

וַיְהִי בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה וַה' הָפָה כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכוֹר פַּרְעֹה הַיֹּשֵׁב
 עַל כִּסֵּאוֹ עַד בְּכוֹר הַשְּׂבִי אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית הַבּוֹר וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה.
 וַיָּקָם פַּרְעֹה לַיְלָה הוּא וְכָל עֲבָדָיו וְכָל מִצְרַיִם וַתְּהִי צַעֲקָה גְדֹלָה
 בְּמִצְרַיִם כִּי אֵין בֵּית אֶשֶׁר אֵין שָׁם מָת.

Now it was in the **middle of the night**: God **struck down** every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the captive in the dungeon, and every firstborn of beast. **Pharaoh arose at night**, he and all his servants and all Egypt, and there was **a great cry** in Egypt, for there was not a house in which there was not one dead. (12:29-30)

§ Now it was in the **middle of the night**: The Slaying of the Firstborn was the most lethal of the Ten Plagues. The account of the plague is slightly different from Moses' warning (11:4). Moses told Pharaoh that the plague would take place **בְּחֶצֶה הַלַּיְלָה** **around** (i.e. approx.) **midnight**, and the Torah's account of the plague says that it took place - **בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה** **at** (i.e. precisely at) **midnight**. Moses' vague warning preserves the element of surprise.¹ He said it would happen at night without specifying which night or what time during the night. Pharaoh does nothing to prepare. Throughout the entire plague story he has been more concerned about himself than his people.² Here he chooses not to intercede with Moses, and does nothing to



Moses Speaks to Pharaoh, James Tissot, French, c. 1896-1902. Wikimedia

protect even his own son. He goes to bed. **§ God struck down.** Israel's recent "pager attack" against Hezbollah serves as a useful analogy to the tenth plague. Thousands of pagers were

detonated simultaneously by an electronic signal, injuring and killing many terrorists. In the tenth plague, we don't know the details of what happened, how the firstborn were precisely targeted, how everyone other than a firstborn was spared, or whether or not the firstborn died instantly. **§ Pharaoh arose at night.** Perhaps Pharaoh was awakened by the wave of screams washing over Egypt. But reading closely, we note that **Pharaoh and everybody else woke up first and then there was a great cry in Egypt.** Does the **striking** wake them up? Or something else? All of us have at one time woken up from a dream or a deep sleep wondering if we heard something. The narrator is tap-ping into a universal human experience. **§ A great cry.** The cry of the Egyptians is the tragic counterpoint to the cry of the Israelites which God refers to in his first encounter with Moses (3:9). **§ For there was not a house in which there was not one dead.** A calamitous moment of sudden and horrific loss creates a momentary bond of shared anguish and suffering. The plague story is totally overflowing with superlatives. But under these circumstances, this is

understandable. We used this kind of language during Covid. We also used this kind of language after October 7th when everybody was experiencing the same overwhelming anguish at the same time.

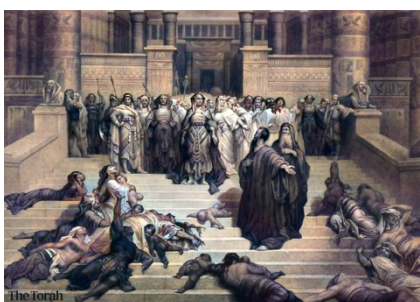
וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן לַיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר קוּמוּ צֵאוּ מִתּוֹךְ עַמִּי גַם אַתֶּם גַּם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְכוּ עֲבַדוּ אֶת ה' כְּדִבְרֵיכֶם. גַּם צֹאֲנֵכֶם גַּם בְּקִרְבְּכֶם קָחוּ כֹאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם וּלְכוּ וּבְרַכְתֶּם גַּם אֹתִי.

He **called** Moses and Aaron in the night and said: **Arise, go out from amidst my people, even you, even the Children of Israel! Go, serve God according to your words: even your sheep, even your oxen, take, as you have spoken, and go! And bring-a-blessing even on me!** (12:31-32)

§ He **called** Moses and Aaron. In the warning, Moses told Pharaoh that the plague would be so severe that Pharaoh's servants would go down to **him** and beg **him** to leave (11:8). But in this moment of obstinacy, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron to come to **Pharaoh** instead. This is an inversion of all the times they came to Pharaoh in the morning.

