

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.¹

The exodus of Israel from Egypt is depicted with the metaphor of extraction of a "bloom" of iron² from an **iron furnace**. Here is what the Torah says:

וְאַתֶּכֶם לָקַח ה' וַיּוֹצֵא אֶתְכֶם מִכּוּר הַבְּרֹנֶז מִמִּצְרַיִם לִהְיוֹת לוֹ לְעָם
נִחְלָה בְּיוֹם הַזֶּה. (דב' ד:כ)

*But you, God took and brought you out of the **Iron Furnace**, out of Egypt, to be for him a people of inheritance, as [is] this day. (Deut. 4:20)*

This metaphor for Egyptian slavery occurs in only two other places in the Bible.³ Nevertheless, it is fascinating that Moses uses it here. How does this metaphor forge the way we ought to understand the slavery experience? Does it have any deeper significance? Where does the metaphor of Egyptian slavery as an **iron furnace** take us?

The Iron Furnace: A Metaphor of Transformation. We take metal for granted. Our cellphones contain an average of 62 different metals procured from all over the world. Mining and metalworking used to be a major industry in our area.⁴ In the not-too-distant past, the vicissitudes of life would have brought us into daily contact with carters, blacksmiths, coal workers, and myriads of other people that sustained the blast-furnaces and metal-shops that brought you every-thing from nails to pots to hinges and locks. The Bible has plenty of metal.⁵ Iron, the metal that defines much of the biblical era, does not exist in nature as a 'native metal' like gold, silver, or copper. Unlike those metals, iron has to be processed from iron oxide ores, and then continually refined and reworked to be made into something useful. It takes incredibly high temperatures, ~2800° F, to turn iron ore into a clump of iron, a "bloom." Special furnaces made out of clay, were shaped like hollow cylinders and ventilated with large leather bellows to get the fuel to high temperatures. You pored the ore and charcoal into the top of the furnace, with flames spurting out (see illustration) and from the intense heat and chemical reactions of the gases, a "bloom" of iron metal would eventually form at the base of the furnace. Once the process was done, the clay furnace would be destroyed to enable the removal of the "bloom" which would then have to be reheated, pounded, and fashioned by the smith into tools, blades, or other implements. Comparing the Exodus to the removal of the

"bloom" from an iron furnace presents slavery as the most oppressive experience imaginable. The harsh labor and humiliation could only be compared to the intense heat of the furnace; however, it transformed Israel from "ore" - its origins as a family - to a "bloom" - a strong, durable, iron-like people, that still needed to be shaped and reworked.

The Iron Furnace: A Metaphor of Refinement. Others see the furnace itself as an instrument of refinement. The metal would be placed in a crucible in the furnace, smelted, and then poured into molds for use. This was done largely for gold and silver. Since it takes almost four times as much energy to liquefy iron, the "bloom" was not smelted but heated and pounded into ingots, blades, and the like. In this understanding of the metaphor, when Israel descends to Egypt it was already in the raw "bloom" state and the centuries of slavery "refined" it. Rashi argues that this is the way to understand the metaphor: **כּוּר הוּא כְּלִי שֶׁמְזַקְקִים בוֹ אֶת הַקּוֹר**-the **koor**-is the vessel in which gold is refined, therefore this is a metaphor of refinement. Shadal (S.D. Luzzatto) disagrees. He says the **koor**: **מְקוֹם נוֹרָא וְאִים שָׂאִי אֶפְשָׁר לַעֲמֹד בוֹ**-is such a terrifying and horrible situation, (because of the intensity of the fire), that it would be impossible to withstand. Thus, the **iron furnace** metaphor allows for at least two different perceptions of the slavery experience. The first, in which the heat and intensity of slavery takes us as ore and transforms us into raw metal. The second in which the heat and intensity of slavery acts on raw metal and refines it further. The way we interpret the metaphor shapes the way we understand our experience of slavery in Egypt: did slavery **transform** us into a new substance that God could extract, or did slavery **refine** us? What are the implications of either interpretation? One ought to be very cautious in disagreeing with Rashi, but here I am going with Shadal: **When Moses invokes the iron-furnace metaphor for the Exodus, he is saying that slavery transformed Israel from a raw "ore" into an iron "bloom" which then could be further refined.** But how would Israel be refined? Answer: Mount Sinai. The revelation at Mount Sinai is depicted twice in the Torah: first in Exodus 19 (Parashat Yitro) and second in Deuteronomy 4 (Parashat Vaethanan). But this leads us to the following observation: **Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4 are two radically different depictions of the Sinai moment.**

¹ George Lakoff, Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. p. 5.

² **"Bloom"** (not to be confused with the bud of a flower) is the technical term for a spongy, porous clump of iron. It comes from the OE world, **"bloma"** which means **"lump of metal."** An iron furnace was called a "bloomery."

³ 1 Kings 8:5, Jeremiah 11:4.

⁴ Some local street names attest to this. **Mine Street** in New Brunswick is a block away from Rutgers Hillel. **Coppermine Road** is in Griggstown, near Rocky Hill. Copper and iron were extensively mined in central NJ in the 18-19th centuries.

