

Issues in Parashat Bo

Judgments on the gods of Egypt

Nahum Sarna

In two passages in the Torah the plagues are understood to be as much judgments on the Egyptian gods as on the Egyptians themselves. In the words of this parashah (in 12.12, the Lord declared, "I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord." The historical summary of Numbers 33.4 distinctly states that "the Lord executed judgment on their gods." The meaning of these assertions is not spelled out, and the motif is again mentioned in the Bible only in Jeremiah 46.25. The Hellenistic-Jewish work known as "The Wisdom of Solomon" that is included in the extrabiblical collection called the "Apocrypha," understood the plagues to be a mockery of Egyptian paganism.

As was seen in the essays following Parashat Vaera, while it may not be possible to account for each and all the ten plagues in this manner, in the case of some of them an explanation of this kind makes sense.

Whether such interpretations are valid, the fact remains that here we encounter for the first time a new development in the religion of Israel. The text unequivocally speaks of judgments upon the gods of Egypt.

The Book of Genesis ignores the theme of the struggle against paganism.

The Patriarchal narratives exhibit no tension between the religion of the founding fathers and that of the nations with whom they come in contact. Only oblique hints of difference are occasionally perceptible, such as when Jacob swears "by the Fear of his father Isaac" while Lavan, the Aramean, takes an oath by his ancestral deities; or when Jacob demands that the members of his household rid themselves of the "alien gods" in their midst.

The notion of a war on polytheism, however, is first found here in this parashah, and it becomes henceforth one of the Bible's major themes. Apart from the explicit statement of chapter 12 and Numbers 33.4, and the nature of some of the plagues, it also finds subtle expression in other ways in the plagues narrative. The inability of the magicians to reproduce the plagues after a while, the transcendent ability of God to manipulate nature in order to realize His purposes, and the protection from the effects of the plagues that He bestows upon Israel—all are calculated to undermine faith in what the Egyptians accepted as divinities.

Without doubt, the Israelite war on polytheism begins with the advent of Moses as liberator from Egyptian bondage. Its ultimate formulation will appear in the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods besides Me."

Another feature of this parashah involves the calendar.

The capitulation of the pharaoh following the culminating and inexorably decisive blow—the death of the Egyptian firstborn—is now at hand. Between the prediction of the impending climax and the account of its realization, the narrative interposes detailed instructions to the Israelites in preparation for their liberation from slavery. A people newly freed must henceforth be sustained by its own native resources if it is to achieve true national independence, if it is no longer to be a passive object of history, subservient to a dominant but alien culture. A liberated people must evolve and stress its own distinctive autonomous culture, devise its own structures of national existence, and forge its own institutions. One of its first desiderata is the establishment of a uniform calendar. Such an institution is a powerful instrument of societal, cultural, and religious cohesion.

This being so, the Israelites are informed that the month of liberation, the springtime of nature and now the springtime of Israel as a free people, is henceforth to be the start of the year. "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you." We know nothing of Israel's earlier calendar, but the phrasing unmistakably points to an innovation, to a break with the past.

In Egypt, not surprisingly, the river and the sun controlled the pattern of calendrical observances. The seasons of the year were named in connection with the agricultural conditions caused by the inundation and subsidence of the Nile. There were three such seasons: 'The Season of Inundation,' in June-July, when the river overflowed the fields; "The Season of Coming Forth," when the arable land emerged and could be worked; and 'The Season of Deficiency,' that is, the period when the Nile was at its lowest ebb.

Throughout most of Egyptian history the calendar was a solar one, based upon a highly complicated calculation connected with the heliacal rising of the "Dog Star," Sirius. The festivals fell into three categories: the festivals of the gods, the festivals of the king, and the festivals of the dead.

The new calendar of Israel is to be completely different. It is to be a lunisolar one. That is, it is to be regulated by the positions of both the moon and the sun. The month begins with the new moon, but the first month of the year is to fall in the spring. The entire gamut of religio-national calendrical observances is to be oriented to the great act of divinely wrought liberation of Israel from Egypt.

Four liturgical calendars are listed in the Torah, and each commences with the Passover. The months of the Israelite year have no names. However, there are traces of a very ancient system. Apart from the “month of Aviv,” there are also the “month of Ziv” (the second month), the “month of Etanim” (the seventh month), and the “month of Bul” (the eighth month). Significantly, these ancient Hebrew names, the only such preserved in the Bible, represent the two months of the spring and the two months of the fall, that is, the two equinoxes.

It is not known whether any other months had names. The predominant system in biblical literature of the pre-exilic period is to designate the months by the ordinal numbers. Wherever it can be controlled, it turns out that the enumeration is based on a spring New Year reckoning.

To give just a few examples, in the Book of Jeremiah it is related that King Y’hoyakim of Judea ordered the scroll of the prophet’s oracles to be fetched and read to him. After the completion of every three or four columns, the king took a knife, cut them from the scroll, and threw them into the fire. The date of this event is given as the “ninth month,” and it is explained that “the king was sitting in the winter house, with a fire burning in the brazier before him.” This makes sense only if the enumeration of the months of the year commenced with the spring.

