

From Egypt to Sinai¹

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In Chapter 13 of the first volume, I suggested a resolution of the “two Creation stories” by viewing the entire doubled narrative as an extended chiasmus. In that chapter, I introduced the meaning of structure as a tool of interpretation and literary analysis and, specifically, the impact of a chiasmus, in which common or symmetrical anti-themes occupy parallel “slots” on both ends of a narrative, such that the first and last segments are related, the second and penultimate are related, etc. to the end of establishing a large literary structure which highlights the center. As pointed out there, many chiasmic structures can be found in single verses, small passages and brief narratives throughout the canon. It is possible, however, to identify much larger swaths of text which are part of a complex structure. By identifying such structures, we may be able to get to the “heart and soul” of the narrative and understand its underlying message.

I. From Egypt to Sinai – Seven Chapters of Growth

Chapters 13 through 19 of Exodus (in the universally adopted Babylonian sectioning of the Torah – the last sixteen verses of Parashat Bo, all of Parashat Beshalach and the first chapter [plus] of Parashat Yitro) essentially map out the road from Egypt to Sinai. Following the climactic verse at the end of Chapter 12: “And on that very day Hashem brought the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions” (12:51), we would expect to come directly to Sinai, following the divine promise given at the beginning of the entire process:

Therefore, say to the B’nei Yisra’el: “I am Hashem,
and *I will bring you out (vehotzeiti etkhem)* from under the yoke of the Egyptians.
I will free you (vehitzalti etkhem) from being slaves to them,
and *I will redeem you (vega’alti etkhem)* with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.
I will take you as My own people (velakachti etkhem li le’am),
and I will be your God...” (6:6–7)

The first three prongs of the divine promise had been fulfilled: God redeemed the Israelites at the slaying of the firstborn (see Exodus 7); He freed them from their enslavement that night, when the Egyptians deported them, and they left the slave-town of Raamses and He took them out when they moved from Sukkot. All that remained, following the events presented in Exodus 12, was for God to take them as His people – the Covenant at Sinai (see *Between the Lines of the Bible*, vol. 2, chapter 5; Exodus 3:12).

Why doesn’t the next chapter detail a direct and immediate move to Sinai and to the fourth step of the Exodus? Why does the Torah detail certain events of the Israelites’ travels to Sinai, and take six chapters to do so?

A verse in Deuteronomy may hold the key to solving this puzzle:

...or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty and outstretched arm and

¹ The following piece is excerpted from chapter 10 of Rabbi Etshalom’s book *Between the Lines of the Bible: Exodus* (Jerusalem, Israel: Urim Publications and OU Press, 2012), pp. 110-122.

awesome power, as Hashem your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?
(Deuteronomy 4:34)

In this reference to the Exodus, the Israelites are described as “a nation” in the midst of “another nation,” in other words, the same as the nation around them (the Egyptians). Yet God took them out and “made them His.”

I would like to propose that the events spanning Exodus 13–19:6 describe the process by which Bnei Yisrael became worthy and ready to enter into the eternal covenant with God at Sinai.

II. “Doubled” Events

A careful read through these chapters brings us specific questions about some of the events:

- (1) Why does Moses exhort the people about observance of *mitzvot* at Marah (15:26) before the Torah had been given?
- (2) What is the significance of the “twelve springs and seventy date-palms” at Elim (15:27)? We are generally not given such detailed landmarks in our travels. Note that this seemingly minor detail is repeated in the much terser travelogue in Numbers 33.
- (3) What is the significance of the second water-scene, where the waters flow from a rock on Horev (=Sinai)?
- (4) Why is Shabbat introduced before we get to Mount Sinai (in the Mannah narrative – 16:23, 29)?
- (5) There seem to be a number of “doubles” in this section: two water scenes (15:22–26; 17:1–7); two wars (Amalek, Egypt); two educationally-oriented commands (teaching children in 13:8; training judges in 18:20). Why the “doubling?”

A Brief Outline

Let’s first take a look at the events in outline form (the first two of these are assayed from a different perspective in the previous chapter of this volume).

