**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**From Slavery to Redemption**

**Dr. Yael Ziegler**

**Shiur #02:**

**Leaving Egypt’s Religious Conceptions (1);**

**The Source of Human Success**

Israel’s vision for a new society, as presented in the previous *shiur*, revolves around its theological objectives. The *Shemot* narrative demurs from offering any concrete information about Egyptian religious practices or attitudes.[[1]](#footnote-1) It names no Egyptian deities[[2]](#footnote-2) and does not indicate any awareness of Pharaoh’s self-proclaimed deified status.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet, if you look more closely at the narrative, you can observe how the text subtly dismantles significant aspects of Egypt’s theological (and cultural) beliefs, including its attitudes toward its deities and king.[[4]](#footnote-4) More significantly, the biblical narrative subverts Egypt’s basic notions regarding the origins of their success and the way Egyptians perceive themselves in relation to the divine.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Egypt’s Economy: The Gift of the Nile**

The success of ancient Egypt revolves around the Nile River, whose dependable flooding cycle produces fertile topsoil and a surplus of food, sustaining a sizeable population with the resources and manpower to construct a highly advanced society.[[6]](#footnote-6) Biblical passages regularly recognize the importance of the Nile for Egypt.[[7]](#footnote-7) In an implicit reference to the Nile, Moses prepares the nation for entrance to the land of Israel by contrasting it to Egypt, especially her well-functioning irrigation system:

For the land that you are coming to possess is not like the land of Egypt that you have left there, where you planted your seed and irrigated it with your feet, like a vegetable garden. But the land that you are crossing over to possess is a land of mountains and valleys; by the rain of the heavens she will drink water. It is a land that God seeks; God’s eyes are always on the land, from the beginning of the year until its end. (*Devarim* 11:10-12)

Egyptians water their fields with their feet, which appears to reference either a pulley system operated with the feet or perhaps channels dug using human labor.[[8]](#footnote-8) In either case, this irrigation system shapes Egyptian attitudes and way of life, drawing the Egyptian eyes downward, toward their feet, their source of their food supply and economic success. Simply put, Egyptians perceive themselves as the fount of their achievements, confidently relying on their own input to ensure sufficient output. Once they construct an irrigation system, the river regularly flows into the fields, securing a seamless and dependable supply of food. In this river society, humans seem responsible for their success; they can easily dispose of genuine reliance upon God.

It is not difficult to imagine how this translates into the deification of humans, who can rise to the status of gods. This is especially the case regarding the king, positioned at the helm of this prosperous society. Consider, for example, Yechezkel’s portrayal of the Egyptian Pharaoh (not a particular Pharaoh, but all Pharaohs) who contentedly swims in the Nile, boastfully taking credit for its bounty: “This is **my** Nile and I have created it!” (*Yechezkel* 29:3).[[9]](#footnote-9)

The land of Israel, explains Moshe in *Devarim* 11, operates differently. No river runs through it. Instead, the residents of Israel rely on rainfall, a tenuous existence in which survivability and solvency remain unpredictable. From a pragmatic standpoint, Egypt is surely preferable. But the land of Israel shapes an entirely different attitude toward prosperity. The passage in *Devarim* introduces a theology linked to the dependence upon rainfall; humans are taught to look upward for the source of their success.

Rain is created to link heaven and earth. Prior to the creation of mankind, God does not create rain, but allows the land to be irrigated from below:

And all of the shrubbery in the field was not yet in the earth, neither did any herb of the field yet grow, because the Lord God had not brought rain (*himtir*) upon the earth, and there was no person to work the earth. (*Bereishit* 2:5).

For Rashi, rains are designed to produce prayer; God brings rain only once there is a creature who can pray:

What is the reason that God did not bring rain [before the creation of humans]? Because “there was no person to work the earth” and there was no one to recognize the benefit of the rains. Only when a human arrived and knew that they were necessary for the world, he prayed for the [rains] and they poured down. Then the trees and grass grew. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 2:5)

*Bereishit Rabba* explains that God had originally intended the land to obtain irrigation exclusively from below, but then “changed His mind” and decided to water the land from above, from the heavens:

And that is how the land first absorbed moisture, as it says, “A mist came up from the ground.” But then the Holy One blessed be He revoked that idea, deciding that the land would only absorb moisture from above. (*Bereishit Rabba* 13:9)

To explain God’s decision, the *midrash* offers four different objectives, concluding with the goal that is relevant for our purposes: “So that all [humans] will train their eyes to look upward.”

