

Parshat Vayigash

Moving to Egypt

Chavruta

This week, we will talk about Yaakov's descent to Egypt and its implications regarding the advent of the Egyptian exile.

I. Look at 45:28-46:6

Many questions can be asked on this parsha. See what you can come up with!

Here are some of my questions:

1. What was Yaakov afraid of? How did God reassure him?
See Rashi(3) and Chizkuni(3) and if you have time - Ramban.
2. Why does he bring korbanot especially to the God of Yitzchak?
- See Rashi, Sephorno, Radak, Rashbam
3. And Yosef will place his hands on your eyes. What does this mean?
- see Rashbam & Radak, and then Ibn Ezra & Chizkuni.
4. Yaakov's name changes: see Ramban (3)
5. Why at Beer Sheva?

Now read this section in context. What is Yaakov's mood before this nevu'a? What is his mood afterwards?

ii. Another interesting parsha to look into is where Yosef talks to his brothers as to their speech before Pharaoh.

- See 46:31-47:6

Were they trying to be polite? Or were there ulterior motives? - Goshen for instance! Did they give a good impression when they said that they were shepherds?

See NECHAMA LEIBOWITZ's article on this.

We will be asking the question as to how Galut might have benefited Am Yisrael. Why was it necessary? We will also deal with the literary description of Yaakov entering galut trying to decipher the pesukim.

iii. Hashgacha and the story of Yosef

See the story of the Yosef's departure from home and the story of the "ish" - 37:12-17

1. See Rashi on passuk 14 ד"ה מעמק חברון
 - What is Rashi's problem?
 - How does he solve it?
 - What is the message of this Rashi?
2. The man in the field. Who is he? Why is he there?
 - Was he a malach? See Rashi on passuk 15 and the Ramban
 - What is the argument between them?
 - What does the Ramban mean by his phrase : הגורר אמת והחריצות שקר

In this light, see the pesukim 45:5-8. Who truly sent Yosef to Egypt? Was it the brothers?

Shiur

This week's parsha sees Yaakov and his clan making the move to Egypt. This family, presently numbering a mere seventy souls, will reside permanently in Egypt for the next four hundred years(1). And they will leave - with the number of males alone recorded at six hundred thousand men (2) – in the historic Exodus, marking the birth of the Israelites as a fully fledged independent nation.

At the moment of their descent to Egypt, what did the family of Yaakov know as regards the historic significance of their actions? Did they know that they were moving to Egypt for the long-term future? Let us examine the evidence. What were the

plans of the family?

Yoseph tells his brothers:

"Now, hurry back to my father and say to him '... come down to me without delay. You will dwell in the region of Goshen... There will I provide for you - for there are five years of famine to come - that you and your household and all that is yours may suffer no want.'" (45:9-11)

According to this text, it would seem that Yoseph's offer of residence in Egypt has a precise purpose. It is aimed at **assisting his family to survive the famine**. This purpose gives us an accurate idea of the minimum duration of their stay. There are five years of famine and therefore, the family should be staying for five years. But, one would imagine that upon the return of rain to the region and the ensuing agricultural prosperity, Yaakov and his family would return to their natural home - the Land of Canaan.

This is Yoseph's plan. How about Yaakov? What is he thinking?

"They came to their father Yaakov in the land of Canaan. And they told him, 'Yoseph is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the entire land of Egypt.' His heart went numb, for he did not believe them ... when he saw the wagons that Yoseph had sent to transport him, the spirit of their father Yaakov revived. Israel said, 'That's it! My son Yoseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die!' (45:25-28)

According to these verses, why is Yaakov travelling to Egypt and for what duration? It would seem that his agenda is simply **to see Yoseph**, to spend some time with him. If this is the case, he will stay a month or two and then return. This journey represents no historic move. This is a visit to see the kids, the grandchildren. There is no permanence about this journey. It is a family trip! In the words of Rav Ovadia Seforno, "I must go and see him ... but I will not stay there as he proposes." **The trip to Egypt, from Yaakov's perspective, should not last anywhere near a five-year period.**

JOY AND FEAR.

