

Parashah: Va'etchanan
Read On: August 17, 2024 | 13 Av 5784
Torah: Deuteronomy 3:23–7:11
Triennial: Deuteronomy 5:1–6:25
Haftarah: Isaiah 40:1–26

What Is It For?

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Dvar Parashah

We do not remember the horrors of the years of oppression under the Egyptians. We commemorate our saving, not our suffering. The story of Exodus gives us just enough of a taste of what life was like for us to know that life had to change. But it does not dwell on the oppression, it does not detail the murders of so many of our children.

As we live Egypt, we consciously construct our memories of Egypt. We develop rituals around the saving, we turn the Exodus into the narrative. God helps us to tell this as the story. When other details of life from back when come bubbling up, when we remember the foods we ate, the lives we led, Moses ceremoniously squashes them. We are to separate ourselves from those memories. In order to move forward, we cannot live forever in destruction and devastation.

So what was it for? Why did we have to suffer? Why did we have to lose so many, so much, for so long? Why couldn't God have saved us earlier? What had we done to merit that pain? Why did it have to happen if it wasn't even going to become part of our story, a way we saw and defined ourselves?

In our parashah, Moses gives us a hint as to what he thinks it was for. He describes Egypt as **כור הברזל**, an iron kiln or crucible. This image gives a horrible purpose to our suffering. We are formed, shaped, called into our current existence by our suffering.

This image appears also in Ezekiel 22, in a prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem. There we read, "The house of Israel has become dross to me. They are all bronze and tin and iron and lead, in a kiln of silver dross they are... So will I gather My anger and My wrath and fan the fire and smelt you. And I will gather you in and fan the fire of My fury upon you, and you shall be smelted within it. As silver is smelted within a kiln, so shall you be smelted, and you shall know that I, the LORD, have poured out My wrath upon you." To apply the process to our parashah, we became God's people, God's possession, by means of the kiln of Egypt.

But we do not really know anything about our people's time in Egypt. It is hard to deduce why God might have seen us as dross there, needing to pour out wrath on us, to forge us into a more pure alloy. It's a metaphor that makes sense when talking about our time in the desert, the creation of the second generation and the destruction of the first. We have those stories. The stories of our nation being forged in Egypt are lacking. Rather, the story we tell about that time is the story of Moses. We see how he was made, shaped, pressured, formed into being who he becomes. For Moses, Egypt was indeed an iron crucible. He survived, he came out stronger. By using the metaphor here, Moses invites the second generation, invites all of us, to see ourselves in him. He allows us to focus on the hero, the winner, of the time in Egypt. He allows us to become him, to identify with him. We are not those who did not make it. We are Moses, forged in Egypt, triumphant in the desert.

We read later, in Proverbs 17, of the kiln as well: "silver has a crucible and gold a kiln, but the LORD tries hearts." Moses was tried and refined in Egypt. The rest of us were dross. But in Deuteronomy, Moses invites us to meld back with him.

Beginning Again in Every Moment

Rabbi Daniel Raphael Silverstein

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Do Not Go Gentle

Ilana Kurshan

White Fire: Poetry on the Parashah

I plead with you, beseech you, let me in
I can't go gentle into that good night
I still have strength, my eyes remain undimmed,
I rage against the dying of the light.

With whom shall I seek mercy for myself?
All others you forgive God, why not me?
I made a few mistakes, as do all men,
It doesn't mean I acted faithlessly.

A slave, we learn, can choose to be a slave,
For life. His master pierces in his ear
I love you God, I don't want to go free
I want to stay your slave, God, do you hear?

And fair enough, if Joshua must serve
You in my stead, I'll gladly cede my role
But let me be his protégé instead
And let his name adorn the Torah scroll.

Should hands that took the Torah from your hands
Should feet that climbed up Sinai toward the sky
Now lick the dust? For forty days I ate
No food and drank no water. Now I die?

Just let me in for one year, so I might
Perform all the commandments in the land
And if I cannot enter when alive
Then let me in when dead. So I demand.

"Enough!" said God to me. "Your life is through,
Since you can't stop for death, he'll stop for you."

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The Talmud teaches that the Torah was given in black fire on white fire (Y. Shekalim 6:1). The black fire is the letters of the Torah scroll, and the white fire is the parchment background. In this column, consisting of a poem on each parashah, I will try to illuminate the white fire of Torah – the midrashim, stories, and interpretations that carve out the negative space of the letters and give them shape.