§ **Go, serve God according to your words.** We wonder: does Pharaoh intend for the Israelites to return? Did he not get it, that this was a permanent exit? **§ And bring-a-blessing even on me!** Other translators render this as **bless me too!** This seems like a strange request. But if we consider that in conflict enemies often have a begrudging respect for each another, then this would be Pharaoh's way of asking Moses to rehabilitate his honor. Common etiquette after sports matches dictates that the bitter rivals shake hands, with the loser congratulating

the winner. This is a necessary moment that re-establishes equilibrium, honors the sport, and enables the competitors to transition from rivals to friends. For Pharaoh and Moses that was not going to happen. **Pharaoh was not a going to become Moses' colleague, or anyone worthy of respect. Rather, he will always be viewed as a ruthless tyrant at whose direction thousands were killed and tortured. He deserved to be punished not honored. Moses understands the moral scandal of honoring cruelty. Therefore, Pharaoh's request for a blessing goes unanswered.**



Moses before Pharaoh, Gustave Doré, ca. 1869-1872 (adapted) Library of Congress

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וַתִּחַן מִצְרַיִם עַל הָעָם לְמַהֵר לְשַׁלְּחָם מִן הָאָרֶץ כִּי אָמְרוּ כָּלֵנוּ מָתִים.

Egypt **pressed** the people strongly, to send them out quickly from the land, for they said: **We are all dead!** (12:33)

§ Egypt **pressed** the people strongly. This little detail discloses the proximity of the Israelites and the Egyptians, and hints to their complex interdependent relationship. The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites but also may have admired

¹ The Talmud gives another reason. By keeping the time vague, Moses does not want to be perceived in any way as misleading the Egyptians (Berachot 4a).

² See Exod. 7:23 at the plague of blood: **וְלֹא שָׁת לְבוֹ גַּם לָזָאת - he did not pay any attention to this.**

them or may have been jealous of them. There may even have been some intermarriage as well. Nevertheless, on this horrible night, the Egyptians realize that Israel's continued presence is a mortal threat to them, and they want them to get out. It is a miracle that things didn't get out of hand. With the spectacles of the recent hostage releases in Gaza, we have seen the way unruly, hate-driven mobs can behave. It is a miracle that no-one was hurt there as well.

וישא העם את בצקו טרם יחמץ משארתם צררת בשמלתם על שכמם.
*So the people loaded their **dough** before it had fermented, their kneading-troughs bound in their clothing, upon their shoulders. (12:34)*

§ *So the people loaded their **dough**.* What happened that night? They slaughtered their lambs at dusk. They then roasted them. They were supposed to eat them when they were fully roasted, that would have been after midnight, together with matzot and bitter herbs. But Pharaoh woke up at midnight and ordered them to leave. Nothing was ready to eat. The meat was still roasting and they hadn't yet baked their matzah. *Israel left Egypt on an empty stomach!* Or in a state of fasting, which makes sense because fasting is a way to demarcate one time from another. When they were rushed out, they left their lambs roasting. Since their dough was portable, they could take it and wrap it in their clothing to prevent it from being spoiled. *The meal and the blood were intended to be a symbolic form of protection upon departure. Now, without anything to fortify or protect them, all they had was God.*

ובני ישראל עשו כדבר משה וישאלו ממצרים כלי כסף וכלי זהב ושמלתם. וה' נתן את חן העם בעיני מצרים וישאלו וינצלו את מצרים.

*Now the Children of Israel had done according to Moses' words: they had asked of the Egyptians objects of silver and objects of gold, and clothing; God had given the **people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians**, and they let themselves be asked of. So did they strip Egypt. (12:35-36)*

§ *God had given the people **favor**.* Back at the Burning Bush, God told Moses that the people would not leave Egypt empty-handed (3:21). This is the third time we have the expression, **חן העם בעיני מצרים** - literally, *the grace of people in the eyes of Egypt*. In terms of emotional disposition, this is the opposite of Pharaoh. Pharaoh constantly *hardened* his heart against the Israelites. Eventually *God also hardened* his heart. But here, *God softened* the heart of the Egyptians towards Israel.

