

Does It Take a Miracle to See a Former Enemy in a Favorable Light?

R. Yaakov Bieler
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Part of the “Brit Bein HaBetarim” (the Covenant between the Pieces) (Beraishit 15:9-21) is the Divine Promise that when the Jews finally are redeemed from the servitude and oppression that they will suffer in a land that “is not theirs”, they will emerge with “great wealth” (15:14). Although HaKetav VeHaKabbala strives to define this “wealth” as not only finite precious material objects, but also in terms of a positive historical evolution of the Jewish people as well as lessons learned during the course of the Egyptian exile, e.g., a national purification of the Jews intended to eliminate those by attrition as well as assimilation who do not believe strongly in HaShem, a demonstration of the impotence of false gods, a lesson to the Jews as well as others concerning HaShem’s Omnipotence and the wondrousness of His Miracles, nevertheless this commentator himself admits that the simple meaning of 15:14, as well as the apparent import of verses in Parshiot Shemot and Bo appears to emphasize the acquisition of monetary wealth.

The apparent importance of the promise that the Jews will leave Egypt materially enriched, originally made to Avraham in Beraishit, is reflected in this promise and its fulfillment being mentioned on three different occasions in Sefer Shemot. First, in Shemot 3:21, Moshe is told by God before he even agrees to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh, , “And I will Place the ‘Chen’ (grace) of this people in the eyes of Egypt, and it will be that when you go (out from Egypt) you will not go empty-handed.” This early prediction is repeated just prior to “Makat Bechorot” (the plague of the firstborn) when Moshe is again informed, (11:3) “And God will Place the grace of the people in the eyes of Egypt; also the man Moshe is very great in the land of Egypt in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people.” NeTzIV suggests that the reason why HaShem now Informs Moshe about the promise a second time is because Moshe might have thought that there had been a change in the Divine Plan. (1) While God had also Mentioned to his prophet early on that the Egyptian ruler would not immediately agree to allowing the Jews to leave (3:19-20), Moshe is nevertheless shocked when Pharaoh in addition to refusing to free the slaves, also imposes harsher work quotas upon the Jews (5:7-9). Moshe registers his dismay when in 5:22-23 he accuses HaShem of maltreating the very people that He had Said He would Redeem. Consequently, HaShem Reassures Moshe in 11:3 that not only is the plan for redemption still on track,

but that the Commitment regarding the enrichment of the Jews would also be carried out as originally promised.

The obtaining of Egyptian property by the Jews is mentioned for a final time when the Tora describes what takes place immediately prior to the Jews' leaving Egypt. We once again read how God is True to His Word: (12:36) "And God Placed the grace of the people in the eyes of Egypt, and they (the Egyptians) caused them (the Jews) to borrow and they despoiled Egypt.

Amos Chacham in Da'at Mikra notes the parallelism between the hardening of Pharaoh's heart by HaShem during the last five plagues (9:12; 9:34—10:1, [2] 10:20, 27; 11:10) and the "softening" of the Egyptians' hearts with regards to their lending the Jews their silver and gold.

However, one can question whether the actions on the part of both Pharaoh and his subjects should be regarded as reflections of either their evil or good intentions in light of the direct Divine Catalyst for what they do. RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Teshuva, Chapt. 5 goes to great lengths to explain how only when an individual has free choice s/he can be both held accountable as well as praised and rewarded for his /her actions.

(5:4) If HaShem would Decree regarding an individual to either be a righteous person or an evildoer, or if there would be some factor inherent in an individual's basic makeup that would inevitably direct him/her to take a certain path or to develop a certain personality trait, or to form a certain opinion, or to act in a certain manner, as some fools who delve into astrology maintain, how could He Command us by means of His Prophets, "Do this", "Don't do that", "Improve your ways and do not follow your evil tendencies" since from his/her very earliest beginnings it has already been decreed or his/her nature has been so constituted that s/he embark upon a path that cannot be altered? And what purpose would there be for the entire Tora (which lists positive and negative commandments along with their rewards and punishments), and based upon what law or judgment could a sinner be punished or a righteous person rewarded? (Beraishit 18:25) "The Judge of the entire world, should He not Engage in Justice?" (3)

