

MEKHILTA, PISḤA, BO' 1¹

'In the land of Egypt' (Exod 12:1). (This means) outside the city. You say 'outside the city,' perhaps it was instead 'within the city'? But when it (Scripture) says, 'And Moses said to him, when I have left the city, I will spread my hands to the Lord ...' (Exod 9:29), are not the words a *qal wa-homer*? If Moses would not pray a prayer – (an event) which is of lesser importance – except when he was outside the city, (does it not follow then that) the divine message (*dibbur*)—(an event) which is of weightier importance—would surely not be spoken with him except outside the city? And why wouldn't it happen within the city? Because (the city) was full of abominable objects of worship and idols!

Before the land of Israel was chosen (by God as his own), all lands were fit for the impartation of divine messages; but after the land of Israel was chosen, all (other) lands were disqualified. Before Jerusalem was chosen (by God as his own city), all of Eretz Israel was fit for (the construction and use) of altars; but after Jerusalem was chosen, (the remainder of) Eretz Israel was disqualified, as Scripture says: 'Take care not to offer your sacrifices at any place which you wish; instead, only in the place which the Lord your God will choose' (Deut 12:13). Before the Temple was chosen (by God as his habitation), all of Jerusalem was deemed fit for the divine presence (lit. the Shekinah); but after the Temple was chosen, (the remainder of) Jerusalem was disqualified, as Scripture says: 'For the Lord has chosen Zion, etc., this will be My eternal resting-place' (Ps 132:13-14). Before Aaron was chosen (by God to be priest), every Israelite was qualified to serve in a priestly capacity; but after Aaron was chosen, the remainder of Israel was disqualified, as Scripture says: 'an eternal covenant of salt it is before the Lord' (Num 18:19), and it also says: '(priesthood) belongs to him and his descendants after him' (Num 25:13). Before David was chosen (by God to be king), every Israelite was qualified to become king; but after David was chosen, the remainder of Israel was disqualified, as Scripture says: 'Do you not know that the Lord God of Israel has given sovereignty to David, etc.' (2 Chr 13:5).

If you say, 'I know there are prophets with whom God spoke outside of the Land (of Israel),' even though God spoke with them outside the Land (of Israel), He spoke with them only on account of the

¹ Translated from *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (2d ed.; ed. H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin; Jerusalem:

merits of the forefathers. For Scripture says: ‘Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be comforted on account of her children, for they are no more. Thus says the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping and (hold back) the tears from your eyes; for there is payment for your work—says the Lord—they shall return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, says the Lord: (your) children shall return to their territory’ (Jer 31:14-16). Some say even though God spoke with them outside the Land (of Israel) on account of the merits of the forefathers, He only spoke with them in a pure place near water. For Scripture says: ‘I was by the canal Ulai’ (Dan 8:2), and it says: ‘I was on the bank of the great river; that is, the Tigris’ (Dan 10:4), and it says: ‘the word of the Lord would come to Ezekiel son of Buzi the priest by the river Kebar’ (Ezek 1:3). There are some who say that He had spoken with him in the Land (of Israel), and (then) He spoke with him outside the Land (of Israel), for Scripture says: ‘the word of the Lord had come and came to Ezekiel’—‘had come’ indicates that He spoke with him in the Land; ‘came’ indicates that He spoke with him outside the Land. R. Eleazar b. Zadok taught: Behold, Scripture says ‘Arise, go out to the valley’ (Ezek 3:22). This indicates that the valley was fit (for divine revelation).

You can learn that the Shekinah (i.e., the divine presence) was never revealed outside the Land (of Israel). For Scripture says: ‘And Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord’ (Jonah 1:2). [Did he think he] could (really) flee from the presence of the Lord? Does not Scripture already say ‘Where can I go from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there. If I am borne by the wings of the dawn and make my dwelling at the end of the sea, even there Your hand would lead me; Your right hand take hold of me’ (Ps 139:7-9). Moreover, it is written: ‘the eyes of the Lord roam throughout the whole earth’ (Zech 4:10), and it is written: ‘the eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the good and the wicked’ (Prov 15:3); ‘if they would burrow into Sheol ... or hide themselves at the top of Carmel ... or go off in captivity’ (Amos 9:2-4); and it says: ‘there is no darkness nor shade of death where evildoers can conceal themselves’ (Job 34:22). Rather, he (Jonah) thought: I will take myself outside the Land (of Israel)—a place where the Shekinah does not reveal itself. For the Gentiles are near to repentance (and) so as to not convict Israel (by their example).

Wahrmann, 1970), 2-6.

A parable: A priest owned a slave who fled from his master. He (the slave) thought: I will take myself to a cemetery—a place wherein my master is unable to come after me. But his master said, I have [other servants] like you (to bring you out)! Similarly Jonah said: I will take myself outside the Land (of Israel)—a place where the Shekinah does not reveal itself. For the Gentiles are near to repentance (and) so as not to convict Israel (by their example). God replied to him: I have other agents like you (to bring you back), as Scripture says: ‘and the Lord threw a mighty wind toward the sea’ (Jonah 1:4).

Consequently you learn there are three kinds of sons.² One demands that honor be given to both father and son; one demands that honor be given the father and not to the son; and one demands that honor be given the son and not to the father. Jeremiah demanded that honor be given to both father and son, as Scripture says: ‘We have sinned and we have rebelled; You have not forgiven (us)’ (Lam 3:42). Therefore his prophecy was doubled, as Scripture says: ‘and still (more) words were added to them’ (Jer 36:32). Elijah demanded that honor be given the father and not to the son, as Scripture says: ‘I have been intensely zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts’ (1 Kgs 19:14). And what is said there (then)? ‘And the Lord said to him, Go, retrace your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Aram, and Jehu b. Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha b. Shephat of Abel-Meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place’ (1 Kgs 19:15-16). Scripture does not use the expression ‘in your place’ except to indicate that ‘I am not satisfied with your prophesying.’ Jonah demanded that honor be given the son and not to the father, for Scripture says: ‘and Jonah arose to flee, etc.’ (Jonah 1:3). And what is written? ‘And the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying ...’ (Jonah 3:1). He spoke with him a second time, (but) not a third time. R. Natan said: Jonah only left in order to destroy himself in the sea, for Scripture says: ‘Lift me and hurl me into the sea’ (Jonah 1:12).

