

RAMAH: UPSWEPT, UPLIFTED, UPRAISED

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Upswept, uplifted, upraised. One or all of these terms constitute appropriate translations of the biblical word *ramah* which was the image chosen for describing the fate of the pharaoh's troops at the Sea of Reeds passage point Pi-Ha-hiroh/Pi-Hiroti, moments before his drowning along with his charioteers while in pursuit of the fugitive Exodus community.

Sus ve-rokhevo ramah va-yam: "horse and chariot did He lift upward in (or into) the sea" (Ex. 15:1). The verse does not say *be-gal*, on a wave or inundation of the water as in your routine, commonplace flash flood. I and others have watched the film footage of unfortunate victims swept along by tidal waves and "swept up" appears to fit the description of a tsunami-like event. An actual tidal or gravitational wave – the distinctions in terminology and definitions of these phenomena need not detain us here – should not be ruled out as a possible source of the episode of the destruction of the pharaoh and his hosts. Although such a wave would not normally be expected to occur in the Sea of Reeds, a marsh full of vegetation, it is clear that we are dealing here with an extraordinary event.

A similar description is found in Egyptian sources. The El Arish shrine (which was discovered as part of a cistern, rather than uncovered in situ and therefore, without context, not easily dated) also informs us that "He was thrown by the whirlpool high in the air."¹ The biblical account adds that the pharaoh's chariots were, by God, *jarah*, "shot out" or "cast off" into the *yam*, the sea.

Elsewhere, the word *ramah* is invariably translated as "lifted" rather than "hurled," "flung" or "cast" (except when a deliberate allusion to the Exodus drowning episode is invoked). But *hippil*, *hifil*, *hishlikh*, *he'if*, *hittil* and even *zarak*, not *ramah*, would yield "thrown", "tossed", "hurled" or "flung." Because images are uncertain, and some terms altogether anachronistic, then perhaps as a reference of an historical episode they are far too imprecise to be of much use. This is especially true in this case, where we are dealing with a *descriptive* image. However, the portrayal of an actual occurrence in meta-Reeve Robert Brenner is author of *While the Skies Were Falling: The Exodus and the Cosmos*, from which this piece is adapted. One of his previous books is *The Faith & Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*. He is the rabbi of Congregation Bet Chesed in Bethesda, MD.

phoric words, a kind of snapshot in poetic discourse, may not be dismissed as merely an image.

That the word *ramah* should be translated as "upraised" or "elevated" and not "hurled" or "flung" can be verified at once in Exodus 14:8 which concludes that the "children of Israel were departing *be-yad ramah* (with an 'upraised arm')", not an arm "hurled", "thrown", "tossed" or "flung." *Yad ramah* is a metaphor for "the Israelites were departing boldly" (JPS translation). *Ramah* means "uplifted." In terms of the Sea of Reeds, *ramah* implies vertical ascent.

This is precisely the image employed in the Egyptian documents. The report of a very unusual drowning preceded by an even more unusual "uplift" of Pharaoh just before, and followed by his submergence, is recorded in both the biblical and the El Arish accounts. By both accounts the episode did not entail a direct plunge into Neptune's deep; rather strikingly, the king was catapulted and swept up high first – in full sight of survivors on both sides – presumably watching from the higher grounds of the banks of the *yam suf* canal waters. The description of the drowning episode inscribed on the El Arish shrine records that the pharaoh "leaped into the place of the whirlpool and was *lifted up* by a great force." The descriptions in the biblical and Egyptian shrine accounts point to the very same event.

We know that the parallels found in Egyptian and biblical texts were not pre-cooked to resemble each other. The translations of Egyptian documents were not undertaken so that they would be seen as resembling the biblical text. No one had connected the two testimonies before 1950, long after their translations in the 1800s. For years, details of the pharaoh drowning inscribed on the El Arish shrine were not seen for what they really were – a construct of the same Exodus incident referenced in a number of Egyptian records, contrary to the usual minimalist assertions – by any Egyptologist or biblical scholar. One wonders how could there *not* be records of such a calamity. A huge catastrophe struck, leaving many despairing witnesses among literate survivors. The enormity of the disastrous event may explain the discovery thus far of a number of corresponding papyri and at least one inscribed shrine recounting the plagues, the fleeing evil doers and even an account of the drowning of an uplifted pharaoh. It would have been extraordinary had there been no corroborative extra-biblical Egyptian evidence ever found of such

an unusual occurrence and such widespread destruction. Egyptians kept such records.

The hard evidence that both sides of a disaster equation pointedly recorded the fact that a pharaoh's charioteers and the pharaoh among them were physically and unceremoniously lifted up before their down-falling downfall is far too significant to be overlooked or seen as merely coincidental. Especially given the place name Pi-Ha-hirot/Pi-Hiroti in both scriptural and Egyptian documents revealing the whereabouts of this most unusual drowning, one preceded by an upward sweep, a raising and plunging of a Pharaoh and his chariotry while chasing escapees.

Nahum Sarna² describes the event: "A fierce wind parted the sea, sweeping back the waters and piling them up like a wall on either side, thus allowing the Israelites to traverse the seabed onto the opposite shore. The pursuing Egyptians came after them into the sea, but God threw them into a panic. Their chariots became immobilized and the Egyptians tried to retreat in flight, but to no avail. God abruptly caused the sea to return to its normal state, so that the watery walls came crashing down, engulfing the Egyptians and drowning the entire host. The *waves cast up* [my italics, RRB] the corpses onto the shore for all to see." The work of your garden-variety gravity wave and then some, given its provenance!

The waters "spewed forth" the Egyptian dead onto the banks of the sea and the heaps of bodies were in full view of all. The Book of Exodus reports that *Israel beheld Egyptian dead on the shores of the sea* (Ex. 14:30). The Rabbis add that God had the utterly lifeless Egyptians wash up by the force of the waves on to the shore in full sight of the fugitives — intentionally, as a display of power to both sides and as a reassurance to the Children of Israel that their God would always be with them.³

The Song of the Sea in the Book of Exodus relates that "*sus ve-rokhevo ramah va-yam*" ("horse and chariot were *uplifted* in the sea"). It was not, apparently, your quotidian wave. The reportage in both the Bible and Egyptian sources of this extraordinary incident of a pharaoh's drowning, which was preceded by his being first raised or lifted up, cannot be seen as an unlikely coincidence. The two accounts must be of the same event. And they were occurring at the same place, named by both sides. Both accounts took special note of the fact that those within eyeshot of the catastrophe on the two sides

saw and reported the identical occurrence: that the pharaoh, his horse and chariotry were swept upward, and that lift-off was of considerable height since it was observed from a distance. One may assume that the escapees on the bank of the canal had a shockingly good view through being in close proximity to the historical event. We now know that there were accurate reports *from both sides* corroborating the extraordinary tsunami-like incident and where it occurred.

NOTES

1. See Roger Henry, *Synchronized Chronology: Rethinking Middle East Antiquity* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002) pp. 26-27.
2. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986) p. 113.
3. See the commentary of Sforno to Exodus 14:30.



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