

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. צרר, 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” זוז/*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, “מ”], “צרר” 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,

זֶה עָנִי קָרָא וַחִי שָׁמַע וּמְכַל-צָרוֹתָיו, הוֹשִׁיעוּ

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

The lowly/humble one, עָנִי /'oni, *calls/cries out* ...and the LORD delivers him/her from all *straits/distress*, צָרוֹתָיו /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* /צָרָרֹת upon our shoulders (Ex 12:34), as we emerge from *Mitzrayim*.