

The Path To Follow

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The Ultimate Goal of the Exile in Egypt

It is written, “Jacob settled in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan” (Bereshith 37:1).

The Sages have explained, “When the tzaddikim wish to live in peace in this world, Satan comes and accuses them: ‘They are not content with what is in store for them in the hereafter, that they wish to dwell in peace even in this world!’ The proof lies in the fact that the Patriarch Jacob wished to live at ease in this world, whereupon he was attacked by Joseph’s Satan” (Bereshith Rabba 84:3).

It is clear that Jacob wanted peace and tranquility in order to better serve G-d. That said, what harm was there in asking for such peace and tranquility in order to study Torah? After all, have the Sages not said: “The discussion of a legal matter requires clarity, like a clear day” (Megillah 28b), so why accuse him for this?

In my humble opinion, Jacob was an upright man throughout his life, dwelling in the tents of Torah. For 14 years, he withdrew to the Beit HaMidrash of Shem and Ever, and he studied Torah wherever destiny brought him. After all those years of intensive learning – which allude to exile and instability – Jacob believed that the time had finally come in which he could study Torah regularly and in peace, since we have no peace of mind when we are constantly on the move. This is the peace that Jacob sought, for he had studied Torah on the move until that time, but now he wanted to establish a fixed place of Torah where he could study in tranquility and peace of mind.

The verse, “Jacob journeyed to Succoth and built himself a house” (Bereshith 33:17) is translated by Jonathan ben Uzziel as: “Jacob journeyed to Succoth and sojourned there for the twelve months of the year, and he built a Beit HaMidrash.” He felt that the end of the exile had arrived, that the time had come for rest and regular learning in a Beit HaMidrash. He therefore emerged from the “tent” of Torah to study in a “house” (beit) of Torah.

Jacob thought that from then on, there would be no reason for his descendants to be exiled in Egypt, since the time of stability and deliverance had arrived. He believed that the reasons for the exile would be diminished by the regular study of Torah, since our ancestors had to descend into Egypt in order to rectify and elevate the 288 sparks of holiness that had been scattered by Adam. Jacob believed that because his beauty was a reflection of Adam’s beauty, and because he represented his rectification (Bava Batra 58a), he was therefore capable of elevating these sparks through his study of Torah. Thus his descendants would not be forced into exile in Egypt, nor run the risk of breaching the 49 gates of impurity.

However G-d said to Jacob, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and the time for deliverance and stability has not yet come.” Hence G-d disrupted Jacob through the misfortune of Joseph, in order to make him understand that they were still in exile and needed to descend into Egypt and be enslaved, as He told Abraham during the covenant between the

parts. Only then could they ascend to Eretz Israel, remain there permanently, and build the Temple.

Although it was possible for Jacob to have gathered the 288 sparks through his service of Hashem and Torah study in the land of Canaan, the exile in Egypt had another goal: To prepare the Children of Israel for becoming G-d’s people and to inherit the land of Canaan. As long as they had not descended into Egypt and experienced that crucible, they could not permanently settle in Canaan. This was because of the danger of being overly attracted to tranquilly and security, which could lead them into allying themselves with the neighboring peoples and imitate the depraved lifestyle of the Canaanites. They would then be drawn to them and eventually become assimilated. Yet when they descended into Egypt, they were automatically separated from the Egyptians because they were not considered important there. They settled in Goshen, where they preserved their language, their way of dress, and their names, allowing them to remain pure. In Egypt, the Jewish people became accustomed to being separated from the other nations, as it is written: “It is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations” (Bamidbar 23:9). Thus even when they would return to Eretz Israel, their native land, they would conserve their lineage, distinguishing themselves from the other nations and not mixing among them. They would then be called G-d’s people. Thus everything that happened to our ancestors in Egypt – the signs, wonders, and the ten plagues, as well as what happened when they left, including the splitting of the sea and the war of Amalek – contributed to fashioning the Jewish people into G-d’s people. In fact it separated them, those for whom everything happens in a supernatural way, from all the other nations. All the nations of the world would then see that G-d is their King, and that He chose them as His people. The difference between Israel and the other nations would then become clear in the eyes of everyone.

