

Haftarat Va'era: The Redemption from Egypt (Yehezkel 28:25 – 29:21)¹

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1. A Parasha of Redemption

We find that the haftarah is divided into three parts: the first (Ez. 28:25-26) may be an independent unit or it may be a continuation of the prophecy about Tzidon, but either way it is not directly connected to the pesukim which follow. The central part (Ez. 29:1-15) is the prophecy concerning Egypt, and the last part is a separate prophecy, but also related to Egypt; its subject is the repayment for the actions of Nebuchadnetzar in Tzor. The selection of a prophecy dealing with Egypt and the plagues as the haftara for Parashat Va'era is obvious, but we are left with the question of why the first two pesukim were also included, since they do not appear to be in any way connected with Egypt.

It seems that these two pesukim about the redemption of Israel are included in order to draw our attention to the fact that Parashat Va'era is, first and foremost, a parasha about redemption. The awesome and frightening plagues are no more than tools that spur the process on. Indeed, our parasha – more than any other – depicts the redemption as it unfolds: “And I shall also uphold My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan... For I have also heard the cry of Bne Yisrael... and I have remembered My covenant... And I shall take you out from under the burden of Egypt, and I shall deliver you from their servitude and I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm... and I shall take you to Me for a people, and I shall be your God, and you will know that I am the Lord your God who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt... and I shall bring you to the land... and I shall give it to you as a heritage...” (Ex. 6:4-8).

The haftarah, which opens with the redemption of Israel and concludes with the redemption of Israel (“On that day I shall make the horn of the house of Israel sprout forth...”, Ez. 29:21) teaches us that this redemption is the purpose of all these events. But there is a difference between the two redemptions. The redemption from Egypt involved getting the entire nation out of one country of exile, while the future redemption will require the gathering of the house of Israel “from the NATIONS among which they were scattered.” But even if the exile and dispersion have extended far and wide, the first redemption will always serve as the model for future redemption: just as in the first instance God brought judgment upon their oppressors, so too in the future “I shall execute judgment upon all those that disdain them around them.” (Ez. 28:26)

2. The Purpose of Redemption

While the redemption from Egypt serves to teach us about future redemption, the reverse is also true. Just as the purpose of the future redemption is the sanctification of God in the world – “And I shall be sanctified in them in the eyes of the nations” – so too the purpose of the redemption from Egypt was likewise, that God would thereby be sanctified in the eyes of the nations in

¹ Certain transliterations were modified to our American Sephardic pronunciation.

general, and in the eyes of the Egyptians in particular. Indeed, this idea is given explicit expression in the parasha just before the plague of hail: “Indeed it is for this purpose that I have raised you up, in order that you may show My power, and in order that My name be proclaimed throughout the land” (Ex. 9:16). Even prior to this Moshe is told, “And Egypt shall know that I am God, when I stretch My hand out over Egypt” (Ex. 7:5). Hence the plagues are not just a vehicle to speed up the departure of Israel from Egypt. They have a purpose in their own right, a purpose similar to that of the redemption itself: to make God’s name known in the world, and to demonstrate His power to the Egyptians and the other nations. This purpose is expressed several times in the haftarah: in the beginning with regard to the nations in general, and further on with regard to Egypt in particular.

3. The Egyptians Shall Know

What unique feature characterizes the Egyptians among all the other nations, such that this message is directed primarily towards them? The pesukim of the prophecy explain: “So says God... Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great crocodile that lies within his streams, who has said, ‘My river is mine and I have made it for myself’” (Ez. 29:3). Pharaoh’s audacious pride reaches destructive proportions when he compares himself to the Omnipotent Creator. He believes himself independent of any outside heavenly entity; his needs are continually taken care of, and he can entertain himself with thoughts of his own exclusive rule, with all subservient to him.

This theme does not appear in the parasha, but the words of the haftarah may explain Pharaoh’s refusal to follow God’s command to let the nation go. His stubbornness is easier to understand if we see the situation as a battle between the Supreme God and someone who fancies himself as a god.

In addition, what applies to Pharaoh in his personal capacity applies equally to the Egyptians as a nation, for they seem to suffer collectively from the same illusion of grandeur as their king: “...Set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt and prophesy against him and against all of Egypt” (Ez. 29:2). Therefore it is important to make all of Egypt recognize God: “And all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am God” (Ez. 29:6); “And the land of Egypt shall be desolate and waste, and they shall know that I am God” (Ez. 29:9). Indeed, our prophecy closes with the words, “And they shall know that I am the Lord God.”

