Conservative Judaism
Volume 65, Nos. 1-2, Fall-Winter 2013-2014

Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael and the Passover Haggadah: A Search for Origins and Meaning

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Although the theme of the Passover seder revolves around the redemption from Egypt, the Haggadah is not squeamish when it comes to recalling—or anticipating—the destruction of Israel's enemies. For example, after *Dayyenu*, the traditional Haggadah draws upon a passage from the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, a late second-century midrash, for a discussion about the number of plagues that the Egyptians suffered at the Reed Sea. One rabbi argues for fifty plagues, another for two hundred, and a third for two hundred and fifty! The wish for vengeance is palpable. Perhaps the most provocative such passage in the Ashkenazic Haggadah is known as *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*, after its opening phrase, "Pour out Your wrath." We recite the passage between the Grace after Meals and the conclusion of the Hallel (Psalms 115–118). We drink the third cup of wine, fill the Cup of Elijah, and open the door for the herald of the Messiah. Customs vary as to whether we pour the fourth cup before or after reciting the biblical verses below:[2]

[1]*Many thanks to Rabbis Burton L. Visotzky and Noah Arnow for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. Thanks also to Rabbi Jeffrey Hoffman for many important conversations about the ideas contained herein.*

[2]*See, for example, Mordecai Katsnellenbogen (*Haggadah Shel Pesaḥ Torat Ḥayim, *Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1998), p. 174.*

> Pour out Your wrath (*sh'fokh ḥamatkha*) upon the nations that do not know You, upon the governments that do not call upon Your name. For they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home (Psalm 79:6–7). Pour out Your wrath on them; may Your blazing anger overtake them (Psalm 69:25). Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of Adonai (Lamentations 3:66).[3]

Is this a call for divine vengeance, pure and simple? Why do we recite these particular verses and why do we do so at this particular juncture in the seder? Although classical commentaries and modern scholars have given diverse answers to these questions, as far as I can tell none has identified the source of the passage, which I believe is none other than the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, the tannaitic halakhic midrash on part of the book of Exodus.[4] As I will suggest, the midrashic context of this passage sheds a great deal of light on these and other questions surrounding it. In exploring these matters, it is not my intention to "sanitize" this troublesome imprecation.[5] Rather, I believe that more than solely a cry for revenge, the passage seeks to provide an answer to a

[3]*The Sephardic and Yemenite rites include only Psalms 79:6–7. See E. D. Goldschmidt,* The Passover Haggadah: Its Sources and History *(Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1960), p. 130.*

[4]*Given the enormous scholarship on the Haggadah one can reasonably ask why no one has previously suggested a source for this passage. For more on this see note 19.*

[5]*Evidence for the troublesome nature of this passage began as early as Eliezer ben Elijah Ashkenazi (Egypt, Italy, and Poland, 1513–1585). His commentary notes that "some of the Gentiles among whom we are exiled under their protection have thought that we are cursing them." He goes on to limit the malediction to nations that know neither God nor of the exodus. The curse cannot therefore apply to Christians and Muslims. See Eliezer ben Elijah Ashkenazi,* Maasei Hashem *(Warsaw, 1871), part 2, p. 37. Ashkenazi's view is all the more important because it was repeated in a commentary on the Shulḥan Arukh (sixteenth century), perhaps Judaism's most influential law code. That commentary,* Be'er Ha-golah, *was written by Moshe Rivkes (d. c. 1671/72) and appears in all printed versions of the Shulḥan Arukh (*Ḥoshen Mishpat, *425:5). See Neta Ecker Rosinger,* Universalism in the Thought of Rabbi Eleazer Ashkenazi *(Ph.D. dissertation, Haifa University, 2010), p. 259. In modern times alternatives to the passage have been presented since the middle of the nineteenth century. See David Golinkin, "Pesah Potpourri: On the Origin and Development of Some Lesser-Known Pesah Customs,"* Conservative Judaism *55:3 (2003), pp. 58–71. Indeed, the Reform Movement's Haggadah eliminated it in*

theological question that has perplexed Jews over the millennia: did the exodus somehow deplete God's power or desire to intervene in history, or will God's "strong hand and outstretched arm" return again to the stage of history?

Note that this analysis focuses exclusively on the passage above and not on its possible relationship either to opening the door or filling the cup of Elijah. The former practice predates the custom of reciting *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* and reaches back to geonic times, while the latter is not mentioned until the fourteenth century, more than a century after these biblical verses had begun to appear in Haggadot.[6]

We will begin with a review of how both classical commentators and modern scholars have understood *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*. We will then consider its origins and the significance of its underlying midrashic context, as well as how the passage relates to themes expressed in Jewish responses to the Crusades. We will conclude with some thoughts about what we can learn about the passage from its placement in the Haggadah, namely, between Grace after the Meal and the concluding psalms of Hallel.

Commentary on One Foot

The classical Haggadah commentaries on *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* are fascinating, but are neither as convincing nor as illuminating as one might hope.[7] One of the more common interpretations[8] explains that enjoining God to

1907; Mordecai Kaplan did the same in 1945. The Conservative Movement has also considered removing it. According to Rabbi Jules Harlow, a member of the editorial committee of The Feast of Freedom, *the Conservative Movement's first Haggadah (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1982), the passage proved controversial and a number of the committee's members wanted to exclude it. See Debra Reed Blank,* "Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha *and Eliyahu in the Haggadah: Ideology and Liturgy,"* Conservative Judaism *40:2 (1987/1988), p. 85, n. 42.*

[6]*Shmuel and Ze'ev Safrai,* Hagadah of the Sages *(Jerusalem: Carta, 2009), English translation, pp. 153–154.*

[7]*Not all the commentators we will consider had before them precisely the same version of the passage as I quoted above. Some may have had just the first two verses, as is the Sephardic custom. For our purposes, that difference is not critical.*

[8]*See Ritba, Orḥot Ḥayyim, Abudarham, and Rashbetz, as cited in* Haggadah Shel Pesaḥ Torat Ḥayyim, *pp. 174–175.*

pour out divine wrath on the nations that do not know God relates to one of the Jerusalem Talmud's numerous accounts of why we drink four cups of wine at the seder (Pesaḥim 10:1, 37b–c).[9] According to the Jerusalem Talmud, the four cups correspond to the cups of retribution—four in total throughout the Bible—that God will give the nations of the world to drink (cf. Jeremiah 25:15, 51:6–7; Psalms 11:6, 75:9). The link between the Haggadah's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* passage and this interpretation from the Jerusalem Talmud seems to rest on the fact that both passages mention both "wrath" and "nations."

