

THE REDEEMPTIVE POWER OF POINTING

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On Seder night, we don't only recite our story of redemption verbally; we also point at tangible objects that catalyze this retelling. In particular, the foods on the table trigger much of the questioning and expounding. But pointing at objects is not just a Seder activity. The physical nature of noticing and indicating—wrapped up in the word “זה - zeh” (and its alternate form, “זאת - zot”)—is actually a fundamental element of the process of redemption more broadly.

We read in Maggid that we cannot start commemorating the Exodus until nighttime, because that is when the *matzah* and *maror* are physically set before us. This is derived from the following verse:

שמות יג:
וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר
בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה עָשָׂה יְיָ לִי בְצֹאתִי
מִמִּצְרָיִם:

Exodus 13:8

And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of this that YHVH did for me when I went free from Egypt.'

A *midrash* found in the Haggadah analyzes this verse to determine the proper time for Maggid:²

יכול מראש חֲדָשׁ? תִּלְמֹד לומר
בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא.
אי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יכול מִבְּעוֹד יוֹם?
תִּלְמֹד לומר בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה.

בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה לֹא אֶמְרֶתִּי, אֶלָּא בְּשָׁעָה
שֶׁיֵּשׁ מַצָּה וּמְרוֹר מְנַחִים לְפָנֶיךָ.

Could it be [that we tell the story of the Exodus] from the beginning of the month [of Nissan]? No, because Scripture states: "[You shall tell your children] on that day" (Exodus 13:8).

Could "on that day," mean even during the daytime (i.e. before the night of the 15th)? No, because Scripture states: "It is because of this [that YHVH did for me when I went free from Egypt]" (Exodus 13:8).

[When] I said "because of this," it can only mean at the moment that matzah and maror are resting in front of you (i.e. on the night of the 15th).

We cannot start the telling as early as the new moon, because the verse says “on that day”—meaning, the day we went out from Egypt, the 15th. The conclusion of the *midrash* is that we cannot start even as late as during the daytime on the 14th, only hours before the Seder. But the proof seems obscure. How is “because of this” a proof that we must wait to tell the story until the nighttime, when the *matzah* and *maror* are set before us?³ To answer this, we need to understand two significant words *midrashically*.

First, the word “בעבור - *ba-avur*” can be understood as related to

food, as in the book of Joshua (in the context of Pesah):

יהושע ה:יא
וַיֹּאכְלוּ מִעֶבְרַת הָאָרֶץ מִמִּחֶרֶת
הַפֶּסַח מִצּוֹת וְקִלְוֵי בָעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם
הַזֶּה:

Joshua 5:11

On the day after the pesah, on that very day, they ate of the produce (עֶבְרַת) of the country, unleavened bread and parched grain.

This unusual, but perhaps older, use of the word “עבור - *avur*” informs how the *midrash* reads the word in our verse: *ba-avur*, “with this food God made for me when I went out of Egypt.”⁴ Therefore, we cannot tell the story before we see the special foods on the table.

But what about the word “zeh”? In our *midrash*, *zeh* indicates someone pointing to the food, for which it must be in front of them. Throughout rabbinic literature, *zeh* often indicates a physical gesture toward something one sees.⁵ In our Haggadah, Exodus 13:8 is used to respond to the child who does not know how to ask: you prompt them by pointing to the food on the table.⁶

This is not the only verse in the Maggid section with the word *zeh* at play. In fact, two other verses with the word *zeh*—conjugated as *zot*—

1 This verse is difficult to translate. See E. Daniel Goldschmidt, “Ba-Avur Zeh... Le-Berur Ha-Haggadah” in *Mehkerei Tefilah U-Fiyyut* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), pp. 387-389; and Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem: Haomanim, 1976), pp. 210-215.

2 Compare the Haggadah’s version with Mekhilta Massekhta de-Pisha 17 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 66).

3 The phrase “זה בעבור” might also have indicated a time when the *pesah* is in front of us. Rashi on this verse lists all three foods with the indicator הללו, a plural form of זה. See also Mekhilta de-R. Shimon b. Yohai, ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 40. If so, this phrase indicates all three of the main seder foods: *pesah*, *matzah* and *maror*, all of which must be before him in order to tell the story. See David Henschke, *Mah Nishtanah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2016), p. 25, n. 34; Goldschmidt, p. 388.

4 Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 777; see also Azzan Yadin-Israel, “Connecting the Mitzvah of Maggid to the Seder Night,” <https://www.thetorah.com/article/connecting-the-mitzvah-of-maggid-to-the-seder-night>.

