

## The House of Bondage By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

Towards the end of Parashat Bo, as part of a series of legal imperatives (12:43-13:16) that close out the story of the actual exodus from Egypt (11:1-13:16), Moshe commands the people to remember this day.

"And Moshe said to the people: Remember this day that you went out (yatzatem) from Egypt, from the house of bondage (beit avadim), for with a mighty hand God brought you out (hotzi Hashem etkhem)..." (13:3)

A few verses later, the Torah presents a similar formulation. When faced with an inquiring son who wants to know what all the laws and rituals are about, who asks the brute question of "What is this?" (13:14), we are supposed to respond:

"With a mighty hand, God brought us out (hotzi otanu) from Egypt, from the house of bondage (beit avadim)." (13:14)

These repeated references to God's "mighty hand" and "yetzia," the leaving or being brought out of Egypt (13:3, 14; see 13:9, 16), comprise not only the rationale for the surrounding legal material (12:43-13:16), but also an appropriate literary and thematic note on which to conclude the story of the exodus.

All the way back at the burning bush, God had informed Moshe that Pharaoh will let the Children of Israel go only after being forced to do so by a "mighty hand" (3:19). Likewise, throughout the story of the exodus, the text utilizes the image "hand of God," to denote the cause of the plagues (3:20, 6:1, 7:5, 9:3, 15). Reemphasizing the image near the end of the story is not surprising.

Similarly, the verb stem Y-Tz-A (meaning leaving, going, removal, etc.) assumes the role of a dominant motif in the text beginning with Moshe's receiving the warning prefacing the death of the firstborn (11:1-10), which is the start of the action of the actual exodus. Utilizing the verb in various permutations, the Torah informs us both of God's "going out" into Egypt to perform the plague of the firstborn (11:4) and of Moshe's storming out from the presence of Pharaoh (11:8). Sometimes we are told of "the taking out" of dough by the Israelites from Egypt (12:39), and other times of the prohibition of "leaving" the house during the night of the plague (12:22). However, most commonly, the verb refers to the "leaving" or "taking out" of the Israelites (11:8, 12:17, 31, 41, 42, 51, 13:3, 4, 8, 9, 14, 16). Altogether, in a stylistic flourish that dovetails nicely with the content of the story of "leaving Egypt," the term appears a remarkable eighteen times. Once again, finding the term at the tail of the story fails to surprise. The image fits both stylistically and thematically.

In contrast, the phrase "beit avadim," here translated as "house of bondage," presents somewhat of a problem. Unlike its partners in the triad of images presented in these summary

verses (13:3, 14), the phrase "beit avadim" has never appeared before in the story of the exodus. In its place we might naturally have expected a simple reference to Egypt or "slavery." Alternatively, if for some reason the Torah prefers a more elaborate phrase, we may reasonably have expected a descriptive phrase used at some earlier point in the narrative. Something like "from under the burdens of Egypt" (6:6-7), "the hand of Egypt" (3:8), or some sort of reference to "affliction" (3:7) and "oppression" (3:9) would seem to have constituted a natural choice.

In fact, the coining of the unique phrase "beit avadim," the house of bondage, here at the end of the narrative, seems part of a larger trend present in the latter part of the story of "Yetziat Mitzrayim," the exodus from Egypt. As mentioned previously, the final stage of the exodus begins with Moshe's receiving and conveying Pharaoh's final warning (11:1-10). At this point, the topic shifts from instructions for Pharaoh to instructions for the Children of Israel. God delivers to Moshe the instructions for that fateful night, the instructions for the selecting, slaughtering and consuming of the paschal lamb (12:1-13).

Concurrent with this shift, the term "bayit," meaning house or household, enters the narrative. God commands the Children of Israel to "take each man a lamb according to the house of their fathers, a lamb for a house" (12:3). If there are insufficient souls in the household to consume a lamb, one joins with his neighbor, literally, "the neighbor near his house" (12:4). The blood of the lamb must be placed on "the doorposts and lintel of the house" in which the lamb will be consumed (12:7). The blood serves as a sign on the "houses," and causes God to pass over the homes of the Children of Israel, thereby sparing their firstborn (12:13, 23, 27). Finally, no one can "go out of the door of his house until morning" (13:22).

