

# BLAZING A TRAIL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## Blazing a Trail<sup>1</sup>

Why does the Torah feel it important to underscore that "Yaakov lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt?" We are told that he lived a total of 147 years, and the Torah previously gave his age as 130 at the time he came to Egypt. The arithmetic needed to determine how long he dwelled in Egyptian exile is not particularly challenging!

The *seforim ha-kedoshim*<sup>2</sup> reveal to us the deeper significance of our exile in Egypt: we were charged with identifying and elevating the sparks of holiness<sup>3</sup> that were waiting there. *Be'er Mayim Chaim* adds an important footnote to this. Whatever gain came out of our Egyptian period was not the doing of those who lived through it alone. The process began with the *avos*, our forefathers. They realized that the odds were not in favor of their children surviving in Egypt as a distinct group, maintaining its own values. The Egyptians were well practiced in all forms of depravity. If the Jews would have fallen into their licentious ways, they would never have emerged! The *avos* were determined to ease the experience for them by taming and weakening the *kelipah*<sup>4</sup> of Egypt, and thereby create the possibility for their descendents to maintain a stable existence in *galus*.

Soro was the first. Taken to the house of Paroh, he offered her incredible wealth to submit to him. She spurned his lavish gifts; this dulled the Egyptian *kelipah* somewhat. Yosef followed, injecting holiness into a society best described as *ervas ha-eretz*<sup>5</sup>, the nakedness of the world. Potiphar's wife, says the Torah, importuned Yosef day after day. The Tanchuma understands this to mean that each and every day was a battle that required *mesiras nefesh* on his part. He spilled his blood to hold on to his principles! The final encounter with Potiphar's wife was more difficult yet. When Yosef resisted, he made his contribution to scaling back the *kelipah* of Egypt. In retrospect, this was the purpose for his descent to Egypt in the first place. In the final analysis, both Soro and Yosef both faced the challenge of a licentious society by safeguarding themselves from the enticement of *ervah*. Soro's success resulted in her female descendents succeeding in safeguarding themselves long after; Yosef accomplished the same for his male descendents.

Similar reasons dictated Yaakov's descent to Egypt. The seventeen years he lived there served the dual purposes of limiting the *kelipah*, while strengthening the nascent force of *kedushah* that had been transplanted there. Seventeen in *gematria* is *tov*, good. The *tikun* of *ervah* specifically is

identified with *tov*. Without such *tikun*, the Jews in *galus* would have lost themselves permanently through the debauchery of Egypt.

Egypt was a strange destination for a *galus*. It was decidedly not what Avraham was warned about at the *bris bein ha-besarim*, the covenant of the broken pieces in which Hashem informed Avraham about the impending exile. No mention was made of Egypt in that warning. Avraham was simply told that his children would be strangers in a land not theirs. Why, then, was Egypt chosen to host them, instead of a less spiritually-challenging? The seventy souls who entered Egypt were all pure souls. Why were they in particular made to experience the unpleasantness of exile?

The upshot of *bris bein ha-besarim* is that the Jews would become the *am nivchar*, but only after subjecting their physical selves to purification. As holy as they were, they would not be ready to stand at Sinai without subjugating the physical bodies that housed their souls. Egypt, offering the most contrast and challenge to *kedushah* of any place on the globe, was the perfect place to accomplish this subjugation.

To arrive at this purpose on earth, every individual must stand at his own Sinai. A prerequisite to this is taming and harnessing his physical self. This is a threefold process, ultimately calling for purity of mind (to earn him a Jewish mind, in his thoughts and beliefs), purity of heart (focusing his wants and desires), and purity of limbs (through proper action).

The goal of physical purification can be accomplished through self-abnegation and fasting, purifying the natural corruption of Man's physical aspects. A "magic pill," however, is available as an alternative. HKBH endowed Torah with the ability to purify the physical self. Chazal tell us<sup>6</sup> that the Torah one studies in one's youth becomes "absorbed in one's blood." There is no other wisdom that has the capacity to become absorbed in one's very self, that can act as the antidote to the internal seething of one's blood for baser passions.

Rambam writes<sup>7</sup> that Torah does not become permanent in those whose study is pampered by creature comforts, in those who study with abundant food and drink. This is the polar opposite of other forms of wisdom, where a student will accomplish most when he does not have to deal with deprivation and denial. With regard to Torah, however, the penetration of Torah's light to his essence is predicated upon his success in breaking the hold of the baser parts of himself. A student succeeds at other forms of wisdom through his own initiative and power; not so Torah. No one succeeds at Torah study without the benefit of special Divine assistance. That assistance is only forthcoming to those who are deserving, to those who have "killed" themselves in diminishing the physical in favor of the spiritual.

This, too, is alluded to at the beginning of our *parshah*. Yaakov represents Torah. He sends Yehudah ahead of him to Egypt to set up a *yeshiva* in advance of his arrival. He then lives there for seventeen years, the equivalent of *tov*. As we all know, there is nothing more *tov* than Torah.

<sup>1</sup> Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 300-302

<sup>2</sup> i.e. Kabbalistic texts

<sup>3</sup> In the early stages of Creation, the "vessel" holding Divine holiness burst, releasing its contents to the world that needed them. Small sparks of this holiness fell far and wide, effectively seeding even the most unlikely places with kedushah that needed to be discovered and liberated.

<sup>4</sup> Lit. shell, a case that surrounds and is impervious to holiness, not allowing entrance to the kedushah that could otherwise penetrate.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, the term refers to the weakness and vulnerable points of the land of Egypt. The still disguised Yosef uses the term to accuse his brothers of espionage, of surveying Egyptian territory for places that could be attacked. The Rebbe sees an allusion to a different translation of the phrase, in which Egypt is described as the nakedness, the most debased society of the entire globe.

<sup>6</sup> Avos D'Rav Nosson 24

<sup>7</sup> Talmud Torah 3:12

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