

The song we sing at the Seder table at Pesach, Dayyenu, has a memorable melody and offers thanks for all the wondrous deeds in the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt. It is first recorded in around the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, though there is extensive scholarly debate over whether it is in fact much older. For a brief overview of Dayyenu itself and a lay-person's commentary on the Pesach Hagadah see: <http://bit.ly/fDrEND> (page 67). So, whilst the text below is from one of the oldest collections of midrashim, we are not suggesting that it was written with Dayyenu in mind nor spurred the authorship of Dayyenu. However, for us in our time, it resonates strongly almost as an anti-text. The Egyptians servants of Pharaoh do not give thanks to God for the ever increasing redemptive acts, rather they bemoan their fate to Pharaoh for each successive blow as slave-masters.

In our reading of the text we are going to do three things. First, we will read through the text and unpick the 'grammar' of the midrash – a look at the technical aspects of the components of the midrash. Secondly, we will try to establish the message of the midrash and ambiguities surrounding its meaning. Finally, we will consider whether there are any contemporary implications for our Seder table.

### Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael – Beshallach 1

ויהפך לבב פרעה וגו', לשעבר ויאמרו עבדי פרעה אליו עד מתי יהיה זה לנו למוקש ועכשיו ויהפך לבב פרעה ועבדיו ויאמרו מה זאת עשינו וגו'. אמרו אלו לקינו ולא שלחנו כדי הוא לנו אלא לקינו ושלחנו. או אלו לקינו ושלחנו ולא היו נוטלין ממונינו כדי הוא לנו אלא לקינו ושלחנו ונטלו ממונינו. משל למה הדבר דומה לאחד שאמר לעבדו צא והבא לי דג מן השוק יצא והביא לו דג מן השוק מביאש אמר לו בגזירה או תאכל הדג, או תלקה מאה מכות, או נתן לי מאה מנה, אמר לו הריני אוכל התחיל לאכול לא הספיק לגמור עד שאמר הריני לוקה לקה ששים לא הספיק לגמור עד שאמר הריני נותן מאה מנה נמצא אוכל את הדג ולוקה ונותן מאה מנה. כך נעשה למצרים לקו ושילחו וניטל ממונם.

“And the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned” (Exodus 14:5). A little while before, Pharaoh’s servants said to him, “How much longer will this man be a snare to us?” (Exodus 10:7) And now the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned. They said, “What is this that we have done...” (Exodus 14:5) They said, ‘If we had been plagued and not let them go, it would have been enough for us. Rather we have been plagued and released them. Or even if we had been plagued and let them go and they had not taken from us our treasures it would have been enough for us. Rather we have been plagued, released them and they took our possessions. A parable: To what may this be compared? This is like a person who says to his servant, ‘Go and bring for me a fish from the market’. He goes and brings him a fish from the market. It smells foul. He decrees upon him – either eat the fish, or I’ll lash you one hundred times or give to me 100 maneh. He says to him, ‘I will eat’. He begins to eat, before he could finish he says, ‘I’ll take the lashes’. He is lashed 60 times and before he could finish he says ‘I’ll pay the money’. He finds that he has eaten the fish, taken the lashes and given the money. Similarly, it happened to Egypt that they were plagued, released them [the Israelites] and had their possessions taken.

### Some additional notes

#### *The Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*

This midrashic collection concentrates on the 'legal' sections of Exodus (from chapter 12), though it also deals with some narrative sections and does not cover all legal material. It is one of the oldest collections of midrashim in origin, known as one of the Halakhic Midrashim and dating from the Tannaitic period (the first two centuries of the Common Era), though it may have gone through revisions and redactions before reaching us today.

### Biblical Verses

#### *Exodus 14:5*

וַיִּגַד לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם כִּי בָרַח הָעָם וַיִּהְיֶה לִבָּב פְּרַעֲהַ וַעֲבָדָיו אֶל הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ מַה זֹּאת עָשִׂינוּ כִּי שָׁלַחנָנוּ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַבְדָּנוּ:

And it was told to the king of Egypt that the people had fled and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants was turned to the people. They said, "What is this we have done, for we have let Israel go from our enslavement?"

#### *Exodus 10:7*

וַיֹּאמְרוּ עַבְדֵי פְרַעֲהַ אֵלָיו עַד מָתִי יִהְיֶה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ שְׁלַח אֶת הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַטֶּרֶם תִּדְעֵ כִּי אֲבָדָה מִצְרַיִם:

Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go and worship the Eternal One their God! Are you not already aware that Egypt is lost?"