We have analysed the evidence, but one piece of the jigsaw is still missing: How is it that the family of Yaakov do not return to their land? They stay for more than a few months, for more than five years; they do not leave Egypt for hundreds of years! What happened? What was the factor that forced them to stay in Egypt once the famine was over?

We will look for an answer to this question in the lines which describe Yaakov's descent to Egypt.

" Israel said, "That's it! My son Yoseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die!" So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-Sheva, where he offered korbanot to the God of his father Isaac. God called to Israel in a vision of the night: 'Yaakov! Yaakov!' He answered 'I am here.' And He said, 'I am the God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Yoseph will put his hand upon your eyes.' So Yaakov set out from Beer-Sheva. The sons of Israel put their father Yaakov and their children and wives in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to transport him and the wealth that they had amassed in the land of Canaan. Thus Yaakov and all his offspring with him came to Egypt."(45:28-46:6)

This should have been Yaakov's finest moment. Yoseph is

alive! He is now to see the son whose death he has mourned for the past twenty-two years. His life has completely turned around. The unexpected has happened! The undreamable has become reality.

However, this elevated mood lasts only momentarily. The key here is to read closely the manner and language with which God addresses Himself to Yaakov: "Fear not to go down to Egypt". We are a little bewildered, why does God approach Yaakov to allay his fears? What fears? Yaakov is happy, revived, rejuvenated. For what reason would Yaakov feel apprehensive on this exhilarating day?

RASHI tells us that God comes to reassure Yaakov for "He (Yaakov) was troubled by the fact that he was being forced to leave the land (of Israel)". Yaakov fears his exit from the land of Canaan. According to RADAK, this is why he addresses his prayers and korbanot specifically to "the God of his father Isaac".

"...for Isaac had desired to descend to Egypt in the face of famine and God had warned him, 'Do not go down to Egypt, dwell in this land'(26:2). Now Yaakov offered korbanot at Beer-Sheva for that was the border of Canaan, and before he left the land he wanted to know whether God would prevent him from leaving as he had prevented his father. Thus he induced prophecy by bringing korbanot"

According to Rashi and the Radak, the central issue here is the worry of leaving Israel. Rashi might be drawing upon a similar situation - a divine communication to Yaakov - a "vision of the night" that occurred at Beit El many years earlier. Then, Yaakov was also leaving the land of Canaan. He was on the run, a fugitive from his angry brother Esau. He had dreamed of a ladder with angels moving up and down. What was the message of the dream? The angels were angels of protection and in that night-time vision God assured Yaakov's safety and well-being during his sojourn outside the Land. He is told then - just as here - "I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land." (28:15) Now, Yaakov finds himself in a similar situation. Aware that his father never left the Holy Land, he feels the need for reassurance and God's blessing before he crosses the border into foreign territory. The visions mirror each other.

GALUT

But this is not the sole reading of this passage and not the only explanation for Yaakov's mysterious fear. There is a second approach which reads the entire passage with more sombre and foreboding tones, and with the weight of historic significance. The RAMBAN puts it this way:

"When Yaakov came to take the journey to Egypt he "saw" (intuited?) that the exile was going to begin with his children, and he was frightened. He offered korbanot ... so that the divine judgment (midat hadin) should not be cast out harshly against him. He chose Beer-Sheva as this was an established place of prayer for his fathers (3)"

For Ramban, it is the impending period of exile that engenders Yaakov's fear. He is concerned that this short journey will lead into a lengthy period of suffering and homelessness. Other commentators echo this reading of the text, linking it to the vision to Abraham when he was informed of a future era of exile and persecution (4). God tells Abraham how his children will be enslaved and oppressed, "Your seed will be a stranger in a foreign land"(15:13). On the receipt of this news, Abraham is described as possessed by a great fear. There, God reassures Abraham: "Do not fear" He tells him. Here, Yaakov too is frightened. He is filled with dread. "Could this be the

beginning of that exile?" he asks himself. God comes to give him some reassurance using the same phrase "AL TIRA" with which he addressed Avraham.

