

Dry Bones/Ezekiel 37 - Shabbat Chol Hamoed Pesach  
Rabbi Arthur Waskow | 9/8/2001

Rabbi Arthur Waskow

Dry Bones: Ezekiel 37

Haftarah for Shabbat Chol Hamoed, Pesach

Can These Bones Live?  
translated by Rabbi Arthur Waskow

The hand of YHWH, the Breath of Life, was on me,  
And in a rushing-breath YHWH brought me forth  
and set me in the center of a valley -  
Full of bones!  
- And led me all around them, all around.  
Here! - Very many on the face of the valley,  
and here! - utterly dry.  
And said to me;  
"Child of Adam, earthling, can these bones live?"

I said - "Pillar of the World, Breath of Life -  
You know-it-in-your-heart, and only you."

Then God said to me,  
"Prophecy upon these bones!  
Say to them,  
'Dry bones,  
Hear the word of the One Who breathes all life!  
Thus speaks the Pillar of the World, the Breath of Life, to these bones:  
'Here! - I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.  
I will weave muscles on you,  
and raise flesh upon you,  
and form skin on you,  
I will give you breath,  
And you shall live!  
And so you will deeply know that I am YHWH,  
the Breath of Life.'"

So I prophesied as I was commanded.  
And while I was prophesying,  
there came a voice, and - here! a commotion! -  
and the bones came together,  
bone to bone.  
And I saw - here! - upon them muscles;  
Flesh arose, skin covered them;  
But there was no breath in them.

Then God said,  
"Prophesy to the rushing-breath-of-wind -  
Prophesy, you child of earth! -  
and say to the breathing-wind -  
Thus says the Pillar of the World, the Breath of Life -  
From the four breathing-winds come, O breath,  
And puff upon these slain, that they shall live."

So I prophesied as God commanded me,  
and the breath blew into them.  
They lived, and stood upon their feet,  
An overwhelming, overwhelming vast array of strength.

Then God said to me,  
"Child of earth,  
These bones are the whole house of Israel.  
Here! - they say,  
'Dried up - our bones,  
Shattered - our hopes,  
Cut off - our roots.'  
So prophesy and say to them,  
'Thus speaks the Pillar of the World, the Breath of Life:  
"Here! - I will open your graves,  
and rouse you from your graves,  
my people!  
And I will bring you to the earth of Israel.  
And you shall know-deep-in-your-heart  
that I am YHWH, the Breath of Life,  
when I have opened your graves,  
and roused you from your graves,  
my people.  
And I will put my breath within you,  
and you shall live,  
and I will place you on your own earth,  
and you shall know-deep-in-your-heart  
that I the Breath of Life have spoken,  
and made it happen -  
proclaims the Breath of Life.'"

- Ezekiel 37: Haftarah for Shabbat in the midst of Pesach

I have retranslated the Ezekiel passage to pick up the key-words, the word-plays, and the breathing patterns of the Hebrew, in the fashion I learned from Everett Fox's transformative translation of The Five Books of Moses, an approach that he learned from Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in their translation of the Hebrew Bible into German.

In this passage I gave special attention to the multiple use in the Hebrew of the words "ruach" (or "ruchot," the plural), which appear ten times in these fourteen verses. It means in English "spirit," "breath," or "wind." Most English translations of this passage use a different one of these

words, in each context — so that a reader would never know that the same word in Hebrew was reappearing again and again or that the passage was thereby deliberately pointing to the vital importance of this word.

I have used the word “breath” in translating “ruach” wherever it appears, sometimes in a compound word like “breathing-wind.” I have used the words “Breath of Life” to translate “YHWH,” because if you try to pronounce these four letters with no vowels, what emerges is the sound of breath or wind.

I have used “Pillar of the World” to translate “Adoni,” which can mean ‘pillar” or “hinge” as well ‘as “lord.” The verb “yada,” which can mean “know” or “make love” or “deeply experience,” is here translated “know-in-your-heart.” “Ben adam” (“human being”) is translated “child of earth,” or “earthling,” to pick up its relationship to “adamah,” “earth.”

A midrashic thought about this passage:

One of the questions that arises in discussing it is what Ezekiel's vision of the "resurrection" of the Jewish people from exile in Babylonia might say to us, the generations soon after the Shoah.

For me, the teaching that arose from the passage in connection with the Shoah is about how the post-Shoah resurrection comes . Some people view the State of Israel AS the resurrection; I see it as the "muscle" part of the dry-bones vision, but Ezekiel teaches that the resurrection can't be complete until the Breath/ Spirit enters, and that the Breath/ Wind/ Spirit comes from all four corners of the earth.

That openness to the Holy Interbreathing of all life is happening much more (not yet enough) through the spiritual renewal of Judaism in America than through the State (especially the government) of Israel.

