The Bracha of Two Births and Two Promises

This piece first ran on our Substack, Reading Jewish History in the Parsha. We're pleased to share it here on our website.

Bamidbar and Shavuot

Why is there a custom to serve hard-boiled eggs before the Seder meal?

True, the Seder is always on the same day of the week as Tisha B'Av, the most solemn day of mourning on the Jewish calendar, and eggs are given to mourners because their round(ish) appearance is reminiscent of the cyclical nature of life. So maybe at this time of birth for the Jewish People, we also recall the challenges and the sorrow, as well as the fact that we will get through them and become renewed again.

But the reason I like best is this: Chickens are born twice. First, passively, as eggs. Then, after 21 days, they must peck their way out of the shell and be born again, this time through their own effort.

So too, the Jewish People were born twice. Once at the Exodus, passively, "וַיּוֹצִאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה," "Hashem brought us out from Egypt with a mighty hand" (Deut. 26:8). And once more at Sinai, actively, by their own choice, when they said: "נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע", "We will do and we will listen" (Ex. 24:7). The first birth was complete; the second is still unfolding as we continue to make our choices under the compassionate gaze of God and the scrutiny of the rest of the nations.

A Promise of Purpose and Pathway

If the Exodus and Sinai were the births, then the conception, so to speak, happened in Lech Lecha, Genesis 12:1-3, when Avraham, then Avram, was first tapped for the mission:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לֶךְ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ

And the Lord said to Avram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וַאֲבָרֶכְךָ וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה

And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and [you shall] be a blessing.

וַאֲבָרְכָה מְבָרֲכֶיךָ וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ אָאֹר וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאֲדָמָה

And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you."

With gratitude and apologies to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's commentary on Bereshit 12:1-3, here is a contemporary way to read those verses as a portend for our nation's journey:

Stage one (verse 1): לֶךְ־לְךָ *Go! [to yourself].*

Avram: How shall I do that?

Hashem: First isolate yourself, then I'll tell you.

Stage two: מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ *Leave your land, your birthplace, your father's house.*

Hashem: Release the outer trappings of who you are, from the most external to the most personal.

Stage three: אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ *To the land that I will show you*.

Hashem: Trust Me, I'll show you the way, you don't have to be in charge of the journey. Let go and let God.

Stage four (verse 2): וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וַאֲבָרֶכְךָ וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ *I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great.*

Hashem: Receive your new tools. Everything given up in the first verse will be more than compensated by Me in the second. Rather than your land giving you a sense of nationhood, *I will make you into a great nation*; rather than your birthplace giving you a sense of prosperity and security, *I will bless you*; rather than your father's house defining your sense of identity, *I will make your name great*.

Avram: Okay, and thanks, but why?

Stage four: וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה *You shall be a blessing.*

Hashem: To accomplish your mission, you need both to be blessed, and to be a blessing yourself. That is your calling, and the mission of every Jew—to be a blessing for all mankind. That's why you can't take your external with you. This journey is about your essence. Therefore…

Stage five: Live in this world as your essential self, for now, the לְךָ (self) that you became: a man of kindness, purpose, dedication, and fidelity.

Hashem: I'll give your family a lot more details later.

Stage six (verse 3): וַאֲבָרְכָה מְבָרֲכֶיךָ וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ אָאֹר *And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.*

Transformation of others: Others will see you, and, as individuals, they will get to choose if they want blessing or curse. It's conditioned on their behavior.

Stage seven: וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאֲדָמָה *And all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.*

Success! All the nations of the earth will be blessed. It's not conditional; it's a promise. It will happen through you.

In these few verses, Hashem both explains and promises that it is not about where you come from that defines you, but rather where you are going. For the Jewish People, the destination is not just physical (i.e., *the land that Hashem will show us*), but spiritual, the blessing that we are to be for all of humanity.

The Promise of Continuity and Capacity

Clearly, Avraham knows his family has a special mission to accomplish, but he still isn't quite sure how it is going to work. In Genesis 15, Avraham is old and childless and then God promises him a future he can't yet imagine: He would be the father of a great nation with a land to call their own. Though Avraham believes the promise, he can't understand how his children would come to accept the mission so they would deserve to inherit it. When he asks Hashem: בַּמֶּה אֵדַע כִּי אִירָשֶׁנָּה—*how will I know this will really happen*, God responds with the mysterious vision of the "covenant between the parts":

יָדֹעַ תֵּדַע כִּי־גֵר יִהְיֶה זַרְעֲךָ וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵצְאוּ בִּרְכֻשׁ גָּדוֹל

Know well that your descendants will be strangers in a land not theirs, and they will be oppressed … but afterward they shall go free with great wealth (Gen. 15:13–14).