The Ramban picks up on another detail that reinforces his thesis. He notes how with the start of the "vision of the night", Yaakov's name changes in the Torah text from Israel - his "higher" name - to Yaakov, his more simple name. Why? Ramban (v.2) explains:

"After God had pronounced, "You will no longer be called Yaakov, for Israel shall be your name" (35:10), it was only appropriate that God should refer to him by that name! But here, he called him Yaakov to hint that he will no longer "fight with Gods and men and be victorious." (32:29) For they shall be in the house of slavery until they arise out of it, for the exile begins at this moment with Yaakov."

Exile begins at this very moment. Israel transforms into Yaakov, and a dark era of exile is ushered in. This is a good reason to exhibit fear. There is much to be apprehensive about. The Torah narrative captures this mood of impending trouble in a very powerful way when it uses the same phrase with minor variations to describe Yaakov's journey TO Beer-Sheva and his journey FROM Beer-Sheva. Yaakov's first leg of the journey is described in this way:

"The spirit of their father Yaakov revived ... So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-Sheva" (45:27,46:1)

But after he receives the tidings of exile:

"The sons of Israel put their father Yaakov in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to transport him Thus Yaakov and all his offspring with him came to Egypt." (46:5-6)

The transformation of Yaakov is tangible in the very texture of these verses. Israel has now become Yaakov. The man who strode down to Egypt with such confidence, enlivened by the thought of meeting his long lost son, is now dragged down to Egypt. He does not lead the family as he had planned. He must be lead to Egypt reluctantly, by his sons. Even the descriptions of the wagons themselves evoke a certain exilic tone. Before (v.27) they were described as "the wagons that Yoseph had sent". But now they are "the wagons that Pharaoh had sent". Yaakov and his family are becoming "strangers in a foreign land" (15:13), coming under the protective hand of the unpredictable Pharaoh.

The promise that "Yoseph will put his hand upon your eyes" also transforms itself. Rather than being indicative of Yoseph's care: "You will not need to keep even an eye open over your affairs. Yoseph will worry about all your needs" (Sephorno), the verse would seem to take a darker tone: "Yoseph will put his hand on your eyes: This is what the living do to the dead after their passing. They close the eyes of the dead. God is telling Yaakov that Yoseph will be present at the moment of his death." (Chizkuni)

And hence, so tragically, the euphoria of the journey to Yoseph, to Egypt, is transformed into fear, trepidation and uneasiness as exile slips through the back door surreptitiously, almost unnoticed. Already at this stage, we - the reader - know, along with Yaakov, that this journey is more than a trip to see the grandchildren. It is not even a five-year stay to survive the dangers of famine. This is Galut. The dreaded depths of exile are beginning.

The verses that describe the descent to Egypt are ceremonial in their tone. The names of the family members are listed and

counted as if to inform us that this event is of historic significance:

"These are the names of the children of Israel who entered Egypt... all the souls from the house of Yaakov who entered Egypt - seventy in number." (46:8-27)

A historic moment. The act has been done. The hurdle has been crossed. The exile has commenced.

THE DIVINE PLAN AND THE YOSEPH STORY.

This is just one of the classic instances in the Yoseph story where the "Godly plan" would seem to supersede the plans of humans in a rather remarkable way. This is a recurring theme in the story and worthy of our attention. A fine example of this would be - years earlier - when Yaakov innocently sent an unsuspecting Yoseph to find his brothers. This simple action led Yoseph to his brothers and to slavery. The verse states (37:14):

"He sent him from the valley (depths) of Hevron"

Rashi comments (ibid.):

"But Hevron is on a hill! ... However, it refers to the deep promise of the righteous one (Abraham) who was buried in Hevron. It was a fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, 'Your seed will be strangers in foreign land'."

