

**Besahalah: The First Three Verses - Exploring the Transition from Slavery to Freedom**  
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וַיְהִי בִשְׁלַח פָּרְעֹה אֶת הָעָם וְלֹא נָחַם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי קָרוֹב  
 הוּא כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים כֹּן יִנָּחֵם הָעָם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלִּחְמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִמָּה. וַיִּסַּב  
 אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעָם דֶּרֶךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יָם סוּף וְחֲמִשִּׁים עָלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ  
 מִצְרָיִם. וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת עֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ כִּי הִשְׁבַּע הַשְּׁבִיעַ אֶת בְּנֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פֶּקֶד וּפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהַעֲלִיתֶם אֶת עֲצָמֹתַי מִזֶּה  
 אִתְּכֶם. וַיִּסְעוּ מִסֹּכֶת וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּאֶתֶם בְּקֶצֶה הַמִּדְבָּר. (שְׁמוֹת יג:כ-כ)

*Now it was, when Pharaoh released the people, that God did not lead them by Way of the Land of the Philistines, though it is nearer, for God said [to himself]: Lest the people regret it, when they see war, and return to Egypt! So God had the people swing about by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds. And the Children of Israel went up armed from the land of Egypt. Now Moses had taken Joseph's bones with him, for he had made the Children of Israel swear, yes, swear, saying: God will take account, yes, account of you - so bring my bones up from here with you! They marched on from Sukkot and encamped in Etam at the edge of the wilderness. (Exod. 13:17-20)*

וַיְהִי בִשְׁלַח פָּרְעֹה-When Pharaoh released the people from slavery it was *in the middle of the night* as we saw last week.<sup>1</sup> They went from *Raamses to Sukkot*.<sup>2</sup> *The initial steps to freedom transpire in that transitional zone of time*, and by morning, they would have reached Sukkot where they baked their miraculously unleavened dough and had their first taste of freedom.<sup>3</sup> § *God did not lead them* Moses may be at the head of the people, but God is the GPS. Pharaoh released them, but God is now guiding them. *The people have transitioned from Pharaoh's total control to God's directional positioning.*

§ *by the way of the Land of the Philistines.* In antiquity, as well as today, many roads are named by their



destinations. For example, in Jerusalem, where I am presently, there is a *Derech Beit Lechem* that takes you from the center of the city southward to Bethlehem; *Derech Yafo*, which starts at the Jaffa Gate and goes west to Jaffa; *Derech Shechem*, which heads north to Shechem and *Derech Yericho* which heads east to Jericho. (Some of our roads in Central NJ are similarly named: *Easton Avenue* originates in New Brunswick and goes west towards *Easton*, PA. *Princeton Pike* runs from Trenton to Princeton. Both of these roads originated during the colonial era.) The earliest audiences of this story were most likely familiar with the geography of the land of Israel and understood that *Derekh Eretz Plishtim* was a fortified route along the Mediterranean coast under Egyptian control. They also knew who the Philistines were.<sup>4</sup> § *though it is nearer. The Torah anticipates a reasonable question from readers and listeners: Goshen to Canaan along the coastal route of the Land of the Philistines is the direct route. Why did they take a detour?* § *for God said [to himself].* There are other moments in the Torah where God speaks to himself: creation of man, the vow after the Flood, the consideration of whether or not to share his thinking with Abraham prior to the destruction of Sodom.<sup>5</sup> They are all quite momentous. Here God has discerned that they should *take the long way home*.<sup>6</sup> This is a cue that the trajourney ahead will be beset with hardships and perils but will also include discovery and deliverance. § *for they will regret it, when they see war, and return to Egypt!* The stated reason for the long detour is because the Way of the Philistines is dangerous. But how do we interpret God's intent here? We can read it as condescension: *They can't handle the prospect of war*, or compassion, *These people have been so oppressed the prospect of war will overwhelm them*. Or perhaps it is a little bit of both. *and return to Egypt!* The prospect of returning to Egypt would be the ultimate reversal of the divine plan. God wants them to inherit Canaan as he had disclosed many generations ago to Abraham, and build a nation there, bound in a covenant to him. The return to Egypt is the ultimate failure of this plan.<sup>7</sup> § *So God had the people circulate about by way of the grazing land at the Sea of Reeds.* Unlike Moses, who drives his flock in one direction

<sup>1</sup> Exod. 12:29. *Now it was in the middle of the night: God struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt...*

<sup>2</sup> Exod. 12:37.

<sup>3</sup> Exod. 12:39.

<sup>4</sup> The Philistines migrated from the eastern Mediterranean in the 12th century BCE. They settled primarily in five principal cities: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gat, and were a significant threat to Israel for centuries. They are mentioned in Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Not noted for their literary output, they excelled at ironworking, sea-faring trade, and beautiful bichrome pottery. The archeological record shows that

they introduced the consumption of pork to the region. The Gaza Strip is the southern reach of Philistine habitation.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 1:26, *Let us make man*, and 2:18, *It is not good for man to be alone*, Gen. 6:7 *I will erase the human that I have created*. Gen. 18:17 *Shall I cover up from Abraham what I am about to do?* And many more.

<sup>6</sup> Supertramp, from the Breakfast in America album, 1979, arguably their greatest album.

