

THE EXODUS
You Almost
Passed Over



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YOU ALMOST
PASSED
OVER

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Founders and pillars of the Baltimore, Maryland Jewish community, they were instrumental in establishing and supporting the city's yeshivos and shuls.

Alan and Fran Broder and family

Acknowledgments

Shortly after *The Queen You Thought You Knew* was published, some good friends, Alan and Fran Broder, approached me about any plans I might have for writing a third book. I had mentioned to them that I was working on researching the story of Joseph, and anticipated that this would probably be the subject of my next writing project. They eagerly asked to dedicate a book on that topic, and we agreed to embark on that project as partners.

At various Pesach retreats over the years, I had wonderful conversations with Alan and his family about the hidden delights of Torah texts. As a computer scientist, and later as a professor at Yeshiva University, Alan has specialized in data mining—finding and analyzing hidden, often nested, patterns in seemingly random bursts of data. We quickly felt each other to be kindred spirits. Those patterns exist in our sacred texts, too, and we each shared a sense of elation at finding them and setting about the task of discerning what they might mean. This book, especially its second part, is an attempt to do just that with the latter part of Genesis and the first part of Exodus. This book has had a long gestation period, and Alan and Fran have waited patiently for it. I hope in its pages they will find something of the delight of those conversations we've had around the Pesach table.

Speaking of that long gestation period, there's a story behind that, too. As I mentioned, I had initially planned with Alan and Fran to write a book focusing on Joseph themes. Time, though,

has a way of confounding our best-laid plans. I devised an outline for a book that would begin with Exodus themes, and then show how aspects of the Joseph story related to those themes. But I started, and abandoned, several drafts. I wasn't pleased with how the ideas looked on the printed page. The whole plan didn't seem to be working out.

Throughout it all, Alan and Fran were patient and more than encouraging, but it didn't look like their hopes for a Joseph-related book would pan out. I finished the Exodus-related sections of the book I had outlined, and pretty much intended to end things there. And that's the way things stood, until a cold Shabbat afternoon in December, when another good friend, Stephen Wagner, approached me to share a thought.

Steve had noticed that the text of the Torah, at the end of the book of Genesis, seemed to devote an inordinate amount of attention to the child-care arrangements that were put in place for Jacob's funeral. He noted that it seemed evocative, in a way, of events that would later transpire in the Exodus. I looked at the text Steve was talking about and it struck me that he was on to something. Steve's insight about Jacob's funeral, I became convinced, was the tip of a grand iceberg that lay just under the surface of the biblical text. Over the next days and weeks, I ran some of these ideas by Immanuel Shalev, our COO at Aleph Beta, and together, we began to discern some of the edges of the rest of the iceberg. That iceberg ended up being the second half of this book. As it turns out, the story of Joseph, and his interaction with his father Jacob, was tied to the Exodus in breathtaking ways. The connection was deeper than I ever suspected.

This would all have passed me by without Steve's little nudge. And, in all likelihood, it all would have passed me by if it weren't for Fran and Alan. Their gentle hope for a work that would speak of the inner meaning of the Joseph story helped change my view of the Exodus and Joseph stories in dramatic ways. I am grateful

for Fran and Alan not only for the support that made this book possible, but for helping to spark the ideas that made this book worth writing in the first place.

This book owes a great deal to many others, too.

LeRoy Hoffberger, ז"ל, has been a real source of blessing in my life. He was my student at the Johns Hopkins University, close to twenty years ago. He was the first to really believe in me, and to see what might come if I devoted myself to the study and teaching of Jewish texts as a full-time occupation. He created a foundation to make that dream a reality, and this book, the two that preceded it, and hundreds of hours of audio and video content available on alephbeta.org, are all the fruits of that dream. His love, enthusiasm, and vision for what can yet be achieved—all this is a constant treasure to me. LeRoy has recently passed away; may this book, and the other works of AlephBeta, continue to give him *nachas* in the Heavenly spheres.

Over the years, as I moved to the New York area, others joined Roy's vision. They banded together to create what has become Aleph Beta, an organization that has helped distill much of my work, and the methodology behind it, into video presentations that speak to a new generation of Torah students. Aleph Beta has its sights on cultivating a new generation not only of students, but of teachers and scholars as well, and I'm proud to say that it has taken its first steps in that direction. I cannot wait to see what the future has in store for this organization, but I do want to acknowledge some of the people who have been instrumental in making it into what it has already become.

The board of Aleph Beta has helped shape the vision for what we could achieve together. In the process of our working together, each has also become a friend. They are: Etta Brandman, Donny Rosenberg, Robbie Rothenberg, Dan Schwartz, Kutya Shalev, and Stephen Wagner. Officers of the board include Jeff Haskell, Josh Mallin, Searle Mitnick, and David Roffman. Mayim Bialik serves in an advisory capacity to the board.

Terri and Andrew Herenstein have been fast friends. They are fierce supporters of original and spiritually meaningful Torah scholarship, and I'm proud to recognize them as those who've made possible *The Queen You Thought You Knew*—first in English, and now in Hebrew as well.

Stephen Wagner's insight on that Shabbat morning in December wasn't just a passing fluke; he consistently anticipates the direction of my thinking more often than I care to remember. Sharing Torah with him has become a regular highlight of my week. Steve, also a founding member of Aleph Beta, has been a forceful advocate for having Aleph Beta maintain a focus on day-school education, which has blossomed into a relationship that the company now maintains with hundreds of schools and scores of teachers.

Kuty Shalev is a close friend. His mortal enemy is small-mindedness, and that has been one of the great gifts he has brought to me. Our bond goes back to a scintillating discussion we had over coffee at Central Perk Cafe, where we ruminated about harnessing technology to create captivating and truly individualized adventures in Jewish learning. That discussion became a kind of touchstone for us, and as Aleph Beta gradually came to take shape, we plucked more and more of that vision out of the rarified realms of our own imagination and brought it into the real world. Scores of Torah learners are the beneficiaries of his vision, passion, and relentless focus on results.

Robbie Rothenberg describes himself as a disciple of mine, but for all his familiarity with my work—and he really does know most of it cold—he is really more of a trusted partner. He is one of the formative forces behind Aleph Beta, and his vision, support, and leadership continue to help drive it forward. Aleph Beta is a personal mission of his, as much as it is my own. He and Helene are a great audience for many ideas that I'm first taking for a spin. They appreciate the good, and gently point out the rough edges. Their friendship means the world to me.

I want to thank the incredibly talented team at Aleph Beta. It has been truly thrilling to work so closely with capable and creative folks who write, research, design, develop, illustrate, animate, produce, market, and help bring Torah to life. Ramie Smith acted as producer for this book, offering valuable insight and commentary—especially bringing to life how an outside reader might relate to what I was writing. I want to thank Carly Friedman for her skill, passion and enthusiasm in marketing and distributing this book, as well as for her strategic vision surrounding this and other Aleph Beta projects. Rabbi David Block provided valuable feedback on the book's first draft, helping to make it cleaner and more readable.

There are others who participated even more directly in the creation of this book.

Many read and commented on the manuscript. These include: Jason Botvin, Michael Fellus, Daniel Fried, Etta Brandman Klaristenfeld and Harry Klaristenfeld, Elinatan Kupferberg, Michael Levy, Searle Mitnick, Shimmy Rosenberg, Robbie Rothenberg, Yair Saperstein, Robert Schechter, Davina Shalev, Josh Shpayer, Hillel Silvera, Stephen Wagner, Barry Waldman, and Shlomo Zuckier. Thanks also to Jerry Stulberger for graciously printing review copies of the manuscript.

Yosef Abraham served as research editor on this project and contributed much valuable material that augmented the footnotes.

Carol Wise helped make this book shine. As the erstwhile editor of both *The Beast that Crouches at the Door* and *The Queen You Thought You Knew*, Carol knows the traps I often fall into as a writer. I am grateful to her for detecting those little foibles and helping smooth the way for the reader.

