



*The Particulars
of Rapture*

REFLECTIONS ON EXODUS

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night, or the continuing narratives of Exodus, represent an absence, an unattainable longing for full presence. The molten core of the self remains unreleased, unspeakable. *Therefore*, the cascade of language, ideas, images, which, by displacement, evoke a speechless passion. On Passover, the mouth speaks (*peh sach*): all the particulars of rapture intimate an absolute desire.

R. Hutner's account has a somber, almost tragic resonance. Ultimately, there is no expressing the heart of the matter. All the coruscations of possibility, all the midrashic versions of an original moment of liberation, all leave some core self still in prison, still in Egypt (*Mitzrayim*), still constrained in narrow places (*meitzarim*). All the mirrors of all the women cannot offer total liberation.

And yet, even in R. Hutner's somber account, there is the moment of surprise: language is the very means by which the imprisoned heart gains freedom. As in the psychoanalytic model, speaking of many things, one comes by indirection at the core. This generation of truth through language: the experience of speaking beyond one's means, has an unwitting character. It happens in the interaction between two people: "one does not have to possess or own the truth in order to effectively bear witness to it."³⁷

Language as testimony, then, can give access to the hidden passion; in a sense, the "many words" of the Exodus narratives beget that passion. This experience is, one might say, the very taste of freedom:³⁸ the taste in the mouth that is impossible to communicate to those unfamiliar with it, and that makes one willing to become a medium of testimony.

I think of midrash with its "many words" concealing/revealing a central mystery as offering a bridge between old hopes and the fullness of an unknown future identity. New narratives of redemption create the very freedom that the original protagonists could not "hear." The old hopes, as Wordsworth intimates, are born from dread. The midrashic mode offers a transformation of those old hopes and a new way of imagining the self. And the quest for such transformation continues to inform the reading practice and the spiritual hopes of those who enter this world of Exodus. This, at any rate, has been my quest in this book. I ask not to share the "secret of redemption"—that is far beyond my reach; but to find those who will hear with me a particular idiom of redemption. And within the particulars of rapture to hear what cannot be expressed.

I Shemoth

THE MIRROR OF REDEMPTION

[Exodus 1:1–6:1]

I. Fit for Redemption? The Human Context

ISRAEL AND EGYPT: THE MOSAIC DISTINCTION

In Jewish tradition, the Exodus from Egypt marks the birth of the Israelite nation and religion. Conceptually, it marks a basic separation between cultures: a distinction between true and false in religion that Jan Assmann, in *Moses the Egyptian*, calls the Mosaic distinction: "The space severed or cloven by this distinction is the space of Western monotheism."¹

How was this distinction conceived? What are the symbolic values attached to each of the two figures, Israel and Egypt? Underlying the issues of truth and falsehood, the Mosaic distinction, in its more profound ethical dimensions, attributes psychological and spiritual values to each figure. The stakes of redemption, of birth to a full selfhood, are large: the issue is not narrowly theological but rather is related to all that makes individual and collective life fruitful or sterile.

Particularly in the midrashic sources and in Chasidic texts, questions as to the inner meaning of redemption generate a construction of Egypt as the world of constriction, paralysis, and silence. The pun often found in Chasidic writings associates *Mitzrayim* (Egypt) with *meitzarim* (straits).

Egypt becomes a country of the spirit, constricted and, in a real sense, inescapable.

This is the fundamental issue of the Exodus: how to be redeemed when Egypt, that enervating soulscape, has one in its pincer grip? From such a perspective, Israel in Egypt *cannot* be redeemed; no separation is possible—in the same way as, in terms of mythic thought, the baby held in the womb *cannot* be born, must remain monstrously but all-too-plausibly immobilized forever.

The peculiar suffering of such inertia haunts the midrashic accounts of the time before the Exodus: “No slave ever escaped from Egypt” (Mekhilta). What makes release possible, or, in midrashic language, what makes the people *fit* for redemption? What is the turning point in the history of this unarticulated misery? And what, again in midrashic language, is the *secret* of redemption?

