

EGYPTIAN EXILE: THE PROTOTYPE FOR LATER EXILES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah does not describe for us in any form whatsoever as to what happened to the family of Yaakov - who are now the people of Israel, and suddenly very numerous and at one time very influential and comfortable in Egyptian society - in the years between the death of Yosef and the enslavement of the Jews many decades later.

The Torah is not here to give us a narrative of interesting historical facts and, as it did in the book of Bereshith, it skips over decades and even centuries without giving us any in-depth description. But Midrash does attempt to somehow fill that void and portrays for us on one hand a people who attempted to remain separate and unique from the Egyptian majority culture by its dress, language and historical memory and yet on the other hand succumbed to adopting Egyptian gods and beliefs.

The Egyptian exile was the prototype for all later exiles. It posed the challenge of how to remain steadfastly Jewish while living under foreign rule and enmeshed in a foreign, even alien, culture and belief system. This has remained the major challenge of Jewish existence throughout the ages. This challenge accounts for the relative paucity of the number of Jews in the world and for the continuing pressures - anti-Semitic and otherwise - that constantly threaten to erode Jewish identity and even existence.

Every place of Jewish exile in the Diaspora has faced this challenge. Some localities have fared better than others in coping with it. Though the challenge has remained constant, the responses to it have varied from place to place. Apparently what may have worked successfully for one society and time may not be the correct solution for another.

It is important to note that the redemption from Egyptian exile was facilitated by Heaven through unlikely means and by a surprising champion of Israel's cause. The likely choice for becoming the redeemer of Israel from Egyptian bondage was certainly Aharon. He was present with the Jews during the darkest years of persecution and was recognized by the people as its leading personality. He led the tribe of Levi, the tribe of scholars of Yaakov's Torah and the bearers and teachers of his tradition.

His brother Moshe, who disappears from the scene of Jewish suffering in Egypt for approximately sixty years, was raised in the palace of the hated Pharaoh and does not appear to be especially articulate in speech. As a shepherd, he engages in an occupation reviled by the dominant Egyptian society and culture. Yet it is Moshe who is the redeemer, the lawgiver, and the greatest of all

prophets that the world will ever know.

It is Moshe who will teach Israel the Torah, which alone will be the necessary guarantee for Jewish survival and growth in all of the societies in which it will find itself to be part of. God's guidance and protection of Israel lies in providing the Jewish people with proper, even if unlikely, leadership to meet the challenges constantly imposed on a small people by varying times and place.

Shabat shalom

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