

WAS THE EGYPTIAN EXPERIENCE NECESSARY?

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The people of Israel were born in exile as oppressed slaves of pharaohs of Egypt. This the Torah records without evasion, distortion or embarrassment, as an undeniable historical fact. What is of significance is that this was not an accidental, anomalous occurrence, but the result of a predestined decree that was to prepare them for a unique role in history and refine their character.

Jews are, of course, not unfamiliar with the adversity of exile. They have the experience of the Babylonian Exile after the destruction of the First Temple, and the exile following the Roman conquest of Judea and the loss of the Second Temple, which has lasted to our time. In both instances, the causes were the failure and betrayal of their heritage. The defeat by the Babylonians was facilitated by assimilatory tendencies and practices that robbed the Judeans of a sense of pride in their Land and of the conviction that heritage was worth a courageous confrontation of the enemy. The present exile had its cause in internal strife and disunity of purpose, which contributed to total defeat and tragedy. In both disasters, the result was predictable and conclusive.

But why the Egyptian exile? No reason for this enslavement and misfortune is recorded. As a matter of fact, long before an Israelite people even existed, God announced to Abraham, *'You shall surely know that your seed shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and shall serve them, and they shall afflict them for four hundred years'* (Gen. 15:13). What is confounding about this forecast is that it suggests that exile and servitude are necessary preconditions for the eventual realization of the promise of possessing the Land. Why would Abraham's descendents have to undergo the disgrace and humiliation of being slaves in a foreign land before they could enjoy their own, where they had already lived and prospered? What was the exile to produce that could not be had without it?

The answer can only be that the Egyptian exile was of a different kind and dimension. It was neither the result of national folly nor a punishment or atonement for wrongs committed. Though the immediate cause was the *sinat* Joel Litke has an M.A. from the University of Toronto and is an ordained rabbi who served congregations in Michigan and California. He recently moved to Israel. He has contributed to various Jewish magazines and journals.

hinam, jealousy of the brothers, the sons of Jacob, the eventual occurrence was already foretold by God to Abraham. This announcement could only mean that the Egyptian experience was meant to be a crucible by which the people would become receptive to and worthy of God's Covenant. There in the pangs of oppression and denial of freedom their destiny would be redirected, and they would be transformed into willing custodians of Abraham's mission. After all, they were not legally obligated to accept the terms of Abraham's call, nor had they been requested to. The experience in Egypt would cast them in a new mold, and they would emerge a different people.

But how was the treatment in exile and slavery to refashion the people and render them fit and worthy for the task that God had planned? Paradoxically, the exile and enslavement in Egypt would become a necessary and effective means for God to acquire a nation which would become His chosen and special people. Their singular fate would become testimony to His Providence, and would advance and realize the promise of Abraham's election to be the source of blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12). This was God's desired purpose, and so He stated to Moses:

'So you shall say to the House of Jacob You have seen what I did to the Egyptians Now if you will listen to My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My own treasure [segulah] from among all nations . . . and you shall be unto Me a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation' (Ex.19).

But by what right and justification could God single out a people and encumber them with a corpus of numerous and exacting laws, and impose on them a mission to carry the torch for God? How would they become beholden to Him to submit to such a heavy responsibility? How would they be obligated to assume such a burden to become models and exemplars that others should emulate? When God had chosen Noah, it was because he was a righteous and faultless man (Gen. 6). Though the Torah is silent about the election of Abraham, there is no doubt that he merited it, as his later life and obedience proved. But that a whole nation with untested qualities should become God's favorites – how was it to become worthy, and why were they willing to accept such an assignment?

The solution was to be the exile in Egypt. There, as slaves to pharaohs, subject to their will and whims, oppressed and despised, they would cry out

and moan for relief and freedom, and God would redeem them from this yoke of Egypt. In doing so, He would transfer them from the bondage of pharaohs to the jurisdiction of God. For such was the law of the times, that slaves could be transferred from master to master.

By redeeming them from foreign tyranny, God became Israel's Redeemer and Benefactor, and they were now beholden to Him for His care and attention. They owed Him their gratitude and loyalty. He could call them now His servants [*avadai heym*] (Lev. 25:42), for He had rightfully acquired them by legal and established norms.

Thus, when God proclaimed the Ten Commandments, He spoke of Himself as the Liberator of Israel *who took you out of the land of Egypt*, which was the logical and legitimate ground to elicit their consent and compliance. God is saying, "My claim to you is just and fair; I am entitled to request your loyalty and obedience," and therefore *you shall have no other gods*, therefore, *you shall keep My Sabbath*, therefore, *do not murder*, therefore, *keep all My commandments*. God does here not act arbitrarily as a vanquisher who coerces and imposes His dictates, but as a Redeemer who seeks the good of His charges. This explains why God did not present Himself as the Creator of heaven and earth as the basis for His call, for that would be an appeal to all nations as much as to Israel; and this is why the opening pronouncement of the Decalogue is to be viewed not so much as a commandment but as a prologue and warrant. Being addressed by their Redeemer, the people consented to *do and hear*, and so sealed their commitment to the Covenant of Sinai.

Israel acquired not only a Redeemer and Ruler in Egypt, but the experience there had a direct and positive influence on the refinement of their character. The oppression to which they were constantly forced to submit sensitized their feelings and souls, and turned them into a generous and kind-hearted people. They felt the sufferings of others as they had known them, and this elevated the degree of their social responsibilities. It may be said that these formed the distinct Jewish personality, which the rabbis define as "merciful, benevolent and modest." These qualities were implanted and nurtured in the agony, deprivation and ordeal of Egypt. For this reason, the Torah motivates many of the commandments with an appeal to the people's experience in Egypt: *you were strangers in Egypt*, and *you shall know the soul of the stranger*.

With their redemption, Israelites became God's servants, rather than servants of a pharaoh. Now that He had acquired them as His servants, they became His subjects to do His Will and Law. At the same time, however, they were formed into a nation. As such, they were entitled to the possession of land, as land is an integral part of nationhood. There they would carry out and fulfill the Divine mission for which they were elected as Abraham's descendants. The Land was thus an essential element in the Covenant between God and Israel: *'I will bring them to the land concerning which I raised my Hand to give it them . . . as a heritage'* (Ex. 6:8). It was to be the chosen arena where Israel was to be witness and agent for God's rule on earth.

When God charged Moses to bring the message of the redemption, it included also the promise that the Land He had vouchsafed to them be secured as a national heritage. The promise of the Land as an integral part of the Covenant lends its possession a unique character, unlike the connection that other nations have with their respective lands, consisting of natural and juridical rights. Israel's claim to its Land contains an additional aspect: it is a covenantal right. As such, the bond and right to the Land cannot be revoked. Even through generations and millennia when the people did not dwell in the Land, their right to it remains in force and is valid and undeniable. No less than the Covenant between God and Israel itself is of everlasting validity and duration, and so, therefore, are its clauses and particulars. Surprisingly, history has demonstrated this relationship. In spite of many attempts by different nationalities to live and thrive on the Land, none succeeded in settling on it for long or managed to generate the fertility and productivity of the soil. The Land simply refused to yield its bounty, and eventually it turned into an arid wasteland. That is, until our days when Jews returned to their ancient soil and revived its fecundity, restored its richness and turned it into a veritable garden.

The answer to the question "Was the Egyptian experience necessary?" is obvious. Not only was it necessary, but imperative and indispensable. It revealed to Israel God as their Redeemer and Lawgiver and established the ground and cause for the Covenant between them. It transformed the nature and mission of the people, and it vouchsafed them the Land as a covenanted heritage.