Thus you discover that the forefathers and the prophets offered their lives for the sake of Israel. Of Moses what does it say? ‘And now, if You will forgive their sin; but if not, please erase me from Your book which You have written’ (Exod 32:32); ‘and if You do thusly with me, please kill me, if I have found favor in Your sight, and let me not look upon my misfortune’ (Num 11:15). And David, what did he say? ‘Behold, I have sinned and I have transgressed; but these sheep—what have they done? Let Your hand be

² Other manuscripts read ‘prophets.’

against me and my family' (2 Sam 24:17). Therefore you discover everywhere that the forefathers and prophets offered their own lives for the sake of Israel.

'... saying ...' (Exod 12:1). That is, go out and say to them immediately—this is the opinion of R. Ishmael—for Scripture says: 'and he went forth and spoke to the children of Israel that which he was commanded' (Exod 34:34). R. Eliezer opined: Go out and say to them, and bring back to me (their) response, as Scripture says: 'and Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord' (Exod 19:8). Moreover, (Scripture) says: 'and behold, the man clothed in linen ... reported the matter' (Ezek 9:11), and it says: 'Can you dispatch bolts of lightning so that they come and say to you, "Here we are"?' (Job 38:35). The messengers of the Holy One, blessed be He, are not like mortal messengers, for mortal messengers must return to their dispatcher; but in Your presence this is not necessary. 'Can you dispatch bolts of lightning so that they come ...'—'and they returned' is not stated—rather, 'they come and say' (ibid.). Behold, no matter where they travel they are constantly in Your presence and can say 'we have accomplished Your mission.' This upholds what Scripture says: 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth—utterance of the Lord?' (Jer 23:24).

R. Yoshiah said: Whenever God issues decrees concerning Israel, (the results of the) good ones are reported to Him, but (the results of the) bad ones are not reported to Him. For Scripture says: 'Behold, six men came from the way of the Upper Gate, etc.' (Ezek 9:2). And it is written: 'the glory of the God of Israel ascended from upon the cherubim,' and it says 'the Lord said to him, "Pass through the midst of the city, etc."' 'but to these (six) He said in my hearing, etc.' and it says: '(kill) the old man, young man, virgin, children, and women, etc. ... and He said to them, "Defile the Temple and fill [the courtyards with corpses' (Ezek 9:3-7). Both (groups) went forth to accomplish their missions. With regard to those who were commanded to do bad things, we do not learn that they reported back about their mission; but as for the one commanded to do a good thing, we do indeed learn that he reported about his mission, as Scripture says: 'and behold, the man clothed in linen ... reported the matter, saying "I have accomplished all which You commanded me"' (Ezek 9:11).

Shimon b. Azzai said: 'Saying' (Exod 12:1) indicates that you should teach it (a lesson) in the same way that you learned it. R. Akiba said: 'Saying' means go out and say to them: for it was for their sake that He speaks with me. During the thirty-eight years that He was angry with Israel, He did not speak with him,

as Scripture says: ‘And it came to pass when all the warriors had died out from the midst of the camp, the Lord spoke to me saying’ (Deut 2:15-16). R. Shimon b. Azzai said: I am not disputing the words of my teacher, but simply adding to his words. It was not with Moses only that He spoke for the sake of Israel, but likewise with all the prophets He only spoke for the sake of Israel. Scripture says: ‘I sat there seven days “desolate” in their midst,’ and it says ‘at the end of seven days the word of the Lord [came to me]’ (Ezek 3:15-16). It is also written: ‘after the end of ten days the word of the Lord [came] to Jeremiah’ (Jer 42:7).

The same you will discover is the case of Baruch b. Neriah, who complained before God: ‘You said: Woe, now, to me, for the Lord has added suffering to my pain’ (Jer 45:3). Why am I different from all (other) disciples of the prophets? Joshua served Moses, and the Holy Spirit rested upon him; Elisha served Elijah, and the Holy Spirit rested upon him. Why am I different from all (other) disciples of the prophets? ‘I am tired with my groaning, but I have found no rest’ (Jer 45:3). ‘Rest’ means ‘prophecy,’ as Scripture attests: ‘the Spirit *rested* upon them’ (Num 11:26), and it says ‘the spirit of Elijah *rested* upon Elisha’ (2 Kgs 2:15), and it says ‘and the spirit of the Lord will *rest* upon him’ (Isa 11:2). Come and see how God answered him: ‘Thus you will say to him, “Thus says the Lord! Behold, that which I have built I will overturn, etc. You seek great things for yourself? Do not seek (them), etc.”’ (Jer 45:4-5). ‘Great things’ refers to ‘prophecy,’ as Scripture attests: ‘Recount to me all the *great things* which Elisha did’ (2 Kgs 8:4), and it says: ‘Summon Me, and I will respond to you, and declare to you the *great things* and inaccessible things which you do not know’ (Jer 33:3). Baruch b. Neriah said: If there is no vineyard, no fence is needed; if there is no flock, no shepherd is required. Why so? ‘For behold Me bringing misfortune upon all mortals, etc. but I shall grant you your life as spoil in the place where you go (to dwell)’ (Jer 45:5). Consequently you learn from every example that prophets prophesied only for the sake of Israel.