

Charoset - From Gan Eden to Mitzrayim and Back Again

Rabbi Avie Schreiber

I. תחת התפוח - Under the “apple tree”

One of the reasons offered in the Gemara¹ for the Mitzvah of חרוסת is that the חרוסת is זכר לתפוח - to remind us of the "תפוח" tree. What does this mean? According to Rashi, this "תפוח" is a reference to the tree mentioned in שיר השירים in פרק ח' פסוק ה':

... מי זאת עלה מן־המדבר מתרפקת על־דודָה תַחַת התפוח עוֹרְתִידָה ...

Who is this that comes up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? I awakened you under the apple tree...

Rashi further explains based on the מדרש that while the Jews were in מצרים, a great miracle occurred under these trees. When the time came for a Jewish woman to give birth, she would go out to the fields and give birth under the תפוח tree - בלי עֶצֶב - without pain. This enabled the Jewish women to give birth in secrecy, thereby saving their newborns from the murderous hands of the Egyptians. The Gemara continues and says that based on this explanation, the חרוסת should have a sour or tart flavor to remind us of the תפוח - apparently meaning an apple tree. This is the basis for the culinary custom to include apples in the recipe for חרוסת.

While this is clearly a significant miracle, why does this miracle in particular warrant the creation of a new מצוה דרבנן in the form of חרוסת?

I would like to suggest that the miracle that occurred under the תפוח is an expression of a deeper truth about the servitude in Egypt and the subsequent redemption from its clutches.

II. גן עדן ומצרים

גן עדן began his life in an ideal world - a world where food was produced with relative ease and in which he answered to no one except G-d. How different was the beginning of the life of the young Jewish nation! Far from ideal, life for the Jewish slaves seemed to epitomize the very curse of אדם - “by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread” - “בזעת אפיק תאכל לחם”. The Jewish people must have understood G-d’s verdict only too well. In גן עדן, אדם was charged with the mission of לעבדה ולשמרה - to work the land and to guard it. In stark contrast, in מצרים, instead of לעבדה - working the land with relative ease and dignity, the Jews were subjected to עבודת פרך - to backbreaking work. And instead of לשמרה - guarding the land out of a sense of ownership and responsibility, the Jews were ownerless laborers toiling for someone else’s gain.

In addition, גן עדן was a world of immanent spirituality where קול ה' מתהלך בתוך הגן - “the voice of G-d ‘travelled’ in the garden.” In מצרים, G-d was not easily beheld. The environment of מצרים was devoid of spirituality and filled with moral and spiritual corruption. The Torah even holds the behavior of מצרים up as the example of what we should not imitate. As an introduction to the *Parsha* of עריות - of illicit

1. פסחים דף קטז עמוד א'.

relationships, the Torah warns us - *כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבֹּתֶם-בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ*² - "Like the actions of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do."

We can suggest that the Torah views and deliberately presents מצרים and גן עדן as polar opposites. As evidence, when לוט separates from אברהם and chooses a different destiny the Torah says:

וַיִּשָׂא-לוֹט אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת-כָּל-כַּפַּר הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי כָלָה מִשְׁקָהּ לִפְנֵי שַׁחַת ה' אֶת-סְדֹם וְאֶת-עִמּוֹרָה כַּגֵּן-ה' כְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם...³
And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt...

In this Pasuk, The Torah compares Egypt to the Garden of Eden. Both were lush, fertile and verdant. In both, a river overflowed and irrigated the land. But the outward similarity only served to highlight the deep chasm that separated the inner life of the two places. Egypt may have had the potential to be like the Garden of Eden, but in actuality, Egypt couldn't be more different. Egypt squandered its potential and allowed itself to deteriorate into a moral wasteland.

This comparison and contrast between מצרים and גן עדן is further evident from the following *Medrashim* found in מדרש רבה and the ילקוט שמעוני respectively.

שמות רבה פרשה יח

<p><i>G-d said - how should I honor Egypt (for venerating Yosef and Yaakov)? I will refer to it with the name of Gan Eden as it says... "like the Garden of Hashem, like the land of Egypt." When they (the Egyptians) began to subjugate the Jewish people, G-d said, ... I will undo the honor I bestowed on them and turn to the land to desolation...</i></p>	<p>...כך ירד יוסף למצרים וקבלו אותו ועשו אותו מלך עליהם, שנאמר (בראשית מב) ויוסף הוא השליט על הארץ, כבדו את יעקב שנאמר (שם /בראשית/ נ) ויבכו אותו מצרים שבעים יום, אמר הקב"ה ומה כבוד אני עושה למצרים? הריני קורא אותה בשמה של גן עדן שנאמר (שם /בראשית/ יג) כגן ה' כארץ מצרים. כשחזרו ושעבדו בהן אמר הקב"ה ועברתי בארץ מצרים חוזר אני מאותו כבוד ואעשה אותה שממה, שנאמר (יואל ד) מצרים לשממה תהיה.</p>
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