- A: *Kiddush Bekhorot* – the divine command to sanctify the firstborn (13:1–2)
- B: The commemoration of the Exodus – including instructing our children (13:3–16)
- C: The events at the Reed Sea, including the Song at the Sea (14:1–15:21)
- D: The waters at Marah (15:22–26)
- E: The Mannah (16:1–36)
- F: The waters from Horev (17:1–7)
- G: Amalek (17:8–16)
- H: Yitro and the appointment of judges (18:1–27)
- I: The preparation for entering the Covenant (19:1–6)

Looking at it again with a few added details will give us a new perspective on this sequence. First, a brief recap of the nature of structure within biblical narrative in general and the mechanics of “chiasmus” in particular.²

III. Structure as Message

² See the *schema* at the end of this chapter.

The Torah not only informs us in words, it also informs us in style and structure. Not only by juxtaposing certain laws or narratives (e.g., the juxtaposition of the mitzvah of the fringes on our garments with the prohibition of mixed-garments);³ but even the greater structure of the narrative can often be instructive. A wonderful example of this is the structure of the “28 times” in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes.

Chiasmus

One common feature of biblical literary structure – chiefly found in “*Shirah*” (poetry) – is known as “Chiasmus.” This form, taken from the Greek letter X (Chi), is basically an A-B-B-A (or more intricate – like A-B-C-B-A, etc.) structure, with which we are all familiar in biblical poetry. An obvious example is found in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:24):

Most blessed of women be Ya’el, the wife of Hever the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.

תברך מנשים יעל אשת חבר הקיני באהל תברך:

We could better see it as follows:

- A:** Most blessed...
- B:** ...of women...
- C:** ...be Ya’el, the wife of Hever the Kenite...
- B’:** ...of tent-dwelling women...
- A’:** ...most blessed.

For clarity – here is the chiastic layout in the original:

תברך
מנשים
יעל אשת חבר הקיני
מנשים באהל
:תברך

The purpose of a chiasmus is to create a center and put the focus on the middle section – in this case, Ya’el.

I would like to propose that the seven (plus) chapters under discussion are also arranged in a chiastic structure as follows [I will include (in parentheses) those terms or ideas which connect the given section with its chiastic partner]:

- A:** *Kiddush Bekhorot* - (קדש לי...לי הם) – “sanctify unto Me...they are Mine”)
- B:** The commemoration of the Exodus – (instructing children)
- C:** The events at the Reed Sea (God’s war against Egypt, 14:14, 25; 15:3)
- D:** The waters at Marah (thirst)
- E:** The מן (Mannah)
- D’:** The waters from Horev (thirst)
- C’:** Amalek (God’s war against Amalek, 17:16)
- B’:** Jethro and the delegation of judges (instructing the people)
- A’:** The preparation for entering the Covenant (והייתם לי...ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי) – “you will be unto Me...and you will be to Me”)

³ Cf. BT *Yevamot* 4a.

This scheme allows us to understand two basic things about the events as they are presented:

- (1) The apparent “doubling” (e.g., the water-scenes) are sequenced in order to highlight the changes that take place from one occurrence to the next (the evolution of the Israelites);
- (2) The fulcrum of the chiasmus is the point of dramatic turning, which helps us understand the goal and method of this educational process in readying the Israelites to enter into the Covenant at Sinai. Since the fulcrum of our chiasmus is the narrative of the Mannah, we will have to examine that section with an eye towards finding the “secret” of this evolution.

Let’s take a closer look at the components of our structure to understand the developments.

IV. A: Sanctification

13:1–2

At the first steps out of Egypt, God commands us to sanctify our firstborn. Although this involves some level of sacrifice (offering the firstborn animals, redeeming the firstborn children), its scope is minimal in two ways:

- (1) It involves a one-time act (offering/redemption);
- (2) It takes place solely within the purview of the family. Each family must sanctify its own firstborn, but this does not impact on the rest of the nation.

In addition, this act is a confirmation of God’s sanctification of the firstborn during the last plague (see *Between the Lines of the Bible*, vol. 2, ch. 7), but it involves no new sanctification on the part of the people.

19:5–6

As they now stand at the foot of Sinai, the Children of Israel are called to become God’s people. Instead of merely confirming that which God already did that night in Egypt, they are asked to move forward and become holy. This holiness is distinct from the earlier one in two ways:

- (1) It involves a constant sanctification involving a life of *mitzvot*;
- (2) It involves every member of the nation, not just the firstborn.

We might posit that the earlier sanctification was a foreshadowing of the latter one. As if the “sanctify unto me” was the first step in fulfilling “I will take you unto Me,” and “you will be unto Me a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation” was the consummation.