⁵ Bronze (the alloy of copper and tin) and iron are already associated with the legendary Tubal-Kayin (Gen. 4:22) the seventh-generation descendant of Adam. Abraham is heavy with gold and silver (Gen. 13:2). The Egyptians fall like lead into the sea (Exod. 15:10). Let's not even mention the quantity of gold, silver and bronze used in the sanctuary. The life of Abraham is situated at the end of the Bronze Age (~1400 BCE) and the Israelite conquest, and monarchy is situated in the Iron Age (~1200-500 BCE).

The Kiln vs. The Furnace:

Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19 vs. Mt. Sinai in Deuteronomy 4.

In Exodus 19 the mountain is pictured as being covered with cloud. There is lightning and thunder and the sound of the shofar. And when Moses brings the people to stand at the foot of the mountain it is belching smoke, like a **kiln**:

וְהָר סִינַי עָשָׂן כֻּלּוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו ה' בְּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עָשָׁנוֹ כְּעָשָׁן הַכֹּבֵשֶׁת וַיִּתְרַד כָּל הָהָר מֵאֵד. (שמות יט:יח)

Now Mount Sinai emitted-smoke all over, since God had come down upon it in fire; its smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln (Exod. 19:18)

But in Deuteronomy, the mountain is on fire, like a **furnace**:

וַתִּקְרַבּוּן וַתַּעֲמְדוּן תַּחַת הָהָר וְהָהָר בֹּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ עַד לֵב הַשָּׁמַיִם חֹשֶׁךְ עָנָן וְעָרְפֶּל. (דברים ד:יא)

You came near and you stood beneath the mountain: now the mountain was burning with fire, up to the [very] heart of the heavens, [in] darkness, cloud and fog. (Deut. 4:11)

In Exodus (24:16), God calls Moses from *within the cloud*: מִתּוֹךְ הָעָנָן. In Deuteronomy (4:12 and more), God's speaks to Israel from *within the fire*: מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ. Thus, we have two very different depictions of Sinai, built around two very different metaphors: the mountain as **kiln-כֹּבֵשֶׁת**, and the mountain as **furnace-בּוֹר**.

Exodus 19-Sinai as Kiln	Deut. 4-Sinai as Furnace
The mountain emits smoke.	The mountain emits fire.
God comes down to the top of the mountain in fire.	God does not come down. Rather, the top of the mountain is covered with darkness, cloud, and fog.
The fire is only on the <u>top</u> of the mountain.	The entirety of the mountain (or a <u>column</u> within the mountain) is on fire.
The fire lasts a moment before the speech.	The fire lasts the duration of God's speech.
All smoke and (mostly) no fire.	All fire and (mostly) no smoke.
The product of a kiln is a stone-like, yet often fragile, ceramic object.	The product of an iron furnace is the malleable but indestructible "bloom" of iron.
The covenant between God and Israel is the "finished" product.	The people of God are the "unfinished" product, which requires refinement.
In Exodus, Sinai is about God entering the world with the perfect (but fragile) covenant.	In Deuteronomy, Sinai is about the "unfinished" (but very durable) Israel entering the land with the covenant.

Metaphors shape the way we view both slavery and Sinai. When Moses uses the **iron-furnace** metaphor to describe slavery, he is saying that what emerged from slavery was the "bloom" - the clump of iron that then needed to be reworked and refined. Although he never says so explicitly, Mount Sinai is also an **iron-furnace**, because he depicts it like a volcanic furnace (see picture)!



The mountain as a furnace.



An Iron-Furnace made of clay.

However, when we view *Sinai as a kiln*, (see below) as in Exodus 19, we imagine a piece of clay in it being heated to an intense heat and



A kiln emitting smoke.

finished. Question: What does this mean? Answer: God makes humans out of clay. Metaphorically, the human being is "unfinished." **The kiln metaphor for Sinai thus suggests that human beings are "finished" when God's word comes into the world.** When Israel endures Egyptian slavery, it experiences the fierce heat of oppression. Plucked out of Egypt, Israel is an unfinished iron

"bloom" with tremendous potential. **The iron-furnace metaphor for Sinai means that God's Torah refines Israel.** Torah reshapes Israel, but to do so, Israel must recall the Sinai moment all the time. That is what the **Shema** is saying. Just after recalling Sinai, Moses says in the paragraph that we call the **Shema**:

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עָלֶיךָ. (דברים ו:ו)
And these words, which I myself command you today, are to be upon your heart. (Deut. 6:6)

What are the **words** that he is talking about? They are the **words** spoken at Sinai! The **עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים**! The **Ten Words**! **THOSE WORDS**, ought to be placed upon the heart of every Israelite every day! In addition to all the other words (**Love God** etc.) that Moses is commanding them. Those words, the Ten Commandments, are to be taught to one's children at every waking moment. **The iron furnace** metaphor that Moses uses in Deuteronomy teaches us that Egyptian slavery transformed Israel into a nation with potential. By depicting Sinai **also** as an **iron furnace**, Moses is teaching us that Sinai, and the Torah, will refine the people as it enters the land and establishes itself as a nation there. In Deuteronomy, we are commanded to recall Sinai in our daily lives. That is how "the fire of Sinai" constantly refines us. Whereas the **kiln** metaphor in Exodus, teaches us that Sinai was a single moment in history of humanity, and that the purpose of Sinai was to "finish" the clay human being with the message of the covenant that Israel, God's treasured people, would bring to the world. **Shabbat Shalom!**

Day 673. We pray for an end to the war and the return of the hostages. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, and heal the wounded.