Don't worry, God explains, I have a workshop specifically designed for the purpose. I'll send them to Egypt, and there your descendants will grow into who they need to be.

And so it comes to pass that in Egypt the children of Avraham gestate into a nation, learning, painfully, what it means to be different. The very word "עִבְרִי" (*Ivri*/Hebrew) means "from the other side." Like Avraham, they have to learn to stand alone and apart, on the other side of Egyptian culture, government, and values. But in the end, as promised, they leave, transformed, and with great wealth.

This is the promise referred to at the beginning of the Seder, when we state: וְהִיא שֶׁעָמְדָה, "This [promise] has stood for our ancestors and us. In every generation, they rise up to destroy us and the Holy One saves us from their hand."

Reading the two together, we see a promise of continuity and capacity: It will be hard, you will become a people, you will face crushing challenges, you will not be destroyed, and you will be strengthened through the process, again and again.

When the Children of Israel finally emerged into the desert as a young nation, they were still very much a family, organized by tribal lineage. Continuity and capacity building were still job one, but now, as they incubated in the desert, changes were afoot.

Parshat Bamidbar: From Family to Formation

Parshat Bamidbar, always read just before Shavuot, can be seen as emblematic of a turning point. The people are counted tribe by tribe, family by family, and then instructed how to camp:

אֵישׁ עַל־דִּגְלוֹ בְּאֹתֹת לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָם יַחֲנוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִנֶּגֶד סָבִיב לְאֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד יַחֲנוּ

Each person by his flag, with banners according to their fathers' house, shall the Israelites encamp around the Tent of Meeting (Num. 2:2).

The *Mishkan*, from which the light of the Torah flows, is now the center, with the families surrounding it. This symbolizes an important shift: Family is no longer the primary organizing force; commitment to the Torah is.

Before Sinai, you could only belong to the Jewish People by being born into it, or by marrying in. But a family, by its nature, is exclusive. It can't truly be joined by outsiders. Once the Torah is given, an additional layer is woven into the fabric of the nation: commitment. Strangers may not be able to join a family, but they can commit to a cause and, through that, join the people who share the mission.

Ruth Creates a Pathway for Us

But the Jewish People didn't fulfill that mission all at once. In fact, over three millennia later, we are both accomplishing and still growing into it. Though we underwent two births, one at the Exodus and one at Sinai, to become a people, we are still in the process of becoming a fully grown nation that can consistently fulfill that original command:"וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה," be a blessing.

And that is one reason we read the book of Ruth on Shavuot. Ruth didn't just join the Jewish People, she helped make us whole. Her era, the days of the Judges, was marked by spiritual confusion, disconnection, and selfishness. The last line of the book of Judges says:

"בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה"

"In those days there was no king in Israel; every person did what was right in their own eyes." (Shoftim 21:25)

Into that fractured society came Ruth, a woman of extraordinary *chesed* (kindness), clarity of purpose, tremendous dedication, and absolute fidelity**,** much like Avraham. The entire book revolves around acts of kindness between Ruth and Naomi, between Boaz and Ruth, and between God and the Jewish People. Ruth embodied *chesed*, and she brought a new infusion of it into the Jewish People at a moment when it was sorely needed. Her life was a reminder of the future the Jewish People were supposed to be striving toward.

That is likely why she merited to become the great-grandmother of King David, whose reign united the nation and whose legacy includes the building of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the great house of peace and blessing, and whose future descendant, *Mashiach*, will unite the world in peace through *bracha* (blessing). When the Jewish People were at a low ebb of mission consciousness, Ruth brought in a trait that the Jewish People needed in order to move forward.

Like Ruth, each of us has something the Jewish People needs, that we, as a nation, cannot be complete without. And that includes every *ger tzedek*, each righteous convert. Because the Jewish People are still becoming, we are still moving toward our mission of being a blessing to the entire world. And every time someone joins our people with passion and purpose, they bring a new piece that we were missing, an essential ingredient for completing the recipe of redemption for all humankind.

Before Sinai, you could only join the Jewish People by birth or marriage. But after Sinai, *anyone* can join by accepting the Torah, the mitzvot, and the Jewish purpose. Ruth not only walked that path—her journey set the standard for the future. Though she started by joining a family, when her husband died, she stayed, not for the family, but for the destiny.

As her famous words to Naomi say:

"עַמֵּךְ עַמִּי וֵאלֹקַיִךְ אֱלֹקָי"

"Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

This wasn't just about loyalty to Naomi. It was about taking on the Jewish mission, and, in doing so, becoming a part of the nation's future.Like an egg that is born and then born again, on Shavuot, we all have the opportunity to exert ourselves afresh and become a part not just of the family, not just a success of continuity (which is amazing by itself!), but a part of the passion, of the purpose and ultimately, of the *bracha* of all the families of the earth.