### Other notes and references

#### *100 Maneh*

In Biblical and Talmudic times, 1 maneh was equal to 50 shekels. Therefore, it would have been equivalent to 5000 shekels or 10000 dinar (1 dinar was probably a day's wage).

#### *The Foul Smelling Fish – a Biblical Inter-text*

**Exodus 7:15-21** <sup>15</sup> Go to Pharaoh in the morning; lo, he goes out to the water; and you shall stand by the river's brink until he comes; and the rod which was turned to a serpent shall you take in your hand. <sup>16</sup> And you shall say to him, The Lord God of the Hebrews has sent me to you, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness; and, behold, till now you would not hear. <sup>17</sup> Thus said the Lord, In this you shall know that I am the Lord; behold, I will strike with the rod that is in my hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood. <sup>18</sup> And the fish that is in the river shall die, and the river shall stink; and the Egyptians shall loathe to drink water of the river. <sup>19</sup> And the Lord spoke to Moses, Say to Aaron, Take your rod, and stretch out your hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in utensils of wood, and in utensils of stone. <sup>20</sup> And Moses and Aaron did so, as the Lord commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and struck the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood. <sup>21</sup> And the fish that were in the river died; and the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink of the water of the river; and there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.

## Step 1 – How does the midrash work?

Midrash	Translation	Notes
ויהפך לבב פרעה וגו', לשעבר ויאמרו עבדי פרעה אליו עד מתי יהיה זה לנו למוקש	“And the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned” (Exodus 14:5). A little while before, Pharaoh’s servants said to him, “How much longer will this man be a snare to us?” (Exodus 10:7)	This is the verse upon which the midrash is now going to provide an exegesis. The midrash now contrasts two verses that appear contradictory and therefore need resolving. Previously, the servants, in addressing Pharaoh, feel ensnared by Moses (and the Israelites). They want to be rid of the problem of the slaves and say as much.
ועכשיו ויהפך לבב פרעה ועבדיו ויאמרו מה זאת עשינו וגו'	And now the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned. They said, “What is this that we have done...” (Exodus 14:5)	However, in contrast to the earlier verse in which the servants seemed eager to release the Israelites, now they seem rueful of the decision. The midrash will now attempt to provide an explanation of this potential contradiction.

The midrash has set out the problem in the text of Exodus. It appears that there is a contradiction between the sentiments of the servants of Pharaoh, who in one place urge the release of the Israelites and, in another, regret the decision. Of course, these two verses, in a close reading, may not seem so contradictory, but that is also part of the midrashic process in which the apparent 'face-value' reading of the text is shown to be lacking.

Midrash	Translation	Notes
אמרו אלו לקינו ולא שלחנו כדי הוא לנו אלא לקינו ושלחנו.	They said, ‘If we had been plagued and not let them go, it would have been enough for us. Rather we have been plagued and released them.	The midrash now seeks to explain why there is no contradiction between the texts, using an imagined dialogue of the servants. In the first biblical verse quoted (Exodus 10:7) the last three of the ten plagues is yet to come (Moses has threatened Locusts). In Exodus 10:1, God tells Moses that he will harden the heart of Pharaoh and his servants (until this point Pharaoh’s hardened heart was seemingly without divine intervention and did not include the servants). The servants want rid of Moses and the Israelites (or at least the Israelite men) and implore Pharaoh to release them. Thus, at this point, the servants have been plagued and potentially asked for freedom for the Israelites. Notice how this statement implies a sort of unrepentant stance – it would have been enough if we’d just been plagued but still were slave-masters. But now we’ve been plagued and let them go.
או אלו לקינו ושלחנו ולא היו נוטלין ממונינו כדי הוא לנו אלא לקינו ושלחנו ונטלו ממונינו.	Or even if we had been plagued and let them go and they had not taken from us our treasures it would have been enough for us. Rather we have been plagued, released them and they took our possessions.	The power of the 'Or' that begins this sentence suggests a development in the text. Looking back to Exodus 12:35-36 (which itself is a continuation from chapter 11) "The Israelites had done Moses' bidding and borrowed from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, and clothing. And the Lord had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus they stripped the Egyptians." Thus the servants have realized that they have been plagued, they have let the people go and they have willingly handed over their possessions to the Israelites.

The lack of penitence featured above continues – we also gave up our belongings.