In the State of Israel, it is as if the muscle is celebrating its own reappearance as if muscle were self-sufficient and as if the People Israel stood on its own ----- and is actually rejecting the sense of the Breath/ Wind/ Spirit that comes -- must come -- from all four corners of the earth.

We might ask: What would a "resurrected" Jewish people look like in our own day if its body were strong and it was profoundly conscious that its life must be infused with the Winds that come from all the earth, from what unites ("Echad") all cultures and the breathing of all life -- from YHWH our God, Ruach HaOlam, Ruach HaKodesh, Nishmat kol chai, the Interbreathing of all life that praises God's Name YHWH because it IS God's name?

Jewish and Interfaith Topics:  
Pesach Yom Hashoah

Dry Bones, Moist Land, and Vital Prayer  
CHOL HAMO-EID PESACH, HOLIDAYS Exodus 33:12-34:26  
D'VAR TORAH BY: DALIA MARX  
PRINTSHARE ON EMAILMAILMORE SHARING SERVICESHARE

On the Shabbat that falls during Passover, we read the prophecy of the dry bones. The prophet Ezekiel experiences an unusual vision and declares an unusual prophecy. God walks him to a valley that is filled with bones and instructs him to declare to these bones: "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live again" (Ezekiel 37:5). Ezekiel complies, and "the bones came together, bone to matching bone . . . and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them" (37:8); but the reconstructed bodies still did not have breath. God instructs Ezekiel to call to the ruach (wind/spirit/breath), saying: "Come O ruach, from the four winds, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again" (37:9). What a dramatic prophecy! The wind complies, "and the ruach entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude" (37:10).

Now God explains the vision to the perplexed Ezekiel, saying that the dry bones are the whole House of Israel, who are now in a state of confusion and despair but shall be revived in the future. This is almost the only place that the Hebrew Bible talks about resurrection, and even here, it appears in a vision, a prophecy.

Why do we read the prophecy of the dry bones on Passover? If the story of Passover speaks of God's mighty hand, this prophetic reading speaks about God's spirit. And indeed, for us to be a free people, Passover, the festival of freedom, requires more of us than military or physical strength. Maybe this is why this prophecy is recited annually in the central memorial ceremony for the Holocaust at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and in many other memorial services. It reminds us that sometimes heroism is g'vurat haruach, "heroism of the spirit."

Let us go back to the ruach, the "wind," in its literal meaning. Six months of the year we declare in G'vurot, "Divine Powers," the second blessing of the Amidah, that God causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall (Mashiv haruach umorid hagashem). The wind appears in the blessing as the manifestation of the power of God. But we stop saying this prayer at Passover, the festival that marks the end of winter and the beginning of the dry season in Israel; instead we say that God causes the dew to fall (Morid hatal).<sup>1</sup>

The transformation between the winter declaration (Mashiv haruach umorid hagashem) and the summer version (Morid hatal), is traditionally marked in a special ritual in the synagogue. The prayer leader is dressed in a white robe (kitel) and then sings the prayers in a heartfelt and moving melody. The ritual ends with three blessings:

MT473NoEnglish.jpg

For blessing and not for curse

For life and not for death

For abundance and not for scarcity

After each blessing the congregation responds with "Amen."

From this point on—from Pesach to Sh'mini Atzeret (the concluding day of the Sukkot season)—rain is not considered a blessing and the crops need the sun's warmth. So is the

situation in Israel. Humorous stories depict of Jews in Europe going to the shul on Passover to recite the prayer for the dew marking the end of winter, while foundering in deep snow. This prayer, as well as the prayer for rain recited on Sh'mini Atzeret, envisions life in the Land of Israel. Even if you, your ancestors, and your descendants, are not physically there, you are always virtually in the Land of Israel. According to this view, religiously, it is the weather in the Land of Israel that matters and not the weather the land where the worshipper lives.

Needless to say, this view—emphasizing the centrality of the Land of Israel, its climate, soil, and agriculture—was, at one time, foreign to Reform Jews. Rabbi Dr. David Ellenson<sup>2</sup> shows how the German Reform prayer books toned down the references to Israel in the case of this blessing, as well as in many other matters. Later, many American Reform siddurim deleted the references to rain and dew altogether.

In the last century we see a gradual growing interest and sense of responsibility on the part of Reform Jews in North America toward Israel. While the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform expresses total lack of interest in it: "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine . . . nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state," the 1999 Pittsburgh Statement of Principles speaks in an utterly different voice: "We are committed to Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel, and rejoice in its accomplishments."<sup>3</sup>

This shift is reflected in the Reform liturgy as well. Among many other changes—large and small—relating to Zion and Israel, Mishkan T'fillah includes the daily acknowledgement of the season: Mashiv haruach umorid hagashem in the winter and Morid hatal in the summer.<sup>4</sup> Reciting these words gives us an opportunity to reflect on ha'aretz, "the earth," our world, and can also provide a moment of connection to Ha'aretz, the Land of Israel.