But if those who added *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* to the Haggadah intended to make a connection between the invocation of divine wrath and the Jerusalem Talmud's four cups of retribution, why wouldn't they have chosen the very verses the Yerushalmi cites? Why choose four completely different verses, none of which refers to cups—or even to wine?

Nor do other commentaries address the question of why we recite these particular verses at this precise juncture. *Orḥot Ḥayyim* (Jacob Hakohen of Lunel, 13th to 14th centuries) simply observes that by this point in the seder we've fulfilled many *mitzvot* and recited many blessings, and in so doing we have demonstrated that in fact we *do* call upon and acknowledge God—as if our activities during the seder draw a bright line between us and those who do not acknowledge God. Isaac Ben Moses of Vienna (1180–1250, *Or Zarua*) notes that "We have mentioned the Egyptians many times [during the seder] and one who mentions an evil one must curse him. Therefore we open with *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha.*"[10]

Even Rashbetz (Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran, 1361–1444), one of the commentators who explains *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* as an allusion to the cups of retribution that God will cause the nations to drink, goes on to express doubts about this interpretation. He notes that there is no good reason for saying *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* after the third cup of wine as opposed to any of

[9]*According to the Jerusalem Talmud the four cups also symbolize God's fourfold promise of redemption (Exodus. 6:6–7), the four cups of wine referred to in the story of Joseph and Pharaoh (Genesis 40:11, 13, 14), the four kingdoms that oppressed Israel, and four biblical references to cups of consolation that Israel will drink (Psalms 16:5, 23:5, and 116:13,* kos y'shuot, *counts as two).*

[10]*Quoted in* Haggadah Sheleimah *by Menachem Kasher (Jerusalem: Torah Sheleimah Institute, 1967), p. 179.*

the others. He goes on to suggest that placing the passage here avoids the dangerous practice described in the Babylonian Talmud (Pesaḥim 110a) of carrying out various activities in pairs, such as drinking two cups of wine. Rashbetz holds that reciting *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* between the third and the fourth cups somehow eliminates the danger of pairing cups of wine. It is as if by doing so we are drinking three cups and then one cup, rather than two sets of two cups each. This illustrates the lengths to which commentators felt they had to go in order to explain the particular placement of this passage in the Haggadah. Rashbetz also asserts that because the night of Passover is a "night of guarding" (Exodus 12:42), we have no fear of a calamity against us, since God will pour out divine wrath against the nations and not upon us. And this, he concludes, is why *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* precedes Psalm 115, which begins with the words, *lo lanu Adonai lo lanu*—usually rendered "not to us" or "not for us," but which can also be taken as "not upon us." According to Rashbetz, first we ask God to bring wrath to the nations that do not acknowledge God and then we ask God not to bring it upon us.

Abarvanel (1437–1506) also links *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* to Psalm 115 and says that the entire psalm revolves around the passage. When the psalm says, "Why should the nations say, 'Where, now, is their God?'" (Psalm 115:2), it means "the nations that do not know You" and that "have devoured Jacob" (Psalm 79:6–7). Abarvanel interprets this verse in Psalm 115 in a manner that comes very close to my understanding of *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*: "Why do You want the nations, when they see our troubles and wretchedness, to say, 'Where is their [i.e., Israel's] God, whom they say did such wonders for them long ago? Perhaps their God no longer has any power or ability to save them, as in former times!'"[11] For Abarvanel, *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* is thus a dire warning to the nations in Psalm 115 who doubt God's power.

The Maharal of Prague (c. 1520–1609) connects *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* to the psalm that follows it, but for different reasons. As we will discuss later, he notes that the Talmud (B. Pesaḥim 118a) indicates that Psalm 115 refers to the war of Gog and Magog that will precede the messianic era. He then cites Ezekiel 38:18, which describes God's coming to Israel's rescue: "In that day,

[11]*Isaac Abarvanel,* Haggadah Shel Pesaḥ: Zevaḥ Pesaḥ *(Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2007), p. 258.*

when Gog sets foot on the soil of Israel—declares the Adonai God—My raging anger shall flare up (*ḥamati b'api*)." This verse includes two words for anger (*ḥeimah* and *af*) that both appear in *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*. This is one of the few commentaries on our passage that provides a justification for its content, at least insofar as its language echoes that of Ezekiel.[12] The question is: if the goal had been to allude to the war of Gog and Magog, why didn't the Haggadah simply quote the relevant verses from Ezekiel?

The Vilna Gaon (1720–1797) similarly connects *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* to the psalm that follows it, a psalm that also refers to Israel's redemption. He says that the righteous will not be elevated until the wicked are cursed. Thus we recite *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* against the wicked before Psalm 115, which speaks of God's remembering and blessing Israel.[13]

One of the great modern scholars of the Haggadah, E. D. Goldschmidt, took a related approach in explaining *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* as an introduction or heading of sorts to the second section of Hallel (Psalms 115–118).[14] He notes that *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* inveighs against the nations that do not know God and Psalm 115 condemns those who worship idols of silver and gold, but Goldschmidt admits that he is uncertain of the origins of the practice.

Summing up their reading of classical commentaries and Goldschmidt's view on this passage, the Safrais conclude: "The explanations seem forced and hard to accept. Even the suggestion of an outstanding scholar [Goldschmidt] . . . is not very convincing."[15] The connection between these particular verses and the four cups of wine seems weak. Many commentators try to create a link between *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* and Psalm 115. But if this had been the goal, it would have made sense to choose a verse that actually includes more of the same language as Psalm 115. Ironically, Psalm 79, the very source of *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*, includes what would have made a perfect segue: "Let the nations not say, 'Where is their God?' Before our eyes let it be known among the nations that You avenge the spilled blood

[12]Gevurot Hashem, *in* Otzar Peirushim v'Tziyyurim al Haggadah shel Pesaḥ, *J. D. Eisenstein, ed. (Jerusalem: Or HaKodesh, 1947), p. 253.*
[13]*See Eisenstein, p. 314.*
[14]*Goldschmidt, pp. 62–63.*
[15]*Safrai and Safrai, p. 152.*

of Your servants" (Psalm 79:11). The phrase "Let the nations not say, 'Where is their God?'" also appears in the second verse of Psalm 115.[16]

Origins and Inspiration

In exploring the origins of the Ashkenazic Haggadah's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*, we must briefly pause to consider the evolution of the passage. In the medieval period many different versions circulated. Some quoted only the first verse (the Italian version) and some the first two (the Sephardic version), while others included as many as a dozen verses interspersed among the four verses that we now find in the Ashkenazkic passage. The Maḥzor Vitry (eleventh century) seems to be oldest source containing a version of *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* and it includes some ten verses.[17] Some argue that the custom began with just the first verse, to which others were added.[18] If so, the Ashkenazic version represents one later such aggregation and it is appropriate to search for its underlying source. It is also possible that the custom began with a large number of verses that, over time, were differently sifted by various communities. In that case, the Ashkenazic version is a residuum and we can search for a textual rationale that may have shaped it.