The centrality of the term "bayit" continues into the legal portions of the narrative delineating the rituals that commemorate the exodus (12:14-20, 43-50). The prohibition of unleavened bread is phrased as a requirement to expunge it from your "houses" (12:15), and a few verses later as a prohibition of finding it in your "houses" (12:19). Likewise, the laws of the paschal sacrifice for future generations include the requirement to eat it in "one house" and the prohibition of "taking it out of the house" (12:46). Altogether, in its various guises, the term appears fifteen times in the narrative of the actual exodus and its accompanying legal instructions (12:3, 3, 4, 4, 7, 13, 15, 19, 22, 27, 27, 46, 13:3, 14).

But this itself seems to constitute the nub of the problem. While we may no longer need to wonder about the strange phrase "beit avadim," house of bondage, we do need to wonder about the centrality of the term and symbol "bayit" to the actual exodus. Why does the story of "Yetziat Mitzrayim," the leaving of Egypt by virtue of God's mighty hand, revolve around the object, theme and literary image of "bayit"? In other words, how does "house," as both object and symbol, connect to the fundamentals of the story?

II

Back in Sefer Bereishit, the Torah presented the story of the destruction of Sedom and the rescue of Lot (19:1-29). Like the story of the exodus, the narrative revolves around the verb stem Y-Tz-A, both textually and thematically. The angels sent to

rescue Lot advise him to "take out" (hotze) his family from Sedom before the moment of destruction arrives (19:13). Likewise, when Lot procrastinates, the angels grab hold of him and "take him out" (vayotziuhu), setting him outside the city (19:16). Similarly, the men of Sedom previously demand the "bringing out" (hotzi'em) of Lot's guests, Lot "goes out" (vayeitzei) to negotiate, and offers to "bring out" (otziah) his two virgin daughters (19:5-8). Altogether, in the course of describing the various negotiations and movements of Lot throughout the story, the text utilizes the term "yetzia" eight times (19:5, 6, 8, 12, 14, 14, 16, 17).

Interestingly enough, in this other "yetzia" story, what might be thought of as "Yetziat Sedom," the leaving of Sedom, the text and story also contain the term "house" (bayit). Lot invites the angels into his "house" (19:2) and eventually persuades them to come into his "house" (19:3). Likewise, the men of Sedom immediately surround the "house" to demand the "bringing out" of the guests (19:4-5).

Much of the ensuing action involves the setting of the house and its component parts. Lot insists that the men should not be harmed, as they have entered the "shadow of his roof" (19:8). When the Sedomites try to break down the "door," the angels draw Lot into the "house," close the "door," and then smite the men clustered around the "entrance to the house" (petach ha-bayit) with blinding, making it impossible to find the "entrance" (19:9-11). On the thematic plane, when Lot is "taken out" from the city by the angels (19:16), he is in fact taken out of his "house," his previous place of refuge from the danger of the mob just outside the entrance to his home.

This last point should make us realize that we have stumbled upon far more than an overlap of imagery between the story of the exodus and the story of the rescue of Lot. In fact, we have here two stories of "yetzia," of being brought out by God. In both stories, the dual imagery of "leaving" and "house" plays a prominent role. On the thematic plane, in both stories, a family unit, the households of the Israelites in Egypt and the family of Lot in Sedom, face danger right outside their front doors. Just as Lot and his family face danger right outside the "entrance to their house" and are trapped inside (19:10-12), so too the Children of Israel are ordered not "to go out of the entrance of your houses" (Shemot 12:22) and are trapped inside. Just as Lot and his family are saved from both the mob and destructive plague that has been visited upon the mob outside their door (19:9-11), so too the Children of Israel are saved from the destructive agent, the plague of the firstborn that reigns outside their door (12:23).

Following both stories chronologically brings us to a third and crucial element of the parallel. Before daybreak, the angels pressure Lot to leave, telling him to "get up" (19:15). But Lot delays (vayitmahma, 19:16). At this point we are told the following:

"And the men seized (vayachaziku) his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters, in God's mercy upon him, and they brought him out and placed him outside the city." (19:16)

Lot's nighttime order to leave and his exit are forced upon him. Likewise, the order for the Children of Israel to leave Egypt occurs sometime before dawn. After God strikes the Egyptian firstborn in the "middle of the night" (12:29), Pharaoh summons Moshe and Aharon and tells them to "get up" (12:31) and leave. Just as in the story of Sedom, Lot is forced to leave without a second for delay, so too here "the Egyptians urged (vatechezak) the people on, hurrying them to leave the land" (12:33). In only

the second usage in the Bible of the word "mitmameha," meaning delay, we are told that the Israelites had no time for delay, and were "expelled" from Egypt (12:39).