2. ויקרא יח: ג
 3. בראשית יג: י

<p><i>G-d's presence was originally on earth itself. When Adam sinned, G-d removed Himself to the first level of heaven. When Cain sinned, G-d removed Himself to the second level.... when Egypt rose up, G-d removed Himself to the seventh (most distant) level of heaven.</i></p>	<p>עיקר שכינה בתחתונים היתה כיון שחטא אדם הראשון נסתלקה לרקיע ראשון עמד קין וחטא נסתלקה לרקיע שני עמד דור אנוש נסתלקה לרקיע ג' דור המבול נסתלקה לרקיע ד' דור הפלגה נסתלקה לרקיע ה' סדומיים נסתלקה לרקיע ו' מצרים נסתלקה לרקיע ז'</p>
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

What is the message of this contrast? What lesson do we learn from the fact that מצרים and גן עדן were situated at opposite ends of the spectrum? We can suggest that we learn an important lesson about the origins and the life-journey of בני ישראל.

In G-d's original plan, from the outset, Man was placed in an ideal world. With no effort on Man's part he found himself in a utopian setting. Physically and spiritually all was perfect. But this plan failed. Man failed. Perhaps the underlying cause was that Man did not toil to achieve his elevated status and idyllic setting. He was bound to take his life for granted and to falter. And indeed he did.

For the narrative of the Jewish people, who are intended to ultimately live an ideal life in a perfect world, G-d had a different plan in mind. The Jews began their national life as far away from גן עדן as can be imagined. While גן עדן and Egypt may have shared geographic proximity and physical attributes, these two places were totally dissimilar. In contrast to אדם, in order to achieve the level of גן עדן, the Jews needed to climb their way out of מצרים and work their way towards perfection. Immersed in forty nine levels of טומאה⁴, the Jews needed to work hard to elevate and extricate themselves from the contaminating grip of Egypt. Only by crossing deep waters and traversing endless deserts would they arrive at their "ideal" Land.

The journey of בני ישראל is destined to end where the journey of אדם began. After such a long and arduous path, בני ישראל are bound to appreciate their "paradise" and treasure their destiny.

III. Other Parallels between מצרים and גן עדן

a. Expulsion and Exodus

When אדם הראשון sinned and was sentenced to removal from גן עדן, the פסוק uses words with the roots ש.ל.ח and ג.ר.ש to express that אדם was both sent and chased out of גן עדן. A similar phraseology is found in the context of בני ישראל leaving מצרים.

4. ספרי חסידות ועוד.

שמות - פרק יא יציאת מצרים	בראשית - פרק ג' גרוש מגן עדן
א... אַחֲרֵי־כֵן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה כְּשִׁלְחוֹ בְּלָה גֵרֶשׁ יִגְרֶשׁ אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה:	כג וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ ה' אֱלֹקִים מִגֵּן־עֵדֶן לְעַבְדֹת אֶת־הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר לָקַח מִשָּׁם: כד וַיִּגְרֶשׁ אֶת־הָאָדָם...
1. ... afterwards he will let you go from here; when he shall let you go, he shall certainly thrust you out from here altogether.	23. And the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from where he was taken. 24. So he chased out the man ...

By using parallel terms, perhaps the Pesukim are expressing to us that in order to reverse the process of the expulsion from גן עדן, the Jewish People needed to be chased out of Egypt in the same way אדם was chased out of Eden. We were challenged to attain a level of spirituality that would naturally be abhorred by an immoral land such as מצרים. We needed to rise above the impurity of מצרים and render ourselves anathema to פרעה and the Egyptians, resulting in our expulsion/exodus from there. Our ability to reach this level displayed our worthiness to return to גן עדן.

b. פרעה - that snake!

In G-d, Adam and Chava played center stage. The נחש, the snake, of course played a significant role as well. Though not in total control, he managed to manipulate the situation according to his design. How terrible would it be to live in a place where the נחש was the primary character, where the נחש possessed almost total control over his surroundings! There was such a land - and the Jewish people were its unfortunate residents. The land was מצרים and the snake in charge was פרעה. The שמות רבה in מדרש expresses this association of פרעה with a נחש - a snake.