<sup>7</sup> At the very end of the Torah, Moses warns the people that if they do not fulfill the covenant, *God will return you to Egypt in ships, by the route of which I had said to*

to beyond the edge of the *midbar*-grazing zone, (Exod. 3:1), God drives the people circuitously, within the boundary of the *midbar*-grazing zone. It would have been great if the Torah gave us a map here, but instead we have to conjure this region in our imaginations. *With these descriptions we begin to understand that the zone to which God is taking the Israelites, the zone between Egypt and the Sea, is a metaphor for the transition zone between slavery and freedom.* They have been released from Egypt but they are not exactly in the clear. Rather, until they cross over the Sea of Reeds they exist in a kind of neutral half-way transitional zone. But even afterwards, their entire trek through the Sinai will become a transitional zone between slavery and freedom. § וְהַמְשִׁים עָלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם - *And the Children of Israel went up armed from the land of Egypt.* This is a confusing detail. If they were armed, do they know how to fight? Like Chekhov's Gun we get this detail here in anticipation of the possibility of violence along the way. Indeed, they will need to defend themselves shortly against Amalek, and later, after the Golden Calf incident, there will be a brief but lethal civil war. § וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת עֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ - *Now Moses had taken Joseph's bones with him.* In the thick of the exodus Moses is fulfilling an ancient obligation. His act inspires a personal question: what would you take with you in the event of a sudden evacuation? During the recent fires in California, many people had to act on that very question. But Moses' act is deliberate and becomes a symbol of redemption. Joseph is symbolically returning with them to Canaan to be formally buried in a grave. Repatriation of a body is a powerful act. Families of the hostages murdered in Gaza want to bring the remains of their loved one's home for burial in Israel precisely because it will bring them "closure" and enable them to move into their futures. So too with Israel and Joseph's bones.

#### A Midrash Digression: Sotah 13a

*The Gemara asks: And from where did Moses our teacher know where Joseph was buried? The Sages said: Serah the daughter of Asher remained from that generation that initially descended to Egypt with Jacob. Moses went to her and said to her: Do you know anything about where Joseph is buried? She said to him: The Egyptians fashioned a metal casket for him and set it in the Nile [Nilus] River as an augury so that its water would be blessed. Moses went and stood on the bank of the Nile. He*

*you: You shall not see it again any more! You will put yourselves up for sale there to your enemies as servants and as maids, with none to buy [you].* (Deut. 28:68). This is the last of a string of terrible curses. In other words, returning to Egypt is the worst thing imaginable.

<sup>8</sup> She is mentioned briefly in Gen. 46:17 and Num. 26:46.

According to legend, she helped convey to Jacob that Joseph was still alive, that she was a witness to the splitting of the sea and even participated in negotiations with Joab ben Tzruyah in the time of David. There are many examples of ancient sybils and oracles in world folklore, and wise old women in fairy tales. The wise-ancient-woman motif is found in movies and fiction as well.

*said to Joseph: Joseph, Joseph! The time has arrived about which the Holy One Blessed be He took an oath saying that I i.e. God will redeem you. And the time for fulfillment of the oath that you administered to the Jewish people that they will bury you in Eretz Yisrael has arrived. If you show yourself it is good but if not we are clear from your oath. Immediately the casket of Joseph floated to the top of the water.*

**Comments:** Serah bat Asher would have been ancient by this time and is the living connection to that era. Like many women of advanced age, she is repository of ancient knowledge and wisdom, and she literally knows where the bones are buried! Many legends are associated with her.<sup>8</sup> The reference to Joseph in a metal casket is significant. Besides the stated reason of "blessing the Nile"<sup>9</sup> the unstated reason is that it would be impossible to pull up to the surface. Knowing that the Israelites wouldn't go back to Canaan without it, the Egyptians placed it in an irretrievable casket to prolong their slavery. § פָּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם פָּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם - *God will take account, yes, account of you - so bring my bones up from here with you!* This is a verbatim quote from the second last verse of Genesis<sup>10</sup> except for one thing - an extra word: *אֶתְכֶם-with you*. The simple interpretation is that Joseph made them swear an oath that they take his body back *with you when you leave*. But R. Shimon ben Elazar states that *אֶתְכֶם means with yours, i.e. your bodies, and not with you. That is, take my bones out of Egypt with yours as well*. But the only burial that the Bible reports is that of Joseph's bones.<sup>11</sup> § וַיֵּסְעוּ מִסֹּכֶת וַיָּחֲנוּ בְּאֶתְמֹת הַמִּדְבָּר - *They marched on from Sukkot and encamped in Etam at the edge of the midbar-grazing zone.* This is the edge of inhabited territory.<sup>12</sup> *The journey forward will traverse many boundaries: habitation to wilderness, water to dry land, from slavery to freedom, death to life.* **SHABBAT SHALOM!**

Today is Day 491.

As we witness the release of more individual hostages, 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.

<sup>9</sup> This is another motif found in folklore and pagan religions. The idea that a dead body sustains life and provides blessing would have conflicted deeply with a tradition that strives to maintain the boundaries between life and death and regards death as a source of impurity.

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 50:25.

<sup>11</sup> Josh. 24:32. *The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought for a hundred kesitahs from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, and which had become a heritage of the Josephites.* The second to last verse in the book of Joshua.

<sup>12</sup> Commentary of R. Isaac Samuel Reggio, 1784-1855.