"Va'eira: Why we were slaves in Egypt"

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M. Cohen

Why our early ancestors had to suffer exile and oppression in Egypt for such a protracted period is something of a mystery. Was it retribution for some terrible wrong perpetrated? If so, we would naturally wish to identify the guilty party and the nature and background of that deed. But such an investigation yields little clarity. Granted that the Israelites were told that the punishment for their lack of faith in believing the false report of the spies, who were away for forty days, was that they would be held back in the desert for forty years – a year for each day (Nu. 14:34) – yet, when God first discloses to Abraham that his offspring would not enter the Promised Land until after a period of 400 years of exile and suffering, He does not link that experience to any causal sin on the part of the Israelites! Quite the contrary: blame is attributed to the Amorites – a generic term for the seven ethnic groups that occupied Canaan during the Patriarchal and early Israelite period (2000 - 1600 BCE) whose occupation of Canaan, God asserts, will have the painful effect of delaying Israel's ultimate conquest and redemption:

> *Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own - and they shall serve them, and they shall oppress them - for four hundred years. But the nation that they serve I shall accordingly judge, after which they will leave with great wealth… But a fourth generation shall return here* ***for the sin of the Amorites shall not yet be complete until then*** (Gen. 15:13-14).

Those two conflicting rationales are problematic. To synthesize them we would have to reinterpret the original revelation to Abraham in the light of later circumstances. When the Israelites at Sinai first heard the latter justification of their Egyptian bondage, they must have been mystified as to why their destiny was to be so negatively intertwined with the 'sin of the Amorites!' They would have been particularly piqued by the notion that they – the Chosen People - had to wait in the

queue until divine justice had been fully meted out to the immoral and idolatrous Amorites! How could they have appreciated the necessity for God to balance the latter's scale of merits and demerits – if it existed at all in their eyes!

Furthermore, given that they themselves had been warned that their occupation of the holy land was conditional upon the observance of the Torah's exemplary moral and ethical precepts, what sense did it make for them to have to suffer a protracted bondage while the Amorites were permitted to continue polluting that land? With the later episode of the spies, however, God was enabled to utilise the opportunity to demonstrate to Israel the justice of His original decree regarding their lengthy enslavement, but to revise its rationale in terms of the new 'Israelite sin' and His changed relationship with His people.

Parallels to such 'relevance-revision' may be found in the re-naming of some biblical personages to