

**Parashah:** Shemot  
**Read On:** January 18, 2025 | 18 Tevet 5785  
**Torah:** Exodus 1:1–6:1  
**Triennial:** Exodus 4:18–6:1  
**Haftarah:** Isaiah 27:6–28:16; 29:22–23

## Bringing Us Home

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

*Dvar Parashah*

Moses returns to Egypt to rescue us, to take us out of Egypt, to lead us off gloriously into the sunset, into the promised land. Moses returns to reunite us with God, the God of our ancestors. No, Moses returns so that God can strike fear into the hearts of the Egyptians who have oppressed us. Or, rather, Moses returns to Egypt because it is home, because he misses it, and because finally there is no one left there who wants to kill him. Or, rather, Moses returns to Egypt because he is concerned about the wellbeing of Aaron and Miriam and wants to make sure they are ok. Or perhaps it is the wellbeing of all of the Israelites about which he is concerned. Or perhaps Moses returns because he was at the right place at the right time, a cog in the machine.

The story of the burning bush, the first encounter between God and Moses, sets the pattern for a prophetic call narrative. Just as we will later see in the stories of the likes of Samuel and Jeremiah, when God introduces himself to a prophet, that prophet demurs. God then insists and the prophet takes on the mission. But Moses is a master of demurrals. He is, after all, the most **humble** of all humans. Five times he refuses God's mission. Five times God reassures him, providing reasons that the mission will succeed.

This dialogue ends bizarrely. Moses asks God to find someone else to do the job. God gets angry and offers Aaron part of the job. And then that's it. The dialogue ends. Next thing we know, Moses is talking to Jethro, his father-in-law. God had told Moses to go to Pharaoh, and Moses goes... to Jethro. Before anything else, before God and kings, Moses goes to family.

Moses says to this created family of his, "Let me go, please, and return to my brothers who are in Egypt that I may see whether they still live." There is no mention of any part of the mission that God has given him. Moreover, Moses quotes Joseph. When Joseph, who had become a near King of Egypt, meets his brothers for the first time since they sold him into slavery, his primary concern is the state of his father. Repeatedly, Joseph asks, "Is your father still alive?" with the question shifting once he has revealed his identity to be, "Is my father still alive?" His

brothers will use this language to convince Jacob to come down to Egypt to see Joseph, saying, "Joseph is still alive."

These are the words that move mountains, that spring Joseph, Jacob, and Moses into action. Moses takes up his mission not because Aaron will help him, but rather, for the chance to see Aaron again. When Moses chooses to have a no-stakes conversation with Jethro, he explains that he needs to return to his brothers, his family. In the moment that God is calling for Moses to be more, to become a prophet, a mouthpiece for God, a leader of all the people, Moses roots himself back in what matters most to him. His family, both the one he built and the one he came from. It is Moses's sense of home that will allow him not only to lead us out of Egypt but to lead us home.

**A Land Oozing Labneh and Silan**

Jonathan Lipnick

*Exploring the Parashah*



*\*In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.*

## A God Who Takes Care of Us in Our Times of Trouble

Rabbi Joshua Kulp

*Midrash and the Parashah*

Exodus opens with a swift and dramatic decline in the Israelites' circumstances. By verse 8 of the first chapter, Pharaoh is already plotting against them, forcing them into slavery. By verse 15, he has commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all male Israelite infants. When this plan fails, he orders his people to throw every newborn Israelite boy into the Nile.

This is a story we have heard countless times and seen depicted in film over and over. Its impact has dulled with familiarity. And while we, too, endure hardships—some of them severe—I don't think we can truly comprehend the suffering of a people suddenly enslaved, whose children were brutally taken from them and murdered.

There are well-known midrashim about the Israelites' resilience in the face of persecution. Perhaps the most famous of these is the story of the women who convinced their husbands to continue having children despite the terrible decrees against them. According to the midrash, the women would go out to the fields, where their husbands were toiling under harsh conditions, and seduce them, ensuring that they continued to procreate. This extraordinary resilience, the midrash teaches, was what ultimately merited the redemption of the Children of Israel.

Yet, we often end the story there, leaving an obvious question unanswered—if the women gave birth and their sons were thrown into the Nile, how did their actions help Israel survive slavery and attempted genocide?