Rashi's comment seems to indicate that events are transpiring on a dual track. Yaakov thinks he is sending Yoseph on a simple mission to his brothers. But the Torah text belies a deeper significance to this mission. In God's mind, these were the first steps of the exile. Yoseph's journey to his brothers sent Yoseph to Egypt, which brought the family to Egypt, which began the process of enslavement.

Likewise here. Yoseph plans to save the family from starvation. Yaakov plans to visit his long-lost son. God has larger plans. He is putting into gear a historic plan of exile and redemption, and the birth of a nation.

It would appear that there is a human agenda and a Godly agenda. Man works at his plans, but God has a way of turning the actions of man into the jigsaw pieces of His master plan.

THE LOGIC OF EXILE - THE BIRTH OF A NATION.

To gain a greater insight into God's plans for exile, let us examine a phrase - uttered by God to Yaakov in his "vision of the night" - and highlighted by the Sephorno in a sharp and incisive way. In his words to Yaakov, God advises him that he should not fear the descent to Egypt, "For THERE I will make you into a great (large) nation" (46:3) The Sephorno comments:

"Indeed, if his sons would continue living here (Canaan), they would marry into the local tribes and would begin to mix with them becoming intermingled. In Egypt, however, this was not going to happen, 'For the Egyptians will not eat bread with the Hebrews (5)'(43:32) and thus they will become a distinct nation. This is echoed by the Rabbis in their statement(6): 'They became a nation there (Deut 26:5) - this teaches us that they remained apart and distinct there (in Egypt)'"

What the Sephorno is telling us here is a deep insight into the need for an exilic period.

The question that is proposed here is: How does a family become a nation? How does the family of Yaakov become the

nation of Israel? Abraham, in his time, was concerned about this issue. He was adamant. "You may not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites amongst who I dwell." (24:4) It was Abraham who sent his slave hundreds of miles, to Mesopotamia, in order to seek a wife for Isaac. Yaakov too travelled there himself to find a wife. The aim here was to ensure minimum contact between the family of Abraham and the pagan value system of Canaan. Taking a girl from a foreign land would ensure her total absorption in the House of Abraham with its monotheistic beliefs and practises.

But how long can this continue? How long can the family remain separate? As the family grows, they are going to be forced to marry the local Canaanite girls. And life being what it is, the likelihood is high that the sons of Yaakov will slowly become absorbed into the Canaanite way of life, celebrating with the Canaanites at happy times and living their culture. This is not solely an issue of differing values, or religious traditions. There is a demographic concern here; that in time, Yaakov's family will fade into oblivion. The Canaanite tribes are the dominant majority. Yaakov's family are a tiny group. How will the small family retain its distinctiveness as it grows and marries into the dominant group and not merge with the majority culture? How are we to protect the unique monotheistic value system of Abraham and grow as a normal nation at the same time? Already the sons of Yaakov; Judah (38:2) and Simeon (46:10); have married Canaanites(7). Yoseph has married the daughter of an Egyptian priest (41:45). How can the family expand into a nation here in Canaan without losing its unique religious and cultural identity?

It is the Sephorno who discovers an ingenious if painful resolution: Exile, namely a hostile society. Go to a place where they resent you, where they do not want to mix with you or marry you. There you will be forced by outside pressures, by an antagonistic host society to "marry-in", to remain within the family unit. You will grow without outside influence. You will retain your distinct identity because you will be seen as different. For the Egyptians, you ARE different. After a number of generations, the family will have grown, will have matured and metamorphosed into a nation. At this point, the nation can be "transplanted" back to Canaan. The theory is quite remarkable!