This liturgical shift that caused the inclusion of the ancient words relating to the seasons is a sign of the vitality of Reform Judaism; matters that were deemed irrelevant and even disturbing in the past are now revisited, reexamined, and sometimes reinstituted in our worship. Perhaps this is also a manifestation of Ezekiel's prophecy on the vitality of matter that may seem "dead," but may be worthy of revival and resurrection. Let us hope that this ruach will always continue to blow.

1. Rabbi Rick Sarason writes: "The Ashkenazic ritual does not include the summer insert morid hatal on a daily basis, but the Sefardic ritual does. In modern Israel, under the influence of the Sefardic rite, this has become common practice in most prayer books, including Reform ones," see "Festival Morning Service Amidah: Insertions for Rain and Dew," Ten Minutes of Torah, <http://tmt.urj.net/archives/4jewishethics/041212.html>

JCC

Shabbat Chol Hamoed Pesach (The Intermediate Shabbat of Passover)(Exodus 33:12-34:26)

MARCH 28, 2013 | LEAVE A COMMENT

"Then I will take My hand away and you will see my back; but My face must not be seen."

(Exodus 33:23)

Because this Shabbat falls during Pesach, the regular cycle of parashot (Torah portions) is interrupted by a special holiday reading. There is also a special haftarah, or reading from the

Prophets, and many synagogues read from Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs. Each reading makes a statement about our relationship God, albeit in very different ways.

The Torah reading follows Moses pleading on behalf of the Israelites after the episode of the golden calf. The reading is tense and suspenseful: how will the breach in the relationship be repaired? God punishes the people, but agrees to forgive them. Moses asks to behold God's presence. God agrees, but only partly.

Shabbat Chol Hamoed (the intermediate Shabbat) provides both the reason for the special reading and the answer to the relationship question. On Shabbat, God's presence comes to us. The Jewish mystical tradition describes the kabbalists of Tsfat going out to the fields to greet the oncoming Shabbat Queen. The Talmud describes the Shabbat angels escorting us home (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 119b). Pesach, though, is the first of the three pilgrimage holidays. In Biblical times, Jews left their homes for Jerusalem to make the appropriate sacrifice and the altar in the Temple. On Pesach (and Shavuot and Sukkot) we seek out God's presence. Both these approaches co-exist on Shabbat Chol Hamoed: God seeks us out and we seek out God. The joy and sanctity of the day results from the mutual commitment: each partner seeks out the other, as do the lovers in Shir Hashirim. Halevai, it should be that way every day! Share this with your friends!

Pesach

Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Pesach, 5631

The Sfas Emes on Pesach is very rich: 69 double-columned pages in small Rashi script. The Sfas Emes has so much to say on Pesach that my best effort to transmit here is like taking a spoonful of water from the ocean.

Why do I mention how much more Sfas Emes is available? Because being aware of how much more Sfas Emes is out there, some members of this Chabura may realize that the time has come to purchase their own set of Sfas Emes. I suggest that you view this purchase as an investment in mind-stretching Divrei Torah -- an afikoman present for the entire family. Owning your own copy of the Sfas Emes will increase your access to his ideas. And better access to the ideas of the Sfas Emes will help you (and your family) avoid a malady to which observant Jews are all too susceptible -- religious stagnation.

Before we begin this ma'amar, it helps to have an idea of what to expect. The ma'amar is crafted along three themes: past and present; the individual and the klal (the collectivity); emes (provable truth) and emuna (unprovable truth). These three themes weave in and out of the ma'amar, giving it a rare beauty. Finally, toward the end of the ma'amar, expect an extraordinary khap -- intellectual coup -- such that only the Sfas Emes could deliver.

In his very first ma'amar on Pesach, the Sfas Emes quotes a text from the Haggada: "Bechol dor vador chayav (!) ahdam lir'os es atzmo ke'ilu HU yatza miMitzrayim." That is, in each generation, a person must (!) view himself as having personally experienced the Redemption from Egypt. The Sfas Emes takes this mandate seriously. This leads to a basic question: what should a person do to reach this esired -- more accurately: mandated -- goal? The Sfas Emes

answers that a two-step process is involved. The first step is to realize that, in reality, every generation experiences its own version of the Redemption from Egypt. With that belief under our belt., the Sfas Emes tells us, we can in fact relive the original, prototypical ge'ula as a personal experience.

The Sfas Emes now elaborates on this idea: i.e., that we are enjoined to relive the experience of our Liberation from Egypt. That Liberation involved much more than escape from physical and political subordination to the Egyptians. Redemption also included escape from the tum'a of Egyptian culture and intellectual life.