“AND THEY SWARMED . . .”

—BLESSING OR CRITIQUE?

Exodus, the book of Exile and Redemption,² begins with a list of names:

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher.

The total number of persons that were of Jacob’s issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. (Exod 1:1–6)

These are the dead; listed, to tell the reader that they are no more. In Jewish tradition, the book is called The Book of Names: the reference is clearly to the names of the children of Israel, those individuals who, in a moment in history, went down to Egypt and died there, together with their brother, Joseph, who had preceded them.

What follows, however, on this meticulous listing of the dead, is an explosion of life, an almost surrealistic description of the spawning of a nation:

And the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. (1:7)

Nameless, faceless, these too are the “children of Israel.” How are we to read this description of their anonymous fecundity? There are two possible understandings. On the one hand, this is a celebration of fullness, of life burgeoning and uncontained. This reading would be a fulfillment of God’s promise to Jacob: “Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation” (Gen 46:3).³ The redundant expressions of fertility have been read as denoting multiple births, healthy development, absence of fetal, infant, or adult mortality.⁴ In the midrashic readings, there is a miraculous, even a whimsical sense of the outrageous victory of life over death: these, for instance, take the six expressions of fertility (they were fruitful, they swarmed, they multiplied, they increased, very, very much) to indicate that each woman gave birth to sextuplets (“six to a belly”).⁵

The affirmation of life contained in these pounding synonyms intimates, in its very excess, a transcendent order of meaning: “Even though Joseph and his brothers died, their God did not die, but the children of Israel were fruitful and multiplied . . .”⁶ The midrash here wants to decipher the cascade of births not only as blessing but as the “survival of God.” The generation that connects with the meaningful past is all gone. But in some way that is not fully explained here, God expresses His undimmed vitality in the language of physical fertility.

An alternative reading of this passage, however, would take its cue from the ambiguous expression *vayishretzu*—“they swarmed.” This can mean the blessing of extraordinary increase;⁷ but it connotes a reptilian fecundity, which introduces a bizarre note in a description of human fertility.⁸ In this second view, *vayishretzu* is a repellent description for a family fallen from greatness.

Seforno, the sixteenth-century Italian commentator, articulates this tragic historical reading most clearly. At first, he writes, there were individuals, named, highly evolved persons, who went down to Egypt. Immediately upon their deaths, names cease. What we have is masses of unindividuated “insect-like” conformists, whose whole effort is to assimilate to their surroundings, and whose unconscious drive is for lemming-like suicide:

After the seventy original immigrants had died, they inclined toward the ways of *sheratzim*, of reptiles (an uncomplimentary reference to the pagan nations, whose concerns are entirely this-worldly). They ran through their lives in a headlong rush towards the abyss (a pun on *sheratzim/she-ratzim* = “those who run.”) (1:7)

An existential failure is marked here: the grandchildren of Jacob have already lost their distinctness, their names, their sense of purpose.⁹ They have assimilated themselves entirely to the surrounding culture. One significant detail that recurs in many midrashic sources is that the Israelites in Egypt stopped circumcising their children.¹⁰ The sages read this drive to assimilation as, in effect, a death wish. Ironically, as both Seforno and his midrashic source point out, the Israelite assimilation project backfires, as it turns Pharaoh against them. Having abandoned their tradition and individuality, they at least share the blame for the fact that Pharaoh no longer recognizes them as Joseph's kin. Seforno tells a tale of justified persecution—not to exonerate Pharaoh, but to ground events in the history of a people who have, in two generations, lost their claim to their own names, and whose swarming is not a token of blessing, but a symptom of alienation from that true self that even a Pharaoh will acknowledge.

Seforno's reading, rooted as it is in traditional rabbinic commentaries, is deeply disturbing. For one thing, it stands against the more often quoted, certainly more consoling rabbinic sources that declare that the children of Israel in Egypt remained essentially untouched by their environment.¹¹ Particularly in matters of language—naming themselves and their world—as well as in their clothing, they held to their own identity. Even on the question of circumcision, there are midrashic sources that make precisely the opposite claim: that they never totally abandoned this fundamental covenantal practice.¹²

In addition to the problem of conflicting sources, there is the larger question of narrative meaning. What does Seforno gain by making the story one of guilt and punishment, within the evolving sense of self of the Jewish people? Surely Pharaoh is the unmitigated villain of the piece. Surely his story is one of unwarranted, fantastical malice and cruelty against a people whose only narrated sin is their fertility. ("Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; else in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and leave the country" [1:10]).

Seforno's reading of the people's "swarming" (*vayishretzu*) may seem to give some theological rationale for Israelite suffering. But this is not a necessary move. For, arching over most of Genesis, there is the unfulfilled decree—the *gezera*, as it is often called—of God's address to Abraham: "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years . . ." (Gen 15:13). By the beginning of Exodus, the time has come for the decree to be applied, the time

for alienation, for slavery, for oppression. Why, then, does Seforno introduce a motif of Israelite responsibility for the suffering that is decreed?

To this question, there is, of course, no unequivocal, historical answer. Perhaps the value of such a question lies simply in its pointing to a choice of interpretation. Seforno, we become aware, has constructed a narrative of failure, guilt, punishment, where the biblical text seemed to give us only the facts of suffering. His choice closes off certain kinds of understanding of history, of the lives of individuals and nations. Lawrence Weschler, in his study of the nature of modern totalitarianism, *Calamities of Exile*, notes that a position that insists on asserting one's own responsibility for a given situation "has heuristic value: it makes possible a future politics that otherwise might become lost in a bottomless sense of victimization and despair."¹³ Concentrating on responsibility for one's own predicaments creates an emotional world in which inner growth becomes imaginable. In adopting this view of Israelite suffering, therefore, Seforno opens up difficult kinds of understanding. He invites us to reflect on the ways in which slavery, persecution, alienation—even when they are functions of a divine "edict"—are generated by human beings, in the freedom of their own narratives. And—in the same vein—on the meanings of redemption, exodus, freedom. In doing this, he stands in a tradition of commentators who read the Exodus narrative psychologically, spiritually, from the point of view of the victim who seeks redemption, in the intimate as well as the political sense.

ANONYMITY AND SILENCE

The particular form of inadequacy that Seforno singles out has to do with names and anonymity. The names that begin—and entitle—the book are a marker for loss, as the narrative begins to tell of the nameless. Moses' parents are conspicuously unnamed at first mention—a "man from the house of Levi" and a "daughter of Levi." Pharaoh's daughter is likewise anonymous. Cumulatively, a world is composed where even the heroes have a faceless, unindividuated quality.

The other feature of the "anonymity" that characterizes the opening of the narrative is the silence of all voices but Pharaoh's. Implicit in Seforno's reading of the "swarming" modality is a vision of a primal, pre-linguistic stage of evolution, of masses of proliferating, reptilian creatures, who utter no response to Pharaoh's scheme, but move in a compelled surge towards the abyss. Language has failed; even the suffering, the harsh labor, the bitterness

of their lives elicits from them no protest, not even an audible groan—no expression of awareness, of memory, outrage, or hope.

In this silence, the paradox of fertility is emphasized: “the more they were oppressed, the more they increased (*ken yirbeh*) and spread out, so that the Egyptians were sickened by the Israelites” (1:12). To the Egyptians, there is something repulsive about the silent fecundity of this people. Contrary to normal behavior patterns, harsh treatment, exhaustion, the unbearable weight of Egypt’s burdens only serve, apparently, to make them reproduce at a faster rate.

Rashi comments: “This is the Holy Spirit speaking: ‘You say, “Lest they increase,” (*pen yirbeh*—[1:10]) but I say, “So they shall increase!” (*ken yirbeh*).’” The policy of persecution, Rashi reminds us, is expressly intended to prevent fertility. God is opposed to this—a head-on clash between intentionalities. For Rashi, the future tense (usually translated as the past continuous—“So they would increase”) is the unheard idiom of God, whose words give meaning to the silent surge of reproduction. In the world of Egypt, however, His intentions are muted, find no resonance; only the alert midrashic reader may respond to the willful play of tenses in the text—“Let us see whose word will stand, Mine or yours . . .” adds Rashi’s midrashic source.¹⁴ Human language, Pharaoh’s monologue against life, is challenged by the unheard word of God, working through unconscious flesh.