שמות רבה (וילנא) פרשה ט

<p><i>Why did the Sages associate the coiling of a snake with the kingship of Egypt? ...Just like a a snake is crooked, so too, the kingship of Egypt acts crookedly....</i></p>	<p>מה... ראו חכמים להקיש כריכת נחש למלכות מצרים? א"ר שמעון בן פיזי דכתיב (ירמיה מו) קולה כנחש ילך, מה הנחש מלחש והורג אף מלכות מצרים מלחשת והורגת כי הוא נותן בבית האסורים ומלחש עליו להורגו, ד"א מה ראה הקב"ה להקיש מלכות מצרים לנחש, מה הנחש מעוקם אף מלכות מצרים מעקמת דרכיה, לפיכך אמר הקב"ה למשה כשם שהנחש מעוקם אף פרעה מעוקם, כשיבא להתעקם אמור לאהרן ויתלה את המטה כנגדו כלומר מזה אתה לוקה.</p>
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

We again see that the Jews found themselves in a world that was גן עדן turned upside down. In this world, the נחש was king. Perhaps this is the significance of the first sign that ה' told Moshe to perform in front of פרעה. ה' told Moshe to put down the staff and transform it into a snake, then grab its tail and transform it back, as if to say - "G-d is in control of the snake, meaning פרעה, and not vice-versa⁵."

5. ראה דרשות ר"י אבן שועיב פרשת ואלה שמות - "ועוד קבלנו בענין הנחש הקדמוני ממנו כי הוא שרו של פרעה."

IV. The Righteous Women and The “Apple” Tree

We began by asking why the miracle that occurred under the תפוח was significant enough to generate its own independent מצה דרבנן. As stated above, the miracle was that the women gave birth without pain. Looking carefully at the words of the מדרש, we see that the מדרש is linguistically linking this miracle to an earlier story in Tanach. The מדרש uses the words בלי עצב - without pain - to describe the labor of the women. In the third chapter of Bereishit, when G-d cursed חוה, He said, בְּעֵצָב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים - “With pain, you shall give birth to children.” The מדרש is telling us that in מצרים, under the תפוח, the women were not subject to the primeval curse bestowed upon womenkind. Perhaps the מדרש is conveying to us that though the land of מצרים was the antithesis of עדן, the women were able to rise above this and view themselves as if they were in the ideal world of Eden - a land of freedom and spirituality. Even in the reality of deep גלות, the women perceived the imminent גאולה.

To go a step further we can say that the תפוח tree itself may be a reference to עדן. While some interpret “תפוח”, as referring to an apple tree, others explain that it refers to an *etrog* tree. ספר הישר סימן in his רבינו תם, referring to the תפוח mentioned in שיר השירים, states תפוח מתורגם תפוח - that the תפוח refers to the *etrog* tree. This is significant because according to the מדרש⁶, the *etrog* may very well have been the forbidden עץ הדעת in עדן! And so when the women went תחת התפוח - under the “*etrog*” tree to give birth, they were in effect seeing themselves in עדן.

And we can further suggest, that in Egypt, the women redeemed themselves from the sin of חוה. Whereas חוה enticed her husband to eat of the fruit and disobey G-d’s command, in Egypt the women enticed their husbands for a wholly positive purpose. The מדרש tells us that the women would go out to the fields where their husbands were laboring and entice them to conceive more children. The men saw no purpose in bringing more children into a world of affliction and slavery, but the women convinced them a better world was on the horizon.

And so, whereas the men were entrenched in the “hell on earth” that was מצרים, the women were able to uplift themselves and see the brighter future that lay ahead. When the מדרש declares that בזכות נשים צדקניות שבאותו הדור גאולו - “the Jews were redeemed due to the merit of the righteous women of that generation,” it is referring to the unshakeable אמונה - the faith of the Jewish women as displayed under the תפוח tree.

V. Conclusion

We can now understand the significance of the miracle of the “apple/*etrog*” tree. When we taste the tartness of the חרוסת, we are reminded of what took place under the תפוח. We remember the great אמונה of the Jewish women. We learn that even in מצרים, one can be in עדן. We learn that by visualizing and believing in a better future, we can overcome national and personal challenges that may confront us in the present.

According to the Gemara⁷, the חרוסת symbolizes something very different as well. It also זכר לטיט - a reminder of the clay and bricks that burdened the Jewish people. And so, when we eat the חרוסת, two different images begin to flutter to the mind, each leading down a different path. With each bite, we are first inclined think of the thick mortar and the heavy bricks - the immoral quagmire of Egypt that held us captive. But as our palates begin to taste the tartness of the חרוסת, we can direct our minds to the תפוח trees of long ago, to the אמונה of the women that held fast, ultimately leading us to our redemption and to the beginning of our national destiny.

חג שמח!

6. פסיקתא רבתי (איש שלום) פסקא מב - וה' פקד את שרה

מה האילן שאכל (ממנו) אדם הראשון הימנו ומת? מה היה? ר"מ אומר חיטים היו, רבי יוסי אומר תאנה היה, רבי יהודה בר' אילעאי אומר ענבים היו, ר' אבא דמן עכו אומר אתרוג היה.

7. פסחים שם.