

Nature in the Parasha

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The Pesach Torah Reading – The Hyssop Paintbrush

On Pesach, we read a special Torah portion. It is a short excerpt from *Parashat Bo* that describes the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites were commanded to sacrifice the Pascal Lamb and to take a bunch of hyssop and use it as a paintbrush to paint the *mezuzot* (the doorposts) with its blood. Pesach, which means ‘skipped’ actually gets its name from this ritual when Hashem skipped over the homes of the Israelites during the plague of the death of the firstborn. Around Pesach time, as part of my weekly herbal workshop, I teach a special class about the hyssop, which is in its prime during this time of year. We go out to see how the native hyssop grows in the dry rocky soil, and then we pick a nice bunch of it. Seated around the picnic table in my garden, we learn both Torah texts about the hyssop as well as its medicinal properties, while we sip the pungent hyssop tea with honey. It tastes a bit like oregano and actually, the hyssop is a related specie of oregano. “It is called *za’atar* in Arabic and in foreign language ‘oregano.’ It is an important herb with several different tastes. However, I don’t know how to reconsolidate this herb with Scripture stating that it grows out of the wall” (Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 12:22). Here in Bat Ayin, we are witnessing that although hyssop is an important herb, about which the *Chida* writes, “that it must always be found on the table,” it still is very low maintenance and grows almost out of a rock wall as written in the Book of the Prophets. At the end of my herbal workshop, we make a special *za’atar* spread, kind of a pesto, from fresh hyssop, sesame seeds, garlic and olive oil. This spread tastes delicious on matzo and is a much healthier choice than sugary jam. Here are some of the questions we discuss, and if you continue reading, I will attempt to give you some answers based on my own as well as some of the students’ insights. Why did Hashem need us to mark the doorposts of Jewish homes? Doesn’t He, who sees all, know where the children of Israel live? Why were we commanded to use specifically a hyssop plant as a paintbrush for the blood? Why is the hyssop more suitable than any other plant for painting our doorposts at the verge of the Exodus from Egypt?

The Hyssop that Emerges from out of the Wall

וַיְדַבֵּר עַל הָעֵצִים מִן הָאֶרֶז אֲשֶׁר בְּלְבָנוֹן וְעַד הָאֲזוֹב אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא בְקִיר... (ספר מלכים א ה: יג)

“He spoke of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Levanon to the hyssop that comes out of the wall...” (I *Melachim* 5:13).

The fact that the hyssop “comes out of the wall” teaches us about its strength of character to overcome hardships and obstacles. Likewise, Egypt was like a closed wall, from which the Israelites needed to pierce through and penetrate. This was not an easy task since we were absorbed in Egypt, “like a nation within a nation” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 43:19). The Hebrew word for Egypt מִצְרַיִם/*Mitzrayim* means narrow straights – constriction. We needed the

ability of the hyssop to break through the wall; this is why hyssop was used to mark the doorways of the Jewish homes. It was not Hashem who needed to be shown where the Jewish people lived, but us who needed the power of the hyssop, dipped in blood of the Pesach Sacrifice, to propel us out of Egypt.

Emerging out of the Egyptian birth canal of Death

The culmination of the process of our redemption took place through the plague of the firstborn. This is why the description of this plague (*Shemot* 11) is interrupted by the description of the Pesach Sacrifice and the holiday of Pesach (*Shemot* 12-1-28). Only afterwards does Scripture return to describe the plague of the firstborn and how Pharaoh finally had enough and sent Israel away (*Shemot* 12:29-36). Through this last and final plague, the Jewish people were born, as the Children of Israel emerged out of Egypt. The plague of the death of the firstborn distinguished between life and death. It is ironic how the death of the firstborn and choicest of Egypt gave birth to the Jewish Nation. Egypt is a people of death; their religion obsesses with preserving the dead. The mummies conserved the death for centuries, and the pyramids were their burial places. Their weltanschauung is contrasted with the Jewish sanctity and preservation of life. The Jewish midwives are life-givers (*chayot*) (*Shemot* 1:19). Blood is the quintessence of life; it is the life force of a person. In order for us to break through the wall/peel of Egypt, we needed the courage to slaughter their “god” and use the life force of its blood for the sake of serving Hashem. We, furthermore, needed the power of the hyssop to break through the walls and bring us through the gate to a renewed redemptive reality. This can be compared to the birth of a baby. In order to be prepared for the life in this new world, the baby needs to pierce through the narrow walls of the birth canal. At a birth, there is blood as well, for the blood is the symbol of life. The effort it takes to break through the narrow straights is what gives us the strength to enter the new reality. The birth of Israel through the hyssop dipped in blood took place specifically at the doorposts to symbolize that the door of our bitter exile was opened. We opened it ourselves through the merit of the blood of the Pesach Sacrifice and the power of the hyssop. The ability of the hyssop to penetrate the hard wall entails its amazing capacity to pierce through the darkness and find the hidden light. This is the same ability the Jewish people needed in order to be redeemed. It was in the merit of the Jewish women who had hope and saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

The Humble Hyssop

וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֲגַדַּת אִזּוֹב וּטְבַלְתֶּם בְּדָם אֲשֶׁר בַּסֵּף וְהִגַּעְתֶּם אֶל הַמְּשֻׁקּוֹף וְאֶל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת מִן הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר בַּסֵּף וְאַתֶּם לֹא תֵצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח בֵּיתוֹ עַד בֹּקֶר: (ספר שמות יב:כב)

“You shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two side-posts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the entrance of his house until the morning” (*Shemot* 12:22).

Sefat Emet explains that at the verge of the Exodus the Israelites were lowly like the hyssop, which is a relatively small plant. We were lowly and not worthy of redemption. This is why

Hashem had to take us out “with a strong hand.” Afterwards when Hashem made us merit in the Torah and mitzvot the Jewish people rose and merited the redemption through the power of our good deeds. To symbolize how we originally were lowly like the hyssop, we had to take a bunch of hyssop. Moreover, using the hyssop as a sign of our redemption signifies how Hashem acts kindly to the lowly and poor and raises them up (*Sefat Emet, Devarim, for Sukkot 1894*). The hyssop is the most humble plant. It is one of the shortest perennial plants contrasted in several Torah passages with the tall cedar tree. It grows in the poorest soil opposed to the high maintenance rose. Pharaoh was full of himself, his haughtiness left no room for Hashem. His cruel exile humiliated us to the extent that we acquired the humility of the hyssop. In order to be redeemed from Egypt, even today, we need the humility that empowers us to overcome attachments. This is why the centerpiece of Pesach, “the matzo” is also called לֶחֶם עֹנִי / *Lechem Oni* – “The Bread of Poverty” or Humility. Matzo is lowly because it has nothing but flour and water. The meager rations of food we received during the Egyptian Servitude can be compared to the poorest soil. Through these hardships, our lowliness and emptiness made us ready to be filled by Hashem. I hope this Pesach to internalize a little of the humility of the hyssop and allow Hashem’s light in! Stay tuned to more insights about the humble purifying hyssop in my upcoming commentary on *Parashat Tazria/Metzorah*. May we emerge from the attachments of our ego this Pesach and may we emerge through all the blockages of our lives with the power of the hyssop that emerges from the wall!