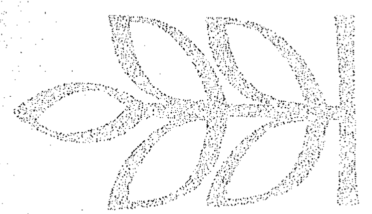

The Particulars of Rapture

REFLECTIONS ON EXODUS

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IMAGE/DOUBLEDAY
New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

as they grow to adulthood. Some of these narratives will be subversive, even demonic. But the project will be "to utter true words," to re-evoke in a later time the power of redemption that is incarnate in language.

All the complex events of the Exodus are *le-ma'an te-saper*, "in order that you may relate the story" (10:2). More pointedly, the practices that will commemorate them are "in order that the Torah of God may be in your mouth" (13:9); in order to utter these true words, a continual process of engaging with the multiform "narrow places" of Egypt, of engaging with the ambiguities of desire, will be necessary. The narrow places are, on the most intimate plane, the straits of the throat passage, constricted with these ambiguities.[137] All the sliding meanings of the Exodus will require continual "re-fixing," to accommodate the claims of the human mouth and of the Torah of God.

4 Beshallach

SONGLINE THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

(13:17–17:16)

1. "What?" Subversion in the Wilderness

Preventing Subversive Thoughts

A remarkable feature of the liberation experience is the negative tonality that informs the narrative. At the moment of crossing the border, we might have imagined high elation, the intoxication of freedom; in so many literary accounts of breaking across borders to freedom, even in dangerous situations, a giddy symbolic joy is the main response to arriving on the "other side." In the Exodus narrative, however, we find a spate of negative statements. On the one hand, there is the baking of the *matza*, the unleavened bread, "for it had *not* risen, for they were driven out of Egypt and could *not* delay; moreover, even provisions for the journey they did *not* prepare for themselves" (12:39). On the other hand, "God did *not* lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, *because* it was close; for God said, *Lest* the people change their minds when they see battle, and return to Egypt"[1] (13:17).

The first of these negative descriptions we shall take up later. The second description, however, of God's choice of travel-route for the liberated people—or, rather, of "the road not taken," of the rejected itinerary—is given prominence by being placed at the beginning of the Parsha. To de-

scribe God's thinking process, as it were, and to reveal the rejected alternatives, together with an opaque rationalization for the chosen route, is certainly an unusual narrative strategy.[2] For what purpose are we told of the road not taken? And how are we to understand God's explanation of His choice?

Rashi's comment seems to clarify the issue:

> ". . . because it was close": and therefore it was easy to return to Egypt by the same road.
>
> ". . . when they see battle": If they had traveled by the direct route, they would have returned to Egypt. If even when He led them round by an indirect route [*me'ukam*—a crooked, zigzag road], they said, 'Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt . . .' (Num 14:4), how much more so if He had led them by a direct route [*peshuta*—a simple, predictable route]!
>
> "lest they change their minds": They will *think a thought* about the fact that they have left Egypt; and will set their minds on returning.

Rashi explains: the logic of God's thinking is about the people's desire to return to Egypt. If the journey back is too easy (direct, straight), they will think the forbidden desire and act upon it. So God leads them by a crooked route, hoping that the complication will prevent their having such subversive thoughts. By being admitted into God's thought process, the reader learns one essential fact: the central importance of the people's desire to return to Egypt, even in the first elation of freedom.

The opposition of the road not taken (the "straight" road) to the route chosen (the "crooked" route) carries its own paradoxical resonance. Obviously, the straight road is preferable to the "crooked"; strategically, physically, and ethically; indeed, the metaphorical use of these expressions—the straight and the crooked paths—is a commonplace in ethical writings.[3]

Yet, here, the Torah makes a point of God's not taking the obvious route. Instead, a dubious, unmarked route[4] is chosen, for reasons that are related to a repressed desire. So far, we have had no evidence of such a desire; it is the omniscient God who first speaks of it, as though it were self-evident. Through this opening speech at the moment of redemption, we understand that the Israelites, even at this moment, are ambivalent about the movement to freedom. There are potential thoughts about the Exodus that they are primed to think. As proof of this, Rashi points to the later moments of transgression, when the people explicitly plan to return to Egypt, even with the practical handicap of God's strategy—the circuitous, zigzag route.

