

Marah and the Torah of the Desert

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The latter verses of the *piyyut* (liturgical) poem *Dayenu* proclaim:

Had He drowned our enemies in the sea but not provided our needs in the desert for forty years, Dayenu. ..

Had He provided our needs in the desert for forty years, but not fed us the manna, Dayenu...

Had He brought us to Sinai but not given us the Torah, Dayenu...

The *piyyut* indicates that each of these steps (along with the others mentioned in the rest of the stanzas) were of themselves sufficiently beneficial to warrant thanksgiving, independent of the subsequent (and prior?) steps. The poet claims that the experience of being sustained in the desert, for example, even without receiving the Torah at Har Sinai, was significant and sufficient. While it is certainly true that gratitude for kindnesses performed need not be contingent upon receipt of further kindnesses, I would argue that the poet might also be implying something more. To wit, *Dayenu* teaches that each of these steps constitutes a sort of micro-redemption of its own, while simultaneously playing a critical role in the construction of the larger redemption of *Sefer Shemot*.

As a case in point, I would like to focus here on the narratives of *Shemot* 15:22-27, situated within the broader setting of chapters 15-17 of the book. The reader of the biblical text might have predicted that, following the splitting of the sea, the text would move immediately to the next major moment, Sinai (with perhaps brief mention of the names of various sites of encampment along the route). Instead, however, between the splitting of the sea (*Shemot* 15:21) and *Ma'amad Har Sinai* (*Ibid.* 19 forward), the Torah records a series of incidents from *Bnai Yisrael's* first few weeks post-redemption. As they begin their travels through the desert, we are told, the people encounter several obstacles, most of which are centered around their need for water and food (as well as the battle with *Amalek* and the arrival of *Yitro*). The location of these narratives, and the amount of detail provided in them, signal that they play an important role, moving the grand arch of the *Shemot* narrative forward. This prompts the reader to ask, what function do these narratives play? What would we be missing if the text did not include them?

While much has and could be said about these verses, I would like to advance one particular argument. In the reading I propose, these verses function as an axis, a transition from Egypt to Har Sinai. While that is obviously so in geographical terms, the text indicates that it is also so existentially. *Marah* and *Eilim* lie betwixt and between the spatio-spiritual spaces of Egypt and Sinai, between exile and sacred space. They are the transition in the narrative from a focus of freedom *from* slavery, to freedom *to* Torah, Sinai, and eventually *Mishkan*.

(כב) ויסע משה את ישראל מים סוף ויצאו אל מדבר שור וילכו שלשת ימים במדבר ולא מצאו מים: (כג) ויבאו מרתה ולא יכלו לשתת מים ממרה כי מרים הם על כן קרא שמה מרה: (כד) וילנו העם על משה לאמר מה נשתה: (כה) ויצעק אל יקוק ויורהו יקוק עץ וישלך אל המים וימתקו המים שם שם לו חק ומשפט ושם נסהו:
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(כו) ויאמר אם שמוע תשמע לקול יקוק אלהיך והישר בעיניו תעשה והאזנת למצותיו ושמרת כל חקיו כל המחלה אשר שמתי במצרים לא אשים עליך כי אני יקוק רפאך: ס
(כז) ויבאו אילמה ושם שתים עשרה עינת מים ושבעים תמרים ויחנו שם על המים:

22 And Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. 23 And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. 24 And the people murmured against Moses, saying: 'What shall we drink?' 25 And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet. There He made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there He proved them; 26 and He said: 'If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His eyes, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon thee, which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD that healeth thee.' {S} 27 And they came to Elim, where were twelve springs of water, and three score and ten palm-trees; and they encamped there by the waters. (translation JPS: 1917)

After finally being redeemed from servitude and passing through the great waters of the Sea of Reeds, Israel enters the nearby desert of Shur¹ and arrive at Marah. During their first three days of travel, the Israelites cannot find any water at all; upon arriving at Marah, they are dismayed to discover that though there is water there, it is too bitter to drink.² In this sense, Marah represents a continuation of *avdut Mitzrayim*, as the encounter with the bitter waters is reminiscent of the bitterness of the enslavement, as described in Shemot 1:14:

(יד) וימררו את חייהם בעבדה קשה בחמר ובלבנים ובכל עבדה בשדה את כל עבדתם אשר עבדו בהם בפרך:

¹ The reader here is reminded of the first mention of this place in the Chumash, in Bereshit 16:7:

וימצאה מלאך יקוק על עין המים במדבר על העין בדרך שור:

Here Hagar, fleeing from Sarah, is found at a spring of water in the dessert, 'on the way to Shur.' In that context, the term *ma'ayan* (spring) puns off of the innui (suffering) Hagar (originally from Egypt) experiences at the hand of her mistress Sarah. Similarly, the *ma'ayonot* in Eilim refer back to the innui the Israelite slaves (or *gerim*) experience in at the hands of their Egyptian masters (Shemot 1:11). Though there is no water shortage in this passage from Bereshit 15, in its sequel (Ibid. 21:1-21) the protagonists do encounter a dire lack of water before they are miraculously shown a well. Cf. Bereshit 20:1.