Consequently, while Pharaoh can be morally criticized and properly punished for the first five instances when he turns down Moshe's and Aharon's request to free the Jews, this is not true with regard to his responses for the last five plagues. (See fn. 2) Similarly, if the converse process, i.e., instead of forcing

someone to do evil, s/he is made to do good, lies at the heart of the decision by the Egyptians to offer their precious possessions to the Jews, they also cannot be regarded as having treated the Jews favorably, since God is merely manipulating them to only give the impression that the Egyptians have high regard for Moshe and his people. Furthermore, it appears that this ostensible “good deed” on the Egyptians’ part is, at least according to RaShI, designed by God to supply Pharaoh with the leverage by which he could eventually urge the Egyptian people to join him in pursuing the Jews to the Sea of Reeds. On 14:6 “VaEt Amo Lakach Imo” (And his [Pharaoh’s] people he [Pharaoh] took with him) RaShI writes: “He (Pharaoh) drew them with words. (4) ‘They smote us with plagues, **TOOK OUR POSSESSIONS** and we sent them out!? Come my nation...’” Pharaoh is portrayed as appealing to the Egyptian sense of having been taken advantage of by the Jews’ who now that they have traveled beyond the journey of three days that Moshe originally requested (5:3; 8:23), not only clearly have no intention of returning to their former state of enslavement, but, adding insult to injury, they also intend to permanently keep the objects that they had ostensibly only “borrowed” from the Egyptians. The ensuing moral outrage on the part of the Egyptians concerning both their lost slave labor as well as their personal possessions convinces them to throw caution to the wind, forget about the massive destruction and hardships that they had just recently suffered, and attempt again to inflict pain and devastation on the Jews, despite the power evidenced by God Acting on their behalf. Although the text regarding the Egyptian’s final pursuit only notes that it is Pharaoh’s heart that is hardened in terms of his deciding to chase the Jews (14:8), “And HaShem Hardened Pharaoh’s heart, the king of Egypt, and he pursued after the Jewish people...”, it would appear that the soldiers manning the 600 chariots that joined the king (14:6) no longer retained any of the “grace” that had been placed in their eyes earlier on, following the Plague of the Firstborn in Shemot 12:36. Consequently, HaShem’s Orchestrating the Egyptian’s feeling positively towards the Jews could be paradoxically and almost cruelly understood to contribute to setting up the Divine Coup de Grace for Egypt and its armies. (5)

In contrast to the apparently literal reading of the verses in question that attributes the “grace” with which the Egyptians looked upon the Jews to a Supernatural Influence comparable to the manner in which Pharaoh’s heart was hardened from Above, both RaMBaN as well as R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch suggest that the Egyptians’ positive feeling towards the Jews came from within the Egyptians themselves and was well-deserved by the Jews.

RaMBaN argues that a close reading of the Biblical text in 11:3 would make it impossible to assume that God’s Placing the “grace” of the Jews in the