From all that we have said, it follows that Jacob feared the difficulties of exile and enslavement, as well as the danger of impurity that threatened his descendants in Egypt, the most depraved of all lands. To protect his offspring, he thought that he could rectify the 288 sparks of holiness through the regular study of Torah in Canaan. This meant that the decree of the covenant between the parts would be achieved in a different way, by the construction of a fixed house of Torah and permanent study. Yet Hashem, Who sees to the end of all the generations, and Who knows what is best for man (since everything that the Merciful One does is for the good), did not agree with Jacob’s assessment. He therefore caused the misfortune of Joseph’s disappearance in order to fulfill the verse “your descendants shall be strangers...” (Bereshith 15:13).

In fact when Joseph sent his father the message that he was still alive and ruled over all the land of Egypt – thereby telling him that even in Egypt, a place of impurity, he controlled himself, maintained his purity, and remained righteous (Tanchuma, Nasso 28) – and when Jacob saw the wagons (agalot) that Joseph had sent him, thereby informing him that Joseph was still learning the passage on the heifer (egla) whose neck is

broken (Bereshith Rabba 94:3), Jacob realized that one can serve G-d and study Torah even in Egypt. At that point all of Jacob's worries left him, and he descended into Egypt with his entire family in order to fulfill Hashem's will and decree. Hence they went into exile; they went to become strangers in a strange land, and to be separated from the other peoples.

This is why Jacob sent Judah before him into Egypt, so he could prepare for him a house of study where teachings for the Jewish people would emerge (Bereshith Rabba 95:3). At that point, Jacob understood what his Creator wanted. He had to continue learning Torah even while in exile, for the time of deliverance and stability had not yet come. He therefore

sent Judah to prepare a place of study precisely in exile, for the study of Torah is the only guarantee that his descendants would continue to exist among the nations. If they devoted themselves to the study of Torah, they would not be drawn to seeking peace and idleness. This fully explains why the anger manifested against Jacob occurred precisely through the sale of Joseph, which led him into Egypt. It is because Jacob had to be troubled because he wanted to dwell peacefully in the land of Canaan by annulling the decree of exile. It was at that point that the misfortunes surrounding Joseph came upon him, this being the sole reason for the Jewish people's descent into Egypt, contrary to Jacob's intentions.

At the Source

The Shepherd of Israel

It is written, "Joseph, being 17 years old, was a shepherd with his brothers" (Bereshith 37:2).

Was he indeed a shepherd? Was he not at the Beit HaMidrash, as it is written: "For he was a child of his old age"?

Since he was destined to later provide for the sustenance of his brothers, he is described as a "shepherd" in advance, while still being with his brothers.

– Shir HaShirim Zutah

The Coat of Many Colors

It is written, "He made him a coat of many colors" (Bereshith 37:3).

What does the term *passim* ("colors") signify?

It signifies that it reached as far as his pass [palm].

Another explanation: It was among the finest and lightest [of coats], and could be held in the pass [palm] of his hand.

Another explanation: They hephissu [cast lots] over it, to determine who should carry it to their father, with the lot falling on Judah.

Another explanation: It alludes to his misfortunes, the *peh* standing for Potiphar, *samech* for socharim [traders], *yud* for Yishme'elim [Ishmaelites], and *mem* for Midyanim [Midianites].

– Bereshith Rabba 84:8

Measure for Measure

It is written, "Reuven heard and delivered him out of their hand" (Bereshith 37:21).

What reward did he receive for this?

Hashem, Who probes the heart, said to him: "Since you started to return a boy to his father, I will return a rebel among your sons towards the good."

Who does this refer to? To Hosea son of Beeri, who writes in his prophesy: "Return, O Israel..." (Hosea 14:2).

– Midrash Hagadol

Blessing and Life

It is written, "Judah said to his brother, 'What gain will there be if we kill our brother?'" (Bereshith 37:26).

There they were, throwing him into the well and saying: "Let us eat and drink, and then we'll draw him up. We'll bring him up and kill him."

They ate and drank, after which they readied themselves to say the blessing after meals. Judah said to them, "We are about to commit murder, and now we are saying a blessing? This isn't a blessing – it's an insult to Hashem!"