HOSTILITY

This somewhat controversial thesis posits that only in an environment of exclusion, may the gestation of the Jewish nation take place. Ironically - according to this hypothesis - a period of time in a hostile Egypt was essential for the successful "coming of age" of the Jewish people as a nation. Egypt, was certainly an environment with a certain hostility towards Yaakov's family.

To support this thesis we can corroborate the theory with some "evidence."

The Torah records how, even prior to the regime of slavery and forced labour, the Egyptians had reasons to resent Yaakov's family.

1. The Sephorno reminds us that the Egyptians would be unprepared to "break bread" with a Hebrew foreigner. For some reason that is left unexplained, this practice was considered as abominable. Maybe there were racial issues involved, maybe a simple resentment towards outsiders, but at any rate, the seeds of animosity were in place.

2. There is the brothers' profession. When Yoseph introduces his brothers to Pharaoh, he is careful to instruct them, in precise words, what to say to the great leader.

"When Pharaoh summons you and asks, 'What is your occupation?' you shall answer, 'Your servants have been breeders of livestock from the start until now, both we and our fathers'- so that you may stay in the region of Goshen. **For all shepherds are abhorrent to Egypt.**"(8)

The precise aim of Yoseph's careful instruction is unclear. Why tell Pharaoh that you are in the shepherding trade if that very profession is abhorrent to the Egyptians? What was Yoseph trying to achieve?

Clearly there is a discussion on this point by the commentators, but for our purposes we will draw upon the approach of the Netziv - Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin - living during the years of emancipation in the Jewish communities of Poland.

"Abhorrent to the Egyptians: And therefore he will not want you to reside in the main population centre. This was Yoseph's plan, to manipulate things so that he will achieve the desired aim; that of **seclusion. Even if it were to mean that Pharaoh would see his father and brothers in a negative light, it was definitely worth it, in order that the family may preserve and protect 'the holiness of Israel'.**"

The children of Israel residing in Egypt are in a fragile position. They are seen as Hebrews, shepherds, outsiders, abomination. Nobody would want to mix with them. And at any rate, they live outside the population centres in the countryside of Goshen. They achieve their own self-made Jewish ghetto in Egypt! All of this, in order that they might retain their cultural distinctiveness. It is clear, however, that this "advantage" is a double-edged sword. In the long run, their advantage will also be their loss as there is no doubt that these feelings of resentment and animosity towards Yaakov's family eventually formed the foundations for the regime of Egypt's slavery of the nation.

CONCLUSION

This then, is Sephorno's understanding as to why in Egypt specifically, we would become a great nation. Why "THERE I will make you into a great (large) nation" (46:3). There and specifically there! Egypt's racial policies and religious caste system would ensure that the family of Israel could become the Israelite nation without interference. The exile was also a means of Jewish survival. Maybe this was behind Yoseph's words when he spoke about his sale into slavery with his brothers many years afterwards:

"... although you intended me harm, God intended it for the good, so as to bring about the present result - the survival of a numerous people." (50:20)

shabbat shalom.

FOOTNOTES

(1) 430 years to be exact. See Ex. 12:40. Note also the Rashi there and Rashi on Bereshit 42:2 which is the source for the figure of 210.

(2) Ex. 12:37

(3) Genesis 21:33, 26:23-25

(4) The brit bein habetarim - see 15:12-21 but especially, "Your seed will be a stranger in a foreign land and they will be enslaved and oppressed - four hundred years ... and afterwards they shall come out with great possession." (15:13-14)

(5) The Hebrew word here is "Ivrim" -sometimes translated simply as foreigners rather than Hebrews.

(6) This statement might be familiar from the Haggada

(7) See Rashi on 37:35 and Ibn Ezra on 46:10 who argue as to the identity of the wives of Yaakov's sons. The Ibn Ezra claims that they married women from the surrounding tribes, whereas Rashi suggests that they married within the family

(8) See the Bechor Shor who translates this phrase in the completely opposite direction

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