

Let My

*A compilation of Talmudic
and Midrashic sources*

 FELDHEIM

Nation Go

*The Story of the Exodus of the Jewish Nation
from Egyptian Bondage*

Y O S E F D E U T S C H

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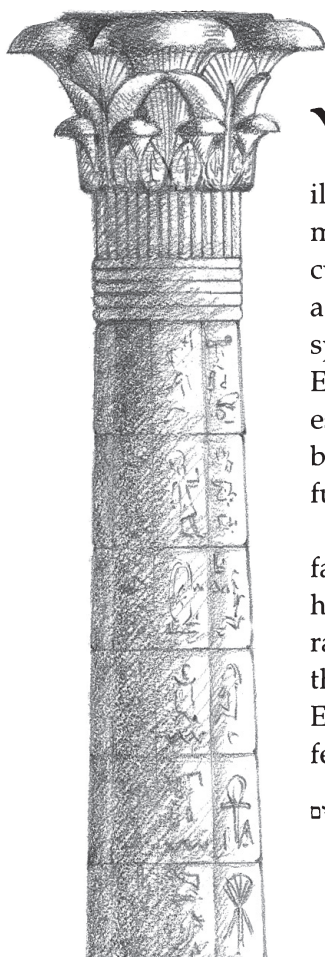
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The Exile Begins

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Yaakov was already entering his twilight years when he arrived in Egypt with his family, but he was suddenly faced with one of the most critical tasks of his life. He knew that difficult trials and tests lay ahead for his offspring and that they would have to remain strong in spirit to withstand the corrupting influences of Egyptian society. The manner in which Yaakov established their presence in Egypt from the beginning would have a great effect on their future.

From the first, Yaakov insisted that he and his family be treated as foreign guests.¹ He wanted his children to feel as strangers in a strange land rather than members of Egyptian society, because this would keep them from assimilating with the Egyptians.² He wanted his descendants always to feel out of place in Egypt, always to feel a desire

(1) הגדת מהר"ל וע"ד שכתב רמב"ן בראשית יב-טו כשירד אברהם אבינו למצרים

(2) הגדת הנצי"ב

to leave the land of Egypt, because that would make them worthy of being redeemed at the appointed time.³ Had he allowed them to assimilate with the Egyptians, the Jewish people would never have been worthy of leaving Egypt.⁴

For the same reasons, Yaakov wanted a place of residence for his family far from the major population centers of Egypt. He chose the Land of Goshen, an outlying district well to the north of the large Egyptian cities.⁵ Many years earlier, Avraham and Sarah had come down to Egypt during a time of famine, and the reigning Pharaoh had taken a liking to Sarah. He wanted to marry her and offered her a dowry which included the Land of Goshen.⁶ Now, when Yaakov selected Goshen as his preferred place of residence, the Pharaoh who reigned in his time was willing to accommodate him.

Having selected a fairly isolated place of residence, Yaakov now turned his attention to fortifying his family against the corruption and immorality of the Egyptians.⁷ Most of all, he wanted to prevent his family from assimilating into Egyptian society. Therefore, he sent his son Yehudah to prepare the way for the rest of the family by establishing a *yeshivah* in Goshen.⁸ For the remainder of his life, Yaakov taught his children Torah in the *yeshivah* of Goshen, as his father Yitzchak had taught it to him, and he conditioned them to do good deeds and always obey the will of Hashem.⁹

For the first years of their stay in Goshen, while Yosef and his brothers were still alive, life was peaceful and prosperous for Yaakov and his family.¹⁰ All their needs were provided by Yosef, and they lacked for nothing. Yosef inscribed each of them in the royal ledger as a privileged recipient of a regular stipend of bread.¹¹ Moreover, the Egyptians admired and respected them because of their noble character and because of their familial relationship to Yosef, the illustrious viceroy of Egypt. They were the family of Yosef.¹² But for all their physical comfort and prosperity, the children of Yaakov found life in Egypt singularly unpleasant and distressing. Brought up in holiness and purity, they could not come to terms with living in a place as *tamei* (spiritually contaminated) as Egypt.¹³

(3 מלכים שמות א-א 4) הגדת מהר"ל, מלכים שמות א-י 5) בראשית מז-ד, הגדת הנצי"ב, וע' תרגום יונתן יב-לא ורלב"ג בראשית טז-ג 6) פרד"א כו 7) ילקו"ש וארא קפ"ב 8) רש"י בראשית מז-כח 9) תנחומא שמות א, שמ"ר יא-ד 10) תוספתא סוטה יג 11) לקח טוב כי תבא כו-ה 12) ספר הישר, מלכים ריש שמות 13) הגדה ע"פ שמחת הרגל

The Passing of the Old Generation

Seventeen years after arriving in Egypt, Yaakov blessed his sons and then passed away. Each of his sons had established his own tribe during the intervening years, and Yaakov's blessings highlighted the particular strengths and missions of each tribe and set the tone for their special roles in the future of the Jewish people. The leadership now passed into the hands of his sons, who are known to us as the Shevatim or tribal patriarchs. For the next fifty-eight years, the Shevatim ruled the growing Jewish nation with great skill and wisdom. Then, one by one, they too began to pass away. The first of the Shevatim to die was Yosef, and twenty-two years later, Levi was the last to pass away.¹⁴