V. B: Instruction

13:3–16

The people are instructed to commemorate the Exodus and to tell their children about it. The *tefillin* are even presented as a way to constantly keep this story “in our mouths” (v. 9).

Here again, we find the same two features:

- (1) The story is only to be told within the context of family;
- (2) The information to be transmitted is a one-time event – the Exodus. There is no mention of teaching children about laws, statutes, ethics, etc.

Keep in mind (more about this later) that until this time, the Israelites had a group of *mitzvot* to fulfill – some in perpetuity – but they all related to the Exodus and were all commemorative. The one exception to this rule is *Brit Milah* – the Covenant of Circumcision.

18:19–27

Here, Moses is advised to teach the Torah to two groups: to the entire nation, and to a select group of “minor” judges. The two features, noted above, are again expanded:

- (1) The teaching takes place on a national level – to the nation or its representatives.
- (2) The information is an ongoing, growing process – “to teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do” (v. 20).

Several things have changed here. Besides the scope of involvement becoming broadened to include everyone interacting with Moses and his designated judges, the nature of the information has changed. Instead of one static story to transmit, Torah has taken on a life – a life of new circumstances and applications. As God instructs Moses regarding new *mitzvot* and laws, which he faithfully transmits this instruction to the people, new situations arise which demand analysis and discussion of those divine words. The “story-time” of Chapter 13 has evolved into the “academy” of Chapter 18. The dynamic discussion which is the inevitable blessing of Torah analysis carries with it a tremendous sense of creativity.⁴ As R. Joshua avers: There is no session of the Academy without a novel explanation or new insight.⁵

Beyond the creativity, this type of learning invests the student with a sense of involvement in Torah, a partnership in creating Torah. Many statements found in Rabbinic literature attest to this approach to Torah study. The best illustration is the story of the Akhnai oven (BT *Bava Metzia* 59b).

VI. C: War

14:1–15:21

One might ask about the necessity of the entire scene at the Reed Sea. Besides the obvious need to defeat (and destroy the army of) Egypt and to ensure the safe Exodus of the Israelites – there was another component which is a significant piece of this evolution.

For all of the miracles and plagues in Egypt, we never have a clear indication that the Israelites witnessed any of them first hand. Some of the plagues only took place in the Egyptian neighborhoods (e.g., darkness), meaning that the Israelites were only aware (by viewing the destruction afterwards) that a plague had taken place. That is not the same as seeing it firsthand. That is why the verse notes that “Israel saw the great work which Hashem did against Egypt; they feared Hashem and believed in Hashem and in Moses his servant” (14:31).

This is, clearly, a necessary prerequisite to entering into the Covenant – having the full experience of seeing God’s power. However, note a salient feature of this war: God does all of the fighting and the Israelites are totally passive. The verse is quite clear:

Hashem will fight for you, and you have only to keep still. (14:14).

When the Israelites sing to God, they describe Him as a “Man of War” (15:3). It is God who fights for His people, just as He did in Egypt via the plagues.

⁴ I highly recommend reading Rabbi Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man* on this point.

⁵ BT *Hagigah* 3a.

17:8–16

Note the dramatic evolution. When Amalek attack the people, Moses immediately charges Joshua to choose valorous men to go and fight Amalek. Moses, for his part, ascended the mountain and raised his hands. The Torah relates that as long as his hands were raised, the Israelites were successful in war, and when they fell, so did the fortunes of the Israelites. The Mishna astutely explains that it was not Moses's hands that were fighting, but that when he raised his hands, the Israelites would look heavenward and succeed.⁶ In other words, this war was an almost direct inversion of the earlier one. In this war, the Israelites are doing the fighting and God is apparently passive. "Apparently" because it is a basic tenet of faith and philosophy that God is never passive, but, within the description of the war, God and the Israelites almost reverse roles. The denouement of this war comes when God declares that the war against Amalek is His war forever (17:16) – the wars of the Israelites are also God's wars.

VII. D: Thirst

15:22–26

The scene at Marah is enigmatic. The Israelites have wandered for three days without water, yet we hear nothing of their legendary complaining. They only lodge a complaint when they come to the waters of Marah and they prove to be undrinkable. In spite of this obstacle, they don't yet phrase their complaints in the familiar litany of "...why did you take us out of Egypt" (Exodus 17:3) or, worse yet "...let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt" (Numbers 14:4).