Another incident related in the Book of Jeremiah tells of the appointment of Gedaliah as governor of Judea immediately after the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians in the fifth month. It was the season of the harvesting of wine, figs, and oil. Once again, this is feasible only if the fifth month occurred in the summertime.

When the Jews returned to Zion after the Babylonian Exile toward the end of the sixth century B.C.E., they brought back with them the Babylonian names for the months of the year, and these gradually displaced the numerical system. The Babylonian names have remained normative in the Jewish religious calendar ever since.

This development is reflected in the Scriptures that derive from post-exilic times in which seven of the 12 Babylonian names appear, often glossed by a note giving the numerical equivalent based on the spring New Year. Several examples are featured in the Book of Esther: “In the 10th month, that is the month of Tevet,” “in the first month, that is the month of Nisan,” “in the 12th month, that is the month of Adar,” and so forth.

On the other hand, there are several biblical passages that indicate an autumnal New Year. For instance, a phrase like *yoreh u-malkosh*, “the early rain and the late,” in Deuteronomy 11.14 and Jeremiah 5.24, shows that the order is determined by the agricultural year that takes its bearings from the fall. This fits in with a formula like “the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year,” and with the dating of this same festival “at the turn of the year.”

One of the earliest Israelite inscriptions, the 10th-century B.C.E. agricultural calendar found in the city of Gezer, commences the annual cycle of a farmer's tasks with the "Ingathering" and closes with the "summer fruit." Since this is hardly a natural order, it must be assumed to reflect a civil year that began in the autumn.

Undoubtedly, the year was reckoned to begin at different dates for different purposes. This is well illustrated by the opening words of Mishnah Rosh Ha-Shanah, which lists "four New Years." These are enumerated as follows: the first of Nisan, in the spring, marks the regnal New Year, and the base for reckoning the cycle of religious festivals; the first of Elul, the sixth month, is the New Year for purposes of paying the tithe of cattle; the first of Tishri, the seventh month, is the beginning of the civil New Year," and of the sabbatical and jubilee year, and is a significant deadline in connection with the three-year prohibition on the fruit of a newly planted tree and with the obligation of the tithe on vegetables. There are variant traditions regarding the "New Year for trees," that is, the deadline for tithes on fruit, as either the first or 15th of Sh'vat, the 11th month.

As was noted above, the phrasing of the prescription in Chapter 12 ordaining a spring New Year shows it to have been an innovation in Israel. Although the celebration of a festival at this season was quite common in the Near East, the Israelite version belongs to a wholly different category from its contemporaries in that the New Year is now grounded neither in nature's renewal nor in mythology, such as an event in the life of a god, but in a historic event—the liberation of a people from national oppression. Such a revolutionary phenomenon is without analogy in the ancient world.

PARASHAT BO, Exodus 10.1-13.16¹

Chapter 10

And the Lord said to Moses, “Come into [Go to—JPS] Pharaoh, for I Myself have hardened [have made heavy with stubbornness—EF] his heart and the heart of his servants, so that I may set these signs of Mine in his midst, and so that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son’s son how I toyed with [have been capricious with—EF; made a mockery of—CS] Egypt, and My signs that I set upon them, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

NS: As the cycle of plagues inexorably draws to its inevitable conclusion, its larger historical and transcendent significance is brought into view. The events are to be indelibly marked upon the collective memory of the people of Israel and thus become a permanent part of the lore that is transmitted from generation to generation. The constant instruction of the young concerning God’s mighty deeds is the medium of such transmission. The idea is that through the evocative power of narration, rather than by abstract theological discourse, the true knowledge of God is understood, is established in the mind of Israel, and is sustained.

REF: Earlier the text says that Pharaoh made his heart heavy. Now it says that God claims to have done it. This verse may refer only to the immediate condition; that is, that Pharaoh hardened his own heart before, but now it is God doing it. Or it may suggest dual causation; that is, even when the human (Pharaoh) decides himself, it is still God who is causing this decision. It is in the theme of the Lord’s becoming known that we may find the explanation of the contradiction that has occurred even to little children: Why does God harden Pharaoh’s heart against releasing Israel and then plague Egypt for not letting them go?! The fact is that the Torah does not present the plagues as punishment of the Egyptians for enslaving the Israelites, but rather as signs by which the Lord will become known. Thus it pictures God stating unambiguously here that it was “for the purpose of my setting these signs of mine among them and for the purpose that you will tell in the ears of your son and your son’s son...and you will know that I am the Lord.” Even more dramatically, the Lord tells Moses (in 9:16) to inform the Pharaoh that “in fact I established you for...the purpose of showing you my power – and in order to tell my name in all the earth.” Dispersed through the account are frequent reminders that this is the purpose of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and that this is the purpose of the plagues. The Egyptians’ suffering in the plagues may be

¹ The translation is by Robert Alter.

understood to be justified, a consequence of their cruelty; but, still, the purpose of the plagues is not punishment but rather to make the Lord known.

