

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
(office@etzion.org.il)

**Yaakov's Dual Descent to Egypt**  
**By Rav Zeev Weitman**

Yaakov receives two invitations to go down to Egypt. One comes from Yosef, who invites him to come and live in Goshen, where Yosef will be able to sustain him and his household during the remaining years of the famine:

"Make haste and go up to my father, and say to him: 'So says your son, Yosef: God has made me lord over all of Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. And you shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me – you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks and your herds, and all that you have. And I shall support you there, for there remain five years of famine – lest you become impoverished; you and your household and all that you have.'"

The second invitation is issued by Pharaoh, encouraging Yaakov and all of his household to partake of all the goodness of the land of Egypt and to eat of the fat of the land:

And Pharaoh said to Yosef: "Say to your brothers, 'Do this: Load your beasts and go [until you] come to the land of Cana'an. And take your father and your households and come to me, and I shall give you the good of the land of Egypt and you shall eat the fat of the land. Now you are commanded thus: Take yourselves wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father and come. And give no thought to your belongings, for all the goodness of the land of Egypt is yours.'"

From Yosef's invitation it seems that what he has in mind is a short-term, temporary stay in Egypt – just for the remaining five years of the famine. Pharaoh's invitation, on the other hand, seems unlimited in time. The reason for his invitation is a matter of family unification – and since Pharaoh has no intention of seeing Yosef leave Egypt, the invitation he extends to Yaakov and his household is for permanent residence.

This double invitation answers a question posed by Avraham concerning God's revelation to Yaakov in Be'er Sheva:

Why did God need to tell Yaakov, "Do not fear going down to Egypt," since he did not fear it? Prior to this, he had already said, "I shall go and see him before I die," and he had already set out on his journey, as it is written: "And Israel journeyed with all that he had."

The answer is that Yaakov had already decided to accept Yosef's invitation for a short-term stay in Egypt, but he was troubled by Pharaoh's invitation and the possibility that his

family's sojourning would turn into permanent residence in Egypt. It was only after God revealed Himself to Yaakov and told him "Do not fear going down to Egypt, for I shall make you a great nation there" that Yaakov was ready to move on and take up Pharaoh's invitation, too.

In order to illustrate the dual nature of the descent to Egypt, the Torah makes use of both of Yaakov's names.

"Yaakov" is the name denoting exile, where guile and cunning are needed in order to survive and to get by under foreign rulers who harbor no special love for *Am Yisrael*. The Torah uses this name when speaking of Yaakov acceding to Pharaoh's invitation, with its hint of a long exile.

"Yisrael" is the name that was given to Yaakov upon his return to *Eretz Yisrael*. It denotes uprightness, power, and the ability to engage in direct confrontation and battle, with no need for guile. "Yisrael," firmly planted in *Eretz Yisrael*, decides to go and visit Yosef, but with a view to going, seeing, and returning. He intends to "stay over," but not to "stay." It is this name that the Torah uses in describing Yaakov's response to Yosef's invitation.

When **Yisrael** hears his sons deliver Yosef's message and sees the wagons which **Yosef** has sent to carry him down, he decides to accept the invitation. The Torah emphasizes that it is **Yisrael** who accepts **Yosef's** invitation, and it is he who journeys to Be'er Sheva on his way down to Egypt:

And Yisrael said: "It is enough that my son, Yosef, is alive; I shall go and see him before I die." And Yisrael journeyed with all that he had, and he came to Be'er Sheva, and he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Yitzchak.

But when God reveals Himself to Yaakov in Be'er Sheva, He calls him "Yaakov:"

And God spoke to Yisrael in visions of the night, and He said, "Yaakov, Yaakov," and he said, "Here I am."

Why is this so? God speaks to **Yisrael**, who is now journeying on his way to Egypt, at **Yosef's** invitation, and He addresses him by his exilic name, **Yaakov**. God reassures **Yaakov**, who is invited by **Pharaoh**, and confirms that he should accept this invitation to come to Egypt for a long period: "Do not fear going down to Egypt." From God's words, it is clear that His assurance covers many long years in exile, for He promises, "I shall make you a great nation **there**."

At this point, Yisrael's name changes to Yaakov. It was Yisrael who journeyed to Be'er Sheva, but it is Yaakov who now continues the journey to Egypt:

And **Yisrael**, with all that he had, journeyed, and he came to Be'er Sheva... And **Yaakov** arose from Be'er Sheva, and the children of Yisrael carried **Yaakov**, their

father, and their children and their wives in the **wagons which Pharaoh had sent** to carry him.