As soon as Yosef passed away, the first cracks in the spiritual defenses of the Jewish people began to appear. Their great leaders had grown old and would soon all be gone, and some elements of the younger generations began to seek acceptance and approval from their Egyptian neighbors. "Let us be like the Egyptians," they told each other. "Why should we try to be different?" And so, they began to change. Many abandoned the *mitzvah* of *bris milah*,¹⁵ the covenant that set them apart from all other peoples. They dabbled in the popular Egyptian practice of sorcery and magic.¹⁶ They intermingled with the Egyptians and frequented their theaters and circuses.¹⁷ They did anything that would make them appear intelligent, knowledgeable and "with it" in the eyes of the Egyptians.¹⁸

Hashem saw all this and decided to have a new king ascend to the throne of Egypt,¹⁹ a king who "had no knowledge of Yosef."²⁰ By the time Levi died,²¹ the Egyptians began to change their behavior towards the Jews.²² The great and respected patriarchs were gone, and the alien nation they had left behind filled the Egyptians with unease. Little by little, the Egyptians confiscated their property—their houses, their fields, all their real estate.²³ They also suspended the bread stipends Yosef had allotted to his family members.²⁴ Relations between the fledgling Jewish nation and the new Pharaoh of Egypt steadily deteriorated²⁵—until the Jews were eventually reduced to slave labor.²⁶

(14) ספר הישר 15) שמו"ר א-ח (וע' שפ"א שמות תרל"ה) (16) הגדת ריטב"א (17) ילקו"ש שמות קס"ב (18) הגדה ע"פ מנחת אהרן וע' ספורנו דברים ד-ז (19) ילקו"ש שם (20) שמות א-ח (21) סדר העולם ג (22) אה"ח שמות א-ו וע' גבורות ד' ט (23) ספר הישר (24) לקח טוב כי תבא כו-ה (25) תוספתא סוטה יג (26) אה"ח שמות א-ו ויעוין שם במלבים דכתב דשנאתם ה' ניכר גם בחיי יוסף וכשנפטר יעקב לא יכלו לצאת ממצרים עם הארון בלי רשות

The New King

Who was this new king who “had no knowledge of Yosef”? Some suggest that he was literally a new king who had taken over the reins of government. Others suggest that he was a new king only in the figurative sense, but in reality, he was the same king who now decided to follow new policies and enact new laws.²⁷

According to some commentators, this new Pharaoh replaced the five-hundred-year-old nineteenth Egyptian dynasty.²⁸ He was a descendant of Cham,²⁹ a commoner with no royal background.³⁰ Some suggest that his real Egyptian name was Mallul,³¹ while others suggest that his name was Amunifus.³² Other commentators are of the opinion that he was of royal lineage, descended from the Egyptian dynasty of Ramses, and that he himself may have been known as Ramses II.³³

There is also a view among the commentators that this particular king was the son born to Pharaoh when Yosef was still imprisoned. As part of the national celebration that took place on the occasion of his birth, the wine steward was released from prison, and this ultimately led to Yosef’s release.³⁴

This new king, whoever he may have been, took note of the hostility of the Egyptian people towards the young Jewish nation growing in their midst, and he decided to act upon it.

The Jewish People, a Nation Apart

The hostility of the Egyptians towards the Jews in their midst was understandable. Although some elements among the Jews had begun to assimilate into Egyptian society, the great majority of the Jews kept their distance.

After many years of living in Egypt, the Jews were still easily distinguished from the Egyptians.³⁵ They lived near each other, kept their distinctive Hebrew names and spoke to each other only Lashon Hakodesh (Biblical Hebrew, “the holy language”).³⁶ They made a pact among themselves to preserve their language and to be kind to each other.³⁷ They always greeted each other warmly and

פרעה וגם הוכרחו לעזוב טפס ומקניהם בגשן למשכון (27 ערובין נג. 28) תורה שלמה - מלואים ה' (29) שם (30) אבי"ע שמות א-ח ובמנחה בלולה שם, גבורות ד' יד (31) ספר הישר (32) ספר ירחמיאל (33) תורה שלמה שם (34) רבנו בחיי שמות א-ח (35) הגדת האברבנל (36) הגדת שבלי הלקט (37) תנ"כ"א כ"ג

courteously.³⁸ Their table manners were more refined than those of the Egyptians.³⁹ They did not follow the Egyptian styles in the way they cut their hair⁴⁰ or in the clothes they wore; the men also wore *tzitzis*.⁴¹ Their modesty was impeccable, and no two families shared living quarters.⁴² They never slandered one another, and they kept the laws of family purity.⁴³

The Jews were proud of their heritage, their customs and their deeply ingrained morality, and they carried themselves with a dignity and noble assurance that was recognizable even from afar. "There goes a Jew," an Egyptian could state with assurance when one of them passed by.⁴⁴ This self-assured separation and unwillingness to assimilate aroused the resentment of the Egyptians.