And Moses—and Aaron with him—came into Pharaoh, and they said to him, “Thus said the Lord, God of the Hebrews: ‘How long can you refuse to humble yourself before Me?’

RA: It should be noted that the language God directs to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron has become more confrontational: now Pharaoh is inveighed against not only for blocking Israel from fulfilling its obligations to God, but for failing to humble himself before God, humble submission being the last thing the supreme monarch of Egypt would imagine he would ever have to do.

“Send off My people, that they may worship Me. For if you refuse to send off My people, look, I am about to bring tomorrow locust in all your territory. And it will cover the eye [surface—JPS] of the land [את עין הארץ, *et ein ha-aretz*], and one will not be able to see the land. And it will consume the rest of the remnant left you from the hail, and it will consume every tree you have growing in the field. And they will fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and the houses of all of Egypt, the like of which your fathers did not see nor your fathers’ fathers from the day they were on the soil [על האדמה, *al ha-adamah*] [from the day they appeared on earth—JPS] until this day.”

And he turned and went out from Pharaoh’s presence.

And Pharaoh’s servants said to him, “How long will this fellow be a snare [a trap—REF] to us? Send off the men [their notables—CS], that they may worship the Lord their god. Do you not yet know [Are you not aware—JPS, CS] that Egypt is lost [has perished—REF]?”

RA: The impatient “how long” of Pharaoh’s courtiers, in the elegant symmetry of the narrative, echoes God’s words earlier, “How long can you refuse to humble yourself before Me?” Pharaoh persists in his arrogance, but the Egyptian united front against Israel is visibly coming apart at the seams as the courtiers, who have ample reason to believe the direness of Moses’s latest threat, try to tell their king that Egypt is on the brink of total disaster. “This fellow” reflects the indicative pronoun *zeh*, “this one,” which is often used in biblical Hebrew to express contempt.

And Moses, and Aaron with him, were brought back to Pharaoh, and he said to them, “Go, worship the Lord your god. Just who is going?”

RA: Moses, after concluding his annunciation of the impending plague of locusts, had turned on his heels and left—the clear implication being that he was rebuffed by Pharaoh, or did not for a moment expect a positive response from Pharaoh. Now, after the courtiers conclude their rebuke to Pharaoh, the Egyptian king appears to concede the justice of their argument and has Moses and Aaron

brought back into his presence. It is noteworthy, however, that Pharaoh's agency, coerced and grudging, is left rather vague by the passive construction ("were brought back"). Presumably, Pharaoh issued the order, but perhaps he merely acquiesced as his courtiers sent after Moses and Aaron.

And Moses said, 'With our lads and with our old men we will go. With our sons and with our daughters, with our sheep and with our cattle we will go, for it is a festival of the Lord for us.'

And he [Pharaoh] said to them, "May the Lord be with you the way I would send you off with your little ones! For evil is before your faces. [Clearly, you are bent on mischief—JPS] Not so. Go, pray, the men, and worship the Lord, for that is what you seek."

And he drove them out from Pharaoh's presence.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locust, that it may come up over the land of Egypt and consume all the grass of the land that the hail left behind."

And Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the Lord drove an east wind [רוח קדים, *ruach kadim*] into the land all that day and all the night. When it was morning, the east wind bore the locust. And the locust went up over all the land of Egypt, and settled, very heavy [in a thick mass—JPS], over all the territory of Egypt. Before it there had never been locust like it and after it there never would be. And it covered the eye of the land, and the land went dark [hid all the land from view and the land was darkened—JPS]. And it consumed all the grass of the land and every fruit of the tree that the hail had left, and nothing green in tree or in grass of the field was left in all the land of Egypt.

And Pharaoh hastened to call to Moses and to Aaron, and he said, "I have offended before the Lord your god and before you. And now, forgive, pray, my offense, just this time, and entreat the Lord your god, that He but take away from me this death."

RA: The mastery of dialogue so often manifested in biblical narrative is striking here. Pharaoh's confident, imperious, aristocratic speech has now broken down into contrite confession and short urgent pleas. The dense layer of consuming locusts, blinding the eye of the land and penetrating every crevice, is given no name by Pharaoh except its palpable meaning for him and his people: "this death." That choice of name for it, of course, is an unwitting anticipation of the last of the plagues, which will soon come.

And he [Moses, and presumably Aaron as well] went out from Pharaoh's presence and entreated the Lord. And the Lord turned round a very strong west wind [ד' רוח, *ruach yam*], and it bore off the locust and thrust it into the Sea of Reeds [blew it to the Red Sea—REF], not a locust remained in all the territory of Egypt.

And the Lord toughened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not send the Israelites off.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the heavens, that there be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness one can feel [that can be touched—JPS]."

