

Some Comments on Passover Texts
Rabbi Eliot Malomet Passover 5783 April 6, 2023

בצאת ישראל ממצרים בית יעקב מעם לעז. תהילים קיד:א	<i>When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech.</i> <i>Psalm 114:1</i>
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It's hard not to hear the melody of these words when we see them. But like so many of our prayers, even though we love to sing them, we tend not to think of the meaning of what we are singing. There is so much information packed into this verse.

First: **בצאת ישראל**. Notice how the psalm begins. It doesn't say:

בצאתכם ממצרים <i>When you left Egypt</i>
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or

בצאתם ממצרים <i>When they left Egypt</i>
--

both of which occur numerous times elsewhere.

Rather, it says:

בצאת ישראל ממצרים <i>When Israel left Egypt</i>

Which makes us wonder, who is this Psalmist talking to? Is he talking directly to Israel or to someone else? If he were talking to Israel he would address Israel in the second person. Thus, he is addressing someone other

than Israel. Who? The world! It's as if our Psalmist is standing at the rostrum of the United Nations and addressing delegates from all the nations of the world and conveying to them the remarkable significance of the

liberation of Israel from Egypt. *My fellow delegates, when Israel left Egypt it was a world historical event. The sea fled...the mountains trembled.* This event was so remarkable that even nature took note.

Second: **בית יעקב - Israel - House of Jacob**.

This is a perfect example of parallelism: the most significant feature of biblical poetry, yea, the most compelling characteristic of ancient Hebrew song. In parallelism, the second half of a poetic line intensifies the first by repeating it in a slightly different way. This creates a remarkable effect in the mind of the listener and draws us into the text. It's as if the first half of the line asks a question, and the second half, answers it. The pair **Israel - House of Jacob** is quite common in the later books of the Bible, and it may seem rather innocuous. But if our ears our attuned,

we are reminded of another great moment in Israel's history where Israel is addressed in just this same

that, we have the obvious plain sense which is that **Israel** is the name of the nation in its mature phase and **House**

ויקרא אליו ה' מן ההר לאמר כה תאמר לבית יעקב ותגיד לבני ישראל. שמות יט:א	<i>And God called to him from the mountain saying, Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob and speak to the Children of Israel.</i> <i>Exod. 19:3</i>
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way. Just prior to the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, God invokes Israel by using the same phrases. And what is the difference between the terms **Israel** and **House of Jacob**? There is a long tradition, articulated by Rashi and others, that **Israel** refers to **men** and **House of Jacob** refers to **women**. But beyond

of Jacob conveys the earliest phase of the national story. Within this parallelism is embedded one of the key dynamics of Jewish peoplehood, namely, are we started as a family with intimate bonds to one another, and became a nation, with a national mission and a national identity? To be a Jew is to live in that dynamic.

Third. **From Egypt - From a people of strange speech**.

Israel and **Egypt** are two geo-political terms. In geo-political terms, the nation of Israel, which now inhabits the Land of Israel, left the nation of Egypt which inhabits the Land of Egypt. So why would the Psalmist choose the phrase, **מעם לעז - from a people of strange speech** as the parallel to Egypt? In what way does that modify the term Egypt? And why does the **House of Jacob** leave a **people of strange speech**? This line gives us insight into a deeper aspect of the redemption. It wasn't only political. It was cultural. Israel and Egypt were completely different cul-

tures. The House of Jacob emerges from a region of Semitic speaking peoples. Akkadians, Hittites, and Arameans spoke languages similar to Hebrew the same way that Spanish, French and Italian are all related to each other. But Egyptian and Hebrew were so utterly different, and the cultural values embedded in those languages, were so completely distinct from one another. And yet, ironically, there are some vestiges of Egyptian language that still remain in the Bible. Perhaps the most interesting one is the name Moses itself! In Egyptian, Moses means *the one who is born* and that syllable is found in many Egyptian names such as

Thutmose (*Thoth is born*) or Ptahmose (*Ptah is born*). But the Torah gives a Hebrew etymology to Moses' name! ויקרא שמו משה ותאמר - **And she named him Moshe, she said: For out of the water meshitihu / I-pulled-him!** Moses, the leader of Israel, who took Israel out of Egypt, also had his name **wrested out of** the Egyptian language. The very name **Moshe** undermines the Egyptian language. Moshe's own name thus not only acts as a harbinger of *the one who will bring Israel out of the water*, but is also a great symbol of cultural re-appropriation. The Israelites leave Egypt and leave the Egyptian language behind.

The Great Haroset Debate.

Speaker: Is eating Haroset a mitzvah? Here, at the *Society for the Preservation of Rabbinic Debates* we are going to re-enact the actual debate that took place among our sages. Our resolution is as follows: *Whereas Haroset is just a condiment, be it resolved that the eating of Haroset is not a mitzvah at Pesach.* Arguing for the resolution, that haroset is not a mitzvah is Rabbi Meir.

