

Shittim Trees: Truth or Consequences?

רש"י שמות כ"ה:ה'

ועצי שטים – ומאיין היו להם במדבר? פירש ר' תנחומא (תנחומא תרומה ט'): יעקב אבינו צפה ברוח הקודש שעתידין ישראל לבנות משכן במדבר, הביא ארזים למצרים ונטען, וצוה את בניו ליטלם עמהם כשיצאו ממצרים.

AND ACACIA WOOD – But from where did they get this in the wilderness? Rabbi Tanchuma explained it thus: Our father Yaakov foresaw by the gift of the Holy Spirit that Israel would once build a Mishkan in the wilderness: he therefore brought cedars to Egypt and planted them there, and instructed his children take these with them when they left Egypt (Tanchuma Terumah 9; cf. Bereshit Rabbah 94 and Rashi on Shemot 26:15).

אבן עזרא פירוש שני שמות כ"ה:ה'

ועצי שטים – יש מקדמונינו שאמרו שיעקב אבינו נטעם, וישראל הוציאו ממצרים במצות משה. והראיה: וכל אשר נמצא אתו (שמות ל"ה:כ"ד), כמו: התכלת והארגמן (שמות ל"ה:כ"ג). ויש לתמוה, למה נאמר: אשר נמצא אתו (שמות ל"ה:כ"ד) – לצרכו. ואם אמרנו כן, יש לתמוה: למה הוציאו עצי שטים כי מה צורך יש להם. ועוד, הנה המצרים חושבים כי לזבח הם הולכים, ואחר כן ישובו, ועל כן השאילום, ואיך יוציאו קרשים רבים אך כל אחד עשר אמות, גם בריחים, והם עברו על מצרים מקום המלוכה, ומה היתה תשובתם לשואליהם: למה יוליכו עצי שטים, והם הלכים לזבח דרך שלשת ימים. והנה לא ידענו, אם קבלה היא ביד אבותינו שממצרים הוציאו, גם אנחנו נסור אל משמעתם.

AND ACACIA-WOOD. Some of our ancient sages said that the patriarch Jacob planted acacia trees in Egypt, and Israel, upon the command of Moses, brought them out. Their proof: "And every man, with whom was found acacia-wood...brought it" (Ex. 35:24). They possessed acacia as they possessed the blue and the purple [fabrics]. However, one must wonder: Why does Scripture say, "with whom was found," which means it was used for personal needs. Now, if we so interpret it, then we must ask: Why did the Israelites take acacia wood out of Egypt? What [personal] need did they have for acacia wood? Furthermore, the Egyptians thought that the Israelites were going to offer sacrifices and then return to Egypt. That is why they lent them [gold and silver jewels plus raiment]. How could the Israelites take out many boards, each one of which was ten cubits plus [even longer] crosspieces, when they passed by the royal palace [on their way out]. What answer could they give to those who asked them why they were carrying acacia wood when they were going on a three-day journey to offer sacrifices? Now we face a quandary. If our ancestors had a tradition that the Israelites took the acacia wood out of Egypt, then we will accept their tradition.

ואם דרך סברא, יש לבקש דרך אחרת. כי היה סמוך אל הר סיני יער עצי שטים, ובבאם שם, אמר להם משה ששם יתעכבו הרבה, ואין עליהם ענן, כאשר פרשתי (ראב"ע שמות פירוש שני ט"ו:כ"ב). אז עשה כל אחד סוכה, והנשיאים עשו כדמות חצרות, כל אחד כפי מעלתו. וכרתו כל היער, כי עם רב היה, ועשו סכות. ומשה לא דבר להם דבר המשכן, רק אחר יום הכפורים. וזה טעם: וכל אשר נמצא אתו (שמות ל"ה:כ"ד).

However, if their statement is based on rational speculation, then we must seek another explanation. Namely, there was a forest of acacia trees adjacent to Mount Sinai. When they arrived there, Moses told them that they would be spending a long time there without any cloud cover, as I have already explained. Then, each one of them made a booth. The princes made court-like structures, each one in accordance with his status. They cut the entire forest down, for they were a large nation, to make booths. Moses did not speak to them regarding the tabernacle until after the Day of Atonement. This is the meaning of "with whom was found" (Ex. 35:24).

ר' יוסף בכור שור שמות כ"ה:ה'

ועצי שטים – במדבר היו יערים שגדל שם אותן עצים הקרוין שטים, כדכתיב: וישב ישראל בשטים (במדבר כ"ה:א'), וכתיב: וישלח יהושע בן נון מן השטים (יהושע ב'א'), על שם יער נקרא המקום שטים. וכן כתוב: אתן במדבר ארז שיטה {וגו'} תדהר ותאשור וגו' (ישעיהו מ"א:ט). ומשם היו מביאין אותם ומנדבין למשכן.

In the wilderness there were forests in which grew those trees that are called acacia, as it is written: "Israel stayed in Shittim" (Bemidbar 25:1), and it is written: "And Joshua, the son of Nun, sent [spies] out of Shittim" (Yehoshua 2:1); the place was called Shittim due to the forest. To wit: "I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia-tree {etc.} the plane-tree, and the larch together" (Yeshayahu 41:19). And from there they would bring them and donate to the Tabernacle.