eyes of the Egyptians at this point prior to “Makkat Bechorot” is synonymous with what is stated in 12:36 regarding the borrowing of possessions after the final plague, when the Jews are about to leave Egypt. The commentator claims that in 11:3, the language “VaYitein“ should not be understood as “And He WILL Place the grace of the people” in the future, i.e., an exact reference to the next chapter when the Jews actually ask for the Egyptians’ property, but rather “And He PLACED”, i.e., the text is describing something that has already happened at this point in Chapt. 11. The grammatical issue in play is how to understand a future form of a verb that is introduced by a “Vav”, known as the “Vav HaHipuch”, the reversing Vav, i.e., in most instances in the Tora, the connotation of the future tense of the verb is reversed to be understood as something that pertains to the past. The Tora often employs such a construct to refer to what has already occurred rather than to what is about to take place. (6) RaMBaN suggests that the “grace” being referred to in Chapt. 11 is a reflection of a newly repentant attitude on the part of the Egyptians concerning their past ruthless treatment of the Jews. Contrary to the reasonable expectation that as a result of the unrelenting plagues that have destroyed crops (hail, locusts) and livestock (wild animals, plague, hail) as well as discomfited and killed segments of the people themselves (blood, frogs, lice, wild animals, boils, darkness, the plague of the firstborn), the Egyptians would be filled with additional loathing and hatred for the Jews, the commentator contends that the opposite had become the case. The plagues, rather than fanning the flames of hatred, aroused a sense of guilt within those who had taken advantage of the Jews, stripping the Egyptians of their elaborate rationalizations and sense of entitlement and demonstrating to them that an Awesome Power was going to punish them and thereby defend the victims of their cruelty. RaMBaN has the Egyptians at least thinking, if not actually saying, “We have done evilly, even perpetrated violence. It is altogether appropriate that ‘Elokim’ (7) should Show you favor.” Consequently, RaMBaN suggests an additional dimension to the many references by HaShem to His Desire to demonstrate to the entire Egyptian people (as opposed to Pharaoh and his servants whom God does not Allow to repent until after the final plague and the miracle of the splitting of the Sea) His total control of the forces of nature, e.g., 7:5; 9:14, 16; 14:4. The Egyptians come to recognize not only the Omnipotence of the God in whom the Jews believe, but also their duplicity in having abused the Chosen People for so many years. Could this have been a positive motivation for the “Eiruv Rav” (the mixed multitude) wishing to accompany the Jews when they left Egypt? (8)

R. Hirsch appears to go farther than RaMBaN, and not only suggests that a change of heart was experienced by the Egyptian people independent of

HaShem's Influence, but that it was precipitated by specific Jewish behavior. In his comment on 3:21, R. Hirsch claims that antipathy evidenced by Egyptians towards Jews was an abnormal state of affairs, and that looking upon the Jews with favor was a more "normal" Egyptian attitude. "The hate of the mass of the nation against the Jews in Egypt did not exist originally. It was artificially called into being and fostered from above by Pharaoh and his government."

What substantiation could we bring to R. Hirsch's presumption? In addition to the Tora's own statement in Devarim as to how appreciative Jews should forever be to the Egyptians for having taken them in while Canaan was stricken with severe famine (Devarim 23:8), the following inferences can be drawn from verses in Beraishit and Shemot:

- a) When the Jews originally come to Egypt during Yaakov and Yosef's lifetimes, they are welcomed and granted an area of their own in which to live (Beraishit 45:17-20; 47:1-12).
- b) The Jews flourish in Egypt and experience rapid population growth (Shemot 1:7).
- c) The new king that begins to rule over Egypt frightens the Egyptians into thinking that the Jews pose a potential threat as a fifth column, should Egypt ever be attacked from without (1:9-10).
- d) If we assume that the midwives that helped Jewish women give birth were actually Egyptians rather than Jews, (9) the Tora presents a clear example of common Egyptian folk who do not wish to participate in the new Pharaoh's genocidal schemes (1:17).
- e) Even Bat Pharaoh is not ready to go along with her father's decree, at least not in the case of Moshe (2:6).
- f) There are some among Pharaoh's own servants who heed Moshe's warnings about the impending hail and thereby save their possessions (9:20).
- g) While there does not seem to be great protests when the plagues begin, it appears that the Egyptians become disillusioned by Pharaoh's obstinacy in not letting the Jews leave and thereby relieving the pressure on the country and its citizenry that was due to the continued plagues (10:7). While the speed with which the Egyptians wish the Jews to finally leave could be attributed to their fright as a result of the death of the firstborn, it could also be a reflection of the attitude of those cohorts who never agreed with enslaving the Jews in the first place and who are finally taking advantage of the opportunity to publicly evidence a viewpoint that previously had been impossible to express (12:33).

In addition to assuming that originally, the Egyptians never harbored ill feelings towards the Jews, and it was only the result of government propaganda and anti-Semitism (10) that soured the relationship, R. Hirsch claims that the positive emotions categorized as the perception of Jewish “grace” leading to the Egyptians generously lending their possessions to their Jewish neighbors were engendered not due to Divine Influence, but rather as a result of the Jews’ personal behavior.