Shur is mentioned again in I Shmuel 15:7, in the context of Saul's routing of the Amalek ("and Saul smote Amalek, from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is close to Egypt"), recalling Moses' battle against Amalek in Shemot 17. Perhaps there is to be found an additional reference to the Shemot narratives, in Shmuel's rebuke of Saul: "Does God desire 'olot and zevachim (forms of sacrifice) as much as obeying God? Behold, obeying is better than a sacrifice, and heeding (God) better than fats of **eilim** (rams)." (I Shmuel 15:22).

² Inter alia, one wonders whether Naomi's self-renaming as "מרא/Mara" (Rut 1:20) might play off of the Marah of Shemot. If, as some have suggested, the name of her daughter-in-law ר.ו.ת./Rut derives from the root ר.ו.ה., meaning overflowing or abundantly watered (compare Ps. 23:5), then the change from Naomi (from the root נ.ע.ם., meaning pleasant) to her new name Mara might connote the contrasting sense of 'lack of water.' As she continues in verse 21, "I went full, but God has returned me empty."

“And they [i.e. the Egyptians] embittered (*va-yi’mararu*) their [i.e. the Israelites’] lives with harsh labor at mortars and brick...”

The experience at Marah continues that of Egypt. Thus, though the Israelites have left Egypt the place, Egypt qua the encounter with bitterness continues.³

This quasi return to Egypt is especially traumatic as it comes after a three day journey into the desert. While three day journeys are common in the Bible (e.g. Bereshit 22:4, B’midbar 10:33),⁴ here there is an additional, ironic overtone to the sum. As R. Alex Israel points out,⁵ earlier in Shemot, Moshe asks Pharaoh for the (temporary) release of the Israelites from their bondage in order to travel three days into the desert, where they will enact a holiday in service of God (Shemot 5:3). Given this association, how bitter indeed it is to find our travelers thirsting at Marah three days into wilderness!

While the bitterness of Marah therefore sends the Israelites and the reader back to the servitude in Egypt, it (and the next stop, Eilim) also reference the redemption from that servitude, the former of which climaxes earlier in the chapter, in the Song of the Sea. Several semantic linkages serve to establish this connection:

Song of the Sea	Marah/Eilim
v. 21 ותען להם מרים שירו ליקוק כי גאה גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים. <i>And Miriam sang unto (va-ta’an) them: Sing ye to the LORD, for He is highly exalted...</i>	v. 23 ויבאו מרתה ולא יכלו לשתת מים ממרה כי מרים הם על כן קרא שמה מרה: <i>And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter.</i>
v. 4 מרכבת פרעה וחילו ירה בים ומבחר שלשיו טבעו בים סוף: <i>Pharaoh's chariots and his host hath He cast (yarah) into the sea, and his chosen captains are sunk in the Red Sea.</i>	v. 25 ויצעק אל יקוק ויורהו יקוק עץ וישלך אל המים ... <i>and the LORD showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters (va-yorehu), and the waters were made sweet</i>
v. 20 ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את התף בידה ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה בתפים ובמחלת <i>And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.</i>	v. 26 ויאמר אם שמוע תשמע לקול יקוק אלהיך והישר בעיניו תעשה והאזנת למצותיו ושמרת כל חקיו כל המחלה אשר שמתני במצרים לא אשים עליך כי אני יקוק רפאך: <i>and He said: 'If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, I will put none of the</i>

³ This is not the only time Egypt appears in the desert narratives. Note for example Shemot 32:25:

וירא משה את העם כי פרע הוא כי פרעה אהרן לשמצה בקמיהם

In the midst of the construction of the golden calf, Pharaoh (פרעה) rises again!

⁴ Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Shemot (Magnes:1967), pg 183. See there for more references to three day journeys, drawn from both biblical and extra-biblical sources.

⁵ See his The Slave Mentality, accessible at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/pesach/ai-slave.htm>.