[16]*This verse from Psalm 79 might have been a good choice for another reason as well. At roughly the same time as* Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha *entered the Haggadah, Psalm 79:11 found its way into* Av ha-Raḥamim, *a memorial prayer introduced into the Ashkenazic liturgy following the Crusades. The prayer precedes Ashrei and customs vary as to when it is recited.*

[17]*The printed version of the* Maḥzor Vitry *that is based on the British Museum manuscript includes these verses: Psalms 79:6–7; 69:25–26; 35:5–6; 28:4; 5:11; Hosea 9:14; Lamentations 3:66 (*Maḥzor Vitry, *ed. S. Hurwitz, Nuremburg: Bulka, 1923), p. 296. The Reggio manuscript owned by the Jewish Theological Seminary includes a different selection: Psalms 79:6–7; 69:25, 24, 26, 28, 29; 2:9; 69:23; Hosea 9:14; Lamentations 3:64, 66, 65. Thanks to Dr. Jay Rovner, Manuscript Bibliographer at the JTS Library, for reviewing this manuscript for me. A London manuscript dated 1287 includes: Psalms 79:6; 69:25, 28; Lamentations 3:64–66; Psalms 69:24, 29; 2:9; Hosea 9:14; Jeremiah 10:25 (David Kaufman, "The Ritual of the Seder and the Agada of the English Jews before the Expulsion,"* Jewish Quarterly Review *4 (1892), pp. 557–558). These variants obviously differ not only in the selection of verses, but also in the overall number of verses.*

[18]*Safrai and Safrai, p. 151.*

In either case, we are looking for a source that may have guided the hand that created our passage.

Modern scholars of the Haggadah have nothing to say on this score.[19] For example, a recent study of our passage concludes that these verses attest to the medieval Ashkenazic concept of messianic redemption, which was to be preceded by God's destruction of the "nations." But this analysis makes no effort to explore the genesis of the passage itself.[20]

I believe the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, a tannaitic halakhic midrash compiled in the late second century, provides this guiding source. This particular section of the Mekhilta comments on a verse from the Song at the Sea: "In Your great triumph You break Your opponents; You send forth Your fury (*t'shallaḥ ḥaron'kha*), it consumes them like straw" (Exodus 15:7). Says the Mekhilta:

> *Tshallaḥ ḥaron'kha*—"You sent forth Your fury" is not written here, rather "You *will* send forth Your fury"—in the future to come. As it is written, "Pour out Your wrath upon them; may Your blazing anger overtake them" (Psalm 69:25). And it is

[19]*See the following: E. D. Goldschmidt, pp. 62–64; Safrai and Safrai, pp. 151–153; Lawrence Hoffman and David Arnow,* My People's Passover Haggadah *(Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), vol. 2, pp. 147–148, 149–151; Joseph Tabory,* JPS Commentary on the Passover Haggadah *(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), pp. 53–56. As to why previous researchers on the Haggadah have not explored the relationship between the Mekhilta and the Haggadah's* Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha, *I can suggest the following. Recent scholarship on the Haggadah's sources generally repeats the findings of previous generations' great scholars. I came across the passage in the Mekhilta when reading the midrash as a source for midrashic insights on the exodus. Rather than searching for the origins of* Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha, *I simply bumped into this particular passage in the Mekhilta. It should also be noted that according to the critical edition of the Mekhilta by Horvitz and Rabin (see below) this particular passage is present in all manuscripts of the Mekhilta.*

[20]*Israel Jacob Yuval,* Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages *(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), ch. 3. Yuval contrasts the Ashkenazic concept of "vengeful redemption" with that of "proselytizing redemption," which he argues was more prevalent in Sephardic communities. Yuval explores our passage in the broader medieval liturgical context of directing curses against Gentiles.*

written, "Pour out Your wrath upon the nations . . ." Why? ". . . Because they have devoured Jacob, have devoured and consumed him, desolated his home" (Jeremiah 10:25).[21]

As is often the case in midrashic literature, this passage uses a kind of shorthand with respect to the biblical verses it cites rather than offering complete quotations. Completing the verses cited by the Mekhilta highlights the parallels between the midrash and the *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* passage as it appears in the Haggadah. (The comparison below includes the complete verses to which the Mekhilta refers.)

The Mehkilta of Rabbi Ishmael	*The Ashkenazic Passover Haggadah*
Pour out Your wrath upon them; may Your blazing anger overtake them (Psalm 69:25). Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You, upon the clans that do not call upon Your name. For they have devoured Jacob, devoured and consumed him and desolated his home (Jeremiah 10:25).	Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You, upon the governments that do not call upon Your name. For they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home (Psalm 79:6–7). Pour out Your wrath on them; may Your blazing anger overtake them (Psalm 69:25). Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of Adonai (Lamentations 3:66).

[21]*The passage can be found in* Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *ed. H. S. Horvitz and I. A. Rabin (1931; rpt. Jerusalem: Shalem Hafatztah Seforim, 1998), p. 136, line 17, B'shallaḥ/Va-y'ḥi 6, and* Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Jacob Z. Lauterbach translator and editor (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1949), vol. 2, p. 48; Shirata 6:69. For Lauterbach the citation includes volume, page, tractate and line number within the tractate. For Horvitz and Rabin the citation includes page and line number, tractate,* parashah, *and chapter number (as per the Mekhilta's arrangement). Parallel forms of the midrash appear in* Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai, *15:7 and in* Yalkut Shimoni *247.*

Both texts quote Psalm 69:25, though in a different sequence. The Mekhilta uses Jeremiah 10:25, which is virtually identical to Psalm 79:6–7. (For the issue of Psalm 79:6–7 versus Jeremiah 10:25, see below.) Beyond this, the addition of Lamentations 3:66 to the Haggadah is the major feature that that distinguishes the sources. We will take up a possible rationale for the Haggadah's addition of Lamentations 3:66 below.