Continuing with this theme of experiencing Redemption,. the Sfas Emes quotes a statement of the Maharal. The Maharal tells us that "bevadai" ("certainly") we all participated in the experience of the Redemption from Egypt as a klal (i.e., the Jewish People as a collectivity). But the Haggada is telling us more than the fact that we experienced Redemption as a collectivity. In mandating: "ke'ilu HU yatzami Mitzrayim", the Haggada is telling us that we must also experience Liberation on an individual, personal level.

How does a person achieve that much more difficult goal of reliving the Redemption from Egypt at an individual, personal level? The Sfas Emes answers: by joining the collectivity. (Note: The idea that an individual can achieve personal religious fulfillment by joining the collectivity is a startling paradox . Anyone but the Sfas Emes would steer clear of such an apparent internal contradiction. By contrast, the Sfas Emes explicitly recognizes the seeming inconsistencies that HaShem built into the world. In fact, he gives them center stage.)

How does an individual become part of the collectivity? With emuna! by truly believing that we were redeemed from the galus of Mitzrayim, we can re-live the actual experience. Once we affirm our membership in the collectivity, we can access this experience on an individual basis. A fair question here is: how does this process work (in the real world)? That is, how does having emuna enable an individual to become part of a collectivity?

I suggest the following explanation. By definition, emuna involves affirmation of ideas that cannot be proven. Hence, choosing to accept a given set of ideas sets a person apart from people who do not give credence to those ideas. By the same token, choosing to accept those ideas puts the person together with people who affirm the same thoughts as he. Thus, affirming a set of unprovable ideas -- i.e., emuna -- enables an individual to join the collectivity of klal Yisroel. (Notice how commonsensical are these ideas of the Sfas Emes once we make the effort to take them seriously.)

The Sfas Emes has articulated two conditions for experiencing personal liberation. He makes it clear that both conditions involve emuna; i.e. affirmation of an unprovable truth. Note that mesora (father to offspring tradition) is not enough for the Sfas Emes. As he sees the world, emuna is necessary to arrive at the emes. What are the two conditions for which -- in this context -- emuna is required? A person must view himself as having participated (past tense) in the Redemption. And he/she must have the emuna to recognize that, were it not for the Redemption, he/she would not have a relationship with HaShem. With these two emuna conditions satisfied, a person will realize that indeed he is (present tense) being liberated.

We can now sum up on this line of analysis. The Sfas Emes has told us that every generation has its 'Yetzi'as Mitzrayim' (Exodus from Egypt). The Redemption varies with the specific

situation and needs of the generation. (Note: Redemption implies prior enslavement. What do you see as the nature of enslavement of the present generation?) Further, the Sfas Emes has told us that, to the degree that a person has emuna that he experienced (past tense) the Liberation from Egypt, so too, can he feel (present tense) the Redemption of his own generation. And so, too, can each individual experience Liberation from his own personal constraints.

"Constraints"? How did "constraints" get into this discussion? The answer stretches one's mind, for it is a typical Sfas Emes chidush. To understand the answer, we must go back to basics. The word "Mitzrayim:" is usually translated as "Egypt." But with ko'ach ha'chidush such as only the Sfas Emes can deploy, he reads the word "Mitzrayim" in a totally innovative way. The Hebrew word "meitzar" means "constraint" or "limit". The Sfas Emes is reading "Mitzrayim" as being the plural of the word "metizar". Thus, "yetzi'as mitzrayim" has become: "liberation from one's constraints". The Sfas Emes does not spell out what he has specifically in mind when he refers to personal constraints that Pesach teaches us can be overcome. I suggest that he is referring to long-standing attitudes, ingrained assumptions, and habits that too often constrain a person's growth.

A final question. Viewing Pesach as a time for Liberation from one's personal constraints is fine and good if the constraints are in fact loosened. But does it make sense to talk of "Liberation" in a case where the constraints are NOT loosened? For example, consider a case in which the constraint derives -- cholilo (God forbid) -- from an incurable medical handicap. Does the Sfas Emes's perspective on Pesach as a time for Liberation from a person's individual constraints apply there too?

I believe the answer is: yes! How so? A major theme in the Sfas Emes's Torah is the need to pierce the Hester with which HaShem cloaks Himself. Piercing the Hester enables a person to view reality accurately. A prominent case in which the Sfas Emes applies this insight is in the context of seeing the hand of HaShem where an untutored eye would see only Nature (teva).

This observation implies that the Sfas Emes's perspective certainly does apply to the case of the person afflicted with an incurable handicap. Knowledge that his condition comes from HaShem (rather than from mindless Nature) implies that his condition is purposeful. This awareness gives meaning to what the person is undergoing. It transforms his experience, and makes it a wholly different condition. Thus, getting the metaphysics of the situation right provides Liberation in its own special way.

Copyright © 2004 by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff and Torah.org