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בס"ד

Parashat Beshalah Part III B On Interpreting Midrash, Continued Examples of Classic Rabbinic Methodology

1. On our *parasha*'s first verse, Rabbi Joshua the son of Levi expounded: וְלֹא נִחַם אֱלֹהִים – G-d did not find it satisfactory (consoling) to bring Israel to its land quickly. Why? It is comparable to a king who has twelve sons and ten portions of land. If he distributes his lands then he will cause conflicts among his sons. He will wait until he acquires two more portions of land. Similarly, the land of Israel was not adequate for the twelve tribes. G-d decided to take Israel the long way around so that in the process they will conquer additional land which the two and a half tribes will take, thus making the land of Israel sufficient for all the tribes (*Exod. Rab.* 20:14).

This may be good advice to a father but surely not the intention of the verse. It is based on translating the letters of the word נ-ח-ם according to another meaning the word could have, but not in its present context. Additionally, the interpretation counters the verse's main message, that the reason for taking the long route was so that the Israelites should not confront war soon. And if taken seriously, what does this comment say about the subject of the two and a half tribes?

2. Israel left Egypt וַיֵּצֵאוּ (Exod. 13:18). The *Mekhilta* first interpreted that word as “armed” or “provisioned,” citing Joshua 1:14 and 4:12, generally considered the more straightforward explanation. It continues with other explanations (based on the fact that חמשה means “five”).

[*Hamushim* means that] only one-fifth of the Israelites left Egypt [the others died], some say one in fifty came out, some say one in five hundred. Rabbi Nehorai says not even one in five hundred...as we expound...the Israelite women were giving birth to six children at a time. When did they die? During the three days of darkness, so that the Israelites buried their dead and gave thanks and praise to the Almighty

that their enemies did not observe and rejoice in their destruction.

Yalqut Shimoni (*Shemot* 287) adds: “Rabbi Yose says: *hamushim* means that the fifth generation came out from Egypt.”

Several lessons are taught in this collection of explanations. It compliments the valor of a minority, in some times and places it is only a tiny minority, who hold fast to their beliefs against the assimilationist tendency of the many. Those who do not remain faithful do not share in the good that G-d brings to Israel. It stresses the value of keeping matters of national shame private. But surely the radically different interpretations of the “other explanations” are not addressing the meaning of our verse or describing the historical setting it presents.

3. Joseph had Israel swear they would take his bones with them out of Egypt (Exod. 13:19). Rabbi Levi stated: This is like a person who discovered that thieves had stolen his wine barrels and drank the wine. He told them: You drank the wine, but at least return the barrels. Joseph said to his brothers: You stole me alive from Shechem, please return my bones there (*Exod. Rab.* 20:19). This is valuable advice: A wrongdoer should be considerate of his victim and should minimize his wrongdoing. Even after a theft, the perpetrator could alleviate the harm he caused to the injured party. But this lesson has nothing to do with the true meaning of the verse.

4. Moses took Joseph's bones with him from Egypt (Exod. 13:19). The *Mekhilta* comments:

How did Moses know where Joseph was buried? Serah, Asher's daughter, was still alive and she had seen them bury Joseph. The Egyptians had made a metal casket for him and sunk it in the Nile. Moses

stood by the Nile, cast a pebble in and called “Joseph, Joseph, the time for HQBH’s* fulfillment of His oath has arrived, give honor to Hashem, G-d of Israel, and do not delay us, for you are now holding up our departure. If you do not rise promptly we will be free from the oath.” Immediately Joseph’s casket floated to the top...Rabbi Natan says: Joseph was buried in the royal tomb of Egypt...And how do we know they also took the bones of the other tribal heads (Joseph’s brothers) with them, for he stated [in the oath he placed on his brothers] מִזֶּה אֶתְכֶם (“from here with you” [Exod. 13:19]).

For some, the lengthy, fantastic account enhances the prestige of Moses and Joseph as well as of Serah, whose keen observation turned out to be so valuable. It highlights the value of proper burial and supports the concept that the individual survives bodily death. It brings out the importance of fulfilling vows made by parents. Rabbi Natan rejected the account outright for a more commonsense approach. In peshat there is no reason to assume that Joseph's burial place was not known.

5. Rabbi Johanan commented on the verse וְלֹא קָרַב זֶה אֶל זֶה פֶּלַח הַלְיָלָה (Exod. 14:20). When Hashem’s angel moved from being in front of Israel’s camp to the back of it, followed by the cloud – a defining moment in the Egyptians’ downfall – the ministering angels desired to utter a song. “HQBH said to them: ‘The creations of My hands are drowning in the sea and you would utter a song?’” (*b. Meg.* 10b). It is a most elevating concept not to celebrate at the death of G-d’s creations, but it is not the intention of the passage.