On this reading, we perceive the strength of God's resolve that the people should not "think thoughts," should not "return to Egypt." But the problem, of course, is that, in spite of all God's precautions, the people do think those thoughts—not just in the case of the narrative of the Spies, which Rashi quotes, but several times before that culminating narrative. Indeed, in this very Parsha, before we have time to draw breath, we hear the people expressing such thoughts, several times. God, then, is represented as changing their itinerary, in order to prevent what, in fact, happens.

Gur Arye raises this problem and, in essence, makes the following suggestion: God's concern is that, if the people do, in fact, think such thoughts, they will surely act on them and try to return to Egypt. What He aims to prevent is the *ease* of such a return. He cannot prevent them from thinking thoughts; He can make it harder for them to act on them.

God, then, sees redemption in a mirror mode, as it were—the way out is also, potentially, the way back; and the people become players in a drama of burned bridges. The fact that they cannot easily return does not, however, prevent them from "thinking thoughts." The words for these thoughts are scattered throughout this Parsha, in episodes of fear and anxiety, in which the people's language "about the fact that they have left Egypt," tells of radical doubt.[5] It is not simply that they cry out in fright at the sight of the pursuing Egyptians: it is the sarcasm of the words they use, a sarcasm about God's intentions, about His relationship with them, about the meaning of this Exodus:

> "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is *better* [*tov*] for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?' " (14:11–12)

The radical nature of their doubt is revealed perhaps most abrasively in their use of the word "good" (*tov*) to describe Egyptian slavery, and to embed it in a fatalistic view of the narrative, which, already, hardly begun, is to end in the desert sands. Their thought represents a serious attempt to make sense of events. When they say, for instance, "Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt. . . ?" we wonder: When did they ever say this? There is no record of such a protest in earlier chapters.[6] We may deduce the missing

passage out of silence, perhaps at 4:31, or 5:21, or 6:9; in this case, their fear harks back to Moses' complaints, which we noticed in the previous chapter, that the people would not believe his message. The people's sarcasm at the Sea, then, seems to justify Moses' earlier skepticism about them. Alternatively, however, we may detect here a fabrication: a retroactive interpretation of the past, aligning it with the perceptions of the present. In other words, this is a moment of serious thinking, one in which the Israelites find it all too plausible that they have been seduced from a place of relative security to a place of sure death. They reread their story as a tragedy, a story about death: "Is it because there were no graves. . . ?" "What is this (*Mah zoth*) that you have done to us. . . ?" is the radical question of meaning. Is this a story of redemption; or of diabolical hatred;[7] or even—the most unnerving possibility of all—of the personal megalomania of Moses? In this last case, the people's question is addressed most personally to Moses: "*You* brought us to die . . . What have *you* done to us, taking us out of Egypt. . . ?"

Moses promises the frightened people, trapped between the Egyptians and the Sea, that they will never see the Egyptians the same way again. And, indeed, after the miraculous events of that night and morning, the people do see differently: "Israel *saw* the Egyptians dead on the shore of the Sea. And when Israel *saw* the great Hand that God had wielded against the Egyptians, the people *feared* God; they had faith in God and His servant Moses" (14:30–31). The difference is etched against a background of similarity: once again, it seems, vision leads to fear. Indeed, the two words form an assonance in Hebrew (*va-yar/va-yire'u*). Before, "the Israelites *lifted up their eyes and saw* Egypt was travelling after them. And they were *afraid* and cried out to God" (14:10). Now, they see Egypt dead—a very different vision—and fear God. What they see and what they fear has changed. But is the experience of fear changed? Is this new "fear of God" different from the primary fear of death?

The earlier fear led them to cry out to God, in the sarcastic terms we have already noticed. ("Is it for lack of graves in Egypt. . . ? What is this you have done to us?") The word *va-yitzaku*—"they cried out"—is traditionally associated with prayer,[8] so that the sarcastic speech jars against it. Ramban suggests that the narrative covers two phases: at first, the people pray to God to turn back the ominous march of Pharaoh's army; then, when they see Pharaoh continue his advance, they realize bitterly: "Our prayers have not been accepted," and "the evil thought entered their minds to doubt Moses' authenticity."

In this reading, the same word, *va-yitzaku*, modulates from a prayer to

a nihilistic sarcasm. Ramban's text describes the effect of frustration, of the unanswered prayer, not only on the heart, but on the *tone of voice*. He compares the souring effect of time passing to "yeast in the dough," a metaphor for the working of the "evil inclination." A moment of faith easily breaks down into the pathologies of bitterness and rejection.[9]

When God silences Moses, "Why (*Mah*) are you crying out to Me?" He makes clear that what is needed is not prayer but action: "Let them travel on . . ." (14:15). One movement of faith is better than a thousand words of prayer. As an aphorism, this has a fine ring to it; but, of course, for God to silence Moses and the people is an enigmatic response to human prayer. As we shall suggest, the function of the word *Mah* is often to frame an apparently rhetorical question—only to reveal the unexpected complexity of the situation. Why, indeed, is Moses to stop praying? Why, similarly, does Moses instruct the people: "You be silent" (14:14)?

Perhaps the emphasis on silence as the people enter the Red Sea is a necessary part of the perception of the miracle. Listening to the sounds of the Israelite camp yields first prayers, then rebellious taunts, Moses' perhaps ambivalent tonalities,[10] silence—and song. The predictable emotions of the song would presumably be triumph, gratitude, faith. And yet, as we have noticed, the people's response to the miracle centers on fear: "When Israel saw the great Hand which God had wielded against the Egyptians, they feared God . . ." The people see the "great Hand," the destructive power of God wielded against their enemies, and, instead of rejoicing, they fear and they have faith. It is almost by a kind of afterthought, according to the classic midrashic reading, that Moses bursts into song: " '*Then* Moses sang': When he saw the miracle, it occurred to him ('It rose up in his heart . . .') to sing a song . . . His heart told him to sing, and he did so."[11]

Indeed, immediately after the miracle of the Splitting of the Red Sea and after the jubilant song of praise that follows it, the people again complain, this time about the lack of drinking water. Again, they use the interrogative *Mah* ("*What*") to introduce their complaint: "What shall we drink?" (15:24). Rashi comments that the word, *Va-yillonu* ("They complained . . .") is always in the passive form, since it reflects on the complainer. We might say that it expresses a certain sense of self rather than of objective reality.

A month exactly after leaving Egypt, the people again complain, this time of hunger (16:1). Here, they escalate the absurdity of their narrative: "If only we had died by the hand of God in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death" (16:3).

It would have been better, apparently, to die with full stomachs in Egypt than to starve in the wilderness. Whatever else can be said about their Egyptian experience, one thing is clear: not to leave Egypt would have been better than to leave. God responds by sending the "bread from heaven," the manna. And the people "test" Him by disobeying His laws regarding its collection.

Immediately after this, the people again lack water; and again "think thoughts" about leaving Egypt: "Why (*Lamah*) did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (17:3). They are given water, and the place is named (Massa and Meriva) to memorialize the "testing" (*massah*), the "dispute" (*riv*) of the Israelites with God: ". . . as though to say: Is God within us or not?" (17:7). This, again, is a grave question: it emerges from the narrative as the unspoken core of the dispute that the people have with God. Some of its implications we will explore later; here, I would like simply to point to the word *riv* ("dispute"), which expresses not merely a "complaint" but a real argument, a difference of opinion. (On one level, it is a legal expression for the opposing sides in a court of law.) Here, then, the people confront God, not simply with an immediate grievance—a need for water—but with a radical question about the nature of His relationship with them. At this point, Amalek appears and threatens the newly liberated people. He is defeated in war. This time, the Israelites are, significantly, silent.

