

Mitzraïm

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The Symbolism in the Word “Mitzrayim” (Egypt) The root word of Mitzrayim, according to Brown, Driver and Briggs, is mem/tzadi/resh, מצר, metzeir, meaning to border, to shut or to limit. Other sources claim the etymology of the word Mitzrayim lies in tzar, either צר or צרר. צר, the verb, means to bind, tie up, be restricted, narrow, scant, or cramped, while צר, a noun, means straits, or distress, and as an adjective means narrow, or tight.

All commentators agree that Mitzrayim, the word, represents hardship, distress, oppression, a narrow place or straits etc. The prefix mem can modify the meaning of a root word and create a noun with the meaning “the place of.” [E.g. Mezuzah (מזוזה) is derived from “the place of” מזז/to move, move about – i.e. the doorpost on which the door moves.] Using this morphology, Mitzrayim, based upon the root צר or צרר, means the place of restriction, a cramped and narrow place etc.

Mi-Mitzrayim (from/out of Mitzrayim)... “In each and every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Mitzrayim” (Pesachim 10:5).

Emerging (מי from/out of) hardship and bondage, from the place of [the prefix, “צרר”], “מ” i.e. narrowness, bondage or restriction, and of “צר”, straits or distress, creates the phrase mi-Mitzrayim (from Mitzrayim) a word that in essence encapsulates and precipitates the Story of Redemption. The word Mitzrayim thus represents an enduring “spiritual” association with Israel’s redemptive experience.

Mitzrayim thus becomes both the symbol and the experience of captivity, of being caught/bound in narrow place(s), and our symbol of deliverance, both of which are captured so beautifully in Psalm 34:7,

זָה עַנִּי קָרָא וַיִּשְׁמַע יְיָ וַיִּצַּל מִכָּל צָרָתוֹ . הוֹשֵׁה יְיָ

Here was a lowly man who called, and the LORD listened, and delivered him from all his troubles.

The lowly/humble one, עַנִּי / oni, calls/cries out ...and the LORD delivers him/her from all straits/distress, צָרָתוֹ / his trouble, from the root צרר.

(The “connection” in the psalm between the Redemption from Mitzrayim and our contemporary “Mitzrayims” is all the more poignant when we add to our reflection the teaching of the Sefat Emet who speaks of the matzah, (also referred to as lechem ‘oni—Poor Man’s Bread) which is such an important part of the Passover Haggadah. The lechem ‘oni, the Sefat Emet teaches, represents our point of “unforgetfulness”: that memory of Divine redemption, that remains, always with us, carried “bound”, tz’rurot / צָרָתוֹ upon our shoulders (Ex 12:34), as we emerge from Mitzrayim.

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