

GHOSTS IN THE HAGGADAH

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The Exodus from Egypt is, in one way of telling it, a ghost story.

This is not the usual genre we assign to the tale. We describe it as a story of liberation. The emotions we associate with it are a mixture of triumph, joy, and awe. But stories are created, in part, by where we choose to begin and end them, and יציאת מצרים/the Exodus is a story with many beginnings.

We usually choose to begin the story of יציאת מצרים/the Exodus with our enslavement, to follow its arc through the plagues, the night of rushed departure and unrisen dough, and to end it either with the people's passage through the Reed Sea or, in the longer version, their arrival at the Promised Land. That arc is the story we know: the story of God's promise fulfilled, of freedom, and of hope. But a close reading of the opening lines of Sefer Shemot suggests another way to read the story—one that begins not with our enslavement, but with our collective sin.

שמות א-ה

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב
אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ: רְאוּבֵן שִׁמְעוֹן לֵוִי וַיהוּדָה: יִשָּׁשְׁכָר
זְבֻלֹן וּבִנְיָמִן: דָּן וְנַפְתָּלִי גָד וַאֲשֵׁר: וַיְהִי כָל־נַפְשׁ יִצְחָק
יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב שִׁבְעִים נֶפֶשׁ וַיֹּסֶף הִיָּה בְּמִצְרַיִם:

Shemot 1:1-5

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt with Ya'akov; every man came with his household: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehudah; Yissakhar, Zevulun, and Binyamin; Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher. And all the souls that came out of the loins of Ya'akov were seventy souls; and Yosef was in Egypt already.

"And Yosef was in Egypt already." With this clause, the text invites us to remember the story that precedes the story, the beginning before the beginning. We

did not end up in Egypt by accident. We were there because of a tragedy precipitated by unthinkable hatred: Yosef's brothers selling him into slavery and deceiving their father, Ya'akov, into thinking that Yosef was dead. We were in Egypt because we were a family torn apart. And while in one way of telling that before-story, the saga of Yosef and his brothers, ends with tearful reconciliation and the family's salvation in Egypt, there is another way of telling it—the way, in fact, that the Torah itself chooses in the final lines of Bereishit—which insists that this story, the story of the Jewish people's foundational sin, is not complete until Yosef's body has been returned to Canaan.

בראשית נ:כה-כו

וַיִּשָּׁבַע יוֹסֵף אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פֶּקֶד וַיִּקְדוּ אֲלֵהֶם
אֶתְכֶם וְהָעֵלְתֶם אֹתִי עֶצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה: וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בֶּן־מָאָה
וָעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים וַיַּחְנֹטוּ אֹתוֹ וַיִּשְׂמוּ בְּאֵרוֹן בְּמִצְרַיִם:

Bereishit 50:25-26

And Yosef took an oath of the children of Israel, saying: "God will surely remember you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." So Yosef died, being a hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

And so, on the night of the Exodus, while the Jewish people are rushing, packing, preparing to leave, while the Jewish people are experiencing the story of their redemption, Moshe instead goes to fulfill this ancient promise, taking Yosef's body with him out of Egypt.¹ It is a doubled experience: redemption side-by-side with atonement, bones and unbaked bread, together, making the exit from the land of Jewish sin and Jewish slavery. The story of life and freedom is twinned with a ghost story, a story of a people haunted by their greatest sin, and accompanied for forty years by the bones of the man they sinned against.

¹ See Shemot 13:19.

This story, the one in which **יציאאת מצרים**/the Exodus is, at least in part, a long march to atonement, does not end until Yosef is finally buried in Shekhem, the place, Rashi points out, from which his brothers sold him all those years ago (Yehoshua 24:32). Intriguingly, the account of Yosef's burial follows almost immediately after Yehoshua's account of Jewish history, which we recite at the Seder:

יהושע כד:ב-ד, לב

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל-כָּל-הָעָם כֹּה-אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּעֶבֶר הַנָּהָר יָשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מֵעוֹלָם תִּרְחַח אֲבִי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם
וְאֲבִי נָחוֹר וַיַּעֲבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים: וְאֶחָד אֶת-אֲבִיכֶם
אֶת-אֲבֹתֵיכֶם מֵעֶבֶר הַנָּהָר וְאוֹלָךְ אוֹתוֹ בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן
וְאֲרֻבָּה אֶת-זֶרְעוֹ וְאֶתָּן-לוֹ אֶת-יִצְחָק: וְאֶתָּן לְיִצְחָק
אֶת-יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת-עֵשָׂו וְאֶתָּן לְעֵשָׂו אֶת-הָר שְׁעִיר לְרִשְׁתָּהּ
אוֹתוֹ וַיַּעֲקֹב וּבְנָיו יָרְדוּ מִצְרָיִם... וְאֶת-עֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף
אֲשֶׁר-הָעֵלּוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם קָבְרוּ בְשֵׁכֶם.

