"The fertility of the early Israelites"

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The book of Exodus opens with a statement of the unprecedented growth rate of the Jewish people in Egypt: *And the Children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty, and the land was filled with them* (Exodus 1:7*).* It has challenged the wit of commentators, ancient and modern, to provide an adequate explanation of this fecundity, dramatic enough in its proportions as to make the new Pharaoh conclude that "*the people of the children of Israel are more numerous and mightier than us"* (v.9).

Nahum M. Sarna seemingly evades the problem. On v.7 his only observation is that this description of the extraordinary fertility of the Israelite population carries strong verbal echoes of the divine blessings of fertility bestowed upon humankind at Creation and after the Flood. It suggests a conception of the community of Israel in Egypt as a microcosm, a miniature universe, self-contained and apart from the larger Egyptian society - the nucleus, spiritually speaking, of a new humanity.[1]

He does not attempt, however, to deal with the practical issue raised by the verse, namely how to account for the birth rate. He similarly evades the issue in his comment on v.9, though he utilizes the opportunity there to deal with the Hyksos invasion as if suggesting that this was the implication of the rapid population increase. The verse does not say, however, that the Israelite

presence was “swelled” by the arrival of any (Semitic) newcomers. It affirms unequivocally that the indigenous Israelites were *themselves* fruitful and prolific.

Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865) quotes, and disposes rather disdainfully of, the views of the distinguished German theologian, Johann David Michaelis, who appears to have been one of the earliest “modern” scholars to have addressed the problem. In the context of his treatment of the verse, “about six hundred thousand men on foot, beside children” (Exodus 12:37) left Egypt, Luzzatto observes that this suggests that at least two million people left Egypt. But this defies normal human increase that, in the course of only 400 years, such a large nation could evolve. Now, Johann David Michaelis has attempted to rationalise this in several ways. First, that Middle Eastern men married when they are about thirteen to fifteen. But this is rubbish, for, truly, marrying so young has the effect of weakening the body and reducing its procreative power (!). Secondly, he asserts that Israelite men married more than one wife. This is also rubbish, for if one man married several women, or even just two, then it would simply have the effect of leaving many other men without wives, since the number of males and females is fairly uniform. He further explains that Israelite men had a longer lifespan, living to a hundred years and more. This is also rubbish, since the psalmist says that “the days of our years are three score years and ten” (Psalm 4:10).

Now, our sages have suggested that they bore six at one time, a tradition corroborated by ancient writers who affirmed that the Nile waters increased fertility, to the extent that Egyptian women generally bore twins (Aristotle, Pliny, Seneca). It could also be that circumcision had that effect on the birth rate, as Philo suggested in his commentary...

It was, in fact, the blessing of God and His providence that preserved the Hebrews from falling victim to illnesses that killed other babies, in order to fulfil His promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:13) that, at the end of 400 years, they would become a nation which could exist and prosper in the land of its inheritance.[2]

In considering Israelite fertility, it is vital, however, not to overlook the fact that the Torah credits that unnatural increase as having reached unprecedented proportions already in the very earliest period of their sojourn in Egypt (See Exodus 1:7). It would be of interest, therefore, to explore whether we can explain that phenomenon in terms of our present demographic knowledge.

From studies of the demography of ethnic minorities under repressive regimes, as well as from our own observation of the high birth rate of free refugee minorities, particularly in the first few generations, before they become acculturated, we know that they instinctively compensate for their physical and economic powerlessness by building up their internal human resources, seeking refuge and solace in the security of offspring and family. Numerical strength gives the illusion of power, whether or not one is creating mere cannon fodder.

Now, to put into perspective the assertion that such a dramatic increase, from but seventy souls of one family of Jacob, is impossible in the space of a single century (until the reign of the "king who did not know Joseph," 1:8), and that we should consequently regard this biblical description as mere hyperbole, we might consider some interesting and pertinent demographic statistics about the growth rate of the Jewish people during the 19th century.