What is the meaning of, "What *betza* [gain] will there be if we kill our brother?" Judah said to them, "It is written: 'He who *botzea* [cheats] and blesses, he insults Hashem.' Let us go and sell him to the Ishmaelites."

– Pesikta Rabbati

Mashiach First

It is written, "And it was, as he drew back his hand, that behold: His brother emerged. She said, 'With what strength have you asserted yourself.' And he called his name Peretz" (Bereshith 38:29).

Zerach wanted to emerge first, but Hashem said: "Since Mashiach will descend from Peretz, can Zerach be the firstborn? Let Zerach return to the innards of his mother, and let Peretz emerge first, for Mashiach will come from him!"

The name Peretz alludes to Mashiach, as it is written: "The one who breaks forth [poretz] will go before them" (Micah 2:13).

– Aggadat Bereshith

He Shined Again

It is written, "And he called his name Peretz. ... And he called his name Zerach" (Bereshith 38:29-30).

Rabbi Rechumai asked why he was called Peretz. He answers that it was because the moon would *niphretzet* (diminish) at certain times (and increase at others). As for Zerach, he was named in relation to the sun, which constantly shines, as it is written: "The sun rises" (Kohélet 1:5). Nevertheless, how could Peretz be the firstborn, since the sun is larger than the moon? This is not an issue, for it written: "He drew back his hand," and then "Afterwards his brother, on whose hand was the crimson thread, emerged." He was given the name Zerach, for he was to have been the firstborn.

Since Hashem knew that David and Solomon (who would compose Shir HaShirim) would descend from Peretz, He arranged things such that Zerach drew back his hand.

– Sefer HaBahir

Guard Your Tongue!

Being Content with Having a Doubt

All that we have said – that a person must be careful when hearing Lashon Hara about someone – pertains only to the fact of protecting himself from the person in question. It certainly does not mean that he should act in any way that may cause him even the slightest degree harm or shame, even if the Lashon Hara was said against him by an honest witness who testified about him to the Beit Din. This can only result in him being required to take an oath. Furthermore, it is forbidden by the Torah to hate him in his heart as a result.

The Miracle of the Chanukiah of Vilna

A large and remarkably beautiful chanukiah (Chanukah menorah), made entirely of copper, adorned the great synagogue of Vilna. It rested on a stone pedestal, and it was placed to the right of the holy ark. In fact it was shaped like the Menorah in the Temple, complete with its buds and flowers.

When the First World War broke out, this chanukiah was brought to Moscow by order of the Russian government, along with other religious articles of historical value that were stolen from synagogues and confiscated by the state's treasury.

Hence this marvelous chanukiah was lost to the great synagogue of Vilna. However the story connected to it was not lost. It happened some 300 years ago, and the story is as follows:

The gaon Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Zatzal was the Rav of Vilna at the time. It was a difficult period for the Jews of the city. Over the course of several decades, Vilna had come under the jurisdiction of one government after another. It once fell under the jurisdiction of the Swedish government, and later Peter the Great reigned over the city. It then returned to the Swedes, and finally came under the jurisdiction of Frederick August I (Wettin dynasty), the King of Poland.

All these conquerors imposed a tribute on the Jews of Vilna. The result was that in the end, the coffers of the Jewish community were completely emptied, meaning that taxes could no longer be levied on them. Anti-Semites then schemed to take the great synagogue as collateral from the Jews until they could pay the taxes imposed on them.

The doors of the great synagogue were therefore closed, and the sounds of prayer and study ceased to be heard from within this miniature Temple in the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." It is easy to imagine how deeply grieved the Jews of Vilna were, for they no longer even had a place to express their sorrow.

One day, some astounding news spread through the city. It went from person to person and aroused the imagination of the public. According to this rumor, every night around midnight a sound of tears and supplication arose from within the great synagogue. Various strange assumptions circulated about this mysterious sound.

Only a small number of people knew its real source: About ten elders of Vilna would usually fast on Mondays and Thursdays due to the situation in the city. Every night around midnight, they would enter a long, secret underground passage that led to the cellar of the great synagogue, and there they prayed tikkun chatzot.

Rumors about this sound, which wailed in the night, reached the ears of the Duke of Vilna. One night he went to the great synagogue, accompanied by a servant. First they checked that all the doors and windows of the synagogue were tightly sealed. Then they waited until midnight, when it turned out that the rumor was true: A sound suffocated by tears suddenly pierced the silence of the night.