Furthermore, the key terms used to structure this "forced exit" parallel, "vayachaziku" (19:16) and "vatechezak" (12:33), are both based upon the verb stem Ch-Z-K, connoting strength, power or force. This of course is the same stem that serves as the basis of the phrase "yad chazaka," the mighty hand that God uses to smite the Egyptians and redeem the Israelites. In fact, when reassuring Moshe after Pharaoh's initial stubborn behavior and crackdown, God explicitly links the mighty hand of redemption with the concept of forced exit. God promises that as a consequence of the divine "mighty hand," Pharaoh will "expel" the people with a "mighty hand" (6:1, Rashi). In other words, the force and strength (vatechezak) by which Egypt hurriedly expels the Israelites is but a manifestation of the divine "mighty hand" (yad chazaka).

So too, and even more blatantly, in the case of "Yetziat Sedom." The divine emissaries have previously "sent their hand" (19:10), "smitten" (hiku) the Sedomites (19:11) and declared their status as divine emissaries sent to "destroy" Sedom (19:13). They are the mighty hand of God, parallel to the "destroyer" that roams across Egypt smiting the firstborn (12:23). When the angels forcefully seize the hands of Lot and his family (vayachaziku), they no doubt use their "hands." In other words, it is angelic "hands," a physical manifestation and symbol of the "mighty hand" of the divine, that performs the plague, the destruction and the forced exit of Lot - just as later on in Egypt.

But this is not all. In commenting on the fact that Lot served his guests unleavened bread (matza), Rashi (19:3) pithily states, "It was Pesach." This comment highlights yet another parallel to the story of the exodus. The story of "Yetziat Sedom" opens with the angels evening-time arrival in Sedom (19:1). They promptly enter Lot's house, termed by Lot in his invitation "beit avdekhem," the house of your servant (19:2), and engage in a repast of matza. As evening blends into "night" (19:4-5), the people of Sedom gather around and the action ensues. This of course eerily resembles the story of "Yetziat Mitzrayim." The Children of Israel, "avadim" (slaves) in Egypt, gather in their houses as evening blends into night and consume matza (see 12:3, 6, 8, 18). As evening turns into night, the redemption ensues.

In other words, our two "yetzia" stories also have similar settings and props. Just as the setting of "Yetziat Sedom" involves evening-time, the house of an "eved" (servant) and unleavened bread, so too the setting of "Yetziat Mitzrayim." In a kind of pun on our starting point, the Children of Israel are in fact literally taken out from "beit avadim," not the house of bondage, but the house of slaves.

To put all of these points and texts together, we can summarize the complex overlap between the story of the exodus, "Yetziat Mitzrayim," and the story of the rescue of Lot, "Yetziat Sedom," by grouping the various parallels around the three images we began with.

1. The imagery of leaving - the inability to go outside the house due to the danger and divinely wrought destruction outside; being taken out/rescued from a plagued place; the prominence of the verb stem Y-Tz-A throughout the story.
2. The mighty hand - forced exit sometime during the night, near daybreak; no time for delay;

- God's rescue from a plagued and destroyed place.
3. The house of bondage (beit avadim) - the setting of evening, unleavened bread and a house of a servant/slave (eved); the protective role of refuge in that house; the rescue of family units; the prominence of the word "house" throughout the story.

By now we no longer need wonder about the prominence of the term and symbol "bayit" in the story of the exodus. Quite obviously, "house" comprises part of a paradigm, shared by both Yetziat Mitzrayim and Yetziat Sedom. To phrase this a little differently, and perhaps more radically, apparently God and the Torah have modeled the leaving of Egypt upon the leaving of Sedom.

But this explains nothing. If anything, we seem to have moved from the frying pan to the fire. Beforehand we faced merely the problem of the connection between "house" and a story of "leaving" by virtue of God's "mighty hand." Now we face the problem of the reason for the modeling, the inner meaning of the parallel between leaving Sedom and leaving Egypt.

### III

As pointed out above, as part of the "forced exit" component of the parallel, both stories contain the rare term "mitmahme'a," meaning delaying or lingering. When the angels order Lot to leave, he lingers (19:16). Only their firm grasp upon his arm forces Lot out of Sedom. In contrast, the usage of the phrase in the story of the exodus carries no such implication of willful lingering. We are simply told that since there was no time for lingering, and hence no time for the dough to rise, the Children of Israel baked their dough into unleavened bread (12:39). The absence of any particular reason for Lot's delay implies that the lingering stems from an inner impulse, not a practical need to prepare supplies.