Up to Be'er Sheva it had been Yisrael who had gone down in the wagons which Yosef had sent – "And he saw the **wagons which Yosef had sent** to carry him" – and it was to Yosef's invitation that he acceded. But from Be'er Sheva onwards, **Yaakov** was carried by his sons on the **wagons sent by Pharaoh**. Thus, he acceded also to Pharaoh's invitation to go and settle in Egypt.

Stylistically, the Torah starts at this critical moment to speak in terms of transition and uprooting to another place, to settle there:

And they took their cattle and their property which they had acquired in the land of Canaan and they came to Egypt – Yaakov and all of his descendants with him: his sons and his sons' sons with him, his daughters and his sons' daughters, and all of his descendants, did he bring with him to Egypt.

This is highly reminiscent of the language that the Torah uses in its description of Avraham's move from Charan to Canaan:

And Avram took Sarai his wife, and Lot, his brother's son, and all their property which they had acquired, and the souls that they had made in Charan, and they went out to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan.

Here too, we find the verb "*I-k-ch*" (to take), in the context of taking property which had been acquired, and the root "*b-v-a*" (to come). We find the same language repeated in Esav's move from Canaan to Mount Se'ir:

And Esav took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all the members of his household, and his cattle and all of his livestock and all his substance which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and he went to [another] country, away from his brother Yaakov.

The expressions "and they came (*va-yavo'u*) to Egypt," "he brought (*hevi*) with him to Egypt," and, after the list of the seventy members of the household, "all the souls of Yaakov's household that came (*ha-ba'ah*) to Egypt," match Pharaoh's invitation. This invitation was not expressed like Yosef's invitation – "come down (*redah*) to me" – but rather, "Take your father and your households and come (*u-vo'u*) to me."

Correspondingly, later on, when Yaakov meets with Yosef, he is called Yisrael, but when he meets with Pharaoh, he is called Yaakov:

And Yosef readied his chariot and he went up to meet Yisrael, his father, to Goshen, and he presented himself to him, and he fell upon his neck and he wept longer upon his neck. And Yisrael said to Yosef, "Now let me die, having seen your face, for you are still alive."

In contrast, when Yosef presents his father to Pharaoh, the Torah uses the name Yaakov five times consecutively, and

Pharaoh's name appears five times correspondingly as the one who invites him:

Yosef brought **Yaakov** his father and set him before **Pharaoh**, and **Yaakov** blessed **Pharaoh**. And **Pharaoh** said to **Yaakov**, "How old are you?" And **Yaakov** said to **Pharaoh**, "The days of the years of my sojournings are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and they have not attained the days of the years of the life of my fathers, in the days of their sojournings." And **Yaakov** blessed **Pharaoh**, and he went out from before **Pharaoh**.

The dual nature of Yaakov's descent to Egypt is also emphasized by the fact that Yosef directs his family to settle in **Goshen**, whereas after the encounter with Pharaoh, Yosef awards them – in Pharaoh's name – an estate in the land of **Ra'amses**. This possession symbolizes a permanent settlement:

And Yosef settled his father and his brothers and he gave them a possession (*achuzah*) in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Ra'amses, as Pharaoh had commanded.

Some scholars have dwelled on the exact terminology of the text, concluding that Yaakov's family "dwelled" in Goshen but "had a possession" in Ra'amses. According to what we have said above, even if they are two names for the same place, by using different names for the same place, the Torah is emphasizing the dual nature of the stay in Egypt: a temporary stay and a more permanent settling.

This also explains why, following the end of the years of famine, we hear nothing of Yaakov or his children seeking to return to the land of Canaan. Aside from the temporary descent to Egypt in order to see Yosef and to live out the years of famine safely at his side, Yaakov also accedes to the invitation of Pharaoh, encouraging him to come and settle in Egypt and take up permanent residence there. This will last until God remembers *Bnei Yisrael* and enables them to return to Canaan and take eternal possession of it.

We say as part of the *Haggada* on Pesach: "My forefather was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and he sojourned there" – this teaches that he did not go down with a view to settling, but rather just to sojourn there.

We now understand that Yaakov originally meant to respond to Yosef's invitation to stay in Egypt during the famine, but God encouraged him to accept Pharaoh's invitation to come and settle there so that God's promise to Avraham in the Covenant Between the Parts could be realized:

"Know well that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them; and they will afflict them for four hundred years. And also that nation which they will serve shall I judge. And afterwards they shall come out with great substance... and the fourth generation will return here, for the sin of the Emorites is not yet complete.