Each of these points of tension deserves discussion. However, although God's design to prevent a return to Egypt has clearly been effective, all these moments of rebellion are, indeed, moments when the Israelites "think their thoughts" about the issue of the Exodus. Moreover, they express their thoughts in words. And all with impunity; God does not seem to be angered by this kind of thinking, of speaking.

Indeed, we might say that God has set aside for them a kind of "academic space" in which, precisely, to do their thinking. For this activity to be innocuous, they need the protection of a vast wilderness, so that acting on their thoughts becomes too complicated to be realistic. Their "crooked road" into the wilderness gives them, paradoxically, a freedom to think, to ask their subversive, sarcastic questions. It gives them, also, the outrageous freedom to "zigzag," not only geographically but intellectually, emotionally.[12] The road that is *akuma* ("crooked," "devious") threads through places of vision and faith and, adjacently, places of doubt and revision. It makes possible a journey that is like a graph curve (a modern Hebrew meaning for the word, *akuma*), zigzag lines joining highs and lows, discontinuities that are intellectually baffling to the reader, but that are presented by the narrator in a

matter-of-fact, empirical spirit: this is the way it was; this is the way it is. These discontinuities cannot be avoided, or dispelled.

The Private Realities

At the conclusion of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James emphasizes the concrete, individual experience, the "private realities," that may be narrow but always remain "infinitely less hollow and abstract than a science which prides itself on taking no account of anything private at all": "The axis of reality runs solely through the egoistic places—they are strung upon it like so many beads."[13]

These private realities, issues of momentum and energy, stagnation and lassitude—most of all, issues of personal narrative and the construction of meaning—assume physical form: in the realities of food, water, existential danger. Unflinchingly, the Torah traces the abrupt metabolic changes in the narrative of a people for whom, in the most obvious way, the body is a reality; the stomach, the innards, the heart, remain a continual reminder of dependence, risk, relationship. Both peril and ecstasy are grounded in the needs of the body[14]; and suffuse religious narrative with shifting, kaleidoscopic colors.

In view of this emphasis on the "particulars of rapture," what is *said* acquires new importance. The drama of the Exodus is invested in verbal responses, querulous, suspicious, as well as in the outburst of song—words and melody—that greets the miraculous act of God. At this stage, the graph curve of the people's progress through the wilderness is drawn through their volatile language—not through their acts. If the midrash praises them for their loving faith in following God, unprovisioned, into the desert, that praise focuses not on a heroic act, but on what they *did not say*:

> "Even provisions they did not prepare for themselves" (12:39): This tells the praise of Israel, that they *did not say*, "How can we go out into the wilderness without provisions;" but they believed and went, as we find clearly in Jeremiah 2:2: "I remember to your credit the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you went after Me into the wilderness, into a land not sown."[15]

Similarly, when they obey God and, instead of proceeding to travel away from Egypt, they turn around toward the Red Sea, the midrash lingers, not on the act but on what they avoid saying:

concreteness of the question, in all its nuances ("To me—and not to you.") [Haggadah Shelemah, p. 24, note 268].

109. See Hizkuni to Deut 6:20. He reads the very mention of God's name as signifying relationship.

110. See Abudraham, in Haggadah Shelemah, p. 21, note 226.

111. See Haggadah Shelemah, p. 22, note 228.

112. Mei HaShiloach, Bo, 2.

113. Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), 236–237.

114. Zizek, *Sublime Object*, 65–66.

115. "The Question," in W. H. Auden, *Poems*, selected by Edward Mendelson (Everyman's Library, 1995), 14.

116. Rashi to 12:27.

117. Likkutei Moharan 64.

118. B. Menachoth 29.

119. *Letters of John Keats*, selected by Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1965, 53.

120. Likkutei 2:52.

121. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), quoted in Ouaknine, 281.