(11:2-3) ...The people had just proved their sterling moral quality in the most brilliant manner. For three days long their oppressors, chained in blindness, were completely helpless in their power; for three days long all their treasures lay open in their houses, and no Jew took the opportunity to take the slightest advantage either against their persons or their possessions. At the moment when they recovered the use of their eyesight and found all their possessions untouched, God Made this recognition of the moral nobility of the Jews at last overcomes the Egyptians’ antipathy to the Jews. This moral greatness on the part of the people, more than all the miracles he performed, made the man Moses great in the eyes of the Egyptians...

(12:36) ...It can very well be that the subject of “VaYenatzlu” is also the Egyptians. “And they (the Egyptians) stripped Egypt.” The honesty and magnanimity which the Jews displayed during the three days of darkness had so raised the opinion of the Egyptians towards Israel, that they pressed their possessions upon them before they asked, and stripped themselves of their treasures. (Earlier, in the introduction to verses 11:2-3, R. Hirsch tries to make a case that “Sha’al MeiEit” as opposed to “Sha’al MeiIm” suggests an outright gift as opposed to only a loan.)

R. Hirsch applies to the events towards the end of the Exodus a profoundly different emphasis than is normally presented by traditional commentators. The plague of darkness is often characterized as the time when the Jews specifically looked through the Egyptians’ possessions in order to be in a position to ask for articles that their owners might otherwise have denied possessing, as in Shemot Rabba 14:3. It is also reputed to have been a period during which those Jews who were refusing to leave Egypt due to their comfortable circumstances died in order that their defiance of God’s Plan for His People not be in evidence once their co-religionists had left—see Mechilta on Shemot 13:18. For R. Hirsch to instead maintain that these three days constituted a demonstration of Jewish self-discipline and moral virtue to the

point that negative stereotypes and false accusations would be discarded, constitutes not only an innovative understanding of the events at hand, but also a utopian hope for how Jews in R. Hirsch's own day in 19th century Germany as well as we today should strive to respond to narrow-mindedness and prejudice. Naturally Jews must protect themselves from physical threats and discrimination. But at the same time, they should seek out venues for Kiddush HaShem whereby those not afflicted with deep-seated hatred, or even what Jean Paul Sartre has referred to as "the mental illness" of anti-Semitism, might be forced to evaluate the harsh depictions and caricatures of Jews and Judaism.

It is possible that the two basic views regarding the origins of the "grace" that was perceived by the Egyptians for the Jews, i.e., that this attitude was Divinely inspired, or that it originated from within the hearts of the Egyptians themselves, can be seen to compliment one another, although the commentators themselves do not appear to suggest such an approach. Sometimes human beings require "Siyata D'Shmaya" (Assistance from Heaven) in order to do the right thing, to see what is obvious, to cease deluding themselves into believing lies and misrepresentations. It is as if one has to act as a Prophet, to form opinions from a Divine Perspective, rather than rely on our own petty, often biased takes on the world and its inhabitants. While "seeing" and "hearing" should be done reflectively and introspectively, a certain crucial moral, ethical objectivity is often lacking as a result of political perspectives and personal biases. Just as the text suggests at least according to some commentators that the Egyptians and Jews were finally reconciled after a terrible, abusive relationship, let us hope that similar transformations can take place, with God's Help if necessary, between feuding individuals, family members, community members, religious groups and nations of the world.

Shabbat Shalom.