I want to especially thank Rivky Stern for her contributions to this book. Rivky has a unique ability to ruthlessly spot, and excise, the extra embellishment that really does not need to be there; the clause that just creates a little bit more fuzz in the

reader's mind. Had I allowed her to edit these very lines, she would certainly have deleted the second half of the previous sentence. That the book is as concise as it is owes itself, in large part, to Rivky. She spent countless hours, nights, and weekends painstakingly reviewing the book and making sure it was in perfect shape. She did all this on a tight timetable and with great skill. I am deeply grateful.

I wish I had some sort of neat title to describe the contribution to this book made by Immanuel Shalev, but his influence exceeds such language. He acted tirelessly as a kind of hybrid between editor, *chevrusa* and producer, alternately wearing one hat, then another—and sometimes all three. But Imu wears a fourth hat, too, maybe more important than all three—that of a friend. His enthusiasm and boundless energy have lifted me up; his humor has brought a wry smile to my face at the end of a long day of writing. Imu is someone who cares deeply about the ideas in this book, and he helped shape many of them, especially in the second half of the work. He is probably as much of a creator of this as I am. If this book touches your life in any way, you are in Immanuel's debt.

Rabbi Hershel Billet, a mentor and friend, has graciously invited me to serve as resident scholar at the Young Israel of Woodmere, where I've been privileged to teach and interact with a wide swath of eager and excited adult students. The Nusach Sefard Minyan at the YIW, in particular, has been a proving ground for many of the ideas in the book. My thanks go to Shaul Schwalb and the other officers of both the *minyan* and the larger shul.

My family has been a real anchor for me. I came into the Wolfson family as a teenager, and it means so much to me to have been embraced, with so much love, by them all, as we gradually became one large family. My siblings and their spouses have been there for me at every turn: Avreimi and Tovi Wolfson, Rabbi Motti and Rifky Wolmark, Rabbi Shlomo and Bella Gottesman, Moishe and Arielle Wolfson, Yanky and Aliza Safier, Aaron and

Ellen Wolfson, Joey and Sarah Felsen, Daniel and Estie Wolfson, and Yossi and Elisheva Oratz.

The unity of our family is a tribute to my mother, Mrs. Nechama Wolfson, who has showered love on child and stepchild alike, as if there were no tomorrow. As a beneficiary of that love, I am immensely grateful. She does what moms get paid to do, and more: she's always happy to listen to my lectures, even if she's heard that one four times before. The material I've developed on Joseph has always been close to her heart, so I hope she will find this book particularly meaningful. My mother's presence in my life has meant everything to me.

My children have brought me great joy, and have also helped out with this book, each in their own way. Moshe, who is on his way towards becoming a serious Torah scholar in his own right, has batted around ideas with me from his perch in Jerusalem. Shalva's quick wit and wisdom has enriched this book. She harbors great passion for the messages in these pages and for their ability to transform lives. She has encouraged me to write with a broad audience in mind, so that the book's message be carried beyond just the audiences it would most easily reach. Avigail thoughtfully and happily parried ideas with me; her keen input helped reassure me that the outline of it all really *did* hold water. Shana holds the distinction of being the earliest reader of the book's first draft. When she felt it passed muster, I breathed a palpable sigh of relief. While writing, Yael's graceful ballet, executed at the barre in our living room, helped soothe my heart. Her dance, and her presence in my life, puts me at ease in a way that is hard to convey in words. Ariella has a running homework assignment to read for fifteen minutes a night, and it touched my heart that she chose to fill her evenings with my manuscript. Her delight in those chapters is a source of great happiness to me. Avichai has the distinction of being named for the material in this book. His sweet innocence constantly reassures me that the world really is a good place.

And here it is, late at night, after many late nights devoted to writing this book. I'm still at my office, trying to reach a publication deadline. At home is the greatest gift I could ask for: my loving wife, Reena. Her presence in my life, and in the life of my family, has meant, and continues to mean, more than I can put into words. While I was busy writing, she was busy studying Tanach with Ariella, helping her take her first steps towards competition in the Chidon HaTanach. Together, we have raised children and weathered life's storms. She laughs at my jokes; she knows my flaws and accepts me anyway. She shares a vision of life with me that has only deepened over the years. I hope that this book is a credit to the love and faith she has placed in me.

To some extent, this book is about what it means for a son to relate to a father—and sometimes, to more than one father. That is a topic that is dear to my heart, for I have been the grateful beneficiary of more than one father's love. My own father, Moshe Fohrman ז'ל, died before I became a *bar mitzvah*, but in the short time we had together, he taught me so much about life and how best to live it. He possessed great psychological and spiritual acumen; he was a teacher to many—and I count myself as not just a son but a student. I hope this book would do him proud. Certainly, much of his wisdom can be found in its pages.

Later, another father would come into my life. My mother married Zev Wolfson ז'ל, a man who embraced me as his own, as did the rest of his loving family. Over the years, my stepfather gave of himself deeply to me; he took a heartfelt interest in fostering my welfare and growth as a student and teacher of Torah. He was my regular *chevrusa*—sometimes by phone, sometimes in person—for almost two decades, and in our learning sessions, we would find ourselves held rapt by the mysteries of the Exodus and the Joseph narratives. Those sessions, too, helped nurture the ideas that would appear in this book.

Still later, one more special man would come to occupy an important place in my life—my father-in-law, Yitzchak Dinewitz, ז'ל.

His quiet and gentle manner, coupled with his vast knowledge of Tanach and commentaries, has made him a wonderful partner. He relished nothing more at a Shabbat afternoon meal than the chance to engage in fierce debate and discussion with me, his wife Vivian, and the rest of the family, over the finer points of the weekly Torah portion. I have learned so much from him over the years. He has recently passed away, and I miss him greatly.

Finally, if writing this book has taught me anything, it is that we all have a deeper father than our earthly ones. Part of life is learning to accept the love of our fathers, even as the mystery of their ways sometimes seem inscrutable. If that is true for the earthly variety of fathers, it is true for our Heavenly Father, too. My thanks go to our Heavenly Father for His love and beneficence in my life. I hope this book will do honor to Him.

Preface

What Kind of Book is This?

I once read a fascinating book by Mortimer Adler, entitled *How to Read a Book*. In it, Adler argues that one of the first things a reader needs to ask themselves is: what genre does this book in front of me belong to? What *kind* of book is it? The reason this question is important to ask, he argues, is that if I do not know the kind of book I am reading, I am likely to misinterpret it. I am likely to ask the wrong questions about the book.

Imagine you are reading Carl Sandburg's poetry—but you think you're reading a meteorology textbook instead. The first line you encounter is: "The fog comes on little cat feet." You become indignant at that silly statement. Fog doesn't have feet. And it's not a cat. You conclude that you are reading a ridiculous book.

Bottom line: knowing the genre of a book makes a difference. In that spirit, let me try to clarify for you, the reader, the kind of book I've intended to write.

The Kind of Book This Is Not

This book may seem a little different than some other books of biblical commentary you might have encountered. The easiest way to describe its genre might be to describe, first, what kind

of book it is *not*. Contemporary biblical commentary comes in three different varieties, more or less. This book does not neatly fit into any of them, though I think you'll find that it does include elements of all three.

One kind of biblical commentary that can be found on today's bookshelf is what we might call critical academic scholarship. While the book in your hands does make evidence-based arguments, it does not fit neatly into the academic genre. I am writing for a lay audience as much as a scholarly one, and I am also seeking to explore questions related to *meaning*: how are we meant to relate to these texts? How can they, and how should they, inform our lives? What spiritual meaning does the Torah wish us to derive from them? Academic writing is typically silent on these questions. I believe, however, that the serious student of the Bible needs to consider them.