Surely the name of the place and the bitterness of the waters must have caused great chagrin among the people. They had just left the bitter work of Egypt (Exodus 1:14), and celebrated that by eating bitter herbs (*merorim*) with their Pesach offering (12:8). Suddenly, their first stop after seeing the end of Egypt and the embittering Egyptians is – Marah – a place of bitter waters. The lesson here is powerful: The Exodus was not a single event, an irrevocable evolution away from oppression. There is always the potential for bitterness and trouble. This is a brand-new lesson for the Israelites: that their relationship with the God of liberation is not over (which they had every reason to believe until this point). Rather, they have an ongoing interaction with Him.

This idea is underscored in two ways. First of all, Moses throws a stick into the water, making them sweet and drinkable. This is a clear inversion of the first Egyptian plague – where sweet, drinkable waters were made unusable when he struck his staff on them. Moses is showing that the same God who can embitter waters and destroy Egyptians is the source of life and sweetness. This is followed by Moses's statement of the relationship between their allegiance to God and their welfare:

If you will listen carefully to the voice of Hashem your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am Hashem who heals you.
(15:26)

There is new information here – that the duties to God extend beyond the few *mitzvot* which He already gave, almost all of which focus around a commemoration of the Exodus.

Note that the waters of Marah are stagnant (although the verse does not say so, there is no indication that these waters flowed in any way and every indication points to settled waters) and that Moses takes the existent waters and changes their taste.

⁶ Mishna *Rosh HaShanah* 3:8.

17:1–7

Here, we have an entirely different “water-experience.” Besides the stronger complaint of the Israelites, note what type of waters Moses brings them. He hits a rock which is on Horev (Mount Sinai) and waters gush forth. The symbolism of new waters flowing from Sinai speaks for itself. Unlike Marah, these waters are flowing (indicating dynamism and growth) and come from Sinai (the source of that dynamism and growth).

VIII. Interlude:

Twelve Springs, Seventy Date-Palms (15:27)

R. Elazar HaModa'i says: “When the Holy One, Who is blessed, created the world, He created twelve springs corresponding to the twelve tribes of Jacob and seventy date-palms corresponding to the seventy elders.”⁷

Before addressing the connection, why are there always seventy elders among the Israelites (see Exodus 24:1, Numbers 11:16)? I would like to suggest that this number held great significance for the Israelites, since it is the exact number of their ancestors who had descended to Egypt (Exodus 1:5, Deuteronomy 10:22). The Israelites understood that their future was strongly rooted in their past – a past of twelve brothers, constituting seventy family members.

This is the connection with our springs and date-palms (which represent nourishment). Let's summarize the evolution of the Israelites since the Exodus:

- (1) They take the first step towards sanctification.
- (2) They are given a system of perpetuating the story of their Exodus and transmitting it to their children.
- (3) They experience God's power first-hand.
- (4) They learn that their relationship with God is eternal.

They also learn that their relationship is not beginning now, nor did it begin in Egypt. Their relationship is built on an ancient one that goes back to the Land where they are headed – and to their ancestral family which came down from there to Egypt. With this lesson in hand, they were ready for the big lesson of the Mannah.

IX. E: Mannah

16:1–27

As mentioned above, since the story of the Mannah sits at the center of our chiasmus, it must include some clue as to how the Israelites evolved into the people who could stand at Sinai and become God's nation.

There are two central features of how the Israelites were to respond to the Mannah:

- (1) They were to only take the proper amount per person in the household.
- (2) They were to take double on Friday and take none on Shabbat.

Each of these commands (which, for the most part, the whole nation followed) carries a critical step in the development of the holy nation.

The command for each person to restrict himself to a daily portion for each member of the household represented not only a good deal of faith in God, but also tremendous self-restraint

⁷ Mekhilta (Parashat vaYassa 1).

and concern for one's fellow.⁸ This is how He explains the "test" of the Mannah (16:4) – that we were tested to see how much concern each of us could demonstrate for our fellow, knowing that if we took more than our portion, someone else would go hungry. Indeed, the Israelites passed this test with flying colors! (v. 18) For a slave people, wandering in a desert to exercise this much self-restraint was a demonstration of their readiness to stand as a unified nation and to enter into a covenant which includes mutual responsibility.

