



Ghosts in the Haggadah

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The Exodus from Egypt is, in one way of telling it, a ghost story.

This is not the usual genre we assign to the tale. We describe it as a story of liberation. The emotions we associate with it are a mixture of triumph, joy, and awe. But stories are created, in part, by where we choose to begin and end them, and *yezi'at Mitzrayim* (the Exodus) is a story with many beginnings.

We usually choose to begin the story of *yezi'at Mitzrayim* with our enslavement, to follow its arc through the plagues, the night of rushed departure and unrisen dough, and to end it either in Parashat BeShallah with the people's passage through the Reed Sea—or, in the longer version, their arrival at the Promised Land. That arc is the story we know: the story of God's promise fulfilled, of freedom, and of hope. But a close reading of the opening lines of Sefer Shemot suggests another way to read the story—one that begins not with our enslavement, but with our collective sin.

שמות א:א-ה

¹ וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ: ² רָאוּבֵן שָׁמְעוֹן לֵוִי וַיהוּדָה: ³ יִשָּׁשְׁכָר



זבולן ובנימין: ⁴דן ונפתלי גד ואשר: ⁵ויהי כל נפש יצאי ירך יעקב שבעים נפש ויוסף היה במצרים:

Shemot 1:1-5

¹These are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt with Ya'akov; every man came with his household: ²Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehudah; ³Yissakhar, Zevulun, and Binyamin; ⁴Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher. ⁵And all the souls that came out of the loins of Ya'akov were seventy souls; and Yosef was in Egypt already.

“And Yosef was in Egypt already.” With this clause, the text invites us to remember the story that precedes the story, the beginning before the beginning. We did not end up in Egypt by accident. We were there because of a tragedy precipitated by unthinkable hatred: Yosef’s brothers selling him into slavery and deceiving their father, Ya’akov, into thinking that Yosef was dead. We were in Egypt because we were a family torn apart. And while in one way of telling that before-story, the saga of Yosef and his brothers ends with tearful reconciliation and the family’s salvation in Egypt, there is another way of telling it—the way, in fact, that the Torah itself chooses in the final lines of Bereishit—which insists that this story, the story of the Jewish people’s foundational sin, is not complete until Yosef’s body has been returned to Cana’an:

בראשית נ:כה-כו

²⁵וַיֵּשְׁבַע יוֹסֵף אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פֶּקֶד פֶּקֶד אֱלֹקִים אֶתְכֶם וְהָעֵלֶתֶם אֶת עֲצָמֹתַי מִזֶּה: ²⁶וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בֶּן מֵאָה וָעֶשְׂרִי שָׁנִים וַיַּחְנֹטוּ אֹתוֹ וַיִּשָּׂם בָּאָרוֹן בְּמִצְרַיִם:

Bereishit 50:25-26

²⁵And Yosef took an oath of the children of Israel, saying: “God will surely remember you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.” ²⁶So Yosef died, being a hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.



And so, on the night of the Exodus, while the Jewish people are rushing, packing, preparing to leave, while the Jewish people are experiencing the story of their redemption, Moshe instead goes to fulfill this ancient promise, taking Yosef's body with him out of Egypt:

שמות יג:ט

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ כִּי הִשְׁבַּע הַשָּׁבִיעַ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹקִים אֶתְכֶם
וְהֶעֱלִיתֶם אֶת עַצְמוֹתַי מִצְרָיִם אִתְּכֶם:

Shemot 13:19

Moshe took Yosef's bones with him, because Yosef had made the Children of Israel swear so to him, saying: God will surely redeem you from here, and you shall carry my bones up from here with you.

It is a doubled experience: redemption side-by-side with atonement, bones and unbaked bread, together, making the exit from the land of Jewish sin and Jewish slavery. The story of life and freedom is twinned with a ghost story, a story of a people haunted by their greatest sin, and accompanied for forty years by the bones of the man they sinned against.

This story, the one in which *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* becomes, at least in part, a long march to atonement, does not end until Yosef is finally buried in Shekhem, the place, Rashi points out (to Yehoshua 24:32), from which his brothers sold him all those years ago. Intriguingly, the account of Yosef's burial follows almost immediately after Yehoshua's account of Jewish history, which we recite at the Seder:

יהושע כד:ב-ד, לב

²וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻעַ אֶל כָּל הָעָם כֹּה אָמַר ה' אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֶבֶר הַנָּהָר יֹשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מֵעוֹלָם תֵּרַח אָבִי אֲבִרָהָם
וְאָבִי נַחֲשׁוּר וַיַּעֲבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים: ³וַאֲקַח אֶת אֲבִיכֶם אֶת אֲבִרָהָם מֵעֶבֶר הַנָּהָר וְאוֹלָהּ אוֹתוֹ בְּכָל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן
וְאֲרָבָה אֶת זֶרְעוֹ וְאָתְּנוּ לוֹ אֶת יִצְחָק: ⁴וְאָתְּנוּ לְיִצְחָק אֶת יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת עֵשָׂו וְאָתְּנוּ לְעֵשָׂו אֶת הָר שֶׁעִיר לְרִשְׁתָּ אוֹתוֹ



וַיַּעֲקֹב וּבְנָיו יָרְדוּ מִצְרָיִם: ...

