



Redemptive Relationship, Part 1: When Nothing Seems to Change

R. Aviva Richman – richman@hadar.org

Parashat Bo 5782

As we read the story of the Exodus in Parashat Bo, our tradition invites us to explore the nature of redemptive relationship. Instead of reading the Exodus as primarily historical or mythic, a prominent strand among our sages interprets the Exodus intimately and poetically, through the lens of the Song of Songs. The narrative becomes the origin story of our covenantal relationship with God—or, one might say, the story of how we fell in love. Our sages offer not one story of the “moment” when our relationship crystallized, but multiple stories that hinge on different moments in the Exodus, offering a dynamic picture of what redemptive relationship looks like. When we study this rich theology of love and read it back onto the interpersonal, we can understand our own relationships in a more dynamic, powerful, and maybe even redemptive way.

This week we see that the earliest moment of when we “fell in love” with God brings us to a scene when Israel is still stuck in Egypt. Our relationship takes shape even before the apparent act of redemption (leaving Egypt) occurs. Parashat Bo teaches us that formative and redemptive relationships can blossom in the very midst of difficult circumstances, even when it feels like our reality has not—and may never—change.



Playing off of the imagery of the “rose of Sharon” and the “lily of the valleys,” (Song of Songs 2:1), *midrash* tells of the Exodus journey as being “hidden in shadow” and then coming into “good deeds” and “song.” Redemptive divine love inspires a transformation into full self-expression, in deed and in voice. While we might think that the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) is the most natural setting for this eruption into song,¹ the first iteration of this arc occurs while we are still in Egypt:

שיר השירים רבה ב:א

"אני חבצלת השרון", אני היא וחביבה אני, אני היא שהייתי חבויה בצלן של מצרים, ולשעה קלה כנסני הקדוש ברוך הוא לרעמסס, והרטבתי מעשים טובים כשושנה, ואמרתי לפניו את השירה, שנאמר (ישעיה ל:כט) "השיר יהיה לכם כליל התקדש חג".

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:1

"I am a rose (*havatzelet*) of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." I am she, and beloved (*havivah*) am I; I am she who was beloved in the shadow (*tzilan*) of Egypt, and in a short time the Holy Blessed One gathered me to Raamses and I bloomed with good deeds like “a lily” and I said before [God] a song (*shirah*), as it is said: “You will have song on the night of the sanctified feast” (Isaiah 30:29).

In this passage, the formative moment of our love story with God is in Egypt, on the eve of the *pesah* sacrifice, singing a song **hoping** for redemption, but not having experienced it yet (the first instance of our custom to sing Hallel on Seder night).² From being “hidden in the shadow of Egypt,” we make it only so far as Raamses, still within Egypt’s borders and a concrete image

¹ And for this, see next week.

² For more on the origins of Hallel, see my essay “Finding Our Song in an Unredeemed World: Three Troubled Origins of Hallel,” in Hadar’s *Pesah Reader* from 5781, *Tzafun: Hidden in the Haggadah*, available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/pesah-reader-5781>.



of our slavery.³ This is a relationship in its earliest moments, when circumstances have not fully changed—after all, we are still in Egypt—and there is still much uncertainty about where the relationship is going and how it will get there. Raamses represents a subtler kind of transformation when realities on the ground still reflect an unredeemed state.

In the continuation of the *midrash*, there are two very different readings of how a transformative relationship with God interfaces with the depths of oppression, relevant for our understanding of this transformation still in the very site of slavery. One interpretation sees an act of full salvation; we were in great distress and God saved us:

רבי אבא בר כהנא אמר, אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, אני היא וחביבה אני, שנתונה בעמקי הצרות, וכשידלני הקדוש ברוך הוא מהצרות אני מרטבת מעשים טובים כשושנה ואומרת שירה לפניו, הדא הוא דכתיב (ישעיה כו:טז) "ה' בצר פקדוך"

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: The Assembly of Israel said before the Holy Blessed One, "I am she and beloved am I, for I am given over in the depths of troubles. And when the Holy Blessed One draws me out from the troubles, I bloom with good deeds like a lily and say before [God] a song (*shirah*).” That is why it is written, “In their distress they sought You...” (Isaiah 26:16).

We are in the depths of troubles, and then God draws us out from the troubles. This is the prototypical way we think of redemptive relationship: being saved from difficult

³ According to some commentaries, God first gathered all of Israel in Raamses before crossing the border, out of Egypt. See e.g. Mekhilta Massekhta de-Vahodesh 2: לפי זה יום רעמסס, ר' אליעזר אומר, ואשא אתכם על כנפי נשרים. שנתקבצו כולם ובאו רעמסס לשעה קלה. Note that this is seen as preliminary stage, leading up to the next moment described in Exodus 19:4 which Mekhilta interprets as Sinai. This seems to be a reference to the city Israel built as slaves. Some commentaries assert that this is a different Raamses, a fortress rather than a city (for example Ibn Ezra to Exodus 12:37). Either way, it is within Egypt.



circumstances.⁴ In a more radical interpretation, later the *midrash* imagines God not only leading us out of “the depths” but eviscerates these depths altogether:

אמר ר' אחא אמרה כנסת ישראל, בשעה שאת מעמיק עיניך בי אני מרטבת מעשים טובים כשושנה
ואומרת שירה, הה"ד (תהלים קל:א) "שיר המעלות ממעמקים קראתיך ה'".