This theme, Lot's difficulty in parting with Sedom, picks up speed as the story moves along. After the angels physically remove him from Sedom, his rescuers give him a threefold instruction. Warning him of being swept up in the incipient destruction, they tell him to flee for his life, not to look back and, finally, to get to the mountains, somewhere off the plain (19:17). But Lot refuses to follow the third order. He tells the angels that he can't flee to the mountains lest some "evil" befall him and he die. Following this strange explanation, Lot requests to flee to a small city nearby and the angels grant his request (19:21). Apparently, whatever drew Lot to the area of Sedom and whatever attracted him to Sedom itself still beats deep within him. He cannot bear to part and wishes to stay nearby.

What for Lot seems difficult, turns out to be downright impossible for his wife. She violates the angels' second instruction and looks back. In accord with their warning, she is swept up in the destruction of Sedom and turned into a pillar of salt (19:26).

The point seems to be that being rescued from Sedom, leaving Sedom, carries the implicit challenge of breaking with Sedom. The angels command Lot to part with Sedom not just physically but also mentally. Lot's lingering, his desire to remain nearby in one of the cities of the plain, his wife's looking back and Lot's eventual retreat into a mountain cave (19:30) all signify the fundamental failure of Lot and his family to part with Sedom.

If so, the paralleling of "Yetziat Mitzrayim" to "Yetziat Sedom" highlights the presentation of the same challenge to the Children of Israel, the newly freed slaves. Can they break with Egypt?

Can their fleeing from Egypt and slavery become a full-fledged parting with their lives as slaves in Egypt and their exposure to Egyptian culture? When they leave, can they truly become, as God has put it in His instructions to Moshe, a people that "knows that I am the Lord" (6:7)? Will they give themselves over wholeheartedly to the "service of the Lord" that constitutes the rationale for Pharaoh's freeing them (12:31)? Or will they continue to be Egyptian slaves, forever entrenched in an identity determined by their experience in Egypt, and eternally pining for the familiar surroundings of their former home?

In other words, the paralleling of the two stories serves to raise the crucial questions that confront the Israelites during their desert journey.

### IV

In elaborating on the parallel between the exodus from Egypt and the rescue of Lot, I chose to utilize the labels "Yetziat Mitzrayim" and "Yetziat Sedom." Theoretically, given the centrality of the paschal lamb to the events of the night of the exodus, and the parallel of that night to the night in Sedom, we could have chosen different terminology. For example, some interpreters have recently begun to refer to "Pesach Mitzrayim" and "Pesach Sedom." However, for obvious reasons I eschewed this choice. The story of Sedom contains none of the symbols of the paschal sacrifice itself, neither the lamb nor the blood. In fact, we may think of it as a story of "Yetzia," of "leaving," God's "mighty hand," and the imagery of "bayit" minus whatever it is that the paschal lamb contributes to the story the second time around. This constitutes the crucial difference between the two stories. But what do the lamb and blood on the house accomplish? What do they add to the story?

After the fourth plague, the plague of the swarming gnats or beasts (arov), Pharaoh offers a compromise. He suggests to Moshe that the people need not bother with journeying into the desert, and can instead sacrifice to their God right at home in Egypt (8:21). Moshe replies that this is impossible. The Israelites will sacrifice the "to'eva" of Egypt to their God. The Egyptians will never stand for this and will surely stone the people (8:22). The mysterious term "to'eva," best translated as "untouchable," has already appeared in the context of Egyptian-Israelite relations. Yosef instructed his brothers to inform Pharaoh that they are shepherds. Yosef hopes that since shepherding, the keeping of sheep and goats, is "to'avat Mitzrayim," untouchable or abomination to the Egyptians, Pharaoh will settle his brothers in the outlying land of Goshen.

This brings us back to the paschal sacrifice. As pointed out by many commentaries, the ritual of the paschal offering clearly plays off of the concept of "the untouchable of Egypt." The procuring of a lamb from either the goats or sheep, guarding it until the fourteenth of the month and the mass slaughter and roasting by every household (12:1-6) will surely strike the Egyptians as an "untouchable" act. Placing the blood of the "untouchable" on your house as a sign to your God surely violates Egyptian sensibilities. But what is "untouchable" and "abominable" about the keeping of sheep and goats or their sacrifice to God? What does Moshe intend when he tells Pharaoh that this kind of sacrifice is an "untouchable-abomination"?