The answer lies in the continuation of the midrash, which is a work of pure fantasy. It reminds me of *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead—a brilliant novel set in 19th-century America that follows an African American woman's escape through a literal yet fantastical underground railroad. Like Whitehead's novel, the midrash envisions a world in which reality itself is bent to aid the redemption of the oppressed.

### Sotah 11b (Exodus Rabbah 1:12)

וכיון שמתעברות באות לבתיהם, וכיון שמגיע זמן מולדיהן הולכות ויולדות בשדה תחת התפוח, שנאמר: **"תחת התפוח עורתיך וגו'."** והקדוש ברוך הוא שולח משמי מרום מי שמנקיר ומשפיר אותן, כחיה זו שמשפרת את הולד, שנאמר: **"ומולדותיך ביום הולדת אותך לא כרת שרך ובמים לא רחצת למשעי וגו'."**

ומלקט להן שני עגולין, אחד של שמן ואחד של דבש, שנאמר: **"ויניקהו דבש מסלע ושמן וגו'."** וכיון שמכירין בהן מצרים באין להורגן, ונעשה להם נס ונבלעין בקרקע, ומביאין שוורים וחורשין על גבן, שנאמר: **"על גבי חרשו חרשים וגו'."** לאחר שהולכין היו מבצבצין ויוצאין כעשב השדה, שנאמר: **"רבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך."** וכיון שמתגדלין באין עדרים עדרים לבתיהן, שנאמר: **"ותרבי ותגדלי ותבאי בעדי עדיים,"** אל תקרי **"בעדי עדיים,"** אלא **"בעדרי עדרים."** וכשנגלה הקדוש ברוך הוא על הים, הם הכירוהו תחלה, שנאמר: **"זה אלי ואנוהו."**

And once they became pregnant, they would return to their homes, and when the time came for them to give birth, they would go and give birth in the field beneath the apple tree, as it is said: **“Beneath the apple tree I awakened you...”** (Song of Songs 8:5). And the Holy One, blessed be He, would send from the heavens someone to cleanse and beautify them, like an animal that tends to its offspring, as it is said: **“As for your birth, on the day you were born, your navel was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing...”** (Ezekiel 16:4).

And He would prepare for them two round cakes, one of oil and one of honey, as it is said: **“And He made him suck honey from the rock, and oil...”** (Deuteronomy 32:13). When the Egyptians recognized them, they sought to kill them, but a miracle occurred for them, and they were swallowed into the ground. The Egyptians brought oxen and plowed over them, as it is said: **“The plowers plowed upon my back...”** (Psalms 129:3). Afterward, when they left, they would sprout forth and emerge like the grass of the field, as it is said: **“I made you numerous like the plants of the field...”** (Ezekiel 16:7). And when they grew up, they would return in flocks to their homes, as it is said: **“And you grew and matured, and you came adorned with ornaments”** (Ezekiel 16:7). Do not read **“adorned with ornaments”** (*ba’adi ada’yim*), but rather **“in flocks upon flocks”** (*be’edrei adarim*). And when the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed at the sea, they were the first to recognize Him, as it is said: **“This is my God, and I will glorify Him.”** (Exodus 15:2).

This beautiful midrash weaves together verses to help us envision God’s protection of the Israelite babies in their most perilous hour. God acts as a midwife, assisting the mothers in giving birth in secrecy. He nourishes the newborns with sweet cakes and, when the Egyptians come to kill them, transforms them into seeds, hidden in the earth until they can safely return home in great multitudes. These children, brought into the world through their mothers’ courage and nurtured miraculously by God, are the first to recognize God’s miracle at the Sea—because they have seen God before.

There are times when the struggle against evil becomes overwhelming, demanding both human effort and *siyata dishmaya*—God’s help. In the midrash, God aids the Israelites by literally protecting them from the evil Egyptians. But we can take a step back and imagine God inspiring the author of this midrash to imagine the world that he (the author) creates. We don’t know a world in which God plants children in the earth. But we do know a world in which the ability to imagine allows us to conjure up a better world. In times of darkness, when we’ve done all that we can, sometimes this is all we have.

Somewhere, there are children and adults trapped underground. Imagining what hell they are going through has been on the minds of every Jew for the last year and a half. May they, like the children of Israel so long ago, swiftly return home, flocks upon flocks, and inspire us to uncover the face of God.