והוא עץ קל וחלק ונאה. ותדע שהוא קל, שהרי מ"ח קרשים ואדניהם, וכל העמודים ס', עמודי החצר ואדניהם, ותשע עמודי המשכן ואדניהם, חמש של מסך וארבע של פרוכת, והיתדות, היו מושכין שמונה בקר שנתנו לבני מררי, כמו שמפורש בנשא (במדבר ז'ח'). ואף על פי שהקרשים היו קורות גדולות, בני עשר אמות, ורחבן אמה וחצי, ועבין אמה, כמו שאנו למידין משני קרשים שבמקצועות. אלא ודאי עץ חשוב וקל היה, דוגמת מזרָא, שעושין ממנו כוסות.

It is a tree that is light and smooth and beautiful. And you know that it is light, for behold: forty-eight planks and their sockets, and all sixty posts: the posts of the courtyard and their sockets, and nine posts of the Tabernacle and their sockets, five of the veil and four of the curtain, and the pegs, [all these] were being pulled by the eight cattle that the children of Merari were given, as is detailed in Naso (Bemidbar 7:8). (Even though the planks were large beams, ten cubits in size, and their width a cubit and a half, and their thickness a cubit, as we learn from the two planks that were in the corners.) Rather, it was certainly a quality wood and light, similar to *madrier*, from which they make goblets.

ר' יוסף קרא שמואל א א':ל"ז

אך דע לך כשנכתבה הנבואה שלימה נכתבה עם פתרונה וכל הצורך שלא יכשלו בה דורות הבאים וממקומו אין חסר כלום, ואין צריך להביא ראיה ממקום אחר ולא מדרש כי תורה תמימה נתנה תמימה נכתבה ולא תתחסר כל בה, ומדרש חכמינו כדי להגדיל תורה ויאדיר.

Understand that when prophecy was recorded, it was recorded whole with its interpretation in order to prevent misunderstanding on the part of subsequent generations; in context, it lacks nothing. There is no need [therefore] to attest to [its meaning] from another text, nor from a Midrash, because the Torah was revealed whole and recorded whole without imperfection. [The purpose of] rabbinic Midrash is to magnify and exalt Torah [i.e., not to render its essential meaning].

אבל כל מי שאינו יודע פשוטו של מקרא ונוטה לו אחר מדרשו של דבר דומה לזה ששטפתהו שבולת הנהר ומעמקי מים מציפין ואוחז כל אשר יעלה בידו להינצל, ואלו שם לבו אל דבר י"י היה חוקר אחר פשר דבר ופשוטו ומוצא לקיים מה שנאמר אם תבקשנה ככסף וכמטמונים תחפשנה אז תבין יראת י"י ודעת אלהים תמצא (משלי ב' ד-ה') כמו בכאן, שאם תפתור לכי לשלום ואלהי ישראל יתן את שאלתך, יתן לעתיד דונר"ד בלעז ולא לשון בקשה.

However, one who does not understand the simple meaning of Scripture and inclines towards Midrash resembles someone overwhelmed by giant waves and submerged in deep water who will grasp anything that comes to hand in order to save himself. If he were to pay attention to the word of God, he would seek out the meaning⁶⁶ of the matter – its *peshat* – and would thereby fulfill the verse: “If you seek it like silver and search for it like treasure, then you will understand the fear of God and discover the knowledge of Him.”

אבן עזרא איכה – הקדמה

<p>Men of truth understand the midrash of our righteous ancients, since they were established upon truth, and in the pouring out of mortal knowledge. All their words are like gold and silver since refined seven times, yet their midrashim differed concerning many things. Some are riddles, secrets, and exalted allegory, some are in order to emit a pleasing scent [to] wearied hearts in profound lessons, and some are to encourage those who stumble, and to fill those who are empty. Therefore, the meanings of the verses resemble bodies. The midrashim are like garments clinging to a body like fine silk, but [also] darkness like sackcloth. But the way of the plain meaning (פשט) is the body in the choice words, and in rules. Thus they say that the text is like its plain meaning, but the words are ancient.</p>	<p>אנשי אמת יבינו מדרשי קדמונינו הצדיקים, שהן נוסדים על קושט וביצוקת מדע יצוקים, וכל דבריהם כזהב וכסף שבעתים מזוקקים. אכן המדרשים על דרכים רבים נחלקים: מהם חידות וסודות ומשלים גבוהים עד שחקים, ומהם להרויח לבות נלאות בפרקים עמוקים, ומהם לאמץ נכשלים ולמלאות הריקים. על כן ידמו לגופות טעמי הפסוקים, והמדרשים כמלבושיהם בגוף דבקים, מהם כמשי דקים ומהם עבים כשקים. ודרך הפשט הוא הגוף הפשוט בדברים ובחוקים, וכן אמרו: שהמקרא כפשוטו, והדברים עתיקים.</p>
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Se` adyah Gaon: Introduction to the Torah Commentary

