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Karen Miller, Editor

A D'var Torah for Pesach

IN A GOOD TIME

בשעה טובה

By Ilana Goldstein Saks¹

On Shabbat *chol hamoed* of Pesach we read from the book of *Yehezkel*, chapter 37, as a *haftorah* portion. In this *haftorah* reading we hear the miraculous prophecy of the dry bones which represent Bnei Yisrael, in the darkness of their Babylonian exile, coming to life and achieving redemption – a return to their homeland. What is the connection between *Yehezkel* chapter 37 and the holiday of Pesach?

In order to answer this question let us review the content of the prophecy. The *haftorah* states:

הִיָּתָה עָלַי יָד ה' וַיּוֹצֵאֵנִי בְרוּחַ ה' וַיְנִיחֵנִי בְּתוֹךְ הַבְּקָעָה וְהִיא מְלֵאָה עֲצָמוֹת:
וְהָעֵבְרִינִי עֲלֵיהֶם סָבִיב סָבִיב וְהִנֵּה רַבּוֹת מְאֹד עַל פְּנֵי הַבְּקָעָה וְהִנֵּה יְבֹשׁוֹת
מְאֹד:

The hand of the Lord came upon me. He took me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry (*Yehezkel* 37:1-2).²

Before the prophet's eyes the dry bones join up and return to life:

וַתָּבוֹא בָהֶם הַרוּחַ וַיַּחְיּוּ וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ עַל רַגְלֵיהֶם חֵל גְּדוֹל מְאֹד מְאֹד:

The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude (37:10).

"Do not despair," *Yehezkel* tells his people. Even if it seems like all is lost, redemption will eventually come.

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² English translations of Translations of Bible taken from The New JPS Translation. Other translations are my own.

הַעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה כָּל בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה הֵנָּה אֲמָרִים יָבֹשׁוּ עֲצָמוֹתֵינוּ וְאֶבְדָּה תִּקְוַתֵנוּ נִגְזַרְנוּ לָנוּ: לָכֵן הִנְבֵּא וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי ה' הֵנָּה אֲנִי פֹתַח אֶת קְבֻרֹתֵיכֶם וְהֵעֲלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִקְבֻרֹתֵיכֶם עִמִּי וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֶדְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל:

These bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.' Prophecy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of your graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel (37:11-12).

The theme of redemption from the depths of despair is clearly common to both Yehezkel's words and the story of the exodus. An intriguing comment in the Talmud, however, links the two in a far less obvious way:

ומאן נינהו מתים שהחיה יחזקאל? אמר רב: אלו בני אפרים שמנו לקץ וטעו.

And who were the dead that Yehezkel revived? Rav said: they were the sons of Efraim, who calculated the time of redemption and erred (*Sanhedrin*, 92b).

The anonymous bones, according to Rav, had belonged to the children of Efraim who were killed after they had miscalculated the timing of the redemption and left Egypt prematurely.³ The midrash implies that like Yehezkel's contemporaries, the children of Efraim were impatient for the redemption. The prophet, according to the reading of this midrash, warns the people of the dangers of expecting redemption before its time.

While it is true that the midrash connects Yehezkel's prophecy to the story of the exodus, one still wonders why this prophecy, of all the prophecies of redemption, would be chosen as a *haftarah* for Pesach when it is associated not with the actual exodus from Egypt but with a prior, failed attempt.

The answer to this question might be found in a different account in the Talmud involving another set of bones – those of Yosef. At the end of *Breishit*, Yosef makes his brothers swear that when Bnei Yisrael leave Egypt they will take his bones with them (see *Breishit* 50:25). Yosef's bones, like those in Yehezkel's vision, become a symbol of hope, a promise of redemption. When the moment of redemption from Egypt arrives, the Talmud relates, Moshe searches for Yosef's coffin, in order to fulfill the oath (see *Shmot* 13:19):

ומנין היה יודע משה רבינו היכן יוסף קבור? אמרו: סרח בת אשר נשתיירה מאותו הדור. הלך משה אצלה, אמר לה: 'כלום את יודעת היכן יוסף קבור?' אמרה לו: 'ארוון של מתכת עשו לו מצרים וקבעוהו בנילוס הנהר, כדי שיתברכו מימיו.' הלך משה ועמד על שפת נילוס, אמר לו: 'יוסף, יוסף, הגיע העת שנשבע הקב"ה שאני גואל אתכם, והגיעה השבועה שהשבעת את ישראל, אם אתה מראה עצמך - מוטב, אם לאו - הרי אנו מנוקין משבועתך.' מיד צף ארונו של יוסף.

³ This midrash is based on a particular reading of an ambiguous statement regarding the sons of Efraim in *I Divrei HaYamim* 7:21. See the commentary of Yehuda Kiel (in the *Daat Mikra* series) for an interpretation of this verse.

And from whence did Moshe know where Yosef was buried? They said: Serah, the daughter of Asher, remained from that generation. Moshe went to her. He said to her: 'Do you not know where Yosef is buried?' She said to him: 'The Egyptians made for him a metal coffin, and they fixed it in the Nile river in order that its waters should be blessed.' Moshe went and stood on the bank of the Nile. He said to him: 'Yosef, Yosef, The time has arrived which the Holy One Blessed be He swore I would redeem you, and the [time of the] oath which you made Israel take has arrived. If you show yourself – good, if not - behold we are clean of your oath.' Immediately the coffin of Yosef floated to the surface (*Sotah*, 13a).