Yehoshua 24:2-4, 32

Then Yehoshua said to all the people, "Thus said God, the Lord of Israel: In olden times, your forefathers—Terah, father of Avraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Avraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring. I gave him Yitzhak, and to Yitzhak I gave Ya'akov and Esav. I gave Esav the hill country of Seir as his possession, while Ya'akov and his children went down to Egypt... The bones of Yosef, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shekhem.

The juxtaposition between Yosef's burial and Yehoshua's recounting of Jewish people's arrival in Egypt makes the gap in the text glaringly obvious. "And Ya'akov and his children went down to Egypt." More accurately, Ya'akov and all but one of his children. Ya'akov and all but one of his children went down to Egypt because of what they had done to the one who was already there. It is the gap here that tells the shadow story at the Seder. Yosef sits at the Seder, invisible, his story addressed primarily through deliberate silence.

According to some commentaries, however, Yosef is alluded to one more time at the Seder. The Ben Ish Hai in the 19th century identifies one of the dippings at the Seder with the event of our foundational sin:²

בן איש חי שנה ראשונה פרשת צו

וטיבול ראשון זה שהוא כרפס בחומץ הוא זכר לסיבת קושי השעבוד שהיה בשביל מכירת יוסף הע"ה ושהטבילו כתונת פסים שלו בדם ומכרוהו וגרמו צער ליעקב אע"ה, וזה נרמז בכרפס והיינו אותיות כ"ר הם סוף מכר ואותיות פס הם ראש פסים.

Ben Ish Hai Year 1, Parashat Tzav

The first act of dipping, the karpas in vinegar, is in memory of the fact that the enslavement was because of the sale of Yosef, and that [his brothers] dipped his coat in blood and caused pain to his father, Ya'akov Avinu. This is alluded to in the word "karpas" (כרפס) which has the letters kaf and reish, which are the last letters of the word "mekher" (מכר), sale, and the letters pey and sin, which are the first letters in the word "pasim" (פסים) [the word used to describe Yosef's coat].

According to the Ben Ish Hai, in dipping the karpas, we bring the story of the brothers' sale of Yosef into the open. Almost as soon as we open the Seder, before we even touch a piece of matzah or begin to tell the story of our enslavement, we engage with our collective sin. We begin the Seder with the story before the story, actually reenacting the moment it all began. Notably, we do not simply tell the story of Yosef's sale. Instead, in reenacting it, we become the holders of our ancestral sin, once again dipping Yosef's coat into blood.

This interpretation of karpas is not an easy one. It demands that on the night that we celebrate our freedom, on the night when we (rightly) remember our ancestors as victims who were freed from bondage, on the night when we praise God for our redemption, we look back even further and see the story in greater complexity. While our ancestors may have been slaves, their ancestors before them were slave sellers. In this interpretation of karpas, we are reminded that

2 This identification of the custom is first mentioned in Rabbeinu Manoah's 13th century commentary on the Rambam's Mishneh Torah: "ואנו נוהגין בכרפס זכר לכתונת הפסים שעשה יעקב אבינו ליוסף אשר בסבתה נתגלגל הדבר וירדו אבותינו למצרים".

even on this night of celebration and joy, we have a responsibility to remember.

The two stories stand together, neither story obscuring the other. Yes, our ancestors committed this sin. Yes, our ancestors were enslaved and then redeemed. Yes, these two stories are intertwined. Yes, our acknowledgment and responsibility must be assumed, and yes, our redemption is to be celebrated. In weaving them together on the night of the Seder, we refuse to allow overt guilt to destroy our gratitude and celebration, or our joy to deny our guilt.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that this balancing act of memory occurs on the Seder night, the night on which we celebrate past and future redemptions. Perhaps, in telling the truth about our past, we are actually creating redemption.

Maybe redemption is what happens when we sit together and tell our stories in their entirety, hiding nothing.

Maybe redemption is what happens when we set our ghosts free. ♦