וְאֶת-עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר הָעִלּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם קָבְרוּ בְּשֶׁכֶם³²

Yehoshua 24:2-4, 32

²Then Yehoshua said to all the people, “Thus said God, the Lord of Israel: In olden times, your forefathers—Teraḥ, father of Avraham and father of Naḥor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods. ³But I took your father Avraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Cana’an and multiplied his offspring. I gave him Yitzḥak, ⁴and to Yitzḥak I gave Ya’akov and Esav. I gave Esav the hill country of Seir as his possession, while Ya’akov and his children went down to Egypt....

³²The bones of Yosef, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shekhem.

The juxtaposition between Yosef’s burial and Yehoshua’s recounting of Jewish people’s arrival in Egypt makes the gap in the text glaringly obvious. “And Ya’akov and his children went down to Egypt.” More accurately, Ya’akov and all but one of his children. Ya’akov and all but one of his children went down to Egypt because of what they had done to the one who was already there. It is the gap here that tells the shadow story at the Seder. Yosef sits at the Seder, invisible, his story addressed primarily through deliberate silence.

According to some commentaries, however, Yosef is alluded to one more time at the Seder. The Ben Ish Hai in the 19th century identifies one of the dippings at the Seder with the event of our foundational sin:¹

בן איש חי שנה ראשונה פרשת צו

וטיבול ראשון זה שהוא כרפס בחומץ הוא זכר לסיבת קושי השעבוד שהיה בשביל מכירת יוסף הע"ה

¹ This identification of the custom is first mentioned in Rabbeinu Manoah’s 13th century commentary on the Rambam’s Mishneh Torah: “ואנו נוהגין בכרפס זכר לכתונת הפסים שעשה יעקב אבינו ליוסף אשר בסבתה נתגלגל.” הדבר וירדו אבותינו למצרים.



ושהטבילו כתונת פסים שלו בדם ומכרוהו וגרמו צער ליעקב אע"ה, וזה נרמז בכרפס והיינו אותיות כ"ר
הם סוף מכר ואותיות פס הם ראש פסים.

Ben Ish Hai Year 1, Parashat Tzav

The first act of dipping, the *karpas* in vinegar, is in memory of the fact that the enslavement was because of the sale of Yosef, and that [his brothers] dipped his coat in blood and caused pain to his father, Ya'akov Avinu. This is alluded to in the word "*karpas*" (כרפס) which has the letters *kaf* and *reish*, which are the last letters of the word "*mekher*" (מכר), sale, and the letters *pey* and *samekh*, which are the first letters in the word "*passim*" (פסים) [the word used to describe Yosef's coat].

According to the Ben Ish Hai, in dipping the *karpas*, we bring the story of the brothers' sale of Yosef into the open. Almost as soon as we open the Seder, before we even touch a piece of *matzah* or begin to tell the story of our enslavement, we engage with our collective sin. We begin the Seder with the story before the story, actually reenacting the moment it all began. Notably, we do not simply tell the story of Yosef's sale. Instead, in reenacting it, we become the holders of our ancestral sin, once again dipping Yosef's coat into blood.

The Ben Ish Hai's interpretation of *karpas* as the deliberate inclusion of Yosef's sale as part of the story of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* allows us to understand Moshe's decision to retrieve Yosef's bones on the very night of the Exodus not as a simple logistical decision, but as a deliberate message to the Jewish people. It is a demand: on the night when we celebrate freedom, we must also remember sin. We cannot become so consumed with our joy that we forget the other, more complicated layers of our history. We will not hide our ghosts for the sake of a simpler story. Instead, as the Jewish people leave Egypt, they carry Yosef with them. As they leave slavery behind them, they bring the memory of the brother their ancestors sold into slavery. Even on a night of ultimate joy, Moshe tells us, we have a responsibility to remember.



Moshe's message, the responsibility to remember, is not an easy one. It demands that we allow the two stories to stand together, neither story obscuring the other. Yes, we committed this sin. Yes, we were redeemed. Yes, we were slaves, and yes, before that, we were slave-sellers. Yes, these two stories are intertwined. Yes, our responsibility must be assumed, and yes, our redemption is to be celebrated. In weaving them together, we refuse to allow overt guilt to destroy our gratitude and celebration, or our joy to deny our guilt.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that this balancing act of memory occurs on the night of the Jewish people's freedom. Perhaps, in teaching us how to tell the truth about our past, Moshe teaches us how to achieve redemption.

Maybe redemption is what happens when we sit together and tell our stories in their entirety, hiding nothing.

Maybe redemption is what happens when we set our ghosts free.