Taken aback, the Duke ordered a large ladder to be brought to

him. He then climbed to the high window of a wall located on the synagogue's eastern side and looked inside. His breathing stopped when he beheld the sight before his eyes: Mysterious silhouettes, draped in white and crowned by grey hair, were gathered at the foot of the holy ark, around a burning lamp, and they wept in silence.

White like a sheet, the Duke descended from the ladder, mounted his horse, and galloped back home. Yet even there, the incredible sight that he beheld in the tightly sealed synagogue of Vilna did not leave him. He had difficulty sleeping that night, and at a certain point he woke up in sweats. He had a nightmare in which one of the silhouettes in white, which he had seen in synagogue, appeared to him and ordered that he stop persecuting the Jews.

The following morning, he summoned the leaders of the Jewish community and told them that he was prepared to reopen the synagogue. However he would only reopen it if they left him one of their valuable religious objects as collateral until they paid their taxes.

Following the advice of the gaon Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Zatzal, they decided to leave the ancient copper chanukiah with the Duke. Happy with this decision, the Duke moved the chanukiah to one of the halls of statues in his castle. However when they tried to light it, it produced a thick, black smoke that covered the statues. Changing the oil did nothing to prevent this, for it continued to blacken the hall and its statues. Having no other choice, and filled with great dread, the Duke transferred the chanukiah from the hall of statues to a small, modest room.

The Ransom

The days of Chanukah arrived. When the Jews of Vilna sought to light the festival lights, they were reminded that their chanukiah had been taken by the Duke as collateral. Another chanukiah was installed in the synagogue, and people recited the blessing over it. However its lamps did not burn well or stay lit for the required time, as established by the Sages. The lamps were changed, but they also went out before the required time. The Rav said, "From Heaven, we are being told that we must ransom the great chanukiah. It is forbidden to leave a religious object with the goyim."

As early as the next day, the Ner Tamid society of the Vilna community began to collect money to ransom the chanukiah. Six full years elapsed from that day, until finally the Jews of the city, who were very poor, managed to collect the heavy tax imposed by the Duke.

On the first night of Chanukah in the year 5493, the Jews of Vilna were joyous. With a large procession, and accompanied by a group of klezmer musicians, the chanukiah was brought from the home of the Duke and put back in its place of honor to the right of the holy ark.

That year, everyone gathered in the great synagogue to see the chanukiah being lit, and to hear the blessing being recited on the Chanukah lights of the ancient copper chanukiah.

A Jew went to see the Maggid of Mezritch, and with tears in his eyes he said: “Rabbi, I don’t have children. I’ve come here so you can promise me that I’ll have a son!”

“Pray to Hashem, and He’ll send you deliverance,” the tzaddik said to this Jew who was beseeching him.

“I’ve already prayed,” said the man, “but it’s useless.” Warm tears streamed from his eyes, and he continued to beseech him: “Rabbi, promise me that I’ll have a son!”

“In that case,” replied the Maggid, “better to ask me to teach you how to pray so you can do it yourself, without having to travel such a great distance to come and see me!”

Following the Maggid’s response, the man left with a broken heart, weeping even more.

Those close to the tzaddik approached him and said, “Rabbi, why didn’t you promise this man that you would pray for him, as you do to every Jew who addresses you?”

The Maggid of Mezritch replied, “When I am approached by a Jew who trusts deeply in Hashem, and he asks me to pray for him because he knows that my prayer is more likely to be answered, I usually promise him that I will accept his request.

“On the other hand, the Jew who was here, who traveled a great distance to see me, was placing all his trust in me, not in the Creator Almighty. I answered him in this way so he would stop placing his trust in me, but turn to Hashem in his distress. I am certain that he will soon be heard.”

The Impression Left by Prayer

By chance, Rabbi Zusha of Anipoli once found himself in the town of Zalkava after having not visited it for several years. He made his way to the local synagogue and remained motionless before the western wall, unable to leave the area.

Moved by this experience, the tzaddik said to those standing nearby: “I feel that the saintly Baal Shem Tov prayed here! A powerful supernal light remains. In my opinion, only the holy prayer of the Baal Shem Tov is capable of radiating like this!”