In clarification hereof, I shall add that it is incumbent upon every rational person to always regard the words of the Torah according to their obvious meaning (*zāhir*), i.e., the one best known (*mashhur*) most widely utilized (*alkathir al'isti 'māl*) by the speakers of that language, since the *raison d'être* of every book is to have its contents attained fully by its readers, unless [1] sense perception or [2] rational knowledge contradicts that obvious meaning, or [unless] [3] that obvious meaning itself contradicts another verse of unambiguous meaning, or [unless] [4] it contradicts a [reliable] tradition. If he sees that by interpreting the word according to its obvious meaning he will cause belief in [the literal truth] of one of these four aforementioned things, he must know that that verse is not to be understood according to that obvious meaning, but that it contains one or several words which must be figurative (*majāz*).

When he realizes just which type of figurative expression it is and reconciles it with the [word of] unambiguous meaning, then that verse is restored to agreement with the sensory, the rational, the other verse [of unambiguous meaning], and tradition. In light of the above, I shall provide illustrations of these four [principles].

To the **first** instance belongs the Torah's saying, "Adam named his wife Eve for she was the mother of "every living [creature]" according to their best known meaning, we would be contradicting sense perception because that would imply that the lion, ox, donkey, and other animals, were children of Eve! Since it is never possible to deny sense perception, we believe that the verse contains an elliptical word (*mudamar*) that will reconcile it with the sense of observation/sight, as we shall later explain, thereby limiting Eve's motherhood to humanity.

To the **second** instance belongs the verse "For the Lord, your God, is a consuming fire" (Dt. 4:24). Were we to believe this according to its obvious meaning, it would contradict reason, because reason dictates that every fire is newly created, inadequate, and subject to change after its inception, while the Creator is not subject to any of these [properties]. We therefore maintain that there is a figurative element in the verse that reconciles reason with the [literal] text.

To the **third** instance belongs God's, grand and exalted, saying, "Do not test the Lord, your God" (Dt. 6:16), which is of unambiguous import. When it later says, however, "take out your tithes, give charity of your own money, and test Me thereby" (Ma. 33:10), we learn that this word [i.e., "test"] is one that bears several meanings, including some that are not well-known but that would reconcile it with the unambiguous Torah verse, as we shall explain in its place.

To the **fourth** instance belongs God's prohibition "Do not seethe a kid in its mother's milk" (Ex. 23:19), upon which [basis] Tradition forbade eating any meat with any milk. Since the Tradition was borne by people who had witnessed this [prohibition in practice] with their very eyes, we are obliged to apply to this verse an acceptable [nonliteral] interpretation (*takhrīj*), which will reconcile it with the prophetic Tradition.

Ralbag:

Then Joshua spoke to the Lord on the day the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel saying, in the sight of Israel: "Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and moon, in the valley of Ayalon" (Js. 10:12).

בזאת הפר' יש ספקות רבות ראוי לעיין בהם האחד הוא שאם היה שהשמש עמד ובטל מהתנועה הנראית לו הנה היה זה המופת יותר נפלא לאין שיעור מהמופתים שנעשו ע"י משה... ואם היה הענין כן הנה זה סותר מה שאמר' התורה שלא קם נביא עוד בישראל כמשה לכל האותו' והמופתים אשר עשה משה לעיני כל ישראל.

Were this [literal reading of the text, i.e., that the sun stood still] the case, it would contradict the Torah stipulation that "there arose no other prophet in Israel like Moses . . . regarding all the wonders and marvels that he performed in the sight of all Israel" (Dt. 34:10–11). And even if we were to hypothesize that a wonder such as this [i.e., making the sun stand still] was performed by Moses, albeit not recorded in the Torah, as some of the Sages proposed, the contradiction would remain patent because Joshua would still be [at least] equal to Moses in this regard. Also, if this were the case, it would not have been appropriate for the Torah to have remained silent about such a wonder because we have seen that it is in the interest of the Torah to publicize wonders and marvels because they stimulate belief in God. As it is recorded in regard to the wonders that were performed for Pharaoh: "That you shall tell of them to your children and grandchildren," and "that you shall know that I am the Lord. . . ."

Having made these clarifications, we turn our attention to explaining this narrative. I maintain that Joshua's intention was that before the sun would move from Gibeon and the moon from Ayalon Valley, the people [of Israel] would finish avenging itself on its enemy. Scripture, however, spoke elliptically as indicated in the continuation, "the sun stood still and the moon, too, until the nation avenged itself on its enemies," meaning that by the time the sun had set in Gibeon and the moon in Ayalon Valley, the matter of the vengeance had been completed. This was a most wondrous thing because not only did Israel avenge itself on its opponents, but that vengeance was accomplished in such a short time, which is why it states that "there never again was such a day on which God [as it were] listened to a man's voice to fight on behalf of Israel." That is why they were able to achieve that vengeance in such a short time because God is omnipotent. And the statement "God listened" means that God did not intend that vengeance to be completed in such a short time, but He listened to [Joshua's] voice in keeping with [the verse] "He upholds the word of His servant and completes the advice of His agents."