And Moses stretched out his hand over the heavens and there was pitch dark in all the land of Egypt three days. No one saw his fellow and no one rose from where he was three days, but all the Israelites had [enjoyed—JPS, CS] light in their dwelling places.

NS: Once again, the third in the series of plagues arrives without prior warning. For three days, the land is engulfed in darkness, a spell corresponding to the three-day journey for worship that Pharaoh had repeatedly refused to grant the Israelites. This affliction can be explained in terms of the *khamstin* referred to above. This scorching sirocco wind blows in each spring from Saharan Africa or from Arabia, enveloping the land in thick sand and dust. It may often persist for several days and blacken the sky in its wake. In the present case, the first *khamstin* to arrive in March would have been far more intense than usual. It would additionally have borne aloft the red soil deposited by the earlier torrential rains and now sunbaked and particulate following the destructive action of the locusts, which had already denuded the land of vegetation. Since the *khamstin* may travel northward in bands, rather than be diffused, the Israelite area of Goshen, situated at right angles to the Nile valley, could escape its effects. The blotting out of the light of the sun for three days would have carried a powerful symbolic message for the Egyptians, for the sun was their supreme god, and its worship was pervasive in the official palace ritual. The sun's diurnal rising was conceived to be a triumph over the demon Apophis, the embodiment of darkness, who struggled daily to vanquish him. The plague of darkness, therefore, would have had a devastating psychological impact. The impotence of the Egyptians' supreme god is exposed, thus foreboding imminent doom.

RA: Abraham Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides both shrewdly infer that this total incapacity through darkness would logically have had to include the disabling of candlelight as well as sunlight – another manifestation of the miraculous character of the event. Then we are told, "but all the Israelites had light in their dwelling places.: This previously reiterated opposition between the Israelites and the Egyptians is here made boldly schematic, as the dramatic manifestation of God's miraculous intervention. The contrast between light in Goshen and terrifying darkness in the rest of Egypt then sets the stage for the distinction between life for the Israelites and death for the Egyptians in the tenth plague.

And Pharaoh called to Moses and said, "Go, worship the Lord. Only your sheep and your cattle will be set aside. Your little ones, too, may go with you."

And Moses said, “You yourself too shall provide us sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may do them to the Lord our God. And our livestock, too, shall go with us, not a hoof shall remain. For from it we shall take to worship the Lord our God, and we ourselves cannot know with what we shall worship the Lord our God until we come there.”

And the Lord toughened Pharaoh’s heart and he did not want to send them off. And Pharaoh said to him, “Go away from me. Watch yourself. Do not again see my face, for on the day you see my face, you shall die.”

And Moses said, “Rightly have you spoken—I will not see your face again.”

Chapter 11

NS: Pharaoh has closed the door on any further negotiations with Moses. Despite their concentrative force, their timing and intensity, the natural disasters have left the king even more uncompromising than before. Now one final, overwhelming blow is about to descend on the Egyptians, one that is wholly outside the range of nature or of previous human experience. This Moses announces to Pharaoh before he leaves the palace. This chapter consists of three declarations. It connects with the past by registering the completion of the role of Moses and Aaron as the effective instruments of God’s chastening and coercive measures against the Egyptians. At the same time, it foretells the impending, unmediated, and decisive intervention of God. By focusing on the initial preparations for the Exodus, it forges a transition to the Passover account in the next chapter.

RA: There is a problem about where to locate this speech temporally and spatially. In the immediately preceding verses, Pharaoh had warned Moses on pain of death never to see him again, and Moses had grimly concurred that he would never again see the Egyptian king. Yet our text makes it clear that Moses is standing in Pharaoh’s presence and announcing the tenth plague to Pharaoh. This speech to Pharaoh, then, would have to be the continuation and conclusion of the angry confrontation reported at the end of the previous chapter. God’s words to Moses do not seem smoothly integrated into the narrative progress, at any rate, not according to modern expectations of narrative continuity. Abraham ibn Ezra points out that most of this material is a restatement of God’s predictions to Moses in the Burning Bush episode. The passage thus may be understood as a summarizing recapitulation – Umberto Cassuto sees it as a kind of flashback in Moses’s mind – of God’s initial promise to confound Egypt and to liberate Israel before the annunciation of the last plague.

And the Lord said to Moses, “Yet one more plague shall I bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will send you off from here; when he sends you off altogether [when he lets go completely—REF], he will surely drive you out from here. Speak, pray, in the

hearing of the people, that every man borrow from his fellow man and every woman from her fellow woman, ornaments of silver and ornaments of gold. And the Lord will grant the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians [disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people—CS]. The man Moses, too, is very great [much esteemed—CS] in the land of Egypt in the eyes of Pharaoh’s servants and in the eyes of the people.”