At the dawn of that century, the Jewish population of Europe numbered some two million. By the beginning of the 1880s this had grown, by natural increase, to nearly seven million, with a Jewish rate of increase that was twice as fast as that of the gentile population. H.H. Ben-Sasson lists several factors to account for this "demographic miracle," notable among which was the improved sanitary conditions during this period which banished hereditary causes of disease, epidemic, death and infant mortality by new and effective methods of garbage and sewage disposal and provision of fresh water.

Now, while the gentile population also enjoyed such benefits, and while there was no significant difference between the Jewish and gentile birth rates, that phenomenal Jewish increase was brought about by their much higher-than-average lifespan caused by a very low infant and adult mortality rate, which that writer attributes to "the specific character of Jewish society, with its religious and cultural traditions." He defines these to include, primarily, the unique Jewish devotion and care of their sick, as well as the greater stability of the family…the infrequency of venereal diseases, the higher status of the

woman within the family, the care lavished on babies and small children, abstinence from alcohol, the readiness of the individual and the community to undergo considerable economic sacrifice in order to help others, and the lengthy tradition of charitable deeds.[3]

In the light of such considerations and given the prosperous conditions under which the families of Jacob lived in the early period of their sojourn in Egypt, we suggest that it is not inconceivable that their demographic increase might well have been in accordance with the dramatic proportions described in Exodus chapter 1.

Now, we have, in fact, outlined two, diametrically opposite, scenarios which could account for such growth: Either repression, creating a situation of ethnic withdrawal from the host society, or, on the other side of the scale, freedom, and prosperity, bringing with it a dramatic improvement in the standard of living, with a consequently healthy diet, relaxation, sanitary conditions and care.

We suggest that the combination of both of these conditions, at different periods during the sojourn in Egypt, might have been responsible for driving up the Israelite birth rate. In the early, Joseph, period, and its aftermath, it was the good life in Goshen where they enjoyed the *meitav ha'aretz*, "the very best conditions that the land had to offer" (Genesis 47:6,11). They were "sustained" by Joseph, at a time when "there was no bread throughout the rest of the land" (vv.12/13). So, the Israelites thrived physically, and the women

were healthy and strong, to the extent that their midwives could offer a plausible excuse to Pharaoh as to why they were not destroying the Hebrew male children at birth. They told him that, "the Hebrew women are not like the [sickly] Egyptian women, for they are "lively" (*kiy chayyot heinah*), that is, blooming with health and vitality.

By contrast, the Egyptian population was undernourished and sickly, with the famine taking a high toll on mortality (*lamah namut le'einecha, gam anachnu gam admateinu* – "Why shall we perish before your eyes, both us and our land?" v.19), and with the undernourished pregnant Egyptians miscarrying and finding the act of giving birth both painful and protracted.

In the later period, when the "new king" introduced extensive measures to enslave the Hebrews and make their conditions of life and work intolerable, this very opposite situation could very likely have had the identical effect of sustaining an increase in the Israelite birth rate, to the extent that the rabbis - perhaps with a touch of exaggeration - speak of "sextuplets arriving at each birth".[4]

It is not difficult, therefore, to understand Pharaoh's great fear of the Israelites and his assertion that they were "more numerous and stronger" than the indigenous population. The latter was being decimated by starvation and disease, while the Israelite percentage of the overall population was increasing dramatically in relation to the Egyptian losses as well as by their own increased fertility.

NOTES

1. *The JPS Torah Commentary*, ed. Nahum M. Sarna (The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem, 1991), p.4.

2. S. D. Luzzatto, *Peirush SHaDaL al Chamishah Chumshei Torah* (Tel Aviv, Dvir, 1965), p.256.

3. H. H. Ben-Sasson (ed), *A History of the Jewish People* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.,1976), p. 790.

4. *Midrash Shemot Rab.* 1:7. Other traditions (*ad loc.*) speak hyperbolically of twelve, or even sixty, being born at a time, clearly reflecting the attempt of different sages to express the uniqueness of the demographic development at that period.