At the other end of the spectrum lies another genre of English-language biblical commentary that focuses more directly on questions of personal relevance. This sort of commentary, however, sometimes seems less interested in rigorously examining the biblical text than in offering nuggets of inspiration for the benefit of the reader. It tends to use the biblical text as a springboard to discuss ideas the author deems to be of spiritual or religious value. While this book is not indifferent to questions of meaning, it tries to allow meaning to arise organically from a close examination of the biblical text itself. As such, it does not really belong to this genre, either.

A third kind of biblical analysis available in today's marketplace is the anthology. In today's Jewish world, such works aggregate the ideas and analyses offered by the classical commentators of the medieval era—such greats as Rashi, Ramban, Seforno, and the even earlier Sages who composed the Midrash. Such works are certainly of immense value, but this book does not belong to that genre, either. While the reader will certainly find many of these commentators cited in the pages ahead, and while the

wisdom of the Midrash serves as a guidepost for me at various crucial points, this book is not, principally, an anthology of earlier commentary.

The Kind of Book This Is

What kind of book is this, then?

It is, perhaps, a guidebook. This book offers the reader a journey—a journey that I myself have taken. It is a travelogue, of sorts, of my own personal attempt to grapple with the Torah's account of the Exodus, and with the meaning of that story. I am sharing with you, a reader of the Torah, how things seem to me, a fellow reader of the Torah.

At the core of this journey is an attempt to engage with the original Hebrew text of the Torah. Everything else will revolve around that. Our journey will begin with a number of questions about the biblical text—basic questions that the average person might ask, were they encountering the stories we are looking at for the very first time. I'll introduce these questions not in the spirit of skepticism but in the spirit of genuine inquiry. By grappling with these questions, and by paying attention to cues in biblical language, we will find our way to deeper and deeper layers of meaning embedded in the text.

There is nothing new or novel in trying to engage the Torah's text directly. Truthfully, *any* classic commentator—from Rashi to the Ramban, to Seforno, to Samson Raphael Hirsch and the Ha'emek Davar—is writing to you based on the assumption that you have already made a serious attempt to understand the text. If you have not tried to do so yet, you are not yet ready to read the commentator—for indeed, you have not yet read the text that he or she is commenting upon.

Making an attempt to read the text closely is not something new in the Jewish tradition. It is something I personally learned from my *rebbe*, the late Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel, Rabbi Yaakov

Weinberg. Rabbi Weinberg believed that, when it comes to the Torah, the choice between meaning and evidence-based learning is a false one. To simply use the Bible as fodder for sermons is to disregard its depth and sophistication. To confine the Torah to the realm of sterile intellectual curiosity is to similarly misunderstand and devalue it. Rigorous, evidence-based study and spiritual meaning must not only coexist in our study of the Torah, but the former must be a bridge to the latter.

I have written this book in an informal style, eschewing the detached air of academic impartiality or tendentious prose that pervades many scholarly works. My hope is that the reader can spend his or her time figuring out what the Torah means to say, rather than what Fohrman means to say. As befits a guidebook, in these pages, I have opted to engage the reader directly. If it feels like I'm talking to you in this book, that is by design. I am opening up my own personal journey through biblical texts and their mysteries to the reader who cares to join me on a re-creation of that journey. If you accept my invitation, I will do my best to provide you with a guided adventure that hopefully will kindle in you some of the excitement and thrill of discovery that I myself have found in the sacred words of the biblical Exodus saga.

PART I

Taking Apart
the Exodus Story

The Angel in the Back of the Room

In Hebrew, it is *Pesach*; in English, it is Passover. But either way, it seems like an odd name for a holiday. Would *you* have named it that?¹

Imagine it is 3,000 years ago. You are an angel in heaven, and you have been invited to join God's Nominating Committee for the Naming of New Festivals.² One day, you and your fellow angels on the committee get word that the Master of the Universe would like to make a shiny new festival that celebrates His miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

1. The biblical text often calls the seven-day holiday that we know of as Passover *Chag ha-Matzot*, "The Holiday of Matzot," and seems to reserve the name *Pesach*, or Passover, for the first night (Leviticus 23:5–6 and elsewhere). However, the use of the name *Pesach* to characterize the entire holiday seems to reach back to the days of King Josiah (see, for example, 2 Chronicles, chapter 35). Moreover, the Talmud regularly calls the entire holiday Passover. At the very least, starting with the Rabbinic Sages long ago, Jewish tradition has ensconced Passover as the name by which this holiday is known. It is this tradition that we will be wondering about below.

2. This is a variation on a thought experiment I first posed in my previous book, *The Queen You Thought You Knew*.

You immediately get down to work with your colleagues to brainstorm some possible names.

The angel on your left nominates *Independence Day*. Most everyone nods in agreement: it's nice, it's short, it gets right to the point. Someone else says, "We could call it *Freedom Day*; how about *Freedom Day*?" A bunch of angels concur. You put *Freedom Day* up on the whiteboard, right below *Independence Day*.

But then imagine some angel in the back of the room raises his hand and says, "I have a great idea. Much better than those names. Let's call it *Passover*. Passover is a really wonderful name."

So you say, as politely as you can, "Can you clarify a bit? That seems like a strange name. Why should we call it Passover?"

The angel at the back of the room speaks up again: "See, it's kind of a pun." He looks disappointed at having to explain his little joke. "You know how God made all these plagues to let the Israelites go, and then there was this tenth plague, right? And in the tenth plague, all of the firstborn children of the Egyptians were killed. But the Israelites? They were saved. So you could say that God sort of 'passed over' their firstborn children that night, when He didn't kill them. You get it? He *passed over* their firstborn? So let's call it Passover!"

You'd assume that few of your fellow angels would be impressed. What kind of name is that? Look, it's all very nice that our firstborn were saved from destruction that night, but in the scheme of things, that's just one particular detail about one particular plague. Yes, it's an important detail—no one wishes that our firstborn were killed—but still, it's a detail; it doesn't address what the holiday is *really* about, in the big picture. It doesn't speak of freedom, independence, redemption, or the birth of a nation.

But then imagine that, yes, God decides to go with that back-of-the-room angel's suggestion: the name Passover wins the day. You'd be left incredulous. And, of course, this isn't really a thought experiment at all; it's more or less real life. The Torah

does ordain a holiday to celebrate our Exodus from Egypt, and, of all things, that holiday ends up being called Passover!

Remarkable. What are we to make of that?

Perhaps the name suggests that we should adjust our sights somewhat. We tend to think of Passover the way I've just described it to you, as the holiday on which we got our freedom.³ And yet, the Torah's *own* name for the night we went free doesn't emphasize the "free" part, it emphasizes being "passed over." Could it be that, somehow, the essence of the holiday really *does* revolve around the mysterious salvation that our firstborn experienced that night?

There might well be reason to believe it does. One gets the sense that the role of the firstborn children in the Exodus story is anything but peripheral. What happened to the firstborn on the night Israel went free seems to represent something more, as if their experience was a crucible, of sorts; as if their experience pointed to some kind of larger idea or mission.

We can demonstrate that with a second thought experiment...

The Little Black Boxes

Let's imagine that one day, you decide to create your very own religion (don't try this at home). You put together lots of commandments for your band of followers, along with a bunch of theological tenets you'd like them to embrace. You write it all down in this really long book. Then you have a wonderful idea: why not create ways your adherents will be able to express their fealty to the tenets of this book? So you decide to create some rituals. In one of them, your followers will fashion for themselves

3. Indeed, even later Rabbinic characterizations of Passover suggest as much; in our prayers, we regularly refer to the holiday as *zman cheiruteinu*, "the time of our freedom."

little black boxes. In these boxes, they will place a scroll on which they will inscribe representative sections of the book. The scroll will contain the most basic tenets of their new faith. Your adherents will show their devotion to these tenets by literally strapping the boxes onto their arms and heads at least once a day.

As it happens, Judaism has just such a ritual device. The little black boxes are known as *tefillin*, and they contain scrolls with short sections of the Bible inscribed upon them.