And Moses said, ‘Thus said the Lord: ‘Around midnight I am going out in the midst of Egypt. And every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the firstborn of the slave-girl who is behind the millstones, and every firstborn of the beasts. And there shall be a great outcry in all the land of Egypt, the like of which there has not been and the like of which there will not be again. But against the Israelites no dog will snarl [will sharpen its tongue—EF; will move its tongue—REF], from man to beast, so that you may know how the Lord sets apart Egypt and Israel. And all these servants of yours shall come down to me and bow to me, saying, Go out, you and all the people that is at your feet [who follow you—CS]. And afterward I will go out.’”

And he went out from Pharaoh’s presence in a flare of anger.

And the Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh will not heed you, so that My portents may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.”

And Moses and Aaron had done these portents before Pharaoh, and the Lord toughened Pharaoh’s heart and he did not send off the Israelites from his land.

Chapter 12

NS: This chapter is a very complex composition. It divides into a number of clearly differentiated literary units, each centering on various aspects of the Exodus events. Some of these units deal with immediate concerns, such as the last-minute preparations for the departure from Egypt; others relate to the enduring impact of the events in shaping the future course of Israel’s life as a people.

Appropriately, the entire complex is framed by the phrase “the whole community of Israel” (verses 3, 47). Another salient feature of this composition is the sevenfold repetition of the Hebrew stem sh-m-r (ש, נ, ר), “to observe, guard, preserve.”

There is considerable overlap among the various units but no exact duplication.

The repetition amplifies the preceding data in various ways, either by the addition of explanatory material or by supplementary details or instructions.

And the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, “This month is for you head of [the beginning of—REF, EF, CS, JPS] months, it is the first for you of the months of the year.

RA: The reasonable inference of many scholars is that this calendric announcement reflects a moment in early Israelite history when there was at least

one other competing system that designated a different month as the beginning of the year. (The Talmud later would speak of four different new years, and subsequent Jewish practice sets the beginning of the year in the early fall month of Tishrei, evidently making the calendar correspond to the agricultural cycle rather than to a historical event.) The point of beginning the annual sequence of months with the one in which the Exodus occurred is to coordinate the annual cycle with the event of liberation that is construed as the foundational act for the nation.

“Speak to all the community of Israel, saying: ‘On the tenth of this month, let every man take a lamb for a father’s house, a lamb for a household. And should a household be too small to have a lamb, it must take together with its neighbor who is close to its house; in proportion to the persons, each man according to what he eats shall take his portion of the lamb. An unblemished [wholly sound—EF] lamb, a yearling male you shall have, from the sheep or from the goats you may take it.

“And it shall be a thing to be kept by you [And it shall be for you to watch over—REF. JPS; for you in safekeeping—EF] until the fourteenth day of this month, and the whole congregation of the community of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. And they shall take from the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel, on the houses in which they will eat it.

NS: It is clear from verses further on that the blood of the slaughtered lamb was first collected in a basin. The daubing at the entrances served to identify the houses of the Israelites, for the blood is designated “a sign.” Blood was a readily available coloring substance; it also possessed symbolic significance because it was looked upon as the life essence. There is no warrant for the theory that it played a magic, apotropaic role—that is, that it was a means of averting or overcoming evil or danger. The deliverance of Israel is ascribed solely to divine decision. The lintel and doorposts form the demarcation between the sacred Israelite interior and the profane world outside. Bachya ben Asher explains this as follows: “The blood does not thwart the plague nor does its absence occasion it. Scripture teaches that the one who had perfect faith and confidence in God, and was not perturbed by Pharaoh’s terror and evil decree but publicly sacrificed what to Egypt was an abomination, and who daubed the blood of the paschal offering on the doorposts and lintels—such a one was a righteous person, having confidence in God, and was worthy of divine protection from the plague and the destroyer.

RA: Much anthropologically informed commentary has been made on the smearing of blood at the entrance of the house to ward off evil spirits, the “Destroyer” (mashchit) of our narrative being a particularly scary instance of such a spirit. It is equally important, however, to keep in mind the deployment of blood as a recurrent motif in the literary structure of the larger narrative. Moses is thrust

from Egypt, and set on the road toward his vocation as prophet, after he sheds the blood of the Egyptian taskmaster. On the way back to Egypt, it is the blood of circumcision that saves his life – a strong foreshadowing of the tenth plague that evidently interprets circumcision as a kind of substitute for the sacrifice of the firstborn. Then the plagues begin with the turning of the water of the Nile into blood.

“And they shall eat the meat on this night fire-roasted, with matzah on bitter herbs shall they eat it. Do not eat from it raw, nor in any way cooked in water, but fire-roasted, its head with its shanks and with its entrails. And you shall leave nothing from it by morning, and what is left of it by morning in fire you shall burn.