A brief digression is in order: Angels are not independent beings with ability to act contrary to G-d’s will but are His messengers and manifestations of His activity. From the wind and burning fire (Ps. 104:4) to the “voice” that stopped Abraham from slaughtering his son (Gen. 22:11) to the appearance revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:2), the angel represents an aspect of G-d’s will and endeavors. The term for angel, מַלְאָךְ, related to מְלָאכָה (work), appears to designate its definition. In a strictly literary usage, angels served in parables to concretize certain thoughts. Concerning destruction of the wicked pursuers in our passage, an idealistic person would feel jubilation at the rescue of the righteous and sadness that it had to end as it did: with human beings, created in the image of G-d, dying. As Beruriah said, we should hope and strive to ensure

that sins will be terminated from the land, not the sinners (*b. Ber.* 10a). Rabbi Johanan represents the conflicting feelings by projecting them to G-d and the angels.

6. It was taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Meir said: When Israel stood at the sea the tribes were quarreling, each one said, “I will be first to enter the sea.” Benjamin jumped into the sea first, as it states, אַל תִּקְרִי רוּדִם אֶלֶּא רָד יָם (Ps. 68:28), (“Do not read the word as ‘rodem’ but as ‘rad yam’” [He went down into the sea]). The officers of Judah threw stones at them, as it states, שָׂרֵי יְהוּדָה הִגִּמְתֵּם (v. 28). Therefore, Benjamin was selected to become the “host” for the “Might” (the Holy of Holies is located in Benjamin’s portion of land). Rabbi Judah said, that was not how it was. Rather, each tribe said, “I will not be first to enter the sea,” whereupon Nahshon the son of Amminadab (of Judah) jumped into the sea first. This is as stated, סִבְבֵּנִי בְּכַהֵשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וּבְמַרְמָה בֵּית קָל (Hos. 12:1), which is elaborated as follows, “Save me O G-d, for the waters have reached my throat, I am sunk in deep mud and have no standing” (Ps. 69:2-3) together with “Do not let the floodwaters sweep me away” (v. 16). Moses was lingering in prayer. HQBH said to him, “My beloved are drowning in the sea and you are lingering in prayer before Me?...Speak to the Israelites that they should travel and you raise your staff and incline your hand over the sea and split it.” Therefore Judah merited to have rulership in Israel, as it states, “When Israel left Egypt... הִיטָה יְהוּדָה לְקַדְשׁוֹ (Ps. 114:1-3), Why did Judah ascend to the status...because the sea saw [what he did] and fled (*b. Sotah* 36b-37a).

There are several lessons here in faith and courage, in psychology and in proper behavior in an emergency. But neither side in the dispute is expounding the straightforward meaning of the Exodus passage or the other passages marshaled for evidence.

7. Upon the defeat of Pharaoh and his troops, the Torah states (Exod. 14:28): לֹא נִשְׁאַר בָּהֶם עַד אֶחָד (generally translated: “there did not remain from them even one”). Taking עַד אֶחָד to mean “until one remained,” Rabbi Nehemiah in the *Mekhilta* states that Pharaoh was spared. *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* (42) added in the name of Rabbi Nehuniah ben Haqanah:

When Pharaoh said, “Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem, Who is like You, majestic in holiness”

(Exod. 15:11), HQBH saved him from the dead so that he would relate His power to others, in accordance with what is stated: “for this purpose have I allowed you to stand...and in order that My name be recounted throughout all the land” (9:16). Pharaoh became king in Nineveh...When HQBH sent Jonah to prophesy that Nineveh will be destroyed, Pharaoh heard, rose from his throne, rent his garments, donned sackcloth and ashes [and brought the city to repentance].

Surely this is a most potent cluster of messages about repentance. It also is an extravagantly imaginative tale spreading over many centuries based on a most fanciful interpretation of a verse.

8. Israel called out, “Who is like You among the אֱלֹהִים, Hashem?” (Exod. 15:11). Among its explanations of the difficult word *elim*, the *Mekhilta* proffers the following:

“Who is like You among the אֱלֹהִים?” (interpreting אֱלֹהִים as אֱלֵמִים, “mute,” based on their having similar letters and sounds). Who is like You that You can hear Your sons’ humiliation and be silent, as it states, “I have been silent from ages ago, I have been still and restrained, I will now cry as a woman in labor, both gasping and panting” (Isa. 42:14). That means to say, in the past G-d was silent and restrained, but from now on it will be different. “I will scorch mountains and hills, and dry up their vegetation, make rivers into islands and dry the pasture lands, I will lead the blind by a route they knew not, by a path they did not know will I guide them, I will make the darkness before them into light and the craggy places into a plain” (vv. 15-16).

This is a beautiful thought concerning the Exodus in the light of Israel’s past affliction. It is also a relevant hope and inspiration during the crushing difficulties the Jewish people were enduring at the time of the author of this midrash, but surely it is not the meaning of the verse it is expounded upon.

9. Following the crossing of the sea, the Torah states: וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם סוּף (Exod. 15:22). In a masterly synthesis of *midrashim*, Rashi comments on the active causative verb: “Moses had to force Israel to travel because the Egyptians had decorated their horses with ornaments of gold, silver and precious stones, and Israel was finding them in the sea. The spoils of the sea were greater than the spoils in

Egypt.” This constitutes an insightful commentary on the folly of the haughty and overconfident, as well as on the huge temptations Israel must rise above in order to serve Hashem. These include the problems often presented by opportunities, even those stemming from Hashem’s graciousness. But this interpretation is not an actual description of the circumstances of the verse being expounded.