So back to our thought experiment: let's talk about what you would put in those boxes. If the book with all those laws was the Five Books of Moses—what short selections from the Five Books would you choose to put in those boxes?

Well, you might nominate the short text known as the Shema. The Shema proclaims one's basic belief in God, and is generally seen as the credo of the Jewish faith: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." That would be a good thing to put in the boxes, right?

One might go further, and add the next paragraph of the Shema declaration. This next paragraph instructs people to love God with all their hearts and with all their souls. That would be good to put in the boxes, too.

What else would you put in the boxes? Remember, there's not a lot of room on the little scroll. You have to choose carefully.

To borrow our earlier image, imagine that our friend, the angel in the back of the room, is back. He raises his hand and suggests the following:

"Why don't we include the law of *peter chamor*, the law of the broken-necked donkey?"

"Excuse me?" you respond, somewhat confused.

"Sure," he says, "you know the law. It's right there in Exodus, chapter 13. See, the Bible says that whenever the Children of Israel have a firstborn male—whether human or animal—they should consider it sanctified to God. If it's a human child, it needs to be redeemed with money, to take ownership of it back from God,

so to speak. If the offspring is an animal, then it depends. If it's an animal that can be offered on the altar, like a sheep, then the firstborn is slaughtered as an offering to God. If it's an animal that is not kosher for sacrifice, like a donkey, then the owner can redeem it with money, and use the money to buy an animal that *can* be offered, like a lamb. And for a donkey in particular, there's a special law—if you don't redeem your firstborn donkey, then it must be killed; the Bible says its neck is to be broken.”

The angel takes a deep breath, and comes to his emphatic conclusion:

“So I say we include *that* law in the little boxes!”

If you were in charge of the ritual committee, you'd probably ask this angel to find himself another job. Look, you might tell this fellow, it's a fine law, this idea of redemption of the firstborn and all those permutations about the donkey and everything. It's great for putting in the book of Leviticus somewhere. But we only have so much room in the little boxes. We must save the space for what's really essential, for the laws and ideas that define the essence of what it means to be a Jew. There's no room for that law in the boxes.

But lo and behold, there *is* room for his law in the boxes; for when we exit our thought experiment and rejoin real life, we find that tefillin, as described by the Torah, do contain, of all things, the law of the broken-necked donkey. Surprisingly, the Torah mandates that tefillin must include these laws. Why? Because they are meant to recall the way God spared our firstborn the night we left Egypt and went free (Exodus 13:14–16).

So there you have it. The threat to the firstborn on the night we went free, and their redemption from that threat—these ideas are evidently more fundamental than we might have supposed. Passover gets its name from them. And these ideas make their way onto the ultimate short list—the tefillin scroll that contains the basic tenets of the Bible. How might we explain that?

Beyond Biblical Poetry

I mentioned above the possibility that the Torah is using the idea of firstbornness as a kind of shorthand, perhaps, for a larger idea. I want to call your attention to a strange statement that seems to confirm this. It appears at the very beginning of the Exodus narrative, before even the first of the ten plagues has struck Egypt:

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְקֹוֹה בְּנִי בְּכֹרִי
 יִשְׂרָאֵל: וְאָמַר אֵלַיךְ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנִי וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי

And you shall tell Pharaoh, Thus says God: My firstborn child is Israel. And I say to you: Send out my child that he may serve Me... (Exodus 4:22–23)

If you stop to think about it, what the verse says here is puzzling. Evidently, God had instructed Moses to go to Pharaoh and to use those exact words, “My firstborn child is Israel,” in phrasing his demand that Pharaoh set Israel free. But the words are so hard to understand; what does it mean to claim that Israel is the firstborn child of God?

Maybe calling Israel firstborn is nothing more than a flourish of biblical poetry. In that case, it simply indicates that God sort of likes the Children of Israel, and that’s the end of it. Anyway, we might argue, no one really takes biblical poetry all that literally. The Bible speaks of a land flowing with milk and honey, but no one traveling to Israel packs galoshes so they can wade through the honey-filled streets more easily. So too, when one encounters a biblical phrase like “Israel is My firstborn child,” a first reaction might be to see it as some sort of flowery, non-literal turn of phrase.

But while this might seem a handy explanation, the rest of the verse simply does not allow for it. After calling Israel the firstborn child of God, the verse continues:

וְתִמְאַן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הַיָּהּ אֶנְכִי הַיָּהּ אֶת־בְּנֶדְךָ בְּכַדָּךְ:

*And if you refrain from sending him out, behold, I
will kill your firstborn child (Exodus 4:23)*

The Almighty makes a direct comparison between Israel, His firstborn, and the actual firstborn children of the Egyptians. On the basis of this comparison, He states that if the Egyptians fail to send out God's firstborn, they will ultimately suffer the demise of their own firstborn—a prophecy that comes to its chilling realization when the tenth plague eventually strikes.

So let's be clear: people will die because of this firstborn-to-firstborn comparison. *You take my firstborn; I'll take your firstborn!* Now, you'll excuse me, but this doesn't sound much like poetry. This sounds real. It sounds like God is quite serious about the notion that Israel is a firstborn nation. But why? Israel was not the first nation ever to come into existence. Lots of others were around before Israel came on the scene. In what sense are they firstborn?

A Nation, First Born

At this point, we don't know much, but we do know one thing for sure: the firstborn theme is everywhere in the Exodus story. The story begins with God's statement to Moses that Israel is His firstborn. It ends with the Smiting of the Firstborn. It is commemorated by tefillin and by rituals such as the redemption of the firstborn. The holiday that celebrates it all is named for what happened to our firstborn. The firstborn theme is the fabric out of which this story is woven. To know the Exodus is to know firstbornness.

Maybe, then, the Exodus story is about more than we ever suspected. Is it about freedom? Yes, it surely is. Independence and the birth of a nation? Yes, that, too. But it is about more than this.

In this book, I want to argue that the Exodus story tells us who we are. It is a story that tells us not just about our past, but about our future. It speaks not only of our birth, but of our destiny. It speaks of *why* we are here and what we are meant to achieve. The story is about what it means to be a firstborn nation.

In the pages that follow, we are going to examine the Exodus story and try to unpack some of its mysteries—among them, the meaning of the firstborn theme. We will try to read the story with fresh eyes, and taste its newness. I invite you to come along with me on that journey, so that together, we may thrill in the discovery of unseen delights, uncovering the hidden secrets of this ancient and sacred saga.

The Exodus Game

A remarkable thing about the Exodus story is that the three most important figures in it—God, Pharaoh, and Moses—each act in ways that defy our expectations. Taken together, their unexpected actions suggest that the story may have some hidden dimensions to it.

Join me, if you would, in a little thought experiment. We might call it The Exodus Game. Let's imagine that we could occupy the position of each of these three different players. What choices might we make? How would our choices have compared to theirs?

Let's start with God.

Let's Play Exodus!

Imagine you are God (again, don't try this at home). As the deity in charge, here's your challenge: An entire people has been unjustly enslaved in the ancient Land of Egypt. You want to deliver the slaves from bondage and take them to the Land of Canaan, making good on a promise you made to their forebears. Your opponent is a nasty and recalcitrant Pharaoh, who has no intention, thank you very much, of letting his fine slaves go free.

Take a moment to ponder your strategy: how are you going to accomplish this task? Now, don't get all nervous; it's not as hard as you think. Remember, you are playing God, the ultimate power in the universe. Any and all conceivable weapons are at

your disposal: lightning, earthquakes, tidal waves, you name it. There's simply nothing you can't do. So how might you, as quickly and efficiently as possible, achieve your objective?

What It Takes to Win

Do you think you would need *ten different plagues* to set your people free? Probably not. Surely you could come up with a scheme that would accomplish your goal more quickly and efficiently than that.

Perhaps you could have skipped the first nine and gone straight to the tenth plague, the Smiting of the Firstborn. It probably would have brought Egypt to its knees all by itself.