Because the Haggadah does not quote the Mekhilta verbatim, but simply uses much of its biblical material, the case for a link between the Haggadah and the midrash requires further justification. The argument rests on several considerations. First, it seems that the Mekhilta is the only source in the standard midrashic corpus in which two verses that begin with the word *sh'fokh* ("pour") have been brought together (Psalm 69:25 and Jeremiah 10:25 in the midrash, versus Psalm 79:6 and 69:25 in the Haggadah).[22]

Second, when the Haggadah draws from midrash, it only utilizes tannaitic halakhic midrashim (e.g. the Sifrei on Numbers and Deuteronomy, and the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael), and from among these sources the compilers of the Haggadah drew far more extensively from Mekhilta.[23] This should come as no surprise because the Mekhilta is, after all, a midrash on the book of Exodus. The compilers of the Haggadah looked to the Mekhilta for the following passages: the Four Children;[24] *yakhol*

[22]*Lamentations Rabbah 2:8 provides another important midrashic source that brings together various verses on the theme of pouring out divine wrath. It cites four "pourings" for good and four for evil. The "evil pourings" are found in Isaiah 42:25, Ezekiel 9:8, and Lamentations 4:11 and 2:4. It is noteworthy that these four verses all refer to divine wrath targeting Israel.*

[23]*The Sifrei on Deuteronomy* (piska *301*) *or* Midrash Tannaim, *a reconstruction of a reputedly lost Mekhilta on Deuteronomy by David Zvi Hoffman (*Likkutei Mekhilta l'Sefer Devarim *[Berlin, 1890]) were thought to be the sources of the Haggadah's lengthy midrash on* Arami Oved Avi. *Research by Jay Rovner demonstrates that although this midrash may have been built upon a short passage in Sifrei Deuteronomy, it continued to develop through the geonic period. See Jay Rovner, "Two Early Witnesses to the Formation of the* Miqra Bikkurim *Midrash and Their Implications for the Evolution of the Haggadah Text,"* Hebrew Union College Annual *75 (2004), pp. 72–120.*

[24]*Lauterbach, vol. 1, p. 166,* Pisḥa *18:119. Horvitz and Rabin p. 73:7,* Pisḥa/Bo, *18.*

mei-rosh ḥodesh,[25] an opaque midrash on the proper time to hold the seder; Ben Zoma's interpretation of "all the days of your life";[26] as well as the midrashic elaboration, following *Dayennu*,[27] of the plagues suffered by the Egyptians at the Reed Sea.[28] (The latter appears in Haggadot contained in the prayer books of the Geonim of the ninth and tenth centuries.[29]) In addition, the Mekhilta also provides the source of a relatively late and now common variant attributed to the Ari (1534–1572), the addition of Ezekiel 16:6 to follow Ezekiel 16:7 in the Haggadah's midrash on the *Arami Oved Avi*.[30] Given the relationship between the Haggadah and the Mekhilta—one that persisted over the centuries—it is not at all unreasonable to view this source as the most likely candidate for having inspired the passage under consideration.

Finally, as we shall see later, the context of the passage from the Mekhilta sheds a great deal of light on both the meaning and placement of *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*, as it appears in the Haggadah. These were issues that classical commentators tried to address, but without a great deal of success.

We must now comment briefly on the differences between the passages as they appear in the Mehkilta and the Haggadah. As noted, the Haggadah

[25]*Lauterbach, vol. 1, p. 149,* Pisḥa *17:96. Horvitz and Rabin, p. 66:8,* Pisḥa/Bo, *17.*
[26]*Lauterbach, vol.1, p. 135,* Pisḥa *16:96. Horvitz and Rabin, p. 60:7,* Pisḥa/Bo, *16. Here the Mekhilta actually provides a somewhat briefer parallel to that which appears in Sifrei Deuteronomy (*piska *130) and the M. Berakhot 1:4.*
[27]*It may also contain some of the language that found its way into* Dayyenu. *See Lauterbach, vol. 1, p. 195,* B'shallaḥ *2:108–109, Horvitz and Rabin, p. 86:14,* B'shallaḥ *1, and vol. 2, p. 55,* Shirata *7:21, Horvitz and Rabin p. 139:17,* B'shallaḥ/Shirata *7, as well as commentary by David Arnow in* My People's Passover Haggadah, *vol. 2, p. 49 (see commentary on "Brought judgment upon them," and "Given us their wealth").*
[28]*Lauterbach, vol. 1, p. 251,* B'shallaḥ *7:110, Horvitz and Rabin, p. 114:1,* B'shallaḥ/Va-y'ḥi.
[29]*Saadiah (892–942) includes this entire section as an acceptable addition; see* Siddur Rav Saadiah Gaon, *ed. I. Davidson, S. Assaf, and B. I. Joel (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass Ltd., 2000), p. 143. The passage also appears in the earlier siddur of Amram Gaon (d. 875), but this may be a later addition.*
[30]*Lauterbach, vol. 1, pp. 33–34,* Pisḥa *5:6, Horvitz and Rabin, p. 14:13,* Pisḥa/Bo *5.*

has not simply quoted the Mekhilta in toto. Rather, the Ashekenazic Haggadah as we know it today changes the order of the verses, substitutes Psalm 79:6–7 for Jeremiah 10:25, and adds a verse from Lamentations. I suggest that these modifications are not significant enough to undermine the argument that the Mekhilta inspired the Haggadah.