⁶ The semantic connection between v. 4 and v.15 was noted by Bernard P. Robinson, Symbolism in Exod. 15:22-27, published in Revue Biblique No. 3 (July 1987), pg. 383. In researching this piece I discovered that Robinson preceded me in noting most of the other semantic connections in the chart as well.

	<i>diseases (machalah) upon thee, which I have put upon the Egyptians</i>
v. 11 מי כמכה באלם יקוק מי כמכה נאדר בקדש v.15 אז נבהלו אלופי אדום אילי מואב יאחזמו רעד נמגו כל ישבי כנען: <i>Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the mighty(ba-eilim)? ... Then were the chiefs of Edom affrighted; the mighty men of Moab (eilei Moav), trembling taketh hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan are melted away.</i>	v. 27 ויבאו אילמה ושם שתים עשרה עינת מים ושבעים תמרים ויחנו שם על המים: <i>And they came to Eilim, where were twelve springs (ayenot) of water, and three score and ten palm-trees (t'marim); and they encamped there by the waters.</i>

The semantic links between the Marah/Eilim passage and the enslavement in Egypt and redemption at the sea highlight conceptual connections between these moments. As noted above, the bitterness of the waters of Marah, reminiscent of the bitterness of the slavery, is exacerbated as an anti-climax to the redemption at the water of the sea. Yet, unlike the extended period of enslavement in Egypt, the redemption at Marah is quick to come. The waters are quickly made drinkable, and the sweetness of Eilim (via the dates/ *t'marim*) quickly supersedes the *mayim ha-marim* of Marah.

Crucially, the micro-redemption of Marah and Eilim also pivots the book as a whole forward, anticipating the next major moment in Sefer Shemot, Sinai:

ויאמר כי אהיה עמך וזה לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלהים על ההר הזה:

(שמות פרק ג:יב)

And He (God) said, I will be with you; and this will be the sign that I have indeed sent you: when you bring the people of out Egypt, you will worship God at this mountain. (Shemot 3: 12)

In the most overt anticipation of Sinai, there is a revelation at Marah which conveys a divine injunction, with a promise of reward for fulfillment thereof.⁷ Additionally, however, there are more subtle allusions to that sacred mountain here as well. As noted by Rashbam, the verb *va'yorehu* in v. 25 (which above we connected with 15:4) derives from the root י.ר.ה, meaning 'to instruct,' the same root as in the word 'Torah.' While Rashbam might intend that God is instructing Moshe as to how to use the 'etz in sweetening the water,⁸ it is also possible that the text is deliberately framing that

⁷ This promise is expressed in the common formula of "If you heed My voice, then..." anticipating the usage of this formula again in Shemot 19. In our context, the 'reward' is that the Israelites will not be afflicted with the "*machalah* of Egypt." In other words, Israel can either proceed to Sinai, or revert back to Egypt. I thank X for this insight.

⁸ Cf. Robinson, pg. 383, where he notes three additional accounts where God's salvation of Israel is effected by the throwing of something (II Melachim 2:19-22; 4:38-41; 6:1-7). Interestingly, none of these other passages utilizes the root י.ר.ה; in fact, the latter passage from II Melachim provides an instructive contrast:

מלכים ב פרק ו

(ו) ויאמר איש האלהים אנה נפל ויראהו את המקום ויקצב עץ וישלך שמה ויצף הברזל:

instruction as a type of Matan Torah.⁹ Eilim is marked here as a place of revelation, a proto-sinaitic site.¹⁰ Its name, meaning “the mighty” or “the strong,” contrasts with the bitterness of Marah both in terms of the abundance of food and water, and metaphorically as a site of spiritual strength on the part of Israel.¹¹

Additionally, v.27 depicts Israel camping at the twelve springs and seventy date-palms of Eilim.

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

The convergence of a campsite with the numbers twelve and seventy foreshadows a later site in Shemot, chapter 24: 1,4:

(א) ואל משה אמר עלה אל יקוק אתה ואהרן נדב ואביהוא ושבעים מזקני ישראל והשתחויתם מרחק:

(ד) ויכתב משה את כל דברי יקוק וישכם בבקר ויבן מזבח תחת ההר ושתיים עשרה מצבה לשנים עשר שבטי ישראל:

And to Moshe He said, Come up to God—you...and the seventy elders of Israel...

And Moshe wrote all the words of God, and arose early and built an altar at the foot on the mount, with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.

This connection is already made by Rashi on v. 27:

שתים עשרה עינות מים - כנגד י"ב שבטים נזדמנו להם:

ושבעים תמרים - כנגד שבעים זקנים:

Twelve springs of water—they appeared in proportion to the twelve tribes

And three score and ten palm-trees—in proportion to the seventy elders

According to Rashi, the oasis of Eilim foreshadows the future encampment of the twelve tribes and seventy elders¹² at the foot of Sinai.

Here we find the hiphi'l conjunction of the root ה.א.ה, meaning to show, rather than ה.ר.ה. The contrast highlights our claim that the usage of the latter root in Shemot 15 is deliberate.

⁹ Several commentators see the 'etz as a reference to Torah, as in Proverbs 3:18, “It (wisdom, Torah) is an 'etz chayyim, a tree of life, to all who grasp it...” See, for example, Maharsha, *Chidushei Aggadot*, Bava Kamma 79a.

¹⁰ Cf. TB BK 82a, which sees in this passage the source for the practice of publicly reading from the Torah every three days.

¹¹ Robinson references Isaiah 11:16-12:3, where reference to the Shemot from Egypt as well as a parallel to Shemot 15:2 (*ki ozi v'zimrat Kah*) are followed by a call to draw from the “springs of salvation.” In his reading, this provides support for the contention that the springs of Elim have metaphorical connotations of salvation in addition to the literal salvation from the water shortages in Marah.

¹² See Rashi here. R. David Silber also points out that twelve children and seventy souls descended into Egypt in Bereshit 46:27. Perhaps this represents again a full circle, with all who have descended into Egypt emerging again.

Thus, while indeed Marah functions as a sequel to the enslavement, the second encounter with Egypt, it and Eilim simultaneously function as prequels to Matan Torah. They constitute, in short, the Sinai before Sinai.

What is the Torah given at this pre-Sinaitic site? While the answer is the subject of an instructive interpretive debate, in this context I find the analysis of Nachmanides to be the most compelling:

רמב"ן שמות פרק טו פסוק כה

על דרך הפשט, כאשר החלו לבא במדבר הגדול והנורא וצמאון אשר אין מים שם להם במחיתם וצרכיהם מנהגים אשר ינהגו בהם עד בואם אל ארץ נושבת, כי המנהג יקרא "חק" ... או שייסרם בחקי המדבר, לסבול הרעב והצמא, לקרוא בהם אל ה', לא דרך תלונה. ומשפטים, שיחיו בהם, לאהוב איש את רעהו, ולהתנהג בעצת הזקנים, והצנע לכת באהליהם בענין הנשים והילדים, ושינהגו שלום עם הבאים במחנה למכור להם דבר, ותוכחות מוסר שלא יהיו כמחנות השוללים אשר יעשו כל תועבה ולא יתבוששו...

In line with the plain meaning of Scripture, when the Israelites began coming into the great and dreadful wilderness... 'thirsty ground where there was no water' (Dev. 8:15), Moses established customs for them concerning how to regulate their lives and affairs until they come to a land inhabited (Ibid. 16:35). A custom is called a chok... Custom is also called Mishpat... It may mean that Moses instructed them in the ways of the wilderness, namely, to be ready to suffer hunger and thirst and to pray to G-d, and not to murmur. He taught them ordinances whereby they should live, to love one another, to follow the counsel of the elders, to be discreet in their tents with regards to women and children, to deal in a peaceful manner with the strangers that come into the camp to sell them various objects. He also imparted moral instructions... (translation by Charles Chavel, Ramban Commentary on the Torah: Shemot [Shilo:1973], pg. 209-210).

For Ramban, the Torah of Marah is different than the Torah of Sinai proper. The former is a Torah specific to life in the desert, an instruction on how to live in that space, with its primal challenges. Only by being in the desert, by experiencing scarcity, lack of rootedness and the consequent temptations for despair, strife, pettiness, and abuse, can Israel cultivate a sense of dependence on God and develop the traits of moderation, mutual respect, and modesty.¹³

Further thirst for water, hunger for food, and struggle with weariness and with Amalek all await Bnai Yisrael as they proceed on their desert journey from Eilim to Sinai. Though chapters 15 through 17 of Shemot seem to be mere digressions from the core moments of the book of redemption, they are in reality a segue in the strong sense of the term, the path Israel must travel to get from their past and to meet their future. Between Egypt and Sinai, one must travel the desert, starting with Marah and, it is always hoped, Eilim.

Had He brought us to the desert, and not to Sinai—Dayennu.

¹³ Cf. the comments of Ramban on Shemot 16:4 and Devarim 8:2.