122. Ibid., 282.

123. W. Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: 1977), 73.

124. Catherine Clement (*Syncope*, trans. Sally O'Driscoll [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994]) writes of syncopation: it "begins on a weak beat and carries over onto a strong beat . . . The first beat is that of hesitation, the second that of the dissonance that is born as if by surprise when the accent carries the weak beat over—unduly!—onto the strong beat" (pp. 4–5). The experience of syncope is "a cerebral eclipse," so similar to death that it is also called "apparent death" (p. 1). "There are artists whose work reproduces the scenario of syncope: a surprise, a delay of life, a violent anticipation, and a slow return to what one calls 'the self' " (p. 21).

125. Sanhedrin 99a.

126. See note 124.

127. Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 323.

128. Shemoth Rabba 19:6.

129. See Rashi to Song of Songs 4:16.

130. Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba 4:31.

131. The end of the midrash describes the winds bringing the scattered exiles from the four corners of the earth to their central place. A similar idea of the transcendent unity of incompatibles appears in Esther Rabba 2:14.

132. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), vol. 2.

133. Even the banquet given by the king, in the first, idyllic scenario, is both a celebration of release from anguish, and composed of a bittersweet menu: roast meat, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs.

134. A similar sense of horror and fascination haunts the strange scene in which Moses (4:22–26), at the beginning of his mission, is attacked by God and saved by his wife's mysterious act of circumcision. The references to circumcision and to blood in the plural form, as well as the erotic implications of the references to "bridegroom" ("You are a bridegroom of bloods to me!") evoke a similar sense of resistance and desire in Moses' early response to God's call to that described in the midrash.

135. Sefath Emeth VaYikra, Pesach, p. 72.

136. Sefath Emeth, Bo, p. 47.

137. Likkutei Moharan 66, 4.

Beshallach: Songline Through the Wilderness

1. See Ha-amek Davar to 13:17. He argues against Ramban that "although it was," is not an appropriate translation for the word *ki* (it is not one of the four basic translations in rabbinic tradition). *Ki* means "because"—one of the four translations—without palliating the paradox of such a causal explanation.

2. Cf. Gen 18:17: God's "decision-process" to reveal to Abraham the impending destruction of Sodom is described in soliloquy, at a moment of rhetorical crisis.

3. Dante's *Divine Comedy* begins with the traveler "whose straight way was lost," as he entered the dark forest. In a striking reading, Robert Pogue Harrison suggests that "it is precisely because Dante is moving in a straight line that he loses himself in the 'selva oscura'." It is only in learning a more circuitous route that he finds his way out of the forest. (*Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 82).

4. See Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), 103: "It is easier to delineate the route that the fleeing Israelites avoided than to chart the course they actually took to their destination . . ."

5. Adam Phillips writes of Winnicott's concept of the mind: "*the mind always seems to come in afterwards* (to repair, to reflect, to reconstruct, to formulate, to consider, to fetishize, etc.). All thoughts are afterthoughts . . ." (*Terrors and Experts* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996], 102).

6. Rashi identifies this protest with the moment when the slave foremen defy Moses after the failure of his first approach to Pharaoh. They are so sure of their reading of reality that they summon God to adjudicate (5:21).

7. See chapter 3, 159–164.

8. Rashi to 14:10: "They seized hold of their fathers' craft . . ."—the "craft" of prayer which had been the peculiar genre developed by the Patriarchs.

9. Cf. "Drawn-out expectation (*tocheleth*) makes the heart sick (*machalah*)" (Prov 13:12).

10. See Ramban to 14:15.

11. Rashi to 15:1.

12. By contrast, the road not taken is called *peshuta* ("simple," "straightfor-

ward"). On another level, this term may also indicate the *peshat* meaning of the narrative: the clear, continuous line of God's narrative.

13. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Fontana Library, 1960), 477.

14. See Phillips, *Terrors,* 93.

15. Rashi to 12:39; quoting the Mechilta.

16. Rashi to 14:4.

17. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 165.