We should not be troubled by the substitution of Psalms for Jeremiah because these verses are virtually identical. Indeed, it is apparent from the writings of some medieval commentators that their Haggadot quoted Jeremiah. The commentaries of Ri ben Yakar (1150–c. 1225), Ritba (1250–1330), and Rashbetz (1361–1444) indicate that their Haggadot included Jeremiah 10:25 rather than the parallel passage from Psalms.[31]

Nor should we worry excessively about the different order of the verses in the Haggadah and the Mekhilta or the addition of Lamentations 3:66. When the Haggadah borrowed from the Mekhilta it did not necessarily do so without modification. As Joshua Kulp observes, "We have noted on several occasions that the Babylonian Haggadah culled material from other places in rabbinic literature, and in nearly every case the earlier traditions were modified."[32] For example, the Haggadah edited the Mekhilta's version of the Four Children and in the process replaced a "stupid child" (*tippeish*) with a "simple child" (*tam*).[33] With this precedent before them, those in Europe who I believe modified this passage from the Mekhilta and added it to the Haggadah would likely have felt free to change the order of the verses and to add another verse as well.[34] The order of the verses may have been changed for a simple reason. The Mekhilta begins with "Pour our Your wrath upon *them*," but the passage in the Haggadah begins "Pour out Your wrath upon *the nations*." Within a liturgical context the Haggadah's approach certainly makes more sense,

[31]*See* Haggadah Shel Pesaḥ Torat Ḥayim, *pp. 174–175.*
[32]*See Joshua Kulp,* The Schechter Haggadah *(Jerusalem: Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2009), p. 210.*
[33]*See Lauterbach, vol. 1, p. 166,* Pisḥa *18:119; Horvitz and Rabin p. 73:12,* Pisḥa/Bo *18.*
[34]*Early versions of the passage included additional verses to these four. For example, see Goldschmidt, pp. 63–64.*

because it begins by clearly identifying the target of divine wrath, whereas the Mekhilta begins with only a nebulous "them."[35]

In addition to the order of the verses, the number of biblical verses also differs. The Ashkenazic Haggadah includes four verses whereas the Mekhilta brings only two (although the Mekhilta covers the same content as the first three of the Haggadah's four verses). If we imagine an editor of the Ashkenazic Haggadah deliberating about how many verses this imprecation ought to include, we should not be astounded by the choice of four, a number with obvious resonance in the Haggadah.

The Midrashic Context

The midrashic passage in the Mekhilta we are exploring comes from a tractate in that source that explicates the Song at the Sea, the song Moses and the Israelites sang upon safely crossing the Reed Sea and witnessing the destruction of Pharaoh's army. The song celebrates the zenith of God's redemptive might in the story of the exodus. The tractate begins with an assertion that recurs numerous times throughout its ten chapters: that the Song should not be understood as referring merely to a one-time historic case of divine salvation, but also to subsequent instances of God's redeeming role in history and to the ultimate messianic redemption. Behind this

[35]*Although my explanation for why the verses were reversed may well be correct, another factor may have been in play as well. In the midrash we find the explanation for God's wrath only at the end of the verses it quotes. In the Haggadah, that explanation comes in the middle of the passage. Thus the rhythm of the midrash begins with two pleas that God pour out divine wrath (A) and follows that with a rhetorical "Why" and the answer—that the nations have destroyed Jacob (B). Schematically, the midrash orders its themes as A-A-B. The midrash was interested in making a point (as we will soon see); it wasn't interested in composing a piece of liturgy. The Haggadah wanted to make the same point as the midrash, but in a liturgical context. Thus, the Haggadah creates the following order: a plea that God pour out divine wrath (A) because the nations have destroyed Jacob (B), followed by another plea that God pour out divine wrath. The Haggadah's order, A-B-A, seems more powerful—both because it supplies a rationale for God's wrath earlier in the passage, and because its A-B-A structure is rhetorically more compelling (it is the classic sonata form, as well as a common poetic rhyme scheme), as it recapitulates the plea for divine intervention.*

assertion lies an implicit question: did the exodus exhaust the reservoir of divine capacity for redemption, or were there ample reserves for God to act in the future?

The midrash begins its argument in its comment on the first word in the Song at the Sea, *az*, "then." It notes that *az* can refer to "the past and sometimes to what is to come in the future." It cites four examples from Scripture in which *az* points to the past and seven that look to the future. As if the seven-to-four ratio were not enough, the discussion concludes with a reading of the first verb in the Song at the Sea:

> It is not written "Then Moses sang (*shar*)," but "Then Moses will sing (*yashir*)." Thus we find that we can derive resurrection of the dead from the Torah.[36]

Next comes an enumeration of ten songs found in the Bible. The first nine relate to past redemptive events. According to the midrash, the tenth song alludes to God's ultimate redemption of Israel, which will bring the painful cycle of its history—from redemption to subjugation, back to redemption and subjugation—to a resounding and final redemptive climax.[37]

A few more examples are worth citing. On the verse "[God] is become my salvation" (Exodus 15:2), the midrash declares, "[God] was my salvation in the past and will be my salvation in the future."[38] On "Adonai is a man of war" (Exodus 15:3), the midrash offers one of its most poignant arguments: "There may be a hero in a country, but the strength which he has at the age of forty is not like that which he has at sixty. Nor is the strength he has at sixty the same as at seventy, but as he goes on, his strength becomes diminished. The One by whose word the world came into being, however, is not so, for 'I, Adonai, change not' (Malachi 3:6)."[39]

[36]*Lauterbach, vol. 2. p. 1,* Shirata *1:1, Horvitz and Rabin, p.116:1* B'shallaḥ/Shira *1.*

[37]*Lauterbach, vol. 2, pp. 2–7, Shirata 1:15–81; Horvitz and Rabin, pp. 116:9–118:13,* B'shallaḥ/Shira *1.*

[38]*Lauterbach, vol. 2, p. 24,* Shirata *3:25; Horvitz and Rabin, p. 126:18,* B'shallaḥ/Shira *3.*

[39]*Lauterbach, vol. 2, p. 32,* Shirata *4:31; Horvitz and Rabin, p. 130:6,* B'shallaḥ/Shira *4. Judah Goldin likewise comments on the frequency of this motif. See his* The Song at the Sea *(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), notes on pp. 150, 161, and 205.*

If the Mekhilta's treatment of the Song at the Sea labors to affirm God's capacity to once again determine the course of history, the circumstances behind that struggle are not difficult to grasp. This is a tannaitic midrash: most of the sages it quotes lived during the first and second centuries C.E., arguably one of the lowest points of Jewish history. Two failed revolts against Rome, one in 70 C.E. and the other in 132 C.E., brought about the destruction of the Second Temple, the death of hundreds of thousands of Jews, the plowing under of Jewish Jerusalem with the construction of Aelia Capitolina, a Roman city, in its place, the banishment of Jews from the Jerusalem, and the exile of a significant portion of the population from the land of Israel. Whereas the First Temple's destruction in 586 B.C.E. was followed by relatively speedy rebuilding some seventy years later, hopes for a similarly rapid reconstruction of the Second Temple were stillborn. It makes perfect sense that a midrash compiled during an era when God's outstretched arm had seemingly vanished would be intent on proving that God was still God.[40]

Let us briefly return to the specific portion from the Mekhilta that I suspect inspired the Haggadah's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha.*

> *T'shallaḥ ḥaron'kha*—"You *sent* forth Your fury" is not written here, but rather "You *will* send forth Your fury"—in the future to come. As it is written, "Pour out Your wrath upon them; may Your blazing anger overtake them" (Psalm 69:25). And it is written, "Pour out Your wrath upon the nations . . ." Why? ". . . Because they have devoured Jacob, have devoured and consumed him, desolated his home" (Jeremiah 10:25).