ויסעו בני ישראל מרעמסס סכתה כשש מאות אלף רגלי הגברים לבד משף. וגם ערב רב עליה אתם וצאן ובקר מקנה כבד מאד.

*The Children of Israel moved on **from Ra'amses to Sukkot**, about six hundred thousand on foot, menfolk apart from little-ones, and also a **mixed multitude** went up with them, along with sheep and oxen, an exceedingly heavy [amount of] livestock. (12:35-36)*

§ *From **Ra'amses to Sukkot**.* This is a journey of approximately 15 km., no more than a few hours by foot. If they left Ra'amses in the middle of the night, they would have arrived at Sukkot around daybreak. *This timing will be occur again at the Sea of Reeds. The splitting of the sea takes place at night, the Israelites walked through, and when Moses stretched his hand over it causing the sea to return to its normal state it was just before daybreak (14:27).*

§ *A **mixed multitude**.* Who are these people? Building on the idea that the populations interacted with each other, Luzzatto suggests that *they were Egyptian men who had married Israelite women and Egyptian women who had married Israelite men.*

ויאפו את הבצק אשר הוציאו ממצרים עגת מצות כי לא חמץ כי גרשו ממצרים ולא יכלו להתמהמה וגם צדה לא עשו להם.

*Now **they baked the dough** which they had brought out of Egypt into matzot cakes, for it had not fermented, for they had been driven out of Egypt, and were not able to linger, and neither had they made provisions for themselves. (12:39)*

§ *Now **they baked the dough**.* According to the sequence of the narration, this takes place at the place known as Sukkot, at daybreak, when they were able to stop, rest, build a fire and bake the matzot. § *For it had **not fermented**. This should be read with wonder and amazement! We would have expected dough to ferment during the hours of the journey, but it did not! That is God's intervention! It was a miracle!* The Israelites wanted to fulfill God's commandment for the sacred meal, but they had no meat. All they had was the dough. The midnight trek risked rendering the dough unusable for this sacred purpose. But miracle of miracles! The dough did not ferment! Thus, they were able to partially fulfill the commandment, albeit several hours later than intended. We are used to telling a different story: that the Israelites were in such a rush to leave Egypt that the dough did not have time to rise. But that means that they were supposed to eat leavened bread, *which they were explicitly told not to eat!* This story is more compelling: they were sent out of Egypt before the roasted lamb was done, and before they baked the unleavened bread - which they were supposed to eat with the roasted lamb! They were in a state of fasting. When they got to Sukkot they discovered that the dough was miraculously still unleavened and hence it was acceptable to use for matzot. Their first act of freedom was to fulfill God's commandment! Thus, eating matzah at the Seder commemorates the first act of freedom.

ומושב בני ישראל אשר ישבו במצרים שלשים שנה וארבע מאות שנה. ויהי מקץ שלשים שנה וארבע מאות שנה ויהי בעצם היום הזה יצאו כל צבאות ה' מארץ מצרים. ליל שמרים הוא לה' להוציאם מארץ מצרים הוא הלילה הזה לה' שמרים לכל בני ישראל לדורתם.

*Now the settlement of the Children of Israel which they had settled in Egypt was thirty years and four hundred years. It was at the end of thirty years and four hundred years, it was on that same day: all of God's forces went out from the land of Egypt. It is a night of keeping-watch for God, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that is this night for God, a **keeping-watch** of all the Children of Israel, throughout their generations. (12:40-42)*

*A night of **keeping-watch** for God.* God kept watch over them that night. To reciprocate, Israel will keep watch on the anniversary of that night for all time.

Shabbat Shalom!

Today is Day 484. As we witness the release of the first hostages in joy, we also pray for the ones who remain. May God protect them. May God comfort the families whose loved ones will not be coming home. May God heal the wounded and shield Israel from terror.