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Why Were We Slaves in Egypt?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel.

[G-d] said to him [Abram], ‘I am G-d who took you out of Ur Casdim to give you this land as a possession.’ ‘O L-rd, G-d,’ replied [Abram], ‘How can I really know that it will be mine?’ ... When the sun was setting, Abram fell into a trance, and he was stricken by a deep dark dread.[G-d] said to Abram, ‘Know for sure that your descendants will be foreigners in a land that is not theirs for 400 years. They will be enslaved and oppressed. But I will finally bring judgment against the nation who enslaves them, and they will then leave with great wealth. (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:7-8 and 12-14, translation, *The Living Torah*, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

Why were we slaves in Egypt? While there are conflicting opinions, the great Talmudic Sage, Shmuel, in *Talmud Bavli, Nedarim* 32a suggested that the entire Egyptian exile was a direct result of Avram’s question found in *Sefer Bereishit* 15:8 “‘O L-rd G-d,’ replied [Abram], ‘How can I know that it will be mine?’” In Shmuel’s view, Avram questioned the veracity of Hashem’s promise and requested a sign to prove that it would be fulfilled. As Rashi (1040-1105) explains: “He made himself great [acted with audacity] and questioned Hashem’s qualities [of fulfilling His promises].” We know from many rabbinic sources that Hashem judges the *Tzaddikim* (Righteous) *k’chute hasa’arah* (with total exactitude). Therefore, in Shmuel’s view, Avram’s seemingly innocuous question was sufficient to bring about the Exile and our servitude.

Whether or not we accept Shmuel’s approach as to why the Exile took place, our Sages taught us that it had to take place, since it was Hashem’s divine ruling (*gezerat*

Hamelech). Thus, Rabbi Yochanan declared in *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 89b*: “It would have been fitting for our father Yaakov to have been brought to Egypt in chains....” Rashi elaborates upon Rabbi Yochanan’s statement and notes that Yaakov was “like all other people forced into exile [and, therefore, should have gone to Egypt in chains if he had not gone willingly] since the [Egyptian] exile was by divine decree.” In other words, Yaakov **had** to go to Egypt so that the Exile could unfold and thereby fulfill Hashem’s words to Avram. (See *Sefer Bereishit 15:13-14*)

What, however, was the purpose of the black and miserable years of our exile in Egypt? What was it supposed to accomplish? These questions were answered by Rav Nisson Alpert *zatzal* (d. 1986), the leading disciple of Rav Moshe Feinstein *zatzal* (1895-1986), in his posthumous book entitled “*Limudei Nisson al HaTorah.*” In his explanation of *Ha Lachmah Anya* (This is the Bread of Affliction) that appears in the *Hagadah* as the first section of *Magid* (the Telling), Rav Alpert suggested the following:

The purpose of the Exile in Egypt was to purify us [literally remove the dross] and to remove the evil qualities of cruelty and egotism. Moreover, it was to enable us to join with our brethren’s burden so that we could approach the goal of “Love your fellow Jew like yourself [*Sefer Vayikra 19:18*]...”

Herein, Rav Alpert focused upon three essential reasons for the long dark night of the exile in Egypt: spiritual purification, removal of evil personality traits, and to enable us to join as one with our fellow Jews.

Rav Alpert continued his explanation by stressing the idea that just like Yosef had served as the life support (both literally and figuratively) for *Yaakov Avinu* (our Father Yaakov) and his brothers, so too, will the Jews who suffered through the exile in Egypt serve as our spiritual guides and mentors throughout all future generations: “So, too, the Jewish

people who were in Egypt were there in order to be a life force and a source of great survival for all ensuing generations through the purification of their moral qualities and the purification of their spiritual nature.” In a word, their horrendous suffering was not in vain.

The *Hagadah* teaches us that no matter what burdens our ancestors were forced to bear, no matter how deep the depths of servitude they were forced to endure, they never changed their names, language or manner of dress. Against all odds, they proudly and defiantly remained Jews. Rav Alpert further suggested that the suffering and wretchedness endured by both Yosef and the Jewish people in Egypt raised them to a new spiritual plane. In Yosef’s case, he was transformed into *Yosef Hatzaddik* (Yosef the Righteous). In the case of our forebears, they were transformed into the nation that could declare throughout all subsequent generations: “*Kol dikfin yaitai v’yachol*” (“All who are truly needy come and eat”). As he explained: “This was the purpose of their going down to Egypt, [so that we would now] declare throughout all the generations ‘*Kol dikfin yaitai v’yachol*.’” (All translations my own)

This *Pesach* (Passover), may we be *zocheh* (merit) to walk in the ways established for us by our Egyptian ancestors, who fought the powerful forces of assimilation and rose to new and unheralded levels of ethical sensitivity. May we be *zocheh*, as well, to reach out to our fellow Jews and address their physical and spiritual needs, and proudly declare from the depth of our hearts “*Kol dikfin yaitai v’yachol!*” *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag kasher v’sameach*

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