THE MIDWIVES’ REBELLION

The first to speak back to Pharaoh are the technicians of birth, the midwives. Emerging from the anonymous, silent masses, ambiguous in their identity (midwives to the Hebrew women, or Hebrew midwives?), they are named and involved in dialogue with Pharaoh. What compels them to speak is their disobedience to Pharaoh’s decree (“When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live” [1:16].) Pharaoh’s tone is the tone of *gezera*, edict: unequivocal, surgical in its categorization of possibilities. The command is to kill: the alternative—in the case of a girl baby—is *vachaya*—“let her be, let her live.” The pivotal verb is “look”: Pharaoh commands them to *see difference*, to analyze the situation in the very thrust of birth. This kind of seeing—boy/girl; death/life—is essential to the mode of *gezera*, of edict. The word, *gezera*, is, in fact, rooted in the verb “to cut,” in the notion of separation, difference, analysis.

The midwives’ disobedience is described with an idiom that has

never before appeared in the Torah in just this form: “they feared God.” We remember that Abraham, after he is released from the trial of the Akeda, the Binding of Isaac, is called a God-fearing person (Gen 22:12). The midwives, however, enact fear of God: they “do” it. Using the verb form—“they feared God”—conveys the sense of a moral act, that mobilizes the energy “not to do what the Egyptian king had told them; they let the boys live” (1:18).

This active “fearing God,” which generates life for the boy babies is, essentially, a refusal to see as Pharaoh sees, to see difference. Traditionally, they are understood to have nurtured the babies, providing them with food and water (Rashi). This “fear of God” is a classic, heroic response to the edicts of tyrants. As Or HaChaim suggests, the very extremity of the edict forces a new moral vision upon the midwives, a radical choice between life and death. Disobedience to Pharaoh becomes more than merely a refusal to kill, it becomes a total dedication to nourishing life. The narrative has conveyed, in mid-flight, as it were, the very moment of “fearing God,” its free assumption of responsibility.

Pharaoh then reproaches them, not with negligence, but with giving, preserving life. And it is at this point that the first words of resistance in Exodus are spoken. Against the absurd reproach of Pharaoh (“Why have you done this thing, and kept the children alive?”), against the unself-conscious brutality of Pharaoh’s implicit question: “Why life?” they answer: “They (the Hebrew women) are vigorous—*chayoth*, lively: before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.” In terms of the Hebrew idioms used, their answer is: “These women are alive: before the birth-aide can come, they give birth.”

Some radical, irreducible confrontation is marked in these first words against Pharaoh. To speak against the *gezera* is, in a real sense, impossible. The only appropriate response to a *gezera* is silence. To utter words is to create an alternative world, a world of undifferentiated life. This is, indeed, the claim of the Hebrew midwives: the Hebrew women are *not like* the Egyptian women; an alternative realm to Pharaoh’s “Egyptian” realm is sketched in their words. In this Hebrew women’s world, life and birth happen irrepressibly.

MOSES’ EARLY LIFE

Pharaoh’s next move is to command the public murder of boy babies: they are to be thrown in the river. And the next words spoken are those of