Unexpectedly, *Devarim* 11:12 does not explicitly state that the quest for rain causes Israel’s populace to look upward. Perhaps this point needs no elaboration. After all, Israel will naturally look upward in hopes of rain. Instead, the passage states that Israel is a land that *God* scrutinizes; God’s eyes remain riveted upon the land. And so, when Israel looks upward in search of rain, they find God’s eyes steadily gazing at them, patiently seeking a connection.

God’s attentions upon the land involve judgment; He routinely evaluates whether Israel deserves rain. The continuation of *Devarim* 11 elaborates on the manner in which God brandishes the rains as a tool of reward and punishment:

And if you listen to my commandments… **then I will give the rains at their proper time**… But beware lest your hearts be misled, and you stray and worship other gods and bow to them. God will become angry with you and stop the heavens. **Then there will be no rain** and the land will not give its produce. (*Devarim* 11:13-17)

God does not just withhold rain to punish; He also actively brings rain in a punitive manner. The book of *Bereishit* presents humankind, on the whole, as disobedient to God. For this reason, God rains only destruction in the first book of the Torah, wreaking havoc and punishment upon humans. The word *matar* (meaning rain) appears twice more in the book[[10]](#footnote-10) first when God brings the floodwaters to destroy humankind (*Bereishit* 7:4), and then, when God showers Sodom and Amorrah with fire and brimstone (*Bereishit* 19:24). The word *matar* appears in the book of *Shemot* in a similarly destructive context, as God unleashes the plague of hail upon the Egyptians (*Shemot* 9:18, 23).[[11]](#footnote-11) It is only once Israel leaves Egypt – with the goal of serving God (*Shemot* 3:12) – that the word *matar* appears in a positive context (the manna), in order to dispense reward (*Shemot* 16:4). For the first time, humankind seems headed toward its purpose; with Israel at the helm, heaven and earth can connect in a propitious partnership.

Dependence upon rain reminds Israel’s inhabitants that survival and economic success are contingent upon the success of the nation’s relationship with God. Obedience to God leads to plentiful harvest, while disobedience spawns drought.[[12]](#footnote-12) Humans must recognize that their success depends upon God. God expects Israel to disseminate this creed to the world, in accordance with its general role to foster widespread knowledge of God.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Egypt’s Economy: The Breadbasket of the Ancient World**

It is not just the Nile that shapes Egypt’s attitude. Bread is a dominant feature in the biblical portrayal of Egypt, an apt representation of her self-reliance and self-satisfaction.[[14]](#footnote-14) Plentiful bread is a critical source of both economic and military success, providing sufficient caloric needs for Egypt’s troops.[[15]](#footnote-15) Archeological finds illustrate the importance of breadmaking in Egypt, artistic scenes and models frequently portray bakeries while tombs often contain loaves in various shapes.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is possible that Egyptians invented the process of making bread.[[17]](#footnote-17) Certainly, they enjoyed their bread, which symbolizes their well-nourished society, content and satiated in its rising, bloated success.[[18]](#footnote-18)

According to the Bible, Egyptians take great care with their bread, imputing it with what seems to be semi-sacred status. *Bereishit* 43:32 explains that Egyptians do not eat bread with the Hebrews, because it is “an abomination to them.” Earlier, Joseph’s Egyptian master, Potiphar, gives him charge over everything in his household, except the bread (*lechem*) that he eats (*Bereishit* 39:6).[[19]](#footnote-19) The source of Egyptian success and the symbol of its innovativeness, bread is an estimable staple of Egyptian sustenance, one not easily shared with foreigners. This does not mean that the nation of Israel did not partake of the bread in Egypt. There appears to have been plentiful bread for all residents, including its Hebrew slaves.

It is not so simple to leave behind a land of bread, a country confident of its ability to provide abundant food for her populace. Not long after their departure from Egypt, the nation expresses its understandable fear of journeying in the desert without food. Their desire to return to the country that enslaved them would be unfathomable were it not for the mention of Egypt’s plentiful food, and especially the meat and bread:

How we wish that we would die by the hand of God in the land of Egypt, where we sat on the pots of meat and **where we ate bread to satiation** – for you have taken us to this desert to kill all of this congregation by starvation.” (*Shemot* 16:3)

God responds immediately, promising to rain down (*mamtir*) upon them “bread from the heavens,” namely, the manna (*Shemot* 16:4).[[20]](#footnote-20) Like literal rain, the manna trains Israel to depend upon God for survival. In Egypt, bread was a product of human toil, thereby confirming the greatness of human achievement.[[21]](#footnote-21) Once they leave Egypt, God directs Israel to look upward for their bread. This parallels the idea of replacing the Nile with rain; by raining down “bread from the heavens,” God steers Israel’s attentions and attitudes in a new direction, forestalling them from drawing the erroneous self-congratulatory conclusions of a thriving society:[[22]](#footnote-22)

When your heart becomes lofty and you forget your God who took you out of Egypt… who feeds you manna in the desert, which your forefathers did not know, so as to give you hardships and to test you, which will benefit you in the end. So that when you will say in your heart, “*My* strength and the power of *my* heart brought me this success,” you will remember that God gave you the strength to succeed. (*Devarim* 8:16-17).

Egypt is the archetype of a nation whose success undermines the ultimate goal of recognizing God, causing them to regard their own success as a product of their human superiority. In removing Israel from Egypt, God guides them to remove Egypt from Israel. To do so, they must construct a society that rejects the worship of their own strength and instead looks upward for the source of their success.

Integrated within the narrative of Israel’s departure from Egypt is a curious detail. In the rush to leave Egypt, the nation departs without leavened bread. This gives rise to a central component of the yearly commemoration of the Exodus. On Pesach, Israel abstains from eating bread for seven days, recalling the manner in which they left bread behind in the land of Egypt. Rejecting bread is equated with rejecting Egypt – her satiation and smugness – and instead embracing exclusive reliance upon God.

1. Tanakh displays its contempt for idolatry by largely neglecting to expound upon specific pagan practices and beliefs. Ramban observes the Torah’s reticence regarding idolatry in his commentary on *Bereishit* 12:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There is one possible mention. In *Shemot* 10:10, Pharaoh seethes with anger at Moshe’s demand, sputtering, “For evil (*ra’a*) is in your face.” Exegetes understand this phrase in various ways. Rashi cites a midrashic idea that the word for evil is actually an allusion to a star, called Ra. Perhaps Rashi unwittingly alludes to the well-known Egyptian sun-god, Ra. In this reading, Pharaoh threatens Moshe with the wrath of his god. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Prophets and *midrashim* do, however, note that Pharaohs regarded themselves as deities. For instance, *Yechezkel* 29:3 observes with derision Pharaoh’s self-perception as the creator of the Nile. The *Shemot* narrative simply ignores these claims, typical of ancient Pharaonic hubris. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In *Shemot* 12:12, God includes the gods of Egypt among those whom He will judge. See also *Bamidbar* 33:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In next week’s *shiur*, we will examine how the biblical story combats other fundamental Egyptian attitudes, such as their perception of the power of the human king and the nature of death. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The centrality of the Nile to Egypt’s success has long been recognized. The fifth century BCE Greek historian Herodotus refers to the “gift of the Nile.” Without the Nile, there would be no Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Prophets, for example, frequently refer to the Nile, often as a metonym for Egypt and sometimes in a manner that intertwines the Nile and Egypt. See e.g. *Yeshayahu* 19:7-8, 23:3, *Yechezkel* 30:12, and *Amos* 8:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Egyptians practiced a form of water management called basin irrigation, constructing a network of earthen banks to control and direct the floodwaters in an efficacious manner. They also used a water-lifting device, called a *shaduf*, which enabled farmers to irrigate crops near the riverbanks and canals during the dry summer, thereby increasing production. Possibly these devices could have been operated with the feet, thereby accounting for the above reference. See Karl W. Butzer, *Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt: A Study in Cultural Ecology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), M.S. Drowser, "Water-Supply, Irrigation, and Agriculture," in C. Singer, E.J. Holmyard, and A.R. Hall, eds., *A History of Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Unsurprisingly, the first two plagues strike at the Nile, illustrating its vulnerability to divine power and the preposterousness of assuming that any human, even the Pharaoh, controls its bounty. See also *Yeshayahu* 19:5-10, where the prophet threatens that God will dry up the Nile, indicating divine, not human, control over Egypt’s most precious resource. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Following the initial appearance of this word in *Bereishit* 2:5, which links rain and the creation of humans. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The next time the word *matar* appears in the Torah is in the passage in *Devarim* 11, where it appears three times. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This becomes a foundational concept for Israel, as is evident from the fact that *Devarim* 11:13-17 is recited twice daily in Jewish liturgy. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This goal begins with Abraham, whose first act in the land is to build an altar and “call on the name of God.” We will examine this idea at greater length in our chapter on the structure of the book of *Shemot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ironically, their bread seems to have been the cause of many Egyptians’ premature death. The bread tended to contain sand, which acted as sandpaper upon their teeth, causing the enamel to wear away; examinations of mummies have often revealed tooth extractions, terrible teeth, and attrition of the teeth with pulpal exposure. Without antibiotics, tooth infections tended to be fatal; King Tut (Tutankhamun) may have died from a dental infection that entered his bloodstream, and the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut likely died from an infection that started in her tooth and traveled into her sinus cavities and beyond. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The Hebrew word for bread (*lechem*) is likely etymologically related to the word for warfare (*milchama*). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. One of the best examples comes from a relief in a [5th-Dynasty](http://www.touregypt.net/hdyn5.htm) tomb at Saqqara belonging to Ti. However, there are also Old Kingdom statuettes that portray baking activities. Middle Kingdom models, notably from the tomb of Meketra, also provide some details, portraying a busy, robust bakery. Several tombs at Beni Hasan contain bread-making scenes, and at least one other is found in the New Kingdom wall paintings of Nebamun's tomb on the West Bank of Thebes (modern Luxor). Two ancient bakeries (from the period of the Old Kingdom) were discovered in Giza near the pyramids. In Elephantine, archeologists unearthed an ancient bakery where evidence of ashes reached near the ceiling, suggesting production of bread on a massive industrial scale. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Evidence suggests that Egyptians used yeast for fermentation (of both bread and beer) in pre-dynastic times, as early as 4000 BCE. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In an article in *Megadim* 13 (1991), Rav Yoel Bin-Nun explains that bread (as opposed to matza) is a symbol of the end result, a symbol of “prosperity and success, blessing and abundance” (p. 26). The process of fermentation causes bread to swell and distend, an apt representation of Egypt’s arrogance and puffed-up attitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Many midrashic sources and medieval commentaries regard the word “bread” as a figurative reference to Potiphar’s wife. Rashbam suggests that *lechem* is simply for a word for food. Nevertheless, the explicit reference to bread here, along with the other references, suggests a reverential attitude toward bread in Egyptian society. See, for example, the comments of both Ibn Ezra and Radak on *Bereishit* 39:6, where they regard the word *lechem* as literal, linking it to the verse in 43:32 cited above. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The word bread appears seven times in *Shemot* 16; the manna is a clear response to Israel’s longing for Egypt’s bread. God sends the quails in response to their recollection of meat. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Breadmaking in Egypt was quite a feat of human labor. It involved an hours-long process that included harvesting the stalks, removing the chaff, delicately separating the seeds from the husks, and moistening and carefully pounding the seed to make the flour. Illustrations found in tombs show that women were generally in charge of this part of the arduous process. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Of course, in the land of Israel, the manna no longer falls. Yet, the lesson has been internalized. Indeed, the blessing made before eating bread blesses God, “who extracts bread from the ground.” Although this contains a slight inaccuracy (only wheat emerges from the ground; it is human labor and innovation that turns the wheat into bread), the blessing is formulated to highlight the role that God plays in Israel’s basic survival and economic success, even when that success seems attributable to human prowess. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)