Serah bat Asher, the central figure in this midrash, is mentioned, very briefly, in two verses in the Torah (*Breishit*, 41:17; *Bamidbar*, 26:46). These verses seem to imply that she lived an unusually long life. The midrash follows suit and extends her days even further. It is her long life, perhaps, which enables her to know things which no other living person knows – such as the location of Yosef's bones. *Tosfot* on this story in the Talmud, comments on Serah's unique qualities:

תימה! והלא מכיר ויאיר בן מנשה נולדו בימי יעקב והיו מבאי הארץ. למה לא שאלם משה והם היו מבני בניו של יוסף. י"ל שסוד הגאולה נמסר לסרח... וכיון שבא משה הלכו זקני ישראל אצלה לפי שכבר נכשלו על ידי בני אפרים שיצאו שלשים שנה לפני הקץ, ונמלכו עתה בה... לכך הלך גם משה אצלה.

This is astonishing! For Machir and Yair, the sons of Menashe, were born during the time of Yaakov, and were among those who entered the Land. Why did not Moshe ask them, since they are from the grandchildren of Yosef? It may be said that the secret of the [time of] redemption was passed on to Serah... and when Moshe came the elders of Israel went to her, since they had already failed by the hands of the sons of Efraim who left 30 years before the end, and so they took council from her now... Therefore Moshe also went to her (*Tosfot* on *Sotah*, 13a).

According to *Tosfot*, Serah, in contrast to the Eframites, held the key to the timing of the redemption. Here her long life not only makes her privy to forgotten information, but it allows her a certain perspective on history. She is portrayed as possessing great perception and a keen sense of timing at a particularly key moment in Am Yisrael's history.⁴ Knowing the consequences of the error of the son's of Efraim, the elders did not want to risk repeating the same mistake by asking the sons of Menashe, Efraim's brother. *Tosfot*, like Rav's comment in *Sanhedrin*, emphasizes that restraint - the ability to hold oneself back until the right moment – is the secret of redemption.

A careful reading of these sources, however, provides a further insight which relates to the message of Pesach. While it is true that the elders display great care and

⁴*Tosfot* bases idea on *Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer*, 48. A similar account is found in *Shmot Rabbah* 5:13. The qualities described in these sources repeat in the many midrashim about her. See *Midrash Hagadol* 45:26, *Breishit Rabbah* 94:9, and *Shmot Rabbah* 20:19 for some other accounts of Serah in the midrash.

hesitation in determining the time of the redemption, once it has been decided, with Serah's help, that the moment has arrived, alacrity, not restraint, is the proper mode of operation. In Moshe's behavior, as described in the account in *Sotah*, it is recognition of the urgency of the moment of redemption that is most evident. The time for the redemption is NOW, Moshe tells Yosef, "We are leaving – it's up to you to decide if you are coming along." The elders teach us that prematurely pushing for something is not good – the behavior of Moshe stresses that one should make sure not to miss the opportunity when the time has finally come.

This second message is central to the holiday of Pesach, as well as its main symbol – *matzah*. The *mitzvah* of eating *matzah* is wrapped up in the idea of seizing a moment, not missing an opportunity. When Bnei Yisrael are first commanded to eat *matzah* they are told to eat it hastily, together with the *korban pesach*, the night they leave Egypt (*Shmot*, 12:18-11). Later, they cannot let their bread rise because they have to leave Egypt in a hurry (*Shmot*, 12:34, 39).⁵ The *matzah*, then, symbolizes the swift break which Bnei Yisrael had to make with Egypt. *Matzah*, like the redemption, does not tolerate hesitation. A second more than 18 minutes and you have *hametz* on your hands.⁶ They had to wait hundreds of years for the redemption, but when the time finally came to go – they had to leave immediately, and not a moment later.

So what of the revived dry bones of the sons of Efraim? Why does Rav see them as the symbol of a resurrected nation? The choice of their story for the *haftorah* emphasizes not their mistake, but that which they did right, and their ultimate reward. The midrash suggests that although they erred with their lack of caution, and consequently suffered, their efforts were not disregarded. Redemption, ultimately, will come to those who look at the world with open eyes and are poised for action. The exiles in Babylonia, to whom Yehezkel spoke his comforting words, only needed to recall the exodus from Egypt to be assured that God would remember them, even when they felt so forgotten. All the more so, the image of the revived bones of the first unsuccessful exodus would remind them, and us, that even when hope seems so distant and actions so useless, one should never despair.

⁵It is generally assumed, based on the above verse and the comment of Raban Gamliel in the Hagaddah, that the reason we eat *matzah* on Pesach is that when Bnei Yisrael were leaving Egypt they did not have time for their bread to rise. Prior to that event, however, they were already commanded to eat *matzah* both as part of the *korban pesach* and as a commemoration of the exodus (*Shmot* 12:8,15). Clearly *matzah* had to have had some significance even before their bread did not rise on the day of the exodus. See the commentary of the Netziv (*HaEmek Davar*) on *Shmot*, 12:39, who suggests that the phrase "יכלו להתמהמה" means not that they were *unable* to hesitate, but rather that they were not *permitted* to hesitate, because of God's command that they leave "בחיפזון".

⁶ See: *Sefer HaHinuch*, *mitzvah* 117, who suggests that *hametz* symbolizes sluggishness.