- (1) Such a change does not reflect indecision on God's Part, but rather that it is possible that the people's status had changed in the interim from more deserving of Divine Consideration to less so. If their difficult workload could be increased, perhaps other benefits would also be cancelled in light of some general shortcoming on their parts. It is assumed that righteous individuals never assume that what has been promised to them will be fulfilled because they recognize their own imperfections and the inability for a human being to maintain a steady spiritual level from minute to minute, let alone day to day and year to year. See e.g., Berachot 4a; Sanhedrin 98b; Rabbeinu Yona on Avot 2:13.
- (2) Although the implication in 9:34 with regard to the plague of hail is that Pharaoh hardened his own heart in not granting permission for the Jews to leave, in the very next verse (10:1) God Takes credit for Pharaoh's negative response. This is consistent with the idea that after the first five plagues when Pharaoh is described as hardening his own heart (7:23; 8:11, 15, 28; 9:7), he no longer is given this prerogative. While Pharaoh may be under the impression that he is independently making up his own mind—suggested by

9:34—in fact, the Tora states that this is not the case. By extension, one can wonder whether, if according to the view that a similar manipulation of the Egyptians’ free choice took place in order to get them to lend their most precious possessions to the Jews, they were aware that something artificial and against their will was taking place, or whether they felt that this was a natural disposition on their parts.

(3) RaMBaM here incorporates what Avraham said to HaShem during the course of his negotiations concerning the sparing of the inhabitants of Sodom and Amora. RaMBaM seems to imply that not only does Avraham argue against destroying innocent people along with evildoers, which appears to be the overt focus of his comments based upon Beraishit 18:24-25, but that even the elimination of the evildoers must be based upon the presumption that they must not inevitably do evil, although Beraishit 13:13 might lend itself to such a fatalistic interpretation.

(4) RaShI consistently interprets the verb L-K-Ch when used in connection with human beings, as opposed to objects, as connoting verbal persuasion as opposed to literal physical coercion, e.g., Beraishit 2:15; 16:3; Shemot 14:6; VaYikra 8:2.

(5) Although it was predicted in Beraishit 15: 13 that a people would enslave and afflict the Jews, suggesting that if they were carrying out a Divine Plan, the Egyptians should be exempt from punishment (See RaMBaM cited earlier in the essay), it is assumed that they went further than their mandate allowed, e.g., nowhere in the Brit Bein HaBetarim did it ever say that children would be killed. See e.g., RaMBaN on Beraishit 15:14 and Shemot 3:9. But for HaShem to Give the impression that something good was happening via the Egyptians looking favorably upon the Jews, when in fact these feelings and the actions based upon them, i.e., the lending of precious possessions, would lead to something bad appears somewhat cynical.

(6) Aside from merely being viewed as an archaic literary form, the Vav HaHipuch vis-à-vis when the Tora is describing a Divine Action, can allude to the theological assumption that God is above time, a concept connoted by the Tetragrammaton, consisting of a combination of the past, present and future forms of the Being verb, Heh-Vav-Heh.

(7) While the Tetragrammaton is the term for HaShem that is pertinent to Jews, in most cases when non-Jews refer to the God worshipped by the Jews, they use the term Elokim, as in Shemot 5:2-3 where commentators point out how in order to properly convey the Jewish concept of God to Pharoah, Moshe has to switch from the Tetragrammaton to the term Elokim. Furthermore, the attitudinal stance of “Yirat Elokim” (fear of God) is attributed to non-Jews, as in Beraishit 20:11; 42:18; Shemot 1:17.

(8) All sorts of negative motivations are attributed to the “Eiruv Rav”, e.g., they wanted to “jump on the bandwagon”, to share in the power that the Jews obviously now possessed, to obtain a portion in the new land to which the Jews were traveling, etc. Is it impossible to suggest that they felt badly about the moral level of Egyptian society, and they now wished to join an obviously more righteous society? Could Yevamot 79a be a paradigm for such an attitude?

(9) E.g. Otzar HaMidrashim, 474: “And there were additional pious women converts from the nations: Asnat, Tziporra, SHIFRA, PUAH, Bat Pharoah, Rachav, Ruth and Yael.”

(10) The Egyptians were descendents of Cham rather than Shem—see Beraishit 10:6. Therefore while the term “anti-Semite” ironically applies to those who discriminate

against some of Israel's Middle Eastern antagonists, who claim to be the descendents of Yishmael, and who therefore trace their lineage through Avraham, a descendent of Shem, someone antipathic towards Egyptians would not technically qualify to be called an "anti-Semite".)