RA: Eating raw meat, still suffused with blood, would in any case have been prohibited, but elsewhere there is no restriction on boiled meat (here that would be lamb stew), whether for sacrificial or profane purposes. The biblical scholar William H. C. Propp offers what may be the best explanation for this insistence on fire-roasting by observing that it is a more archaic method of cooking meat, without the use of a pot, cooking utensils being the instruments of a more complex culinary technology. In this fashion, he goes on to suggest, fire-roasting would be associated with a kind of purity in the preparation of the meal, just as flatbread (probably baked over an open fire, nomad-style) without any admixture of leaven, might be associated with purity. One could add that these archaically prepared foods enhance the sense of ritual reenactment of what amounts to an archaic moment of national history, when the nation itself was awaiting its foundational liberation as death stalked through the Egyptian night and passed over the houses of the Israelites.

“And thus shall you eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it in haste. It is a passover offering to the Lord.

NS: Hebrew pesach has given birth to the English adjective “paschal,” used to designate both the Passover lamb and Easter. Like matzah, pesach is assumed to be an immediately intelligible term, so it too must have a history antedating the Exodus. Three traditions about the meaning of the stem p-s-ch (פ, ס, נ) have survived. The oldest, and apparently the most reliable, is “to have compassion”; another is “to protect”; a third is “to skip over.” Although this last is the interpretation that has gained the widest currency, it is the least likely because the term was originally independent of the Exodus events. Strictly speaking, only the 14th day of the month can be called pesach, but in the course of time this term was extended to cover the entire week of the festival.

“And I will cross through [pass through—REF] the land of Egypt on this night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt from man to beast, and from all the gods of Egypt I will exact retributions [make judgments on—REF; render judgments—EF; mete out punishments—JPS]. I am the Lord. And the blood will be a sign for you upon the houses in which you are, and I will see the blood and I will pass over you, and no scourge shall become a Destroyer amongst you [will not become a Bringer-of-Ruin to you—EF; that no plague shall destroy you—JPS] when I strike in the land of Egypt.

REF: The Lord Himself goes out through Egypt, as the text says. Later Jewish tradition, presumably unable to bear the thought of God personally passing through Egypt and causing the deaths, introduced the horrible concept of the “Angel of Death.” But there is no such thing as an Angel of Death in the Tanach. The text is explicit that God personally passes through Egypt. The subtlety comes in the question of the relationship between the deity and the agent of the destruction: on one hand, God says, “I strike Egypt,” and, on the other hand, it appears that God halts at the door and prevents this “destroyer” (the “mashchit”) from coming into the house. Is the “mashchit” a sickness? a force? or a personified being? The wording — “a plague among you as a destroyer” — indicates that the destroyer is the plague itself and not some person or angel. In any case, God clearly is responsible for the creation of it and can therefore say “I strike.”

REF: Regarding “judgments on all the gods of Egypt,” the best-known deity of Egyptian religion is the sun, and Egyptian religion was profoundly concerned with death. The plagues culminate with “judgments” on these. In the ninth plague, there is darkness for three days. And in the final plague death itself is shown to be in the Lord’s control, as only firstborn humans and animals die. (The first plague turns Egypt’s waters to blood, and this too undermines Egyptian deities.) Some readers may see in this an implicit recognition of the existence of the pagan deities, who must be thought to exist in order to be thus defeated. The text, however, does not present these “judgments” as a defeat of the gods. The plagues are rather a show of where power resides, namely, outside the “gods” (which is to say, outside of nature), beyond them. The forces of nature are not personified in the plagues narrative, and they do not confront or challenge the God of Israel. They are merely manipulated in the course of events.

NS: The foregoing rites relate solely to the specific situation at that time — the Passover of Egypt. From here, the events of the Exodus become an experience indelibly stamped for all time on Israel’s memory and imagination, permanently shaping its religious consciousness and practice. The opening verse establishes an annual commemorative festival; the succeeding verses explain how it is to be observed. The focus is on the festival of matzot, unleavened bread. Without doubt,

throughout the biblical period this remained a distinct celebration separate from the one-day paschal rite. Witness the fact that the next chapter (13) features the laws of matzot without so much as a mention of the paschal sacrifice. Leviticus 23.5-6 similarly differentiates the one from the other: "In the first month, on the 14th day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a passover offering to the Lord, and on the 15th day of that month the Lord's Feast of Unleavened Bread." During the Babylonian exile Ezekiel (45.21) likewise ordains: "On the 14th day of the first month you shall have the passover sacrifice; and during a festival of seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten." Finally, we are told in Ezra 6.19-22 that when the exiles returned from Babylon they "celebrated the Passover on the 14th day of the first month," and then "joyfully celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days." The paschal sacrifice is characteristically rooted in the life of the pastoral nomad who follows a lunar calendar; the matzah is grounded in the life of the soil and the farmer, which is governed by a solar calendar. Since the two festivals occurred in close propinquity to each other, and both coincided with the time of the Exodus, all three elements merged and were fused into a unified entity. The pre-Israelite ingredients were stripped of their former content and were invested with completely new associations and meanings connected with the events of the Exodus.