5 R. David Kimhi (Radak), *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, eds. Biesenthal and Lebrecht (Berlin, 1847), p. 84, defines *zeh* as follows: “על הודעת הדבר הנמצא” - pointing to a referent that is usually close, or sometimes far.” See also David Henschke, *Mah Nishtanah*, p. 26-27; Yisrael Rosenson, “Al Darkam shel Hakhamim Be-Milit ‘Zeh,’” *Balshanut Ivrit* 55 (2005), p. 77.

6 וְשִׂאֵינוּ יוֹדֵעַ לְשֹׂאֵל – אֵת פֶּתַח לוֹ, שְׂנֵאָמֶר, וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְצֹאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם.

are used as statements by two of the other children, the wicked and simple:⁷

שמות יב:כו
וְהָיָה כִּי־יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה
הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם:

Exodus 12:26
*And when your children ask you,
“What is this service to you?”*

שמות יג:יד
וְהָיָה כִּי־יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר
מַה־זֹּאת

Exodus 13:14
*And when, in time to come, your
child asks you, saying, “What is
this?”*

Only the wise child does not use the word *zeh* or *zot*, perhaps indicating a more abstract trigger for his question. By contrast, with the other three children (wicked, simple, and one who does not know how to ask), either the child or the parent points to something physical. The three foods we must discuss at the Seder (*pesah*, *matzah*, and *maror*) may even correspond to these three verses, with their three uses of the word “*zeh/zot*.”⁸

Pointing and noticing the foods on the Seder table is one critical instantiation of celebrating Pesah. On a broader level, however, the entire story of the Israelites’ redemption can be traced to an act of pointing and empathic noticing: that of Pharaoh’s daughter (Bat Par’oh) taking the baby out of the basket.

שמות ב:ו
וַתִּפְתַּח וַתִּרְאֶה אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה־
נָעַר בֶּכֶה וַתִּחַמַּל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִי־לִי
הָעֶבְרִיִּים זֶה:

Exodus 2:6
*When she opened it, she saw
him—the child, and it was a boy
crying. She had mercy on him*

and said: “Of the children of the Hebrews is *this*.”

Bat Par’oh opens the basket and sees a baby boy crying. She reacts with emotion and, instead of fulfilling her father’s command to kill all the baby boys, has mercy on him. She states out loud: “*This* is a Hebrew child.” The use of the word *zeh* in her statement (and the usual assumption that *zeh* indicates pointing) inspired R. Yose b. R. Hanina to consider the question: What specifically was she pointing at?

תלמוד בבלי סוטה יב:
מִנָּה יָדְעָה? א”ר יוֹסִי בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא:
שְׂרָאֲתָהּ אוֹתוֹ מֵהוּל.

Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12b
*How did she know [that the
child was a Hebrew]? R. Yose b.
R. Hanina said: She saw he was
circumcised.*

Bat Par’oh notices the distinguishing mark of a Jewish baby boy: circumcision. One can imagine her pointing at the baby and exclaiming: “This [mark of circumcision indicates that he] is a Hebrew baby!” She sees the baby for who he is: but someone different and distinct—a “Hebrew,” not someone just like her and her people. And yet, she concluded that this baby, although different, deserved mercy, not death. The redemption begins in this moment of pointing, and of deciding not to reject the difference of the other, but to embrace it and express care.⁹

Later, Moshe himself echoes this instinct of Bat Par’oh by noticing something different:¹⁰

שמות ג:ג
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְתֵּר־נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־
הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוֹעַ לֹא־יָבֹעַר
הַסִּנָּה:

Exodus 3:3

*Moshe said, “I will turn aside and
see *this* great sight. Why doesn’t
the bush burn up?”*

Moshe—like the future children at the Seder—also points and asks a question: “Why does *this* bush not burn?” Moshe’s noticing leads directly to an encounter with God’s presence. Without Moshe’s curiosity, the divine encounter might never have taken place.

Indeed, one *midrash* (again from R. Yose b. R. Hanina) introduces this element of divine encounter into the story of Bat Par’oh’s noticing as well:

תלמוד בבלי סוטה יב:
וַתִּפְתַּח וַתִּרְאֶה אוֹת הַיֶּלֶד - וַתֹּרֶא
מִיִּבְעֵי לִיָּה!
א”ר יוֹסִי בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא: שְׂרָאֲתָהּ
שְׂכִינָהּ עִמּוֹ.

Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12b
*“She opened and saw him—the
child” (Exodus 2:6). It should have
said: “saw the child”! [Why does
the verse employ the direct object
“him”?]*

*R. Yose b. R. Hanina said: She saw
God’s presence was with him.*

R. Yose b. R. Hanina answers the question of the strange word *וַתִּרְאֶה*—which should have simply read *וַתֹּרֶא*, without the suffix *הוּ*—explaining that Bat Par’oh sees the Divine Presence enveloping the baby boy. By seeing the child, she herself encounters God, and through her mercy, God’s presence is magnified.