Thus the midrash has provided an initial explanation of how the apparent contradiction in verses may be resolved. If we were to read this with a psychological bent we would easily resolve the difficulty – as the plagues were mounting on the Egyptians the servants of Pharaoh (who are powerless to make the decision for themselves) implore Pharaoh to release the Israelites. However, their attitude shifts when they realize they have suffered a triple ignominy – they wanted to release them having suffered seven of the plagues, but now they have also lost their possessions. No wonder they are rueful then and sing their own *dayyenu*. It would have been enough if...Now the midrash continues its exploration of the idea it has presented with a *mashal* (a parable).

Midrash	Translation	Notes
משל למה הדבר דומה לאחד שאמר לעבדו צא והבא לי דג מן השוק יצא והביא לו דג מן השוק מבאיש אמר לו בגזירה או תאכל הדג, או תלקה מאה מכות, או תתן לי מאה מנה, אמר לו הריני אוכל התחיל לאכול לא הספיק לגמור עד שאמר הריני לוקה לקה ששים לא הספיק לגמור עד שאמר הריני נותן מאה מנה נמצא אוכל את הדג ולוקה ונותן מאה מנה.	A parable: To what may this be compared? This is like a person who says to his servant, 'Go and bring for me a fish from the market'. He goes and brings him a fish from the market. It smells foul. He decrees upon him – either eat the fish, or I'll lash you one hundred times or give to me 100 maneh. He says to him, 'I will eat'. He begins to eat, before he could finish he says, 'I'll take the lashes'. He is lashed 60 times and before he could finish he says 'I'll pay the money'. He finds that he has eaten the fish, taken the lashes and given the money.	The parable provides a further layer of explanation of the servants' cry. A parable, used prevalently in rabbinic literature, is a convenient mechanism to provide an example for something that is difficult to describe in and of itself. Thus, parables are frequently used to help describe the behavior or attributes of God. The other advantage of a parable is that the analogies offered can never fit exactly. In the difficulty of finding a perfect fit, we come to appreciate the ambiguity and intricacies of the ideas being expressed. The components of the parable correspond to the situation described between the servants of Pharaoh and Pharaoh – we shall return to this below. Note that the servant is due to receive 100 lashes – which is a multiple of ten (perhaps corresponding to the ten plagues). He receives sixty lashes which would, in this ratio, be equivalent to six plagues. Exodus 10:7 occurred after the seventh plague not the sixth. On the other hand, sixty is a divisor of six hundred thousand – the number of Israelites who left Egypt (or they were as six hundred thousand, the biblical text Exodus 12:37, the verse right after we are told the Egyptians lost their possessions). This is just one example of the ambiguities in a parable – whether the lashes or the eating of the fish correspond to the plagues. Or perhaps they are a combination of the two.

A parable (*mashal*) in rabbinic literature often has a stated *nimshal* (comparison to the *mashal*). However, it is not always explicit and sometimes simply implied. In our midrash the *nimshal* is explicitly stated here:

Midrash	Translation	Notes
כך נעשה למצרים לקו ושילחו וניטל ממונם.	Similarly, it happened to Egypt that they were plagued, released them [the Israelites] and had their possessions taken.	The <i>nimshal</i> makes plain that the eating of the rotten fish, the lashes and the payment all correspond to the plagues, the release of the Israelites and the loss of their possessions, thus bringing us back to the beginning of the midrash.

### Figuring out the parable

Parables in Rabbinic literature work on many levels. One of the interesting aspects to explore is where the correspondences between the characters in the parable and those in the Biblical text occur and where there is ambiguity. The table below shows some of the possibilities:

The Mashal (the parable)	The Nimshal (comparison)
Servant	Pharaoh's servants (and possibly Pharaoh?)
Master	Pharaoh / God?
Foul smelling fish	Slavery or the Israelites
Eating the fish	Plagues?
Lashes	The release of the Israelites / Plagues?
Money	Handing over their money

### Step 2 – The ambiguities of the mashal/nimshal lead us to the following thoughts:

In the first verse (Exodus 10:7) the servants of Pharaoh turn to him, whereas in Exodus 14:5 it is the heart of Pharaoh and the servants which is turned. This shift in the biblical text implies an ambiguity over who exactly is the servant owner in the parable. If it is Pharaoh why does the servant owner not suffer and 'join' with his servant in the experience as he does in the biblical story? If it is God on the other hand, Pharaoh does not figure in the parable at all. This ambiguity actually implies some of the significance of the biblical story in which it reads as if Pharaoh, who sets himself up to be divine, is contrasted to God. Initially, Pharaoh is able to make his magicians reproduce the plagues, but by the end he is a victim of them just as all the Egyptians. Initially, Pharaoh chooses whether to bring the plagues on his people, but later his heart is hardened by God.

Moreover, in the mashal there is an issue with the fish – did the servant buy a deliberately 'off' fish from the market? You don't go to market to buy a rotten fish – and if he did what does that say? So who makes the fish go off? Perhaps, this is a hint towards the hidden hand behind the mashal. However, Pharaoh is the one who is causing the hardship on his servant (through no fault of the servant's own). He lashes him, makes him eat the fish and takes the money. Could it be, hidden in the portrayal of the owner of the servant, another ambiguity over whether he is actually Pharaoh or God? Either way the servants seem at the mercy of forces that present them with little free choice – though they inflict the triple punishment on themselves when the payment in the first place would have sufficed.

A further ambiguity is at work in the character of the servant owner. If it was God we might expect him to be a king who sends a servant to fetch a fish from the market. Could it be possible that such an explicit sentiment of God's subjugation of Egypt occurs through the enslavement of Israel? - Perhaps it would be too scandalous to say that God forced the Israelites into slavery but there is, even in the biblical text, a query regarding whether the enslavement is part of the divine purpose (see for example Genesis 15:13-14). Therefore, the fact that the servant owner is without title once again emphasizes that Pharaoh was not God, but leaves room for us to believe that God is working through this character. As if to remind us of this fact, the mashal has the servant paying 100 maneh to his owner. We know Pharaoh does not receive the property but the Children of Israel do. And, of course, though the servant owner lashes his servant, it is actually God who inflicts the plague because of Pharaoh's hardened heart.

Perhaps the servant owner is merely a foil to help us understand the experience of the servant, but we can also entertain the possibility that the character's ambiguities are significant.

### Step 3 – Can this midrash bring anything to our own Seder at Pesach

#### *i) Leaders and non-leaders – we are all responsible*

The midrash reminds us that rabbinic literature was not afraid of imagining the experience and emotions of even their enemies and the pain that they underwent, sometimes at the behest of their rulers. The servant of the mashal is at the mercy of his owner, and suffers a threefold punishment. Similarly, the servants of Pharaoh were somewhat at the mercy of Pharaoh. However, they were not altogether innocent, as the unrepentant 'if only we had only been plagued but not let them go' statement implies and the servant's choice to go through the threefold punishment rather than settle immediately with paying the money.

**Being able to imagine the experience of an Other (even a perpetrator of oppression) does not mean they are innocent or that their behavior needs to be excused or condoned. How society treats the weak and vulnerable is not just a reflection of its leaders, responsibility also lies with society.**

#### *ii) What is rotten is not always what we think*

The fish itself is a curious aspect of this mashal. It could just be a part of the parable to enable us to understand the servant's experience. But let us suppose that the fish is actually a representation of the Israelites, what makes it rotten is their enslavement, post enslavement it will become the people who stood at Mount Sinai.

**Sometimes what we think is rotten, is a result of our action or inaction and actually opportunity to change is often present as a potential.**

#### *iii) Our freedom can sometimes feel remote and unrealizable*

Throughout the Biblical text and in the midrash itself, we are filled with questions about who is actually 'running' the show. How are events orchestrated and does anyone, from the servant owner, servant to the fish- that-is-rotten have any control over things?

**The story of Pesach is a reminder to cherish the freedoms that we have and to remind us that we each individually have to steer a path towards establishing our own freedom.**

#### *iv) The anti-Dayyenu*

One of the striking elements of the midrash is the cynicism of the servants of Pharaoh who 'sing' their Dayyenu without praise, but with only shamefaced greed and desire. They suffer, for sure, but they are also incapable of celebrating the freedom from the situation – who wants to be unceasingly plagued on account of slaves and keep them after all? They do not offer thanks, but regret. Pesach is ultimately a time when we put ourselves in a position in which we have both responsibility for appreciating our own freedom and resolve to continue to work for the freedom of others. We try to take the non-cynical route every time. There is much that we can be thankful for, and should give thanks for – as in our Dayyenu. There is also much that is still to be accomplished:

We begin our seder with the wonderful, poetic and inspiring words:

**"This is the bread of poverty which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are needy come and celebrate the Passover. At present we are here; next year may we be in the land of Israel. At present we are slaves; next year may we be free."<sup>1</sup>**

**A stark reminder of: our present freedoms; our current responsibilities; and our aspirations and hopes for the future. A complete opposite to the anti-Dayyenu featured in our midrash. Next Year in Jerusalem!**

<sup>1</sup> Translation by Joshua Kulp, found in Kulp J (2009) *The Schechter Haggadah: Art, History and Commentary*. The Shechter Institute of Jewish Studies: Jerusalem. p. 26