Surprised, the leaders of the community told him that they had never heard of such a thing.

“Go and find out,” the tzaddik advised them.

After asking numerous questions to the oldest men in town, it was determined that indeed, the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polna, the author of Toldot Yaakov Yosef, had prayed there. [Translator’s Note: Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polna was a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.]

The prayer of this tzaddik was so intense and powerful that it had left a strong impression, even numerous years afterwards.

You’re the Minister of Finance

During one year in which there was very little rain, Rabbi Ezra Hamavi Zatzal, who served as the Rosh Av Beit Din in the Syrian community of Aleppo (and whose yahrtzeit takes place this week), ordered the community to gather in synagogue to read tehillim in order to awaken Divine mercy during this great drought.

Among the Jews who participated in this reading of tehillim, Rabbi Ezra noticed a wealthy merchant from Aleppo.

He turned to him and said, “This is not your place. You should pursue your business, earn money, and help feed the poor of the city.”

He didn’t limit himself to this remark, but adorned it with a nice parable:

“Imagine a king who has fallen ill, and the doctors prescribe beautiful Arabic melodies to be played for him. Will the king think of summoning the Minister of Finance, even if he is an expert in music? Clearly not! Instead, he will summon a professional musician and let the Minister of Finance continue working in his ministry.

“Your situation is the same: You’re the treasurer for the poor, and your job is to find sources of revenue. On the other hand, the mission of the poor who are here is to weep and implore G-d, to recite tehillim and pray to the Creator, and He will answer their cries of distress.”

In the Light of the Parsha

One Who Puts an Effort into Torah Avoids Suffering

It is written, “Jacob settled in the land of his father’s sojournings” (Bereshith 37:1). Here our Sages have said, “When the tzaddikim wish to live in peace in this world, Satan comes and accuses them: ‘They are not content with what is in store for them in the hereafter, that they wish to dwell in peace even in this world!’ The proof lies in the fact that the Patriarch Jacob wished to live at ease in this world, whereupon he was attacked by Joseph’s Satan” (Bereshith Rabba 84:3).

Why did Hashem allow the Satan to send misfortunes upon Jacob, since they would prevent him from serving Him in peace? In fact we learn that the Divine Presence left our Patriarch during the 22 years in which he was separated from Joseph (Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer 37).

Before answering this question, let us examine the assertion of our Sages: “Words of Torah are firmly held by one who kills himself for it” (Berachot 63b). This means that we can only acquire Torah if we put a great effort into learning it. In fact the Midrash interprets the verse, “If you follow My decrees and observe My commandments” (Vayikra 26:3) as follows: “From here we learn that G-d expects the Children of Israel to put an effort into Torah. If they refuse to make this effort, the 98 curses mentioned in Torat Kohanim [i.e., Sefer Vayikra] will strike them” (Torat Kohanim, Bechukotai 11).

Thus our father Jacob wanted to settle down in peace, to rest a little from the toil with which he studied Torah. That is when Hashem said, “As long as this tzaddik put an effort into the Torah, I did not test him. Yet now that he wants to diminish his efforts, I will send him sufferings and he will learn through adversity.”

Toil is part of human nature, as it is written: “Man is born to toil” (Job 5:7). If he toils for the Torah, I will not send him trials. Better yet, I will make the notion of suffering completely foreign to him. On the other hand, if he distances himself from the study of Torah, worries will assail him and take the place of study.

It is a rule that the Torah only endures with one who puts an effort into it. Hence it is natural that whoever refuses this yoke will have to face other difficulties. Furthermore, we have an example of this in the Torah: When our forefathers arrived in Rephidim (a name which comes from the root rapha, which means “to weaken”), the Torah states: “They encamped in Rephidim” (Shemot 17:1). Here the Sages say that they weakened in the study of Torah (Sanhedrin 106a). This does not mean that they neglected the study of Torah, but simply that they did learn it through effort and toil. Hashem sent them trials as a result of their behavior, and Amalek attacked them, as it is written: “Then Amalek came” (Shemot 17:8). Our Sages explain, “Because they slackened from words of Torah, the enemy confronted them.”