Did the Egyptians worship sheep and goats? Does untouchable here mean "holy" in the sense of godly (Rashi 8:22, Abarbanel 12:1-13)? Perhaps. Ibn Ezra (8:22) suggests the variant possibility that the Egyptians were proto-Hindus, vegetarians who were disgusted by the shepherding, slaughtering and consuming of meat. Or maybe cattle that literally consume

precious agricultural space and produce along the holy Nile were considered destructive, vile, un-holy and disgusting objects (see Rashbam 8:22). Either way, a religious ritual that involves the sacrifice of "to'evot Mitzrayim," either a holy or disgusting object, constitutes a fundamentally un-Egyptian act. The smearing of the blood of the lamb on the house constitutes a declaration of religious independence, a shattering of Egyptian cultural norms and taboos. It defines a new identity, a non-Egyptian culture loyal to the instructions of the Lord, the God of the forefathers.

As such, the inclusion of the paschal sacrifice and its symbolism of religious and cultural disjunction with Egypt in the story of "Yetziat Mitzrayim" defines the difference between the exodus and "Yetziat Sedom." Lot never broke with Sedom. The story of leaving Egypt is precisely about differentiating not just from Egypt but also from Lot.

## V

This brings us full circle back to the image of "bayit," and the problem of the centrality of the symbol and object of the house in the two stories.

Lot's house was a hospitable place. It was a place where he maintained the traditions of Avraham, acted with kindness and hosted guests (19:1-3). It served as a physical and cultural barrier against the evil of Sedom that surrounded his home (19:4-10). Part of the tragedy of Lot lies in the fact that his house turns out to be no more than a semi-permeable barrier, a mere membrane, that the pernicious influences of Sedom have long breached. His sons-in-law consider the possibility of God destroying the evil city no more than a joke (19:14). His two virgin daughters (19:8) turn out to be sophisticated enough to seduce him (19:31-35). His wife is so unable to separate from Sedom that it literally kills her. Finally, even Lot himself, the student of Avraham, cares so much for his guests that he offers his virgin daughters to the mob (19:8). He, too, has been absorbed into Sedom.

In other words, the symbol of "house" symbolizes the failure of Lot, his integration into Sedom and his attachment to Sedom. It foreshadows his lingering and his eventual retreat to the cave. The Sedomite without Sedom is a broken man.

If so, it is understandable why the symbol of "house" enters the story of leaving Egypt, and at the same time as the paschal sacrifice. Putting the blood on the house, the place of the household, implicitly symbolizes the need to construct a barrier, to cut the cultural tendrils that have snaked across the threshold. The Israelites must break with Egypt. They must construct a physical and cultural space that truly contains the tradition of Avraham. They must succeed where Lot had failed. They must move from the "house of bondage" to the "house of Avraham."

[Note: Many of the ideas presented in this shiur were formulated through conversation with my wife, Michelle Waxman. Without her unflagging support, none of this week's shiur, nor any other, would have been possible.]

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Sedom? See Bereishit 13:1-6, 10-13. Compare these verses with Bereishit 45:10, 17-20, 46:6, 46:31-47:4. b) See Shemot 9:27, 10:16-18. Take a look at Bereishit 18:20, 23-25. What are the similarities? Integrate this new material with Bereishit 19:13 and Shemot 12:23. Does this suggest a new focus for the entire para?
- Reread 12:2-13. a) List the various laws of the paschal sacrifice. Can they be grouped based upon the apparent inner logic for each law or some other criteria? b) See Rashi 12:13, Ramban 12:3, Abarbanel, Rashbam 12:8-9 and Ibn Ezra 12:7. What are the various opinions regarding the purpose and nature of the paschal sacrifice? Analyze Ibn Ezra's rejection of the general approach taken in the shiur above and shared by Rashi, Ramban and Abarbanel. c) Try to explain the details of the laws (see Abarbanel). Utilize the ideas contained in the shiur for explaining the laws related to hurrying, matza and maror (see Rashbam).
  - Read 12:43-13:16. Divide the text and various laws into groups. Compare 13:3, 14 with 13:9, 16. Try to explain the inclusion of the phrase "beit avadim" in one set but not the other?
  - See Bereishit 19:29. Why is Lot rescued? Is it due to his own virtue? See Shemot 2:24. Analyze the place of this verse in the overall exodus narrative. Can this provide a new interpretation of the parallel presented in the shiur?

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- The parallel outlined above can be expanded. Here are two issues to explore. a) Why did Lot originally settle in