

PARASHAT VAYIGASH

The Priests of Egypt and the Kohanim of Israel

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In this week's parasha we read of the descent of Yaakov's family to Egypt, and of his meeting with Yosef. The human drama which we have followed during the past few weeks reaches its climax in the reunion between the aged father and his beloved son. Yaakov, who found comfort in Yosef after the death of his beloved Rachel, until he, too, was taken from him, goes so far as to utter, "Now I can die, having seen your face."

But together with the great excitement we feel at the description of this personal encounter, the descent to Egypt embodies a very significant historical turning point for the Israelite nation. This descent will realize God's promise in the berit bein ha-betarim: "Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they shall enslave them and afflict them for four hundred years." (15:13) This is no light-hearted sojourn that will end in the near future - like Avraham's journey to Egypt because of the famine, or like Yitzchak's wandering to Gerar for similar reasons. This time, Yaakov's family is going to remain in Egypt for many years, and only "the fourth generation will return here."

Are Yaakov and his sons aware of this? It is quite reasonable to assume that they are. It seems most likely that the content of the covenant between God and Avraham was passed down to Yitzchak and Yaakov. But beyond the tradition which is passed down in Avraham's family, Yaakov knows of the impending exile from what God has told him himself, on his way to Egypt: "Do not fear to descend to Egypt, FOR I SHALL MAKE YOU A GREAT NATION THERE."

If so, then perhaps we should understand Yosef's actions, specifically the brothers' settling in Goshen, a preparation for this long exile, as well as an attempt to soften it and make it as tolerable as possible. Yosef's assumption is that if Yaakov's family settles in an area which is isolated from the Egyptian capital ("in order that you may settle in the land of Goshen, for any shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians"), they will be less noticeable and may succeed in living their lives insulated from Egyptian culture.

But Yosef does not stop here. The Torah, immediately after the settlement of Yaakov in Goshen, appends a lengthy description of the changes in Egyptian society during the years of famine, and even lists the new laws enacted in Egypt by Yosef as a result:

"And Yosef purchased all the land of Egypt for Par'o, for the Egyptians had each sold his field because the famine was difficult for them to bear, and so the land became Par'o's. And he transferred the nation to the cities, from one end of Egypt to the other ... and Yosef said to the nation, Behold, I have bought you today and your land for Par'o. Here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And it shall be in the harvest that you shall give a fifth part to Par'o and the other four parts shall be yours for sowing the field anew and for food and for happiness in your homes and for food for your children ... And Yosef made it a law until this day for the land of Egypt to be a fifth part unto Par'o; only the land of the priests alone was not Par'o's" (47:20-26).

Yosef purchases the lands of Egypt and transfers the population between cities inside Egypt. No Egyptian owns property in his country, not even a fixed place of residence. Why does Yosef introduce this law and - even more surprising - why does the Torah describe the economic measures enacted in Egypt? It would certainly seem that this pertains more to Egyptian history than to the Torah!

The verse clarifies the matter: "And Yosef made it a law until this day for the land of Egypt to be a fifth part unto Par'o; only the land of the priests was not Par'o's. AND ISRAEL DWELT IN THE LAND OF EGYPT, IN THE LAND OF GOSHEN, AND THEY HELD ONTO IT, AND THEY WERE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLIED EXCEEDINGLY" (47:26-27).

The Torah itself draws the obvious comparison: the Egyptians have no land ("I have bought you today and your land"), while Israel holds onto their portion and settles in the land of Egypt: "And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt in the land of Goshen, and they held onto it." The former wander from place to place while the latter, newcomers to the land, settle with some degree of permanence.

Yosef creates differences in status within Egyptian society: there is the general population which has no land or fixed abode, and the Hebrew family

which owns land. Even if it has been decreed that Israel will dwell in a strange land for a lengthy period of time, Yosef insures that the Egyptian masses will not be able to oppress them and may even need them because of their economic power.