[40]*For a review of the historical context within which the Mekhilta was compiled, see Elaine A. Phillips,* Mekhilta D'Rabbi Ishmael: A Study in Composition and Context *(Philadelphia, PA: Annenberg Research Institute, Ph.D. dissertation, March 1991), pp. 691–707. Phillips demonstrates that "a main objective of the midrash is to bring the biblical text into the present. That God is consistent in His being and action is vital. . . . He is the same from one biblical context to the next, from the past to the future and from this world to the world to come" (p. 310). She begins her treatment of the text's historical context with an observation that "The exhortations throughout seem to indicate a population tending toward disinterest in traditions" (p. 691).*

In a context where we might well have expected the past tense, the midrash exploits the ambiguity of the imperfect in Hebrew, which allows the verb to be understood in either the present or future tense. As Judah Goldin observes, "Verbs in the imperfect give the homilist his opportunity to suggest eschatological intentions."[41] The basis, however, for the midrash's choice of prooftexts (Psalm 69:25 and Jeremiah 10:25) is not so clear. Both verses begin with an imperative, *sh'fokh* ("pour out"). We might have expected prooftexts with verses that referred to the pouring out of divine wrath using the imperfect (i.e., *yishpokh*).[42] Perhaps the midrash assumes that the imperative refers to an action yet to occur and and assumes that the imperative implies action to occur in future time.[43] But I think the historical context of the verses themselves offers an additional reason for why they are indeed appropriate prooftexts.

Both verses refer to the destruction of the First Temple and call upon God to punish the responsible nation. The Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E., who died in 561 B.C.E.; scarcely two decaces, later the Babylonian empire fell to Cyrus the Great of Persia. Here then was a case in which the call for God's wrath met with a clear and swift divine response. Again, Goldin's words are apt: "These comments are a good example of the Rabbis seeing 'prophecy' in history, that is, events in the past are for them a foreshadowing also of the future."[44] Our midrash argues as follows. "Look at how God brought down Neuchadnezzar and restored the exiles from Babylon. If God intervened then, God can—and therefore will—do so again. Have no fear! The divine hand that redeemed Israel at the Sea has lost none of its strength."

[41]*Goldin, p. 205.*

[42]*Indeed, the midrashic passage that immediately follows does exactly this with this biblical passage: ". . . it consumes them like straw" (Exodus15:7). The midrash takes a verb form usually read in the present tense,* yokh'leimo, *"consumes," reads it as future, and then brings two prooftexts—each of which uses the future tense to demonstrate that God* will *consume Israel's enemies like straw.*

[43]*Thanks to Joel Hoffman for explaining the relationship between the imperative and the future tense.*

[44]*Goldin, p. 161. Goldin refers to the passage in the Mekhilta that immediately precedes ours and that also understands the imperfect as referring to future time.*

It is now time to consider the Haggadah's rationale for adding Lamentations 3:66 to the material it used from the Mekhilta. The verse reads: "Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of Adonai." Let us assume that this verse should share various attributes with those that precede it in this passage. If so, my hypothesis about the relationship between the Mekhilta and the Haggadah's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* would lead to three predictions: (1) that this verse should relate to the destruction of the First Temple; (2) that it should appear in the Mekhilta; and (3) that its midrashic context should speak to the issue of God's capacity for future action. These predictions constitute a test, as it were, of the hypothesis advanced so far.

Each of these predictions proves correct. First, as with the preceding verses in the passage, this one too relates to the destruction of the First Temple and calls on God to wreak vengeance upon the guilty party. Second, this verse—which makes only a few appearances in midrashic literature—does appear in the Mekhilta.[45] And third, its midrashic context is startlingly similar to the passage from the Mekhilta we have discussed above. Here too, the midrash revolves around the fact that the opening verb in this verse should be understood as referring to the future. Usually, *tirdof* is rendered as "pursue" (i.e., as an imperative) but according to the Mekhilta it should be read as referring to future, "You *will* pursue." The Mekhilta comments on God's pledge to blot out the memory of Amalek from "under the heavens," *mi-taḥat ha-shamayim* (Exodus 17:14):

> When will the name of these people be blotted out? At the time when idolatry will be eradicated together with its worshippers and God will be recognized throughout the world as the One, and divine sovereignty will be established for all eternity. For at that time, "shall Adonai go and fight" (Zechariah 14:3); "And Adonai shall be Sovereign" (14:9). And it also says, "You *will* pursue them in wrath and destroy them [from under the heavens of Adonai"] (Lamentations 3:66).[46]

[45] *In a search of the classical midrashim in the Bar Ilan Responsa Project (version 17+), in addition to the Mekhilta, the verse appears only in Lamentations Rabbah 3:10 (which repeats the same midrash found in the Mekhilta) and Midrash Psalms 121:3.*

The similarity between the Mekhilta's midrash featuring this verse from Lamentations and that containing the other *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* verses is striking indeed.

Lamentations 3:66 thus passes the test with flying colors. And I believe the midrashic affinity between this particular verse and the earlier ones in our passage greatly strengthens the argument for a relationship between the Mekhilta and the Haggadah's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*.[47] Viewed in light of its midrashic substrate, the entire passage offers a resounding promise that the interventionist God of the exodus can and will return.

Theological Questions Prompted by the Crusades

We cannot be sure if the Haggadah's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* came about as a direct response to the First Crusade or whether it had developed somewhat before then.[48] But we do know that after Maḥzor Vitry (composed sometime before 1105), one or another version of the passage appears in Haggadot without fail. So if the Crusades did not inspire the passage, they likely created fertile ground for its rapid and universal acceptance. In either case, it is useful to take a brief look at Jewish reactions to the first two Crusades (1095–1099 and 1147–1149) because they make it clear that the

[46] *Lauterbach, vol. 2, pp. 158–159,* Amalek *2:155–161; Horvitz and Rabin, p. 186:7,* B'shalaḥ/Amalek 2.