You probably could have done it without any plagues at all, if you liked. Maybe you could load all the Hebrews onto magic carpets, departing at noon from Gate C-15 for the Holy Land. Or even easier: freeze the Egyptians in place and let the Israelites simply walk to freedom, right before their oppressors' eyes. For added measure, you could erect a magical force field around your people to protect them from any wayward spears or arrows cast in their direction by the hapless Egyptians.

When you really think about it, the above scenario could have been implemented without too much trouble in the real Exodus; all the elements needed for it were already in place.

Consider, for example, the ninth plague, the plague of darkness. In that plague, an unnatural pitch-black darkness descended upon the Land of Egypt. The blackness was so profound that no Egyptian dared venture outside for a full three days (Exodus 10:23).⁴ But, the text tells us, the blackness affected Egyptians

4. Generally, we think of darkness as an absence of light. Ramban, in his commentary to Exodus 10:23, however, suggests that this darkness was different. Its cause was not an absence of light but a physical *presence* of darkness, almost palpable. Hence, the Egyptians could not circumvent the

only. The Israelites could see perfectly.⁵

Can you imagine a better opportunity? The Egyptians can't see a blasted thing. The Israelites are enjoying full lighting privileges. Why not just walk right out of Egypt? The Hebrews have three whole days to make their escape, plenty of time to gather their possessions and go.

Why didn't they do it? Was it, perhaps, too dangerous? Were the Children of Israel worried that sightless Egyptians would randomly hurl arrows and projectiles their way, some of which might find their mark? Well, let's talk about that protective force field for a moment. As it turns out, that too was a feature of the real Exodus. At the Splitting of the Sea, the text goes out of its way to tell us that God employed a pillar of cloud as a kind of protective barrier between the pursuing Egyptian army and the fleeing Israelites. So again, all these elements really *were* used by God in the real-life Exodus. They were just used differently.

For some reason, in the real Exodus, God uses darkness and protective pillars of cloud—but does not employ them to quickly allow the Israelites to leave. Instead, a long, laborious process ensues, involving no less than ten distinct plagues. Why did God dismiss these marvelous alternative possibilities, and insist on doing it the long way? Was He simply trying to be dramatic?

effects of the plague by kindling light for themselves. In a room merely devoid of light, one can light a candle and see, but in a place covered with the mysterious *presence* of darkness, lighting a candle is of no use at all.

5. In Goshen, where the Israelites lived, the sun continued to shine. According to tradition, it wasn't only in Goshen that the Israelites were provided light; they could see perfectly well *anywhere and everywhere* in Egypt. In other words, in some mysterious way, the ninth plague was a subjective phenomenon: the same landscape that might appear utterly dark from an Egyptian's point of view would appear full of normal light and color to an Israelite.

Was He worried that future generations wouldn't find the story intriguing if He got it over with too quickly?

None of these explanations seem particularly compelling. Does the fact that God eschewed the quick and easy road to freedom indicate that there was some other agenda at work in the Exodus events, that we've not yet picked up on?

Getting to Yes

The outline of some larger divine agenda is suggested by other aspects of the story, too. Leaving aside the question of whether the Exodus could have happened more efficiently, there are other things we probably would have done differently had we been the ones in charge, had this been our little "Exodus Game" version of events. Consider, for example, the seemingly duplicitous request that Moses makes for a three-day work holiday.

In the very first encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, Moses asks the Egyptian king to "please" let the Israelites go into the desert "for three days" so they can worship God and offer sacrifices to Him (Exodus 5:3). Would you have done this, if you were playing Master of the Universe in our Exodus Game? Why talk about three days when you really mean forever? Phrasing your "request" in these terms makes you seem unnecessarily weak and waffling, not to mention dishonest.⁶ God has all the power in the world. There's no need for a charade. Just declare: *Let My people go!*—and leave out this silliness about three days.

In the movies, by the way, that's the way it always goes. From Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* to Steven Spielberg's *Prince of Egypt*, Moses's interaction with Pharaoh looks very different. In these Hollywood portraits of the Exodus, a stern-faced Moses sets forth a no-holds-barred ultimatum to Pharaoh: *let*

6. Cf. R. Yaakov Kaminetsky, *Emet L'Yaakov*, 255.

my people go! Somehow, the rest of Moses’s speech—the word *please*, and the part about the three-day vacation—always gets left on the cutting room floor. And it’s no wonder why. It’s not the way we would expect the Lord to play His hand. But for some reason, there it is, black and white, in the Torah: “The God of the Hebrews has called to us; let us go, please, for three days in the desert to sacrifice to him, lest he strike us with the sword or with pestilence” (Exodus 5:3).

Pharaoh and the Persian Bazaar

The truth is, why Moses needed to ask for just a three-day work holiday is really part of a larger question: why did Moses need to ask Pharaoh for anything at all? Over the course of the Exodus, Moses bargains with Pharaoh repeatedly, seeking his consent to let the slaves go. Moses exhibits extraordinary patience as the Egyptian king gives in partially, retracts his consent, and then gives in just a little more next time.

For example: a plague occurs in which wild animals are unleashed into Egyptian homes and marketplaces. Pharaoh tells Moses that he will allow the Hebrews to worship for three days, but *could they please do it right here, in the Land of Egypt, rather than out there in the desert?* (Exodus 8:21) Moses refuses, on grounds that the Egyptians wouldn’t react kindly to Israel slaughtering these animals, since the Egyptians hold them sacred (Exodus 8:22). Pharaoh concedes the point and says that Israel can leave the country for three days—but then he adds, almost hopelessly:

רַק הֲרַחֵק לֹא־תִרְחִיקוּ לְלֶכֶת

Just make sure you don’t go too far away! (Exodus 8:24)

It all seems faintly ridiculous, the squabbling back and forth. One wonders: Isn’t all this a little beneath Moses’s dignity? Isn’t it beneath God’s? God doesn’t need to bargain with Pharaoh.

God doesn't even need Pharaoh to say yes at all! The Master of the Universe is perfectly capable of delivering His people to the Promised Land, whether Pharaoh agrees to the plan or not. So why go through all of this?

An Unwritten Rule

One thing seems clear. For some undetermined reason, there appears to be an unwritten rule throughout the Exodus narrative, a rule that God is *choosing* to adhere to: the Israelites aren't going anywhere unless Pharaoh says they are.

Why is Pharaoh's consent so important to God? Why would God go to such lengths to secure that consent, even to the point of asking Pharaoh—seemingly deceptively—for just a three-day holiday? What was God's agenda? What was He really after?

Catch-22

Whatever God was trying to accomplish, it involved something more than just setting Israel free. Seemingly, it involved obtaining Pharaoh's *consent* to let Israel go free, too. But that's not quite it either. For just when you think Pharaoh's consent is everything, it turns out to be nothing at all.

Consider the following: any reader of the Exodus story will pretty quickly notice a familiar pattern. It goes, more or less, like this: A plague hits Egypt. Soon enough, Pharaoh summons Moses and asks him to call off the pain and hardship. Moses asks that, in return, the Israelites be set free, and Pharaoh agrees. But once the plague comes to a halt, Pharaoh reneges and decides to keep the Hebrews enslaved after all. Another plague strikes Egypt, and the cycle repeats.

But here's the thing: at a certain point in the development of the Ten Plagues, this familiar script shifts. Instead of Pharaoh changing his *own* mind, God seems to step in and do the mind-

changing for him. In the words of the Torah, the Almighty “hardens Pharaoh’s heart” (Exodus 9:12). This happens pretty consistently through the later plagues, like *arbeh*, Locusts, and *choshech*, Darkness. In these cases, Pharaoh’s mind changes—but God appears to cause it.

Turning Yes to No

Now, there are two problems that can be raised here: a moral problem and a tactical one.