15. See chapter 1.
16. Tanchuma Pinchas, 7.
17. I am grateful to Dina Kazhdan, Tali Stern, and Bracha Zornberg who pointed this out to me.
18. *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber), 112.
19. See, e.g., Sefath Emeth, VaEra, 25.
20. R. Kook, *Olath Re'iyah*, 26–27.
21. Susan Sontag, "Thinking Against Oneself": Reflections on Cioran," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 74–75.
22. Sefath Emeth, Pesach, 72.
23. See chapter 3.
24. For a similar notion of transgenerational religious experience, in which the later experience completes and in a sense transcends the original, scriptural experience, see Sefath Emeth, Pesach, 55.
25. Meshech Chochma to 32:19.
26. Rashi to 38:8. See chapter 1.
27. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 30.
28. *Ibid.*, 31.
29. *Ibid.*, 32.
30. *Ibid.*, 33–34.
31. *Ibid.*, 34.
32. See chapter 8 for a discussion of finitude and infinitude figured in the "bells and pomegranates" of Aaron's priestly robe (pp. 378–381).
33. Cf. the classic midrashic pun on Pesach—*Peh sach* ("the mouth speaks")
34. Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 35. See chapter 2 for a discussion of speech as an expression of liberation from Egypt.
35. *Pachad Yitzhak*, Pesach, 77. It is interesting that it is women's desire that serves as a model for this inexpressible spiritual energy.
36. B. Pesachim 36a.
37. Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, Chapman, and Hall), 15.
38. See Mei HaShiloach II, 13b.

Shemoth: The Mirror of Redemption

1. Jan Assmann, *Moses in Egypt: the Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.
2. This is Ramban's description of the theme of Exodus (Chavel [Hebrew], vol. 1, 279).
3. See Hizkuni on 1:7.
4. See Rashbam and Rashi on 1:7.
5. See Shemoth Rabba 1:7. The hypothesis about multiple birth is merely the basis for further speculation: perhaps each belly held twelve babies? Or sixty?

6. Shemoth Rabba 1:7.
7. Rashi bases the sextuple-birth idea on *vayishretzu*, presumably after the midrashic notion that *sheratzim* (reptiles) produce no fewer than six young at a time (see Pesikta d'Rav Kahana [10:85b]).
8. Compare the use of *shiretzu* in God's instructions to Noah after the flood (Gen 9:7), where it connotes both divine blessing and the compulsive drive to fill the denuded, post-flood world. Also, see my *The Beginning of Desire*, 10–17, for a discussion of the two axes of human experience—the horizontal, "swarming" axis, and the vertical, "dominating" axis—in the Creation narrative.
9. See B. Berakhot 28b: "I run, and they run—I run towards eternal life, while they run towards the abyss . . ." (This is part of the prayer of gratitude for the opportunity to redeem the mortal condition by learning Torah; it is to be said on entering the Beit Midrash [House of Study] each morning).
10. Shemoth Rabba 1:8.
11. See, e.g., Shemoth Rabba 1:32.
12. See Torah Shelema 86: (Seder Eliyahu Rabba 21). In some sources, Pharaoh's decrees are primarily intended to undermine their practice of circumcision (e.g. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 29).
13. Lawrence Weschler, *Calamities of Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 37.
14. Shemoth Rabba 1:12.
15. Semprun, *Long Voyage*, 75–76.
16. Num 12:3.
17. See Ha-amek Davar on the difference between God's words (*veshame'u lekolecha*) and Moses' (*lo yishme'u bekoli*): Moses doubts that the people will take him seriously, will pay attention to him as bearer of prophecy—a more radical doubt than one about the content of the prophecy.
18. B. Erchin 15b.
19. Indeed, he begins his comment on the verse with this midrash; only after it, does he return to the *peshat*, the more obvious contextual reading of the phrase.
20. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 48.
21. Significantly, the period that the Israelites lived in Egypt is defined as "four hundred and thirty years," to the very day of the Exodus (12:40–41). This time frame is traditionally traced back to the birth of Isaac.
22. Shemoth, p. 18.
23. Mei HaShiloach, Shemoth 2.
24. See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
25. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), 198.
26. This is a frequent concern in Oliver Sacks's work, where the starting point is neurological—e.g. *Awakenings* (HarperPerennial, 1990), 284–285, on the question of posture in Parkinsonism: ". . . every posture is an 'I' no less than an 'It.' . . . And it is precisely this which is missing in Parkinsonism—there is a loss of naturalness in posture and action . . . a loss of the living 'I' . . . And this is the rationale of an 'existence' therapy: . . . to inspire with the personal and living, and, in the directest