4. Completion of the Redemption from Egypt

The narrative in *Sefer Shemot* indicates that with Israel’s departure from Egypt, the Egyptian exile came to an end. This is certainly true of the physical exile, but there is some doubt as to whether it applies to their psychological exile as well.

Hundreds of years of harsh and bitter labor turned the nation of Israel not only into laborers, but into slaves –completely dependent on Egypt and the Egyptians. This dependence was deeply rooted in the national psyche, such that even many years after the exodus its negative consequences were still recognizable. Even when they became a sovereign entity in their own land, they turned to Egypt at the first sign of any external threat, seeking the patronage and assistance of their former taskmaster.

It is most likely that for this very reason, the Torah warns us not to return to Egypt - and not to collect too many horses for the imperial chariots, which would provide an excuse to go back there. In order for there to be a psychological break with Egypt, there must first be a physical break, and in the course of time the complete break will bring about the completion of the redemption. But it is only when Egypt becomes “desolation and waste” (Ez. 29:9) and “desolate in the midst of waste lands, and her cities desolate among ruined cities” (Ez. 29:12), that everyone will know and recognize that Egypt is nothing but a broken reed, “and it shall no longer be a haven for the house of Israel, a remembrance to their sin when they shall turn after them; and they shall know that I am God...” (Ez. 29:16). At that time, the redemption from Egypt will be complete – the redemption whose plan is set out in *Parashat Va'era*.

5. Redemption from Egypt – the Significance of Redemption

This concept is generally understood as referring to the redemption of Israel from Egyptian slavery, but in Yehezkel's prophecy, mention is also made of the future redemption OF Egypt. After the land of Egypt is completely laid waste and her cities destroyed, and after “I will scatter Egypt among the nations and will disperse them throughout the lands,” the era of redemption for Egypt herself will arrive: “For so says God... at the end of forty years I will gather Egypt from the nations where they were scattered. And I shall bring back the captivity of Egypt and I shall return them to the land of Patros, into the land of their origin” (Ez. 29:12-14). Just as Bne Yisrael are redeemed, i.e. that they return to their land after forty years, so shall the Egyptians return and rebuild Egypt. This is the redemption of Egypt. What is the nature of the renewed Egyptian kingdom? “And they shall be there an abject kingdom. It shall be the most abject of the kingdoms, and it shall not exalt itself any more over the nations, for I shall diminish them so they shall no longer rule over the nations” (Ez. 29:14-15). How can this “abject kingdom” be considered “redeemed”? A profound and important principle of redemption is to be learned here. Redemption for a nation means bringing that nation to its proper proportions. An enslaved nation requires redemption, but the nation which enslaves them is also in a state of “exile.” It is not normal or natural to be an oppressor, to bind others against their will. The return of Egypt teaches us about the significance of redemption: redemption means the return to proper and natural proportions, no more and no less.

6. Thereafter They Shall Leave With Great Bounty

It remains for us to discover why the last portion of the haftarah was included – the portion dealing with the future payment to Nebuchadnetzar king of Babylon. In and of itself, this portion is surprising: since Nebuchadnetzar received no reward from Tzor for the work he performed there, he is to receive a reward from Egypt. But what does Egypt have to do with Tzor? Furthermore, why should he receive any reward at all, considering that he did what he did on his own initiative and for his own profit rather than for the good of Tzor?

We can never fathom the ways of Divine Providence and the way in which events unfold and arrange themselves in this world. But one lesson does arise from this prophecy: labor does not remain uncompensated. Sometimes the payment is direct and obvious, other times it is indirect and hidden – but always there is compensation for labor.

And from here we understand the reward concerning which Bne Yisrael are commanded in Egypt. For if reward is given even for work performed voluntarily, for one's own gain – like that of Nebuchadnetzar – then how much more appropriate is compensation for labor performed against the will of the laborer and in the interests of his employer rather than for his own gain. Therefore, before leaving Egypt, Bne Yisrael must ask their Egyptian neighbors for vessels of silver and gold, and this serves as some repayment for their prolonged servitude in Egypt. This is extremely significant, for complete redemption also includes an element of justice being performed, and so long as no payment has been made for labor – not even a symbolic compensation – justice has not been done.

The awarding of the Egyptian bounty to Nebuchadnetzar as reward for his labor in Tzor may be seen as the closing of a circle that started with the bitter and difficult servitude of Bne Yisrael in Egypt. Despite the great bounty with which Bne Yisrael left Egypt, their servitude had not yet been compensated in full, and Egypt was still indebted to them. Now Nebuchadnetzar acts, as it were, as God's emissary to be a staff of wrath among the rebellious nations, to demand repayment by force. And from where? From the nation which still has an outstanding debt – Egypt.