Here’s the moral problem: To the extent that Pharaoh’s free will was compromised by God Himself, how can this same God hold Pharaoh responsible for his actions? It seems axiomatic that people are responsible for their choices only if they are the ones making those choices. Take away our autonomy, and you also take away our responsibility. So if God deprived Pharaoh of free will, say, in Plague Eight—where’s the justice in inflicting Plague Nine upon him? Why is Pharaoh punished by God for recalcitrance that wasn’t really his fault?

To be sure, we aren’t the first readers to notice this difficulty. The problem is debated vigorously by the classical commentators, and they offer various solutions.⁷ This is an issue we shall return to later in this book. But for now, put this problem out of your mind, and let’s consider a related difficulty. Leaving aside the

7. *Ramban* to Exodus 7:3 (based on Exodus Rabbah 5:6), for example, suggests that Pharaoh, by virtue of his barbarism toward his slaves and his free-willed refusal to let them go, richly earned a good deal of divine retribution. Thus, God at a certain point withheld from Pharaoh the possibility of repenting, and any plagues that afflicted Pharaoh after this point were justified as punishment for his prior refusals. Other commentators offer different solutions. For a fuller exploration of this topic, see Appendix A, *God, Moses, and the Worst-Case Scenario*.

question of whether it is ethically justified to change Pharaoh's mind—why would God even want to?

From a tactical standpoint, it just doesn't seem to add up. Here God is, sending Moses repeatedly to Pharaoh, enduring endless bargaining sessions with the Egyptian monarch, even coming up with a dubious three-day vacation offer—all in the interest of getting Pharaoh to say yes. Finally, it actually happens! Pharaoh says yes, and it really *is* yes; he's not going to back down and change his mind. Why, at that very moment, would God interfere with Pharaoh's free will and make him say no? Wasn't this the moment we had all been waiting for?

God's decision to harden Pharaoh's heart seems inexplicable. Instead of allowing Pharaoh to release the Israelites, instead of bringing the whole Exodus story to a nice, satisfying conclusion—the Israelites head off into the sunset, bound for the Promised Land, and everyone lives happily ever after—instead of all that, the Almighty sees fit to harden Pharaoh's heart, and suddenly, we're all back to square one. Why would God do that?

Indeed, we can go even further and ask the question this way: if *that's* what the Almighty had been planning to do all along—turn a long-awaited yes from Pharaoh into a no—then why bother asking Pharaoh for his consent in the first place?

At the end of the day, it's a catch-22. Does God care about Pharaoh's free-willed consent, or not? If He does, then once Pharaoh gives that consent, the game should be over. And if the Almighty doesn't care about that consent, why needlessly ask for it to begin with? Either way, the story as we have it doesn't seem to add up.

Taking Stock

Let's take stock of where we are. In the Exodus, God takes the long way: ten plagues replace a simple magic carpet exit. And God, for some reason, seems interested in securing Pharaoh's

consent to Israel's departure—except when God is not interested in it, and makes Pharaoh say no.

It certainly is not the way we would have done it if we were God, playing the Exodus game. But as it turns out, it is not only the Almighty's actions that defy expectations in this story. The actions of Pharaoh do, too. Let's now take *his* position in the Exodus game, and see just how surprising the Egyptian king's actions really are.

Power and Precision

Pharaoh's behavior over the course of the Exodus story is a rich source of evidence for understanding the larger significance of the Exodus events. The Sages of the Talmud and Midrash seem to say as much. They observed Pharaoh's behavior carefully, and, almost as if these Sages were themselves playing our Exodus game, they highlighted some of the ways the king's decisions departed radically from expectations.

Calculated Ambiguity

Just before the tenth plague, Moses warns Pharaoh about the coming devastation:

כֹּה אָמַר יְקוּהָ בְּחֻצַּת הַלַּיְלָה אֲנִי יוֹצֵא בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם:
וּמַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכוֹר פְּרִיעָה

Thus says the Lord: At about midnight, I shall go out into the midst of Egypt; and all firstborn in Egypt shall die (Exodus 11:4–5)

The ancient Sages (*Berachot* 4a) were bothered by the language of the verse. Moses had said *kachatzot halaylah* (בְּחֻצַּת הַלַּיְלָה), which can be rendered literally as “at *approximately* midnight.” Why, the Talmud asks, does Moses need to fudge it like that? After all, God knows when midnight is. So just say outright that the plague

will occur at midnight! Just a few lines later, when the plague actually strikes Egypt, the text is very clear about the timing:

וַיְהִי בַחֲצֵי הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּקְוֶה ה' כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

And it happened at midnight, that God struck all the firstborn in the Land of Egypt (Exodus 12:29)

When the plague descends upon Egypt, the narrator says it happens *at midnight*. It seems odd that Moses would be imprecise about this when forecasting the events to Pharaoh.

The Sages propose an answer. They say that, yes, God obviously knew the precise moment at which midnight would occur, but who says Pharaoh knew this—or if he thought he knew, who says he was correct? Say that Pharaoh’s palace astrologers were off by a few minutes in their calculations. Had that occurred, the Talmud continues, Pharaoh might have summoned Moses the morning after the plague, and scornfully accused him of lying: *You said the plague would occur at midnight—and you were wrong!* Thus, to prevent any possible mix-up, Moses avoided pinning the plague down to a precise time. Better safe than sorry.

CNN and the Prophet

Now, here’s the problem with all this. Just stop for a moment and think about the scenario the Talmud suggests here. Are things really likely to have played out like that?

Imagine if something similar were to happen in contemporary times. One day, the CNN newsroom receives a faxed message from a self-proclaimed prophet, containing an outlandish prediction. “Tomorrow, at exactly 4:03 PM EST,” it warns, “simultaneous lightning bolts will descend from heaven and destroy the seats of governments in all world capitals represented in the United Nations General Assembly.” *Right*. CNN routinely gets occasional messages from crackpots like this. The clerk who first sees the

message rolls his eyes, then files it away. The message doesn't even get reported. Everyone goes about their business, just as before.

But then imagine that the very next day, at exactly 4:01 PM EST, *it really happens*. Simultaneous lightning bolts really do descend and wipe out all the seats of government. What would the headlines be in the next day's papers? Would they be PROPHEET IS A LIAR? PROPHEET SAYS DESTRUCTION WILL HAPPEN AT 4:03; IT HAPPENS AT 4:01? We all know that's not the headline! What, then, are the Sages telling us here? That Moses had to pull his punches and say *kachatzot halaylah*, it's going to happen at *approximately* midnight, to forestall these ridiculous headlines in the Egyptian papers? On the morning after the tenth plague, whether Pharaoh thought it happened precisely at midnight or not, the last thing on his mind would be calling Moses a liar about a tiny detail in the plague!

I want to suggest that the Sages of the Talmud didn't concoct some half-baked theory out of thin air. They really believed this is how Pharaoh would react, and they had good reason to believe this. They looked at the evidence—Pharaoh's reactions to prior plagues—and they discerned a pattern. They then extrapolated the next obvious step in the pattern and concluded that Pharaoh would have reacted to the tenth plague in precisely the way they described. Let me show you what I mean.

A Frog-Free Tomorrow

The pattern begins with Pharaoh's reaction to the second plague, the plague of frogs. To set the scene, there are frogs everywhere: under tables, in beds, in ovens. He is so desperate to get rid of them that he is willing, at least for the moment, to trade his Hebrew slaves for relief from the amphibian onslaught. So the king calls Moses in for an audience, and says to him:

הַעֲתִירוּ אֵלַיִקוּהָ וַיִּסֶּר הַצְּפַרְדָּעִים מִמֶּנִּי וּמֵעַמִּי
וְאֲשַׁלְּחָה אֶת־הָעַם וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לִיקוּהָ:

Beseech YHVH,⁸ that he take away the frogs from me and my people; I will let the people go, that they may sacrifice to YHVH (Exodus 8:4)

And now listen to Moses's reply:

הַתְּפַאֵר עָלַי לְמַתִּי אֶעֱתִיר לְךָ וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ וְלַעֲמָךְ
לְהַכְרִית הַצְּפַרְדֵּיִם מִמֶּךָ וּמִבְּתוּתֶיךָ

Glorify yourself over me: exactly when should I beseech God, on behalf of your servants and your people, to rid you and your houses of frogs? (Exodus 8:5)

It sounds like Moses is taunting the Egyptian king with those words. “Glorify yourself over me,” Moses says. Rashi interprets Moses as having issued a challenge to Pharaoh: *Give me something you don't think I can do. You pick the time, and we'll see if I can call off the frogs precisely when you want them to be gone!*

Now, if you were Pharaoh, how would you react to that?