## Strangers and Sojourners in Egypt

Yaakov's family became permanent residents in Egypt, as emphasized in the final verse of our *parasha*:

And Yisrael dwelled in the land of Egypt in the land of Goshen, and they possessed it (*va-ye'achazu bah*) and they took possession of it, and they grew and multiplied exceedingly.

Ironically, in contrast, the Egyptians became sojourners in their own country, after selling their land for food during the years of famine, as described in the preceding verses:

And Yosef bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for the Egyptians sold every man his field, since the famine prevailed over them; thus, the land became Pharaoh's. And he moved the people to the cities, from one end of the borders of Egypt to the other.

The only land that was not sold to Pharaoh was the land belonging to the priests:

Only the land of the priests he did not buy, for the priests had a portion assigned to them by Pharaoh, and they ate their portion which Pharaoh gave them; therefore, they did not sell their land.

It seems likely that the only other exception was the family of Yaakov, who retained the land in their possession and did not sell it. They had likewise received their portion from Pharaoh and were not forced to sell it because Yosef supported them from the king's table, as he did the priests:

And Yosef supported his father and his brothers and all of his father's household with bread, according to [the number of] their children.

This suggests that the laws of possession in *Eretz Yisrael* are exactly the opposite of the laws of possession in Egypt as established for future generations in the wake of the years of famine and Yosef's campaign to keep the population fed. In Egypt, no one owned any property, and the people in fact lived on the king's land – all except the priests, the only landowners in Egypt. Amongst *Am Yisrael*, in contrast, everyone owns some possession of land in *Eretz Yisrael* except for the *kohanim*, who receive no inheritance.

The *kohanim* – both in Egypt and amongst *Am Yisrael* – receive their food from the king. In Egypt, they are fed from the royal treasury; amongst *Am Yisrael*, they receive their food from God's table. Who earmarks for them the gifts which *Am Yisrael* must contribute from the produce of their land. The difference is that in Egypt, since the food of the *kohanim* is provided by the king, they need not sell their land, and they are therefore the only ones who remain in possession of their land. Amongst *Am Yisrael*, the *kohanim* are the only ones who do not receive any inheritance of land in the first place, since they are assured their portion directly by God and therefore have no need for land to supply produce.

Alongside this difference, there is also an interesting similarity:

Yosef said to the people: "Behold, I have bought you this day, and your land, for Pharaoh; here is grain for you, that you may sow the land. And it shall be, at the time of harvesting, that you shall give a fifth part to Pharaoh, and four fifths shall be yours, for seed of the field and for your food, and for your households and for food for your children." And they said, "You have saved our lives. Let us find favor in the eyes of our lord, and we shall be servants to Pharaoh." And Yosef made it a law over the land of Egypt to this day, that a fifth is for Pharaoh; except for the land of the priests alone, which did not become Pharaoh's.

Egyptian law since the time of Yosef, and as arising from the experience of the years of famine, was that farmers were obligated to contribute a fifth of their produce to the royal treasury, since the entire land in fact belonged to the king and they worked it as his tenants. *Am Yisrael* also contribute approximately a fifth of their produce as gifts and tithes at God's command. The *teruma gedola*, *ma'aser rishon*, and *ma'aser sheni* add up to more or less twenty percent.

The idea behind the giving is remarkably similar as well. In Egypt, the fifth donated to the royal treasury expressed the fact that the land belonged to the king; a fifth of whatever produce was grown was given to him as payment for the right to make use of the land. Similarly, *Am Yisrael* live on land that is God's inheritance, and as an expression of this message and as a way to internalize it, we are commanded to separate a fifth of our produce by way of gifts and tithes to God and to the people and the institutions designated by Him for this purpose.

Just as this law caused the Egyptians to feel that they were living upon the king's land, so *Am Yisrael* must know and remember that we live upon the land and inheritance that belong to God: "For the land is Mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with Me." This feeling is strengthened and reinforced by the obligation to separate tithes and gifts expressing the fact that we are not the owners of the land. We merely have the right to use it, and this entitles us to 80% of its produce, while the remaining fifth belongs to the King of kings and His designated servants. Like the Egyptians who dwell in Pharaoh's kingdom upon land that does not belong to them, so *Am Yisrael* dwells in *Eretz Yisrael*, upon God's land.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>