The hostility of the Egyptians towards the Jews only brought them closer together. And as the exile grew more and more oppressive, this strong feeling of solidarity helped ease the pain and the bitterness, because all the Jews knew they could rely on each other in times of need and distress.⁴⁵

Because of this steadfast adherence to the preservation of Jewish identity, the observance of Jewish laws and customs and the devotion of the Jewish people to each other, they were eventually redeemed from their exile in Egypt.⁴⁶

Phenomenal Fruitfulness

Although Yosef and the rest of the holy Shevatim passed away, Hashem's love for their descendants did not diminish.⁴⁷ He had promised Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov that he would make their descendants into a great nation, and now, as the numbers of their beloved grandchildren grew and multiplied, Hashem showered them with His blessings.⁴⁸ The Jewish people suddenly began to reproduce in phenomenal numbers.⁴⁹

According to some views, all Jewish women gave birth to twins.⁵⁰ According to others, they gave birth to six children at a time, three males and three females.⁵¹ Some commentators even suggest

(38 שפתי כהן שמות 39) לקח טוב ו-1 (40) שם, פסיקתא ווטרתא כי תבא עה"כ ויהי שם לגוי וגוי וע"ע בהגדת רשב"ץ (41) הגדת ריטב"א, ויש לצרף לזה משי"כ בפרשת דרכים דרוש א בשו"ת חשק שלמה דמשום ספק ישראל ספק בן נח הוצרכו האבות להתעטף בציצית בשבת ואי לכן נח חשיבי הוצאה היא ואינם בגדר עכ"ם ששבת ואי לא מה טוב. וא"ש שמצינו שאכן עשו תחבולה זו (42) שפתי כהן שמות 43) ויקרא רבה לכה- ואע"פ שנפלו הרבה, בזה הזהירו ועי' בהגדה ע"פ יעב"ץ (44) הגדת יציאת מצרים (45) הגדת ריטב"א (46) ויקרא רבה שם (47) מדרש הגדול א-48) שמ"ר א-ח ומת"כ שם (49) מדרש הגדול שם (50) תנחומא פקדי ט (51) גור אריה שמות א-1,

that it was not unheard of for a woman to have sixty children at a time, as do scorpions.⁵²

The sudden phenomenal fruitfulness of Jewish women manifested itself not only in multiple births, but in other ways as well. Every Jewish woman was blessed with children; not a single one remained barren.⁵³ Girls who were married at a very young age also began having children.⁵⁴ No Jewish woman miscarried.⁵⁵ The babies were all sturdy and robust, and they all grew to be tall and strong.⁵⁶

As time went on, the Jewish population in Egypt exploded. Women gave birth every nine months, so that Jewish families had six ten-month-old babies and six one-month-old babies in the house all at once,⁵⁷ according to the views that women bore six children at a time. In fact, the growth was so rapid that 600,000 children were born on one particular night.⁵⁸

The land of Goshen was no longer large enough to contain the burgeoning Jewish population, and numerous Jews began to settle in the central areas of Egypt. Their numbers began to rival those of the Egyptians,⁵⁹ and eventually, there were virtually twice as many Jews in Egypt as there were Egyptians.^{60*}

The Jewish people became like thorns in the eyes of the Egyptians.⁶¹ Wherever they went, the Egyptians saw multitudes of Jews before their eyes, and the sight disgusted them.⁶² These alien people, who stubbornly insisted on maintaining their separate identity and not assimilating into Egyptian society, were taking over the entire country through the phenomenal growth in their population. Something had to be done.⁶³

* Yaakov would have had more children had he not been injured in the thigh during his struggle with Eisav's ministering angel. (*Sefer Tzror Hamor*)

גליון הש"ס ברכות סג: 52) שמו"ר א-ח ורש"ש שם. בגבורות ד' י"ב איתא דכל השיטות אזלי במספר שש משום שענו את ישראל בששת ימי המעשה בלי הפסק (ע' לקמן פ"ה ציון 147) וכתבי כאשר יענו כן ירבה לכן נתרבו תמיד במספר זה (53) הגדת נצ"י"ב (54) נצ"י"ב שם (55) ילקוט מעין גנים א-ז (56) רבנו בחיי שמות א-ו (57) אברבנל שמות א-ז, הגדת האלשיך, שם מבאר תבת וישרצו שהרבוי הי' עצום כל כך שנראו כשרצים קטנים הרצים אנה אנה בבית (58) מדרש הגדול א-ז, ספר הישר, וע' בבראשית רבה עט דלפני פטירתו של יעקב כבר נולדו ששים רבוא (59) העמק דבר שמות א-ז, גם אז נשארו רובם בגושן, ע' רמב"ן שמות יב-לא וטור שם ח-ח (60) מדרש משלי יט (61) סוטה יא. (62) דברים רבה כת"י מובא בתורה שלמה כט (63) שמו"ר א-ח, בהגדת חכמי ירושלים מובא שהעירוב עם מצרים הי' נגד רצון ד' ולכן כשיצאו מגושן הוצרך כביכול לשלוח מלך קשה שעל ידי גזירותיו יובדלו מהם