However, "many are the thoughts in a man's heart, but God's counsel is what prevails." As is only too familiar to us from Jewish history, it is specifically this preferential economic status that arouses the jealousy of the local population. When Yosef and his generation die out, a new king will arise over Egypt and not only will the differences in status between the Egyptian and Hebrew nation not prevent him from enslaving the latter, but he will in fact succeed in gaining the support of his entire nation in the battle against the Hebrews. The economic issue may even serve as the most convincing argument regarding the danger represented by the Hebrews. (Similar examples are unfortunately found throughout Jewish history - it is sufficient to examine the process which took place in Germany and which led to the most terrible tragedy of our century.)

The irony of what ultimately took place as opposed to Yosef's plan is sharpened by the form of enslavement chosen: Par'o decrees that the Hebrews must build him "treasure cities:" "And they built treasure cities ("miskenot") for Par'o; Pit'om and Ra'amses" (Shemot 1:11). What are treasure cities? The answer is to be found in the description of Chizkiyahu's kingdom in Divrei Ha-yamim II: "And Chizkiyahu had very great riches and honor: he made himself store houses for silver and for gold and for precious stones and for spices and for shields and for all types of beautiful vessels, and treasuries (miskenot) for the harvest of corn and wine and oil, and stables for all types of beasts, and folds for sheep." (32:27-8)

Three different types of storage buildings are mentioned: "storehouses" - for silver, gold etc., "stables" - for the animals, and "miskenot" - for the harvested grain, etc. We learn from this that "miskenot" refers to a place for storing produce. When we read of the Israelite slavery in Egypt and how they are forced to build "arei miskenot" - in other words, cities for the storage of produce - we are immediately reminded of the last time that produce was collected and stored in Egypt - when Yosef bought the entire Egyptian nation as slaves and took their land from them. Now the Hebrews - who were still landowners during the previous gathering of the produce - are enslaved to the Egyptians and are forced to build them cities for storing their produce!

However, not only the Jews retained their land in Yosef's Egypt - the Egyptian priests also retained their land; they were also not sold to Par'o and forced to move from place to place.

Concerning the Egyptian priests we read, "Only the land of the priests he did not purchase, for there was a portion for the priests from Par'o, and they would eat their portion which Par'o gave them, and therefore they did not sell their land ... And Yosef made it a law until this day over the land of Egypt that a fifth part belong to Par'o; only the land of the priests did not belong to Par'o" (47:22, 26).

This Egyptian law is striking, for it is the exact opposite of Jewish law concerning kohanim: according to the Torah, the entire nation has a portion in the land EXCEPT for the tribe of the priesthood, which has no portion! What is the meaning of this difference between the priests of Egypt, who have a permanent inheritance, in contrast to the rest of the nation which is uprooted from its land, and the Jewish kohanim, who are "wanderers" among the nation, while the other tribes do inherit land?

I believe that this phenomenon can be examined from two different perspectives: that of the nation, and that of the kohanim themselves.

1. From the point of view of the nation: In contrast to the priests of pagan cultures (such as Egypt) whose function was limited to religious ritual, kohanim had an educational function. At the same time as serving God in the mishkan and in the beit ha-mikdash they were responsible for teaching the nation, for ensuring justice and righteousness and for spreading Torah in the hearts of Israel. This is clearly apparent from a number of pesukim. "And the kohanim, the sons of Levi, shall come near, for the Lord your God has chosen them to serve Him and to bless in God's name, and by their word shall EVERY CONFLICT and every affliction be decided" (Devarim 21:5). Similarly, Moshe blesses the tribe of Levi: "You shall teach Yaakov your judgments and Israel your Torah" (Devarim 33:10); Yirmiyahu's opponents claim, "For Torah shall not perish from the kohen nor counsel from the wise nor the word from the prophet" (Yirmiyahu 18:18); Yechezkel prophesizes: "And they shall seek (in vain) vision from the prophet, and Torah shall be lost from the Kohen, and counsel from the elders" (Yechezkel 7:26), etc.

Since a significant portion of the kohen's job involved educating the nation, it was necessary to ensure that he would constantly be on the move amongst the various tribes, reaching even the most far-flung outlying areas, in

order to teach the nation Torah and its values. Therefore inheritance and a permanent abode were denied him.