The noticing and pointing of Bat Par’oh and of Moshe—both experiencing a divine revelation—is also a precursor to the ultimate noticing related in the Pesah story: the children of Israel pointing directly to their God, when they are rescued at the splitting of the Reed Sea. We read in a *midrash*:

7 See *Mah Nishtanah*, p. 26 and p. 217.

8 This may also explain the focus on the three foods about which Rabban Gamliel insists we speak (Mishnah Pesahim 10:5)—*maror*, *matzah* and *pesah*—corresponding to the three original questions of the Mishnah. See *Mah Nishtanah*, p. 411. See also discussion of my colleague Jason Rogoff below, p. 14.

9 Bat Par’oh’s stance of wondering and caring stands in contrast to Par’oh himself, who fails to pay attention to the plague of blood, using the same language of *zot* (Exodus 7:23): “וַיָּבֹא אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וְלֹא־שָׁתָּה לְבָנוֹ גֵּם־לְזֹאת” - Par’oh turned and went to his house, and did not pay attention also to this.”

10 For the similarities in the way Bat Par’oh and Moshe see, and the similar use of the root *ראה* for each of them, see Aviva Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 24.

מדרש אבכיר
 ותאמר מילדי העברים זה – שעל
 ידו יהיו ישראל עתידין לאמר: זה
 א-לי ואנוהו

Midrash Avkir¹¹

*"She said: 'Of the children of the Hebrews is **this**'" (Exodus 2:6)—for through him, Israel would in the future say: "This is my God and I will glorify Him" (Exodus 15:2).*

Moshe—spared at birth by the one who noticed him—is the one who leads the people to the Reed Sea, where they cross to safety thanks to God's miracle. In that moment, they sing a song ("השירה הזאת" - **this** song," in fact) in which they point to the Divine and say: "זה א-לי - **This** is my God." This pointing is the moment of recognition for the Israelites. They see God and attribute their redemption to God. Just as Moshe was noticed as a baby by a powerful mother figure (who bucks her societal norms to save him), so God is noticed by the saved people as they cross the Sea.

Another *midrash* connects this pointing at the Sea to the birth moment, not only of Moshe, but of the Israelites as well:

דברים רבה (ליברמן) פרשת דברים א:י

הקדוש ברוך הוא היה נכנס עמהם
 והיה מראה לכל א' וא' בית אביו,
 ואומ' לו קרא לאביו פלוני ולאמר
 פלוני...

והיא שואלתו ואומרת לו מי היה
 מגדלך, והוא אומ' לה בחור אחד
 קוץ נאה שאין כיוצא בו, והרי הוא
 בחוץ והוא הביאני לכאן, והיתה
 אומרת לו בא והראהו לי.

והיו יוצאין לחוץ ומחזירין בכל
 המבואות ובכל מקום ולא היו
 מוצאין אותו, לפי' כשבאו לים וראו
 אותו היו מראים לאמותם באצבע,
 ואומר' להן "זה א-לי ואנוהו", זהו
 שגדלני.

**Devarim Rabbah (Lieberman),
 Parashat Devarim 1:10¹²**

The Holy Blessed One would enter with them (the Israelite children born in the fields) and show each one the house of their parents, and say to them: Your father is

called so and so, your mother is called such and such...

And [the mother] would ask and say: Who raised you? The child would say: This beautiful lad, whom there is none like. Here, he is outside, and he brought me here. She would say: Show him to me!

They would go outside and look all over but would not find him. Therefore when they came to the Sea, and saw him, they showed their mothers by pointing with their finger, and saying to them, "This is my God and I shall glorify Him"—this is the One Who raised me.

In this *midrash*, God saved these Israelite babies from Egyptian attackers, and then brought them to their parents. Later, these children point to God when they are redeemed at the Sea, because they remember God bringing them home. The noticing has come full circle: Moshe, who was noticed and saved by Bat Par'oh, is at the head of the people, who notice their ultimate Savior. It is Bat Par'oh's courageous act of noticing one child and reacting with empathy that sets in motion the redemption of the entire people. On Seder night, we notice and point, in an act perhaps meant to recall this significant noticing on the parts of Bat Par'oh, Moshe, and the Jewish people at the moment of redemption. ♦

11 Cited in Torah Sheleimah to Exodus 2:6, vol. 8, p. 67 = Yalkut Shimoni #166, ed. Hyman, p. 23.

12 On pp. 14-15 in Lieberman's edition. For a further exploration of this *midrash*, see my colleague R. Tali Adler's essay from last year's reader, "Telling God's Story," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/pesach-reader-5782>.