The second piece is an even stronger statement. We first learn about Shabbat in the beginning of Genesis. God created the world in six days and ceases creating on the seventh day. For the first time, we are given the command to abstain from certain types of creative actions on Shabbat – in imitation of God. The lesson of Shabbat is integral to the education of the B'nei Yisrael: They are not *merely* to be the recipients of God's bounty – they are to be His partners in this world.

X. Summary

Now we can see the step-by-step education of the Israelites and how they come from being a "nation in the midst of another nation" to "a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation."

Moving from a static relationship with God which revolves around one event in their personal past and which would be celebrated and commemorated in the family (13:1–16)...

...to experiencing of God's power "firsthand"; (14:1–15:21)...

...to learning that the relationship with God will be ongoing (15:22–26)...

...to a reminder that their roots are ancient and that their nourishment comes from those roots (15:27)...

...to an exercise in concerned fellowship and partnership with God (16:1–27)...

...to a demonstration that the relationship with God will be a flowing source of life coming from Sinai (17:1–7)...

...to demonstrating their own readiness to fight and play a role in their own survival (17:8–16)...

...to being introduced to the Academy of Moses our teacher (18:1–27)...

...to standing at Mount Sinai and being invited to become God's holy people (19:1–6).

Afterword

By finding the beginning and end points of the journey, each marked with a common word *li*, we were able to identify a large chiasmus which takes us from the passive, relatively impotent nation of slaves to an active, dynamic nation prepared to enter the Covenant at Sinai. The axis of the story, the fulcrum of the chiasmus, is the story of the Mannah, where the ultimate lessons needed for any people to be free – the lessons of communal responsibility and the maturity to exhibit self-restraint to ensure the common weal – are learned and the people pass their test successfully.

⁸ Cf. Y. Medan, "Efah v'Efah: An Inquiry into Israel's Travels in the Desert," *Megadim* 17:61–90 [Hebrew].

The Structure of Exodus 13:2–19:6 מבנה פרשת בשלח



יג:ב קדש לי כל בכור פטר כל רחם בבני ישראל באדם ובבהמה לי הוא :

יג:ד והיה כי ישאלך בנך מחר לאמר מה זאת ואמרת אליו בחזק יד הוציאנו ה' ממצרים מבית עבדים :

יד:ד ה' ילחם לכם ואתם תחרישון :

טו:כג-כה ויבאו מרתה ולא יכלו לשתת מים ממרה כי מרים הם על כן קרא שמה מרה :
וילנו העם על משה לאמר מה נשתה :
ויצעק אל ה' ויורהו ה' עץ וישלך אל המים וימתקו המים שם שם לו חק ומשפט ושם נסהו :

טו:כז ויבאו אילמה ושם שתים עשרה עינת מים ושבעים תמרים ויחנו שם על המים :

טז ויאמר ה' אל משה הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים ויצא העם ולקטו דבר יום ביומו למען אנסנו הילך בתורתך אם לא :
... זה הדבר אשר צוה ה' לקטו ממנו איש לפי אכלו עמר לגלגלת מספר נפשותיכם איש לאשר באהלו תקחו : ויעשו כן בני ישראל וילקטו המרבה והממעט : וימדו בעמר ולא העדיף המרבה והממעט לא החסיר איש לפי אכלו לקטו :



יז:ג הנני עמד לפניך שם על הצור בחרב והכית בצור ויצאו ממנו מים ושתה העם ויעש כן משה לעיני זקני ישראל :

יז:ט ויאמר משה אל יהושע בחר לנו אנשים וצא הלחם בעמלק מחר אנכי נצב על ראש הגבעה ומטה האלהים בידי :

יח:כא-כב ואתה תחזה מכל העם אנשי חיל יראי א-להים אנשי אמת שנאי בצע ושמת עליהם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי חמשים ושרי עשרת :
ושפטו את העם בכל עת והיה כל הדבר הגדל יביאו אליך וכל הדבר הקטן ישפטו הם והקל מעליך ונשאו אתך :

יט:ד-ז

Parashat Beshallah

אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי למצרים ואשא אתכם על כנפי נשרים ואבא אתכם אלי: ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקלי ושמרתם את בריתי והייתם לי סגלה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ: ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל בני ישראל: