among the sheepfolds... After the women had conceived they returned to their homes; and when the time of childbirth arrived, they went and were delivered in the field beneath the apple-tree... “I caused thee to multiply (r'vava) like plants of the field;” The verse from Ezekiel is used elsewhere to explain how the Israelite babies were saved in Egypt. The children that

were thrown into the Nile were carried away and ejected into the wilderness – this too is, “I let you grow like ten thousand the plants of the field.”

And this goes on, suffice it to say that there is the usual rabbinic pretzel-twisting to get this verse to fit the purpose of the text.

As we would expect, Rashi has a more straightforward explanation:

“God commanded the Israelites two commandments prior to their qualifying for redemption. They had to slaughter (release blood and put it on their door posts, and they had to give up some blood of their own bodies by circumcising themselves). This is referred to in Ezekiel 16,6 when the prophet refers to their having remained alive due to these categories of blood”.

Through the Pesach they separated themselves from idolatry and through circumcision they were sanctified themselves to God.

If you Google these verses you will quickly find this common explanation as to why these verses are here. Sounds good, right? Unfortunately, I have to admit that it doesn't do much for me. I agree with it, but I was hoping for more.

Who was the prophet Ezekiel? Robert Alter, in his commentary on the Nivi'im, considers prophets collectively to be near-psychotic and Ezekiel to be on the extreme end of that category. Ezekiel must have been very high most of the time. Ezekiel was a Cohain, born in Jerusalem and eventually was part of the exile into Babylonia after the destruction of the first temple. Ezekiel describes God's Merkavah (chariot) in the haftarah we read on Shavuot, he tells of the war of Gog and Magog that we read on Succot. We also read Ezekiel on shabbat Parah and shabbat Hachodesh and, of course, we just read Ezekiel 37:1-14 for shabbat hol hamoed Pesach – another weird account of the Valley of the Dry Bones that assemble, grow skin and become live humans. Really cool stuff, right? Waaay out there. So, to me there must be a better reason why he appears in the Haggadah at that point in the Magid.

This past shabbat, at the TE mincha service, Rabbi Gardenshwartz talked about the Valley of the Dry bones and brought up the discussion in the Gemara about this haftarah. One Rabbi says, it was true, and it was a parable. Another Rabbi challenges him and says, it's either one or the other but can't be both. No, says the first Rabbi, it is both. For the Valley of the Dry Bones is eluding to the Exodus from Egypt, and/or the rebuilding of the second temple and/or the spiritual resurrection of the Israelites that took place under tumultuous trials and circumstances during the wandering in the desert post-Exodus. Here too, I wish to make this explanation of truth and parable and connect it to what we learned from Rabbi Elie Lehmann at our Lunch and Learn a few weeks ago. Elie was teaching us about the main message of the Haggadah “In every generation every human is obligated to see oneself as being personally released from slavery.” Prior to the Israelites leaving, we were numerous and strong (plenty of sunshine and exercise despite the oppression and slavery). We knew of nothing else but Egypt. Most of us were full-grown (parable: well-formed) but spiritually naked and bare. We made the sacrifice (parable: blood) to leave what we knew and try something different with no guarantee that it would work out.

I offer these thoughts as something to contemplate at next year's sederim. What is it to be well-formed, yet besotted in our own issues? For now, I hope we can see these lines from Ezekiel along with the Valley of the Dry Bones to move forward, to rebound from the events of October 7th and the events we have experienced since then. We are strong and we need to learn not to wallow; what sacrifices do we need to make?