[47] *As noted earlier, a number of medieval Haggadot included many more biblical imprecations than those which now appear in the standard Ashkenazic Haggadah. No one would assert a dearth of such biblical verses! It is nonetheless interesting that if we consider the eighteen additional verses that augment* Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha *in various ensembles in different Haggadot, we find that none of the additions are used by the Mekhilta. Put differently, one of the criteria for inclusion in the Ashkenazic text as we know it today may have been that the verse have a midrashic "pedigree" traceable to the Mehkilta.*

[48] *It makes its first documented appearance in the Maḥzor Vitry, which was completed by one of Rashi's students before Rashi died in 1105.*

age-old questions about God's capacity to intervene in history had surfaced again with renewed urgency. *The Chronicle of Solomon bar Simson* (1140) reports that the Jews of the Rhineland "cried out with all their hearts, saying . . . Where are all Your wonders, which our ancestors related to us, saying: 'Did You not bring us up from Egypt and from Babylonia and rescue us on numerous occasions?'"[49] When the chronicler relates the murder of eleven hundred people on a single day in Mainz, he asks, "Why did the heavens not darken and the stars not withhold their radiance? . . . Will You restrain Yourself for these things, Adonai?" *Sefer Zekhirah* (c. 1174) calls for God to "reveal to us divine vengeance against both Edom and Ishmael, as God did against Pharaoh and of Egypt. . . . We cannot question the ways of the One who is fearful and awesome. We must always declare God's righteousness. It is we who have sinned; what can we say? *May God's strength be aroused* and God's mercies awakened upon us. Amen."[50]

As a final example we must note a *piyyut* that uses a shocking word play, the original source of which is none other than the Mekhilta's commentary on the Song at the Sea. The *piyyut* was composed by Isaac bar Shalom in 1146 in the wake of the Second Crusade.[51] Until the early decades of the twentieth century it appeared in the Ashkenazic Passover Maḥzor for recitation on the first Shabbat after Passover. It begins with a midrashic word play on Exodus 15:11, "Who is like You, Adonai, among the mighty . . ." With the addition of a single Hebrew consonant, the *piyyut* transforms God from *eilim*, "mighty," to *il'mim*, "dumb," utterly incapable

[49]*Shlomo Eidelberg,* The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades *(Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1996), p. 24. An almost identical plea appears in the* Narrative of the Old Persecutions *(Mainz, anonymous), p. 105.*

[50]*Eidelberg, pp. 132–133; italics added. As Eidelberg notes, the phrase "May God's strength be aroused" (Numbers 14:17) appears in B. Sanhedrin 111b as the conclusion to a lengthy passage in which Moses questions God's actions.*

[51]*Lauterbach, vol. 2, pp. 60–61,* Shirata *8:19–25, Horvitz and Rabin, p. 142:10* B'shallaḥ/Shira, *8. For the* piyyut *see Jakob Josef Petuchowski,* Theology and Poetry: Studies in the Medieval Piyyut *(London: Routledge, 1978), ch. 7, p. 71, ff. For a parallel source see BT Gittin 56b. It is odd that Petuchowski, who ascribes the* piyyut's *word play to the Gittin 56b, did not look further. There the Talmud ascribes the words to Rabbi Ishmael, traditionally thought to be the author of the Mekhilta. That attribution does not occur where the passage occurs in the Mekhilta itself.*

of speech even in the face of Israel's suffering. The *piyyut* continues with a plea that God "arouse Your mighty power . . . [that] once smote the monster of the Nile." Its haunting refrain comes from Psalm 83:2: "Do not keep silent."

This small sample of responses to the Crusades illustrates the yearning for the return of an interventionist God. I believe that whoever assembled the verses in the Haggadah's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* was not only familiar with our passage in the Mekhilta, but felt a special resonance with it, as if he were living through a dark period of violence and vulnerability akin to that from which the Mekhilta emerged. The historical details differed, but during both periods the sense of God's absence offered a particularly painful contrast with God's palpable presence in the biblical exodus, the paradigm of Jewish hope for redemption. To a scholar from France or the Rhineland in the bleak years of the Crusades, our passage in the Mekhilta must have offered a dose of comfort—at least insofar as it often helps to know that one's forebears lived through comparable tragedy and wrestled with the same painful theological questions. Over the millennia, the answers remained broadly similar: God's inaction could not be fully explained; but belief in God's *capacity* to act remained intact. Indeed, it became the role of liturgy to affirm that answer, day in and day out.

A medieval commentary on the Haggadah attributed to Rabbi Eliezer ben Judah of Worms (Rokei·aḥ, c. 1176–1238) refers to a custom that offers further support to this argument. He notes that before *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* it was customary to recite the following verse from Psalms: "Display Your faithfulness in wondrous deeds, You who deliver with Your right hand those who seek refuge from assailants" (17:7). This introductory verse gives tangible expression to the connection between *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* and the deep yearning to once more witness the mighty deeds of God's redeeming hand.[52]

[52]*Rabbi Eliezer explains this introduction by noting that "we don't begin with 'Pour out'; we don't begin with retribution." The commentary is cited in Safrai and Safrai (p. 174) and Tabory (p. 54). Thanks to Joseph Tabory for supplying the following source which contains the commentary: Moshe Hershler,* Haggadah shel Pesaḥ v'Shir ha-Shirim im Peirush ha-Rokei·aḥ, *(Jerusalem: Mekhon Shalem, 1984), p. 135.*

We ought not be surprised that the Haggadah incorporated a response to such yearnings. It is worth remembering that the Song at the Sea—midrashically understood as describing God's ultimate victory in messianic times—had not been part of the daily P'sukei D'zimra until the Middle Ages.[53] We can't be sure just why the Song at the Sea found its way into the daily liturgy. The Zohar (thirteenth century) suggests that it is the most important hymn and that reciting it with proper devotion plays a key role in stirring God's capacity to carry out acts of redemption.[54] A comment in Mahzor Lev Shalem, the Conservative Movement's new High Holyday *maḥzor*, bears consideration: "The experience of the long exile may have created the need for the memory of triumph. The Midrash associated this Song with the final redemption."[55] As the Song of the Sea ultimately became part of the daily liturgy, so too did *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha*, part of the Mekhilta's midrash on the Song at the Sea, eventually enter the Haggadah.