I don't know about you, but if I were Pharaoh, I would probably say something like: *Now would be good. Yesterday would be even better. Can we dispense with this silly game and just get rid of the frogs?* But look at Pharaoh's actual response:

וַיֹּאמֶר לְמָחָר

And he said: Tomorrow. (Exodus 8:6)

Tomorrow? Is this for real? The frogs are everywhere, and Pharaoh can't stand it anymore. He'll do anything to be rid of them—but now he is willing to endure another twenty-four hours of frogs, just to see whether Moses can turn off the frogs at exactly the moment Pharaoh picks?

8. Throughout this book, I will adopt the convention of transliterating the divine name spelled יהוה-י-וה as YHVH. I will treat the significance of this name and its possible implications later.

He took the bait Moses cast out to him. It's as if Moses spread out a deck of cards, asked the king to *pick a card, any card*—and the king, suddenly oblivious to the stench and aggravation of the amphibian infestation, complies! Pharaoh draws a card from the deck, just to see whether Moses really *can* guess his card.

When Pharaoh asks for the frogs to go away “tomorrow,” Moses replies:

בְּדַבְרֶךָ לְמַעַן תֵּדַע בִּי־אֵין בְּיָקוּהָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ:

As you wish! So that you should know, that there is none like the Lord, our God! (Exodus 8:6)

In a way, Pharaoh and Moses appear to be on the same page here. Moses taunts Pharaoh with an odd challenge, and he seems to know that this is exactly the kind of challenge Pharaoh is likely to take him up on. And he was right; Pharaoh *does* take him up on it. Moreover, once the challenge is set, Moses wraps up the dialogue by saying that his winning the bet will prove “that there is none like the Lord,” which in itself is kind of strange, once you really think about it. Why would whether Moses can turn off the plague precisely when Pharaoh wants it turned off become—in both Pharaoh’s eyes and Moses’s—*the* most important indicator here of the might of God? It’s as if turning off the plague is somehow even more impressive than its miraculous onset in the first place! Strange.

But there is no denying that Moses understands how Pharaoh will see things. For some reason, the sheer power of the plague—the discomfort and stench of the frogs, as overwhelming as this is—is less impressive to Pharaoh than whether Moses can turn off the frogs precisely at the moment Pharaoh picks.

That’s the first instance of this kind of behavior on the part of Pharaoh. Now, one instance does not a pattern make—but there’s a second, too.

The Wrong Question

A few plagues later, the fifth plague strikes Egypt's cattle and livestock. Let's return to our little role playing game and imagine how we might react in the situation the Torah describes.

You are the sovereign of Egypt. You've been battling Moses over this thorny slavery issue for a while. One fine day, you are sitting in your throne room, when the first reports start to trickle in from some of the provinces. *Sire, there's been a plague; it seems to be hitting the livestock. It happened in Heliopolis, maybe in Nabata, too. We don't understand what's happening, or why, Sire. We'll keep you posted.* Five minutes later, you're getting reports from a third city and a fourth.

If you are a responsible Egyptian sovereign, what's the first thing you do? You want to assess the damage; you need to know how bad it is. Any captain would do that following a strike on his vessel. Any leader would do that following a strike upon his land. But look at Pharaoh's actual response:

וַיִּשְׁלַח פְּרֹעֶה וְהָיָה לְאִמַּת מִמֶּקְנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד-אֶחָד

*And Pharaoh sent—and, behold! Not one of
Israel's animals had died! (Exodus 9:7)*

Pharaoh doesn't even bother looking at his own losses! The only thing he looks at is how many head of cattle the Children of Israel lost (and, of course, he finds that they didn't lose any). *That's all he cares about.* It's the strangest damage report of all time.

Precision vs. Power

For some reason, Pharaoh seems more interested in the precision with which God wages a plague against the Egyptians than in the raw power of the plague itself. In the plague of frogs, Pharaoh and Moses wrangled about precision in time: *If I pick 'tomorrow'*

out of the hat, can you turn the frogs off tomorrow? And now, in the plague of dying livestock, Pharaoh's concern focuses on precision in space: *How precise are the spatial contours of the affected area?*

If you or I were the sovereign of Egypt, we wouldn't care a whit about precision; we would care only about how powerful the plagues were. But for some reason, that's not true for Pharaoh. He *is* interested in precision. We can debate why, but that's the way Pharaoh seems to look at things. The Sages of the Talmud saw this, and it led them to their theory about why Moses chose to be ambiguous about when the climactic tenth plague would strike. Moses preferred to say it would happen at "about" midnight, they suggest, because had he specified midnight, *that* would become the focus of Pharaoh's attention. As crazy as it sounds, there would have been hundreds and thousands of dead Egyptian firstborn all around Egypt, yet the obsessive focus of Pharaoh's mind would be on the precision with which the plague had descended. In Pharaoh's mind, if the plague were off by three minutes, the whole thing wouldn't have seemed nearly as impressive anymore.

Now, this sounds crazy, but there is method in his madness, as Shakespeare might say. There was clearly a test of wills going on between Pharaoh and God, but maybe the test of wills wasn't entirely about what we thought. We tend to assume Pharaoh was battling God exclusively over the release of the enslaved Hebrews. But maybe that wasn't the only agenda. Maybe he was battling God over something for which precision, strangely, counts even more than power. What could that be?

Moses

We have seen how, in various parts of the Exodus story, both God and Pharaoh seem to defy our expectations. Let us now turn to the third key figure in the Exodus story, Moses. We will find that he, too, behaves in ways that seem inscrutable.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Tale of Two Speeches

One fine day, after centuries of unremitting Egyptian oppression, Moses and his brother Aaron show up at Pharaoh's palace and makes a demand on behalf of Israel. It is Moses's opening salvo in what will soon become a protracted battle:

כֹּה־אָמַר יְקוּה אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלַח אֶת־עַמִּי וַיַּחֲגוּ לִי בַמִּדְבָּר:

Thus says YHVH, God of Israel: Send out My people, and let them rejoice before Me in the desert (Exodus 5:1)

Let's freeze the action right here, and imagine that we can walk back in time and inhabit that moment. Pretend you are Moses and you have just said these words to Pharaoh. Pharaoh is about to respond to this demand you have made, and when he does, you will need to figure out what to say next. So listen carefully, and plot your next move accordingly. Here is what Pharaoh says to you:

מִי יְקוּה אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמַּע בְּקוֹלוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִדְעָתִי אֶת־יְקוּה וְגַם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח:

Who is YHVH that I should listen to his voice to let Israel go? I do not know YHVH, and what's more, I will not let Israel go! (Exodus 5:2)

Okay, Moses, your move. How are you going to respond to this? Pharaoh is being pretty direct here; there's not a lot of ambiguity

in his position. He doesn't know your God. He's not interested in letting Israel go. End of story. What are you going to say to him?

You seem to have two options.

The first is simply to accept Pharaoh's answer, throw up your hands, and go back to God for further instructions. Remember, God is the one who sent you to deliver this message to Pharaoh. You fulfilled that mission. You went to Pharaoh just like God asked you to, and you said what you were supposed to say. So you're done. You just go back to God and say: *Look, I did what you wanted. Here's what Pharaoh replied.* The ball, as it were, is back in God's court. The Master of the Universe will have to figure out how to handle things from here.