"And this day shall be a remembrance [commemoration—REF] for you, and you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord through your generations, an everlasting statute you shall celebrate it. Seven days shall you eat matzah. The very first day you shall expunge leaven [make leaven cease—REF] from your houses, for whosoever eats leavened bread, that person shall be cut off from Israel, from the first day to the seventh day. And on the first day a sacred convocation and on the seventh day a sacred convocation you shall have, no task shall be done on them, only what each person is to eat, that alone will be prepared for you.

"And you shall observe the [feast of—CS, JPS, EF] matzah, for on this very day I brought out their battalions [ranks—JPS, CS; forces—EF; masses—REF] from the land of Egypt, and you shall observe this day through your generations, an everlasting statute. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening you shall eat matzah, until the twenty-first day in the evening. Seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, for whosoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, sojourner and native of the land alike. Nothing that is leavened shall you eat, in all your dwelling places you shall eat matzah."

And Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Draw out and take yourselves sheep according to your clans and slaughter the Passover offering. And you shall take a bundle of hyssop and you shall dip it in the blood that is in the basin and

you shall touch the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts, and as for you, none of you shall go out from the entrance of his house till morning. And the Lord shall cross through to scourge [pass to strike—REF] Egypt, and He shall see the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, and the Lord shall pass over the entrance, and He shall not allow the Destroyer to come into your houses to scourge.

“And you shall keep this thing as a statute for you and your sons [your children—EF], everlasting. And so when you come to the land that the Lord will give you as He has spoken, you shall keep this service. And so should your sons [your children—EF] ask you, ‘What is this service to you?’, you shall say, ‘A Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he scourged Egypt and our households He rescued.’”

And the people bowed and did obeisance. And the Israelites went and did as the Lord had charged Moses and Aaron, thus did they do.

And it happened at midnight that the Lord struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and every firstborn of the beasts. And Pharaoh rose at night, he and all his servants and all Egypt, and there was a great outcry in Egypt, for there was no household in which there was no dead.

And he called to Moses and to Aaron at night and said, “Rise, go out from the midst of my people, both you and the Israelites, and go worship the Lord as you have spoken [according to your words—EF]. Both your sheep and your cattle take as you have spoken, and go, and you shall bless me as well.”

REF: What we have seen here is a gradual overwhelming of the power of Egypt through twists of events and personalities, stymieing the Pharaoh’s initial confidence and leading him to surrender unconditionally. In the first meeting he is unbending. In the second meeting and through the first two plagues, he stands firm as his magicians perform the wonders, as well. The magicians cannot perform the third plague, and so the Pharaoh, no longer commanding cosmic forces himself, negotiates on the fourth (“Only don’t go too far”). He gets away with his reneging on the negotiation, and so he stands firm again through the fifth plague. His magicians themselves suffer the sixth plague, and, following this indication that the opposing power can even encroach on his forces, the Pharaoh talks to Moses again on the seventh, generously sharing the blame with his subjects (“I and my people are wrong...”). When he reneges yet again, and an eighth plague strikes, his own servants urge him to give up resisting (“Don’t you know yet that Egypt has perished?”). He then negotiates again (“just the men”). When this only leads to a ninth plague, darkening Egypt’s divine sun, he negotiates again,

allowing the children, but not the livestock, to go. When Moses insists on the livestock, as well, the Pharaoh returns to his original position, refusing to let the people go and harshly telling Moses to get out and never return. The horror of the tenth plague then comes, and the Pharaoh capitulates utterly. It becomes clear that this had never been a matter of negotiation at all, but rather an agonizing, gradual drawing of the Pharaoh to a decision that had been inescapable from the start.

And Egypt bore down on the people to hurry to send them off from the land, for they said, ‘We are all dead men.’”

And the people carried off their dough before it rose, their kneading pans wrapped in their cloaks on their shoulders.

And the Israelites had done according to Moses’s word, and they had asked of the Egyptians ornaments of silver and ornaments of gold and cloaks. And the Lord had granted the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, who lent to them, and they despoiled Egypt.

And the Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, some 600,000 men on foot, besides the little ones. And a motley throng [a great mixture—REF; a mixed multitude—JPS, EF, CS] also went up with them, and sheep and cattle, very heavy livestock.

And they baked the dough that they had brought out of Egypt in rounds of matzah, for it had not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not tarry, and provisions, too, they could not make for themselves.

And the settlement of the Israelites which they had settled in Egypt was 430 years. And it happened at the end of 430 years and it happened on that very day, all the battalions of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. It is a night of watch for the Lord, for His taking them out of the land of Egypt, this night is the Lord’s, a watch for all the Israelites through their generations.