Obviously, the pedagogic function of the kohanim is inseparably bound up with their ritual function. The basic assumption is that those who stand before God and serve Him in His house are suitable educators for the nation, and will be able to convey the ethical-religious values reflected in the Torah. There is not, nor can there be, any division between the moral world connected with a person's social activity and his religious-ritual world, and therefore the same person responsible for religious ritual is also responsible for the religious-educational aspect. In contrast, the Egyptian priests are connected exclusively to the world of pagan ritual. They have no educational message or status among the nation, they are not connected to the performance of justice in the kingdom, and there is no reason why they cannot remain in one fixed place, in their own private inheritance.

2. From the point of view of the kohanim: The tension and contrast between dwelling in a fixed place and perpetual wandering accompanies us throughout Sefer Bereishit. The most outstanding example of this is Lot's separation from Avraham (13:5-18). After Avraham and Lot return from Egypt they decide to separate. The first choice of land is given to Lot. Standing on the Beit El ridge, he looks around and decides where he wants to live. "And Lot lifted his eyes and saw the entire plain of the Jordan, for it was all good pasture-land before God destroyed Sedom and Amora, like the garden of God, like the land of Egypt as you come to Tzo'ar. And Lot chose himself the entire plain of the Jordan, and Lot traveled eastwards, and they separated from each other." Lot chooses to live in Sedom for "it was all good pasture-land;" in other words, there was a permanent water source there. The Torah compares two other places to Sedom: "The garden of God" (i.e., the garden of Eden) and "the land of Egypt." The most outstanding common feature of these three sites is the permanent and fixed local water source (the rivers in the garden of Eden, and the Nile in Egypt) - a solution to several economic problems and something which facilitates permanent dwelling in one fixed place.

Lot chooses to live in a place which reminds him of the Egyptian culture which he has just left; a place he will not have to leave when he seeks pasture for his flocks, thanks to the bountiful water supply. In complete contrast, as soon as Lot departs, God promises the land to Avraham but tells him: "Arise, walk about in the land, along its length and breadth, for to you I shall give it." It is specifically this wandering and walking about that will give Avraham his right to the land. And indeed, we are told immediately thereafter, "And Avraham removed his tent..." - in other words, he began wandering. (It is interesting to note that later on when the angels come to visit Avraham he is in his TENT, while when they visit Lot, the latter lives in a HOUSE.)

It is not only Avraham the individual who is required to wander and not to rest on his economic laurels, but the entire nation as well. Surprisingly enough, the Torah lists as one of the reasons for the choice of Eretz Yisrael specifically the lack of permanent water-resources: "For the land which you are coming to in order to inherit it - it is not like the land of Egypt from whence you departed, where you sowed your seeds and watered with your foot, like a vegetable garden. The land which you are passing over to inherit is a land of mountains and valleys; you shall drink water at the mercy of the rains. It is a land which God inquires after; God's eyes are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year." (Devarim 11:10-12) It is not a bountiful land which is chosen as the dwelling place for Israel, but rather a place which is dependent on the rains and on the raingiver - God.

I believe that a similar phenomenon, on a different level, characterizes the relative position of the kohanim. The entire nation enters the land, settles in it, sows seeds and builds houses. But the one special tribe which is dedicated to God's service must continue to wander; that tribe must continue to experience the sense of basic dependence on the One who watches over us, who "opens His hand and satisfies all living things in want."

If the first explanation we suggested for the difference between the Egyptian priests and the Jewish kohanim revolves around the educational role of the kohanim, the second explanation points in the direction of the educating of the kohanim themselves - it is they who have to remember perpetually that their lives hang in the balance. It is they who dare not forget for a moment the Creator and guardian of the Universe.

Further study:

1. Yosef, in effect, enslaved the Egyptian populace, greatly increasing the power of Par'o. What was his motivation? Is this step "good for the Jews?"
2. How would the different status of the Egyptian populace and the Jews affect their relationship with Par'o? Compare this to Par'o's speech to his nation in the beginning of Shemot.