Said Rabbi Aḥa: The Assembly of Israel said, “At the time your eyes gaze deeply at me, I bloomed with good deeds like a lily and said a song.” That is why it is written “*A song of ascents from the depths I called to you God*” (Psalm 130:1).

This *midrash* takes the same components—the depths, our transformation and adornment with “good deeds,” and an eruption in song. Yet, in this interpretation, the depths are not depths of troubles but rather God gazing deeply at us. Instead of crying out to God from the depths of trouble (as in Psalm 130, the intertext), the image is that the depths of God’s love, staring deeply into our eyes, as it were, transforms us to be able to “call out” and express ourselves in song. Short and sweet, this interpretation actually gives us pause to reconsider the whole story of the Exodus, where God’s dramatic plagues loom large. Instead, it suggests, the real root of redemption is not a miraculous and ostentatious rescue, but the sheer intensity of love.

In stark contrast to the interpretations we’ve seen so far, where our redemptive relationship leaves us without woes, the continuation of the *midrash* offers an alternative picture of what redemptive relationship looks like. Rather than emerging out of the depths of our troubles, this version amplifies that troubled experience. The *midrash* does not mince words. “I am in

⁴ Note that the prooftext is somewhat ironic, referring to a chapter in Isaiah that at face value has people crying out to God with no response. This is either actually meant ironically, or the *midrash* is based on Isaiah 26:19 and reads ורננו as the people of Israel in times of trouble—as good as “dead”—revived through God’s salvation and singing in praise.



hell” it says, and then imagines being redeemed from the depths of hell at the end of days. Yet when it goes on to expand this scene, we don’t find God taking us out of hell but rather going to hell with us, just as all nations are doomed to hell with their gods due to misdeeds and failures. The *midrash* closes with the famous verse from Psalm 23: “As I walk in the valley of the shadow of death I will not fear evil, for You are with me.”⁵ The trajectory of relationship here is not God taking us out of our troubles, but God coming to accompany us where we are, as we suffer like all of humanity suffers. The theme of God suffering with us is not unfamiliar in Jewish theology—particularly in understanding the destruction of the Temple and years of exile—but is surprising to see juxtaposed with an image about the Exodus. The Exodus is a story of God rescuing God’s special people from their suffering. This passage retells “redemption” as God being with a not-so-special people, as undeserving as everyone else, as we remain in the midst of suffering.

This final scene of God joining us in our woes may seem totally different than the previous interpretations we saw, but perhaps it is not entirely at odds. The idea that the origins of our relationship with God began in Raamses, still in Egypt, makes room for a picture of redemption that grows in the very midst of an unredeemed context. The second interpretation we saw may actually reinforce this picture, as it is solely focused on God gazing deeply at us. We learn that redemption comes by virtue of being in a relationship grounded in a deeply loving gaze that brings us to fuller self-expression, even without any conclusive shift in our circumstances.

רבנן אמרין כנסת ישראל אמרתהו, אמרה כנסת ישראל אני היא וחביבה אני, שאני נתונה בעמקי גיהנם, וכשיגאלני הקדוש ברוך הוא ממעמקיה, הה"ד (תהלים מ) ויעלני מבור שאון אני מרטבת מעשים טובים ואומרת לפני שירה, הה"ד (תהלים מ) ויתן בפי שיר חדש, אתיא דרבנן כההיא דאמר ר' אלעזר המודעי, עתידים שרי אומות העולם לעתיד לבא, שיבואו לקטרג את ישראל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואומרים רבש"ע אלו עבדו עבודת כוכבים ואלו עבדו עבודת כוכבים אלו גלו עריות ואלו גלו עריות, אלו שפכו דמים ואלו שפכו דמים, מפני מה אלו יורדין לגיהנם ואלו אין יורדין, והקב"ה משיב להם ואומר, אם כן הוא ירדו כל העמים עם אליהם לגיהנם, הה"ד (מיכה ד) כי כל העמים ילכו איש בשם אלהיו, אמר ר' ראובן אלו לא היה הדבר כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו כביכול (ישעיה סו) כי באש ה' נשפט, ה' שופט אין כתיב כאן אלא נשפט, הוא שאמר דוד ברוח הקדש (תהלים כג) גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירע רע כי אתה עמדי.



To the extent that our lives or our world feel stuck at times, the “Raamses” version of the origins of redemptive relationship resonates strongly. The theological love of Raamses translates into the love we express when we take the leap to be with someone in pain, even when we know we can’t make it go away. It is the love of day-in, day-out presence in relationships with children, parents, loved ones, or friends navigating chronic conditions. It is the love that carries us through a global pandemic. God and Israel in this formative stage teach us the force of a loving presence as we weather the storms that we cannot control. From inside the storm, this mutual love powers a sense of expression and agency, in action and voice (“good deeds” and “song”). Even as circumstances may be slow to change, or not change at all, we can all hope to build these kinds of relationships that are the root of any redemption.