R. Meir: Thank you Mr. Speaker. Friends, let's just get to the sweet truth of the matter. The mitzvah on Pesach is to eat maror. Bitter herbs. Everybody knows that the reason we eat the maror is because the Egyptians embittered our lives in Egypt. As it says, וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה - *They, the Egyptians, embittered our lives with harsh labor* (Exod. 1:14). But let's not forget that what we are talking about here is a meal, a meal of roasted meat and unleavened bread. Now, I know that our audience thinks unleavened bread is a kind of cracker, but I have news for you. It wasn't. It was a flat bread, soft and chewy like laffa. But not a lot of taste. The roasted lamb probably did not have a lot of flavor in it either. Everybody knows that to make a good roasted lamb you have to garnish it with something savory. And what could be better than bitter herbs, something that is fresh, tastes sharp, has a bit of crunch to it, that makes the lamb taste wonderful! Dipping the bitter herbs in the haroset is simply a way of adding more taste to the meal. It would be like what modern people call ketchup or a chutney, a sweet and savory, nutty, but also zesty, blend of flavors that will simply give us a lot of joy. I would add one thing. There are some people that think that there is an actual poison in the bitter herb. Some people in my camp believe that the haroset is actually a neutralizer to the poison. For those reasons, eating haroset is not a mitzvah. It's just a condiment. Condiments are not mitzvahs. They are just for taste. Thank you.

Speaker: Now to tell us that eating haroset is a mitzvah, R. Eliezer ben Zadok.

R. EBZ: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My colleague, Meir is a learned man. And pious as well. And he knows his way around the kitchen it appears. But by not insisting that the haroset is a mitzvah he has deprived us of an important opportunity, an opportunity to remember. In his argument R. Meir will have you think that the purpose of eating roasted lamb meat wrapped in a laffa bread, garnished with maror and haroset is just to have a delicious meal. Indeed, it is a delicious meal. But it was also a meal that had a purpose! And what was that purpose? To remember! To remember the past! R. Meir was very skillful when he quoted the verse that *they embittered our lives with harsh labor*. But he neglected to quote the end of the verse: בְּהִמְרַ וּבְלִבְנִים וּבְכָל עֲבֹדָה בַשָּׂדֶה - *in loam and in bricks and with all kinds of servitude in the field*. My friends, how do we represent the loam? How do we represent the bricks? And how do we represent the field? With a food that is pasty, that looks like clay and has a scent. Ever grind walnuts and pecans together? You get a kind of paste. It's a kind of mortar that you put between bricks. It holds the building together. Sure, we add a little sweetness to it. Maybe some prunes, some wine, some dates. But the point of the haroset is not the taste, it's the texture. And the point of the texture is to remind us of the past. R. Meir will have you believe that you are here on this night to enjoy a good, tasty family meal. I want to argue that this meal has a purpose, and each food here is to remind us of something. The bitter herbs remind us of the bitterness of slavery. And the haroset reminds us of the mortar that was used in their harsh labor. Thank you.

Speaker: Thank you both for your statements. In our audience today we have some additional sages from a later period. I'd like to bring in their thoughts on the matter. They argue that haroset is a mitzvah, but it turns

out, they have different reasons. Here is Rabbi Levi.

R. Levi: Thank you Mr. Speaker. I concur that haroset is for remembrance. But for what? Two words: זָכַר לַתְּפוּחַ - *in remembrance of the apple*. What do we mean by that? It's a shorthand for the spiritual resistance principally deployed by the Israelite women. We don't have time to go into it in depth, but I refer you to the Song of Songs, 8:5 which says, *Under the apple tree I awakened you*. You can put two and two together and figure out what *that's* about. The women *comforted* the men from their harsh labor. And as a result of their *comfort*, the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied. It's spiritual resilience we are remembering; the sweetness of love. That is why haroset is made with apples, to this very day.

Speaker: And now Rabbi Yohanan.
R. Yohanan: This has been a very interesting discussion. We have talked about taste and labor. Joy and suffering. I respect my dear colleague R. Levi, but he is a bit of a romantic. The Seder is about remembrance. And as with all periods of suffering, we remember the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt. I have to side with my elder colleague, R. Tzadok. My two words: זָכַר לַמָּוֶט - *in remembrance of the mortar*.

Speaker: We have one more opinion to consider. With everyone's permission, I'd like to call one of the last, most respected sages of the Talmud, for the final word. Abbaye.
Abbaye: Thank you. It seems reasonable that we can find a position that will satisfy all positions here. Maror is indeed the mitzvah but when you make your haroset, make it thick to remember the mortar, and tart with sweetness to remember the apples. That way, everybody is happy and we can all learn to find common ground to celebrate our freedom together!

Mazel tov to Diana Malomet on the occasion of her 90th birthday! With love from Rabbi Eliot Malomet, Kim Pimley, and family.