Placement in the Haggadah

Before concluding, we must consider the matter of this passage's placement in the Haggadah—an issue, as we have seen, that has long occupied commentators. The key to solving the problem lies in two areas. First we must understand the significance of this particular juncture of the Haggadah. Second, we must remember the midrashic context of our Mekhilta passage. As to the first issue, recall that our passage precedes the second part of the Hallel, Psalms 115–118. (We recite the first part of Hallel, Psalms 113 and 114, just before the blessing over the second cup of wine, before the meal.) The

[53]*A. I. Schechter* (Studies in Jewish Liturgy; *Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1930, pp. 52–55), cites evidence that the custom of this daily recitation began in the land of Israel and spread to Germany by the early ninth century. It does not appear in the siddur of Rav Amram Gaon but Saadiah includes it as an acceptable addition;* Siddur R. Saadiah Gaon, *p. 312. See also Ismar Elbogen,* Jewish Liturgy *(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 75.*

[54]*Soncino Zohar, Exodus, ii:131b–132a.*

[55]Mahzor Lev Shalem for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *(New York: Rabbincal Assembly, 2010), p. 65.*

Talmud discusses (at B. Pesaḥim 118a) why we recite the standard Hallel at the seder, since we also recite the Great Hallel (i.e., Psalm 136). According to the Talmud, we do so because the Hallel refers to these five events:[56] the exodus, the splitting of the Reed Sea, the giving of Torah, the resurrection of the dead, and the travails of the Messiah. The Talmud then brings the verses from the appropriate psalms to prove its point. The Talmud finds allusions to the first three events, all of which occurred in the past, in Psalms 114:1, 3, and 4; allusions to resurrection of the dead and the travails of the Messiah—events in the future—are found in Psalms 116:9 and 115:1. This seems to have given rise to the more general assertion propounded by Eleazar ben Judah of Worms that the first two psalms of Hallel refer to the redemption from Egypt and the last four to the future war of Gog and Magog.[57] This view was spread by Meir ben Barukh of Rothenberg (c. 1215–1293) and Jacob ben Moses Moellin (c. 1360–1427).[58] (As noted, the Maharal of Prague expressed a similar opinion.)

Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha comes just at the moment when the seder's focus on redemption shifts from past to future, from Egypt to the days of the Messiah. The midrashic origins of this passage supply the perfect resonance. As we have seen, the Haggadah's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* reaches back to a passage in the Mekhilta that also looks both backward and forward as it wonders about God's redemptive power—in Egypt, versus the future to come. The Mekhilta concludes that just as God acted back then, God's redemptive capacity remains alive and well. To prove the point, it brings verses that call on God to avenge those who destroyed the First Temple. Because the call seems to have met with a favorable divine response—the demise of Nebuchadnezzar and his empire—the midrash thus "proves" that God's power to act remains intact. As the Haggadah turns from the exodus to the coming of Messiah, this is precisely the reassurance we need.

[56]*Rashbam says they are all related to redemption.*

[57]Rabbi Eleazar of Worms: Drasha L'Pesaḥ, *ed. Simcha Emanuel (Jerusalem: Mikize Nirdamim, 2006), p. 2006.*

[58]*See* Sefer Minhagim of the school of Rabbi Meir ben Barukh of Rothenburg, *ed. Israel Elfenbein (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1938), p. 25;* Sefer Maharil: Minhagim *(Jacob Moellin), ed. Shlomo Shpietzer (Jerursalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim, 1989), p. 108,* siman 29.

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Understanding the background of Mekhilta's *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* midrash illuminates the theological issues that may have drawn the midrash into the Haggadah. It's primary function was to "prove" the potential for divine action subsequent to the time of the exodus. Secondarily, in light of its connection with the destruction of the First Temple and the rapidly ensuing downfall of the Babylonian empire, the passage offers tangible support for the efficacy of calling on God to avenge Israel's enemies.[59] The passage's midrashic roots also clarify the location of *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* in the Haggadah, at the very transition between the remembrance of God's saving hand in Egypt and the yearning for its reappearance, this time to help bring the ultimate messianic redemption—*bimheirah v'yameinu,* speedily, in our time.

Finally, let me add that this analysis should not be read as an argument for or against retaining *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* in our Haggadot. Nor is it my intent to sugarcoat the passage, to make it more theologically palatable. For those who continue to recite it, I believe it is important to understand that the passage is not simply about cursing our enemies, but grows out of profound questions that have gnawed at Jewish consciousness over the centuries. Did the exodus somehow deplete God's redemptive power? If not, how do we explain the apparent difference between God's forceful interventions on Israel's behalf back then and God's comparative remoteness throughout so much of subsequent Jewish history? These questions remain as vexing today as they were in the second or third centuries, when the Mekhilta was compiled, and in the era of the Crusades, when the Mekhilta's midrash found its way into the Haggadah. If *Sh'fokh Ḥamatkha* can help you dig into those questions at your seder, *dayyenu,* it would suffice!

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[59]*For more on the Ashkenazic practice of "cursing" Gentiles during the Middle Ages, see Yuval,* Two Nations in Your Womb, *ch. 3. (n. 20 above).*

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Revelation: A Work in Process

MICHAEL KNOPF

Ultimate meaning is not grasped once and for all in the form of timeless ideas, acquired once and for all, securely preserved in conviction. It is not simply given. It comes upon us as an intimation that comes and goes.

—*Abraham Joshua Heschel,* Who is Man?

For millennia, Jewish thinkers have wrestled with the issue of revelation. We want to know whether God reveals anything, and if so, what of God's will has been revealed to us. We seek to prove whether anything claiming to have been revealed by God actually has the imprimatur of divine authority. We hope to know whether God obligates us to live in any particular way, and to discover why and how God reveals God's will to human beings.

For those with an Orthodox disposition, the answers to those questions are indisputable: The Torah as we know it is the direct result of verbal revelation.[1] God dictated the text, which was dutifully recorded by Moses on Mount Sinai and passed down, unaltered, from generation to generation. It must be interpreted closely and followed precisely, because every letter in it has unambiguous divine authority. On the other hand, for those with a purely scientific outlook, the answers to those questions are also clear: The Torah as we know it is a human document. As such, it must be interpreted contextually and followed only if it concurs with modern sensibilities.

Those who are not given to embracing either extreme position, however, face a dilemma. The former view seems to call for the suspension of critical

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[1]*Elliot N. Dorff,* Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants *(New York: United Synagogue Youth, 1977), p. 115.*