10. Regarding the manna, “When the sun became hot it would melt” (16:21). The *Mekhilta* states: “Melted manna would flow into rivers and into the great sea, animals would drink that water, hunters would capture the animals and members of other nations would eat them and get a taste of the manna that descended for Israel.” This is an instructive lesson regarding indirect influence, perhaps reflecting the *Mekhilta’s* view of how the Torah’s message spread to the world, but not a depiction of a particular physical process.

11. In the battle against Amalek, Moses’ hands were faithful until the sun set (17:12). *Midrash Tanhuma*, cited by Rashi, asserts: The Amalekites were calculating through astrology the propitious time that they could be victorious. Moses stopped the sun and confused their calculations. The message is clear. The enemy may possess many skills and use all sorts of means against Israel, but steadfastness in commitment to Hashem will thwart them. The scientifically knowledgeable individual knows that such a statement, were it literal, would be depicting a miracle of the very highest order, which is not even hinted at and has no foundation in the text, and which was not cited by the other schools of sages. Clearly, it was not intended to be taken literally. And G-d cannot be manipulated by astrology or by any other means.

12. The following passage, dealing with topics of our *parasha*, appears in a talmudic discussion on the Mishnah’s statement of reciting Hallel toward the conclusion of the Passover *sefer* (*b. Pesah*. 118:b):

Rabbi Natan said, the verse וְאֶמְתָּהּ ה' לְעוֹלָם “The faithfulness of Hashem is forever” (Ps. 117:2), was said by the fish in the sea. This is in accordance with Rabbi Huna, who said that Israel in that generation [of the Exodus] were of little faith. This is as Rabbah bar Mari expounded: What is the meaning of the verse “They rebelled at the sea, the Sea of Reeds” (Ps. 106:7)? This teaches that the Israelites were

skeptical at that moment [upon crossing the sea] and said: “Just as we are ascending from the sea on one side so are the Egyptians ascending on the other side.” HQBH then told the Minister of the Sea to spew forth [the dead Egyptians] upon the dry land. He answered, “Master of the Universe, does a master give a gift to his servant [the many corpses, food for the fish] and then take it back?” He responded, “I will give you [in the future] one and a half times their number.” He replied, “Can a servant make a claim to collect from his master?” He told him: “נַחַל קִישׁוֹן (the Brook of Kishon) will be My guarantee.” Immediately he spewed the bodies forth upon dry land and Israel came and saw them, as is stated, “Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore” (Exod. 14:30). What is the meaning of “one and a half times their number?” Regarding Pharaoh it states, “six hundred choice chariots” whereas in the case of Sisera it states, “nine hundred chariots of iron” (Judg. 4:13). When Sisera came... HQBH brought the stars out of their orbits against them [Sisera’s army]... they became heated whereupon they went to cool themselves in the Brook of Kishon. HQBH said to the Brook of Kishon, “Go and deliver your guarantee.” Immediately, the Brook of Kishon swept them away and cast them into the sea, as it states, נַחַל קִישׁוֹן גָּרַפָם נַחַל קְדוּמִים (5:21). What is the meaning of נַחַל קְדוּמִים, the ancient brook?” The brook that had been the guarantee in ancient times. At that moment the fish said, וְנֶאֱמַת ה' לְעוֹלָם “The faithfulness of Hashem is forever.”

Major values are expounded here. In the midst of an enormous miracle on behalf of the Israelites, G-d regarded and alleviated their skepticism by further altering the natural order. Since this action clashed with another’s expectations of a benefit for his charges, G-d repaid the latter’s loss with interest. He accepted the argument that it was proper to have a guarantee and gave one. He permits His creations to

think independently and present their viewpoints to Him. And He is interested in justice even for the fish. Many precedents for appropriate human behavior are exemplified here, particularly to counteract the hubris and disregard of others sometimes found among the affluent. Nobody should disappoint another with merely, “Sorry, I changed my mind, something came up.” Nobody should say, “I’m good for my commitment, you do not need a surety.” People are expected to argue for those who cannot do so for themselves. And everybody should be concerned with the welfare of even lower creatures, how much more so the lowly among man. But this finely crafted homily has nothing directly to do with the intention of the verses being expounded or of the existence of heavenly ministers complaining to G-d. As midrashic interpretations generally do, it views the whole Tanakh as one integrated unity from which snippets of verses may be expounded and linked with other snippets of verses regardless of their literary context or historical setting to produce a moral that is independent of the verses expounded.

Between the *Talmudim* and classical compendiums of Midrash there are many thousands of statements commenting and elaborating on words and verses of Tanakh that contain great wisdom but are not the actual interpretation of those words and verses. And in subsequent times many rabbinic authors wrote in that style. Great caution must be taken in studying and teaching this material to gain the benefit without the harmful consequences described in the first part of this study. The Rambam’s words are as relevant today as ever.

Endnote

* These letters are an acrostic of *HaQadosh Barukh Hu* (“The Holy One Blessed Be He”).