WGP: We have a numbers problem here. In the reference to 600,000 men, the spotlight is on men as part of a military metaphor for the Israelite departure and later conquest of Canaan. Hence it is the men who are counted. Together with women and children, 600,000 would amount to an unmanageably large multitude [probably well over a million and a half people]. Still, the figure is a firm part of Torah tradition and must be taken seriously. Therefore, “600 alef” cannot mean “600 thousand” but means “600 contingents,” a contingent being about nine or ten men. Altogether there were somewhat fewer than 6,000 men. Regarding the 430 years, that figure is problematic, as well, for in Genesis 15.13, the number 400 is given. Further, the forecast in Genesis 15.16 was that the fourth generation would leave Egypt (and indeed Exodus 6.13-30 lists four generations from Jacob to Moses), but 1 Chronicles 7.20-27 lists 10 generations from Jacob to Joshua.

Tradition dealt with these figures in various ways. For instance, the 400 years were said to count from the decree (Genesis 15.13) to the liberation, but the actual sojourn in Egypt lasted only 210 years. Or the extra 30 years were believed to have been added on because Israel neglected circumcision in Egypt. The biblical scholar William Albright has suggested that the stele of Ramses II honoring the 400th anniversary of Tanis (or Zoan, built about 1700 B.C.E.) may be connected with the figure 400 or 430 in the Exodus story, which would bring the event to 1300-1270 B.C.E. The commentator Tur-Sinai has offered still another theory, basing it on reading sh'loshim as shileishim, understood as "three generations."

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'This is the statute of the Passover offering: no foreigner shall eat of it. And every man's slave, purchased with silver, you shall circumcise, then shall he eat of it. A settler or hired worker shall not eat of it. In one house shall it be eaten, you shall not take out any meat from the house, and no bone shall you break in it. All the community of Israel thus shall do.

"And should a sojourner sojourn with you and make the Passover offering to the Lord, he must circumcise every male of his, then may he draw near to do it and he shall be like a native of the land, but no uncircumcised man shall eat of it. One law shall there be for the native and for the sojourner who sojourns in your midst."

And all the Israelites did as the Lord had charged Moses and Aaron, thus did they do. And it happened on that very day that the Lord brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt in their battalions.

Chapter 13

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Consecrate unto Me each firstborn, breach of each womb among the Israelites in man and beast—it is Mine."

And Moses said to the people, "Remember this day on which you went out of Egypt, from the house of slaves, for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from here, and unleavened stuff shall not be eaten. Today you are going out, in the month of the New Grain [ripe grain—EF; Hebrew—Chodesh Ha-aviv; month of Aviv—JPS, CS, REF]. And so when the Lord brings you to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Hivite and the Jebusite which He swore to your fathers to give to you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall perform this service in this month. Six days shall you eat matzah and on the seventh day a festival to the Lord. Matzah shall be eaten through the seven days and no leavened stuff of yours shall be seen and no leavening of yours shall be seen in all your territory.

"And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, 'For the sake of what the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt.' And it shall be a sign for you on your hand and a

remembrance between your eyes, so that the Lord's teaching will be in your mouth, for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt.

“And you shall keep this statute at its fixed time year after year.

“And so when the Lord brings you to the land of the Canaanite as He swore to you and to your fathers and gives it to you, you shall pass every womb-breach [first issue from the womb—JPS, CS; first birth—REF] to the Lord and every breach of spawn of beast that you will have—the males to the Lord. And every donkey's breach you shall redeem with a lamb, and should you not redeem it, you shall break its neck, and every human firstborn of your sons you shall redeem.

REF: “As He swore to you.” But God did not swear it to them. Rashi, citing a talmudic era text, says He swore when He said, “And I'll bring you to the land that I raised my hand...” (Exodus 6.8). But there is no swearing of an oath to the people there. Ramban (Nachmanides) suggests that the word of God itself may constitute an oath, but that is not correct. The Tanach definitely distinguishes the cases in which a divine oath is sworn. Ramban also takes the earlier words, “He swore to your fathers to give to you,” to constitute an oath to the people. If an oath to the ancestors is, in fact, the explanation of this, then I believe we should focus on the words that God says to Abraham in the middle of their “covenant between the pieces” ceremony. There, in Abraham's vision or dream, the fire that expresses the presence of God passes between the parts of animals, which constitutes an oath ceremony; and the stated purpose of this ceremony is to confirm that Abraham will possess the land. God states that after a period of slavery “a fourth generation will come back here.” Or, more generally, we may say that the promise to Abraham is repeated to his descendants, the later patriarchs, showing that the oath carries through the lineage to the descendants. Since the whole people of Israel is a descendant of Abraham, the oath may be regarded as made to them, as well. I am not certain of the answer to this problem. I point it out in order to make it known and in the hope that someone else may solve it.

“And so should your son ask you tomorrow, saying, ‘What is this?’, you shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slaves. And it happened, when Pharaoh was hard about sending us off, that the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt from the firstborn of man to the firstborn of beast. Therefore do I sacrifice to the Lord every womb-breach of the male and every firstborn of my sons I must redeem. And it shall be a sign on your hand and circlets [a symbol—JPS, CS; headbands—EF; bands—REF] between your eyes [on your forehead—EF], that through strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.’”