

Ex. 14:1 The LORD said to Moses: ² Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. ³ Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, “They are astray in the land [יָבִיטִים הֵם בְּאֶרֶץ]; the wilderness has closed in on them.” ⁴ Then I will stiffen Pharaoh’s heart and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.

And they did so.

Ex. 14:5 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart about the people and said, “What is this we have done, releasing Israel from our service?” ⁶ He ordered his chariot and took his men with him; ⁷ he took six hundred of his picked chariots, and the rest of the chariots of Egypt, with officers in all of them. ⁸ The LORD stiffened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he gave chase to the Israelites. As the Israelites were departing defiantly, ⁹ the Egyptians gave chase to them, and all the chariot horses of Pharaoh, his horsemen, and his warriors overtook them encamped by the sea, near Pi-hahiroth, before Baal-zephon.

RASHI: **Astray.** OJPS “entangled” is preferable. They are captive, stuck. (See the similar words in Job 38:16, Ps. 84:7, and Job 28:11.) They are captive in the wilderness, not knowing where to go or how to get out of it.

RASHBAM: **They are astray.** They are *nevukhim*, that is, there are *nivkhei yam* (“the sources of the sea,” Job 38:16) before them. That is why they have turned back—they have no idea where they are going! For **the wilderness has closed in on them.** It has closed the way on them. For it is a place of “seraph serpents and scorpions” (Deut. 8:15) and wild animals, and they are worried about what may be behind them as well. That is why they have turned back from their encampment “at Etham, at the edge of the wilderness” (v. 2), and now they have come back between Migdol and the sea, to camp by the sea. So they are “all at sea”—the sea is before them. They have nowhere to flee, either backward or forward. To repeat: *nevukhim* means closed in by the *nivkhei yam*, the sea, that is in front of them.

IBN EZRA: **Astray.** The word would indicate not merely that they were lost, but that they had no idea where to go. Grammatically, it is a Niphal passive of בּוֹר—it has no connection with *nivkhei yam* of Job 38:16, which comes from נִבַּךְ.

Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* (JPS Torah Commentary)

3. astray Hebrew *nevukhim* in the present context has the sense of “disoriented” or “hopelessly confused.” The Israelites are hemmed in on all sides—by Egyptian border fortresses, by the wilderness, and by the sea.

William H. C. Propp, *Exodus* (Anchor Bible)

confused. The rare word *nəbūkîm* has occasioned some philological speculation. Norin (1977: 34), citing Arabic *nab(a)k* ‘quicksand,’ interprets *nəbūkîm* as “mired.” But this fits the context poorly and is linguistically dubious (*nab(a)k* is probably related to Akkadian *nagbu*, Hebrew **nēbek* ‘subterranean source’). Rabin (1961: 388), on the other hand, translates “distressed,” invoking Arabic *bāka* ‘press.’ Actually, “hemmed in” would work even better, parallel to “the wilderness has closed against them.” But in Joel 1:18; Esth 3:15, *nābôk* connotes mental perplexity, a meaning also paralleled in Arabic. “Confused” remains the most likely interpretation.

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Is. 22:5 For my Lord GOD of Hosts had a day
Of tumult and din and confusion [מְהוּמָה וּמְבוּזָה וּמְבוּזָה] —
Kir raged in the Valley of Vision,
And Shoa on the hill ...

Mic. 7:4 The best of them is like a prickly shrub;
The [most] upright, worse than a barrier of thorns [מִמְסוּגָה].
On the day you waited for, your doom has come—
Now their confusion [מְבוּזָתָם] shall come to pass.

Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (Lauterbach translation) 1:190 f.

And Pharaoh Will Say of the Children of Israel: They Are Entangled (Nebukim) in the Land. The word *Nebukim* means perplexed, as in the passage: “How do the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed” (Joel 1.18). Another Interpretation: *Nebukim*. The word *Nebukim* means confounded, as in the passage “And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Shushan was confounded” (Esth. 3.15). Another Interpretation: *And Pharaoh Will Say*. But he did not know what he was saying. He said: “Moses has led them astray, he did not know where he was leading them.” For it says: *Nebukim*, etc. and *Nebukim* here only alludes to Moses, for it says: “Get thee up into this mountain of Abarim, unto mount Nebo”³ (Deut. 32.49).

Another Interpretation: *And Pharaoh Will Say*—but without realizing what he was saying—: “The Israelites are bound to cry [לִבְכוּת] in the wilderness.” As it is said: “And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried [וַיִּבְכּוּ]” (Num. 14.1).

³ The first part of the Hebrew word נְבוֹכִים was taken as an allusion to Nebo, the place where Moses was buried.

Gesundheit & Hadad, “The Guide of the Perplexed – What’s in a Name?” REJ 2021

Maimonides wrote his *Guide* in Arabic and assigned it an Arabic title, but ever since it was translated into Hebrew by R. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, it was commonly known by its Hebrew title, *Moreh Nebhukhim*. Maimonides himself adopted this title, for in his letter to R. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, in the section written in Hebrew by Maimonides himself, he refers to the book by this Hebrew name.

...

The verse, “they are perplexed (*nebhukhim*) in the land”, is cited by Maimonides in the *Guide* 3:50. This chapter deals with the usefulness of Torah stories that appear to be superfluous. The specific difficulty addressed by Maimonides with respect to this verse is why the Torah dealt at such great length with the duration of the children of Israel’s stations and journeys, emphasizing each time that everything was done “at the commandment of the Lord”. Maimonides answers that this was meant to rebut the notion of the nations of the world that the children of Israel had lost their way in the wilderness.

...

We argue that when Maimonides assigned the Arabic title to his work, he too thought of this connection to the verse. According to this, *Moreh Nebhukhim* serves not only as a guide to those who are perplexed by the contradictions between the Torah and philosophy, but also as a defense against those religions that make claims about the confusion of the Jewish religion.

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