18. Chullin 89a.

19. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: Signet Classics, 1963), *Book the First, Chapter II.*

20. Shemoth Rabba 20:5.

21. See, e.g., the several midrashim that tell of Pharaoh's belated realization of Israel's value—which was either intrinsic or developed *after* liberation.

22. "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," *Poetry @ Prose,* selected by W. M. Merchant (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955), 576.

23. Sefath Emeth 84.

24. Phillips, *Terrors,* 11.

25. Mei HaShiloach 2, Beshallach.

26. See chapter 3, pp. 180–186.

27. See, e.g., 7:5; 7:17; 8:6; 8:18; 9:14; 9:29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4; 14:18.

28. Rashi to 32:1.

29. Midrash Tehillim 78:15. The claim is made on the basis of a play on the expressions the "finger" and the "hand" of God, thus multiplying ten (the hand) by five (for each finger).

30. See Megilla 10b.

31. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, 42.

32. There are, of course, many midrashim that depict luxurious, personal corridors within the Split Sea, lined with fruit and all manner of delights. Even those corridors, however, are a glass world, transparent, suggesting that even in their well-furbished tunnels, the Israelites remain aware of the Egyptian anguish.

33. See Seforno to 15:16–18.

34. Shemoth Rabba 21:9.

35. B. Berachoth 54a.

36. See Ha-amek She'eila on 26:2.

37. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* II.ii.533.

38. See also Rashi to 15:6, 12, 16. And Seforno and Ramban.

39. Mei HaShiloach 1, Beshallach.

40. Phillips, *Terrors,* 11.

41. Cf. Rashi to Deut 32:10: "Even there, in the howling wilderness, they were attracted by faith . . ." Cf. also Maharal, *Gevuroth Hashem,* chapter 7.

42. Sefath Emeth 69.

43. See Introduction, 7–9.

44. Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 144.

45. Ibid., 146.

46. Ibid., 143.

47. See chapter 1, 56–71.

48. "To swing" is a literal translation of Rashi's word, in his version of the midrash: "she seduces (*meshadalto)* him with words" (38:8). The physical sensation behind the word is kinetic: she moves him to another state of being.

49. See Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, 48.

50. Rosenzweig, *Star,* 173.

51. Ibid., 175.

52. See Rashi to Song of Songs 1:4.

53. Lacan, *Ecrits,* 4. See chapter 1 for a discussion of the "mirror stage" notion.

54. See the fate of the heroine in Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique,* for a film exploration of this idea—"she who sings must die."

55. Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women,* trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 176. Quoted in Cavell, *Pitch,* 169.

56. Sefath Emeth, 69.

57. Rashi to 15:2, from Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba 3:15 and Mechilta Shirah, chapter 3.

58. B. Sotah 11b.

59. Shemoth Rabba 1:16.

60. Shemoth Rabba 23:9.

61. Cavell, *Pitch,* 144.

62. Rosenzweig, *Star,* 156.

63. Ibid., 157.

64. See B. Sanhedrin 91b.

65. Cf. Socrates' description of himself as a midwife, using language to clarify and transform thinking.

66. See Ramban to 15:20.

67. Partially explaining also why she is identified as "Aaron's sister" (15:20), Mechilta amplifies by telling the story of how Miriam prophesied the birth of Moses, the future redeemer; and of how she persisted in her confidence of prophecy throughout the vicissitudes that followed: her father's acceptance of her prophecy, the baby born, only to be surrendered to the Nile, where she stationed herself in prophetic steadfastness, open to knowledge of the future (2:4). Now publicly acknowledged as a prophetess, she brings her prestige to bear on the distinctive Song of the women.

68. In Rashi's source, the Mechilta, it is "the righteous," who have the confidence—without gender determination. Rashi, it seems, is sharpening the midrashic language to engage with the Torah text, which speaks, of course, of women.

69. See note 65.

70. Shemoth Rabba 26:1. Job is the speaker in this midrash: the reference to his suffering Pharaoh's decrees is, presumably, linked to the midrashic tradition that