Your second option is to do the exact opposite. Instead of retreating, you could up the ante: *Look, Pharaoh, you don't realize who you're provoking here. It's the Master of the Universe, and trust me, you don't want to get Him angry. If you back down now and let your slaves go, I think you'll be able to work something out with this God. But if you don't—look, I don't know how much of Egypt is going to be left after God is done with you.*

Either of those responses would have made some sense: retreat, or up the ante. But what seems to make absolutely no sense is what Moses actually says.

An Inexplicable Plea

Here are Moses's *actual* words to Pharaoh at this juncture:

אֱלֹקֵי הָעִבְרִים נִקְרָא עָלֵינוּ גִלְכָּה נָא דְרָדָּךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים
בַּמִּדְבָּר וְנִזְבַּחַהּ לִיקוּהָ אֱלֹקֵינוּ פֶּן־יִפְגְּעֵנוּ בַדָּבָר אוֹ בַחֶרֶב:

The God of the Hebrews happened upon us. Let us go, please, for three days in the desert and sacrifice to our God; otherwise, he might hurt us with pestilence or with the sword. (Exodus 5:3)

Now, did Moses really think this would work? It's as if he's saying: *Pharaoh, we're really scared of our God. Who knows what he might do*

to us if we don't take a long weekend in the desert to offer sacrifices to Him? Please, can't we just go? You wouldn't want your loyal slaves to get hurt or anything...

Did Moses believe this had a *chance* of working?

Why would Moses think that Pharaoh would react favorably to this? Pharaoh had already said he didn't know who God was. The Being in whose name Moses is speaking is a nonentity to Pharaoh. So why should Moses have any hope that Pharaoh would agree to his proposal? Is Pharaoh going to be worried that his slaves might feel the wrath of their fairy-tale god?

And, of course, it *doesn't* work. This second speech of Moses seems to backfire terribly. Pharaoh accuses Moses and Aaron of needlessly distracting his precious slaves from their work (Exodus 5:4-5). He dismisses them, and tells his taskmasters to double down on the Hebrews' workload. From now on, the slaves will not be provided straw for making bricks; they will need to gather their own—but their daily quota of bricks will remain the same (Exodus 5:6-9). Pharaoh accuses the people of being lazy—*why do they have so much time on their hands to dream about a vacation in the desert to serve their god?*—so he dispenses the ultimate “cure” for laziness: crippling, backbreaking work (Exodus 5:17-18).

What was Moses thinking? What was the point of that second speech? Pharaoh had already said no, in clear, unambiguous terms. If Moses had retreated back to God, or alternatively, upped the ante—fine, maybe those are risks worth taking. But don't provoke Pharaoh with an appeal that has virtually no chance of success. *Um, Pharaoh... remember that God you say you don't believe in? Well, we're worried He might get really mad at us if you don't let us go for three days to sacrifice to Him.* Why even bother with a second speech that seems destined from the get-go to infuriate the Egyptian king?

If Pharaoh's response to the various plagues seemed peculiar to us, Moses's tactics now, in this discussion with Pharaoh, seem equally mind-boggling. Surely, though, Moses must have had some sort of rational plan. What was it?

A Study in Contrasts

It might be possible to discover the plan if we look carefully at the two speeches of Moses and compare them side by side. The tale of these two speeches is told not just in the generalities but in the specific, granular details that distinguish each speech from the other. In general terms, the first speech feels confident and bold and the second feels weak and waffly—but we need to drill a bit deeper and examine exactly *why* each speech feels the way it does. What are the details that combine to form our impressions of these speeches?

The speeches differ in maybe a half a dozen different ways, from the name used to describe the Israelites, right down to the consequences that might ensue if Israel doesn't go into the desert to serve the Lord. I invite you to take a moment and go through the speeches on your own. As you read, you might want to jot down a brief list of the discrepancies as you see them.

SPEECH 1 Exodus 5:1	SPEECH 2 Exodus 5:3
כֹּה-אָמַר יְקוּה אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי וַיַּחֲגוּ לִי בַמִּדְבָּר:	אֱלֹקֵי הָעִבְרִים נִקְרָא עָלֵינוּ גַּלְכָּה נָא דְרֹד שְׁלִשֶׁת יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְנִזְבַּחַה לְיְקוּה אֱלֹקֵינוּ פֶּן-יִפְגְּעֵנוּ בַדָּבָר אוֹ בַחֶרֶב:

*Thus says YHVH,
 God of Israel: Send
 out My people, and
 let them rejoice before
 Me in the desert.*

*The God of the Hebrews
 happened upon us. Let us
 go, please, for three days
 in the desert and sacrifice
 to our God; otherwise, he
 might hurt us with pestilence
 or with the sword.*

Discrepancies

Here is a quick summary of some of the main differences I've found between the speeches:

WHAT ARE THE ENSLAVED PEOPLE CALLED? In Speech 1, Moses refers to them as *Israel* and God calls them *My People*. In Speech 2, the enslaved people are referred to as *the Hebrews*.

DIRECT OR INDIRECT COMMUNICATION? In Speech 1, Moses portrays God as communicating a message directly to Egypt: *Thus says God: Let my people go...* In Speech 2, however, God is not portrayed as communicating directly to anyone—neither Egypt nor Israel. Moses instead tells Pharaoh that God “happened upon us” (*nikra aleinu*), a phrase suggesting a kind of haphazard, unplanned encounter. And in that encounter, God didn't actually say anything to the Hebrews. In this speech, the request comes from the people, not God: *and now, let us go three days...*

CELEBRATION OR SACRIFICE? In Speech 1, Moses says that the people are leaving in order to *celebrate* with God in the desert. In Speech 2, he says they are going to *sacrifice* to God.

WHAT HAPPENS IF ISRAEL DOESN'T GO? Speech 1 doesn't suggest any untoward consequences for Israel if they don't go. There's simply a demand to Pharaoh to let them go. Speech 2 mentions that bad things might happen to the Hebrews if they don't offer the sacrifices.

Faced with these differences, the next logical question to ask is: do these discrepancies add up to something? Are there any patterns here, clues that would help us understand the underlying dynamic of each speech? Can we look at this list, above, and say: *Speech 1, it's all about x. Speech 2, it's all about y?* I think we can.

X and Y

It seems to me that, in Moses's two speeches, two radically different conceptions of God are being portrayed.

The God of Moses's first speech is a God who wants His people to celebrate with Him. This God will address humans directly and convey His desires and expectations to them. He is a God who views the enslaved people as *Israel*—a special name, denoting a covenant He made with their forebears. This God seems to evince a personal connection to the people, calling them *My people*. He doesn't intimidate His people with threats of retribution if they don't serve Him. People serve this God because they actually want to. That's the God of Moses's first speech.

The God of Moses's second speech is a very different being. He doesn't address human beings directly; at best, He might “happen upon” them now and then. The people that are enslaved are not “His” people. They are just Hebrews (*Ivrim*)—a generic term denoting folks that migrated from across (*me'ever*) the river. No one has a very clear idea exactly what this Being wants from them—but the people surmise that they'd better sacrifice to Him, just to be safe. He can be vindictive if not appeased. Celebration with this Being would be out of the question. Fear-driven sacrifice would be the limits of service to Him.

Why, exactly, does Moses open with one conception of God and then transition to another? Which of these two visions is the real one? These are very good questions, and in time, we will get back to them. But for now, I want to call your attention to one last way in which the two speeches of Moses contrast. Of all the differences between the two speeches, this is perhaps the most mysterious. It has to do with the names of God.

In his first speech to Pharaoh, Moses spoke of God using His ineffable name, spelled in Hebrew יהוה-י-ה, or, as we've rendered it in English, YHVH. In the second speech, Moses did not introduce the Almighty this way. He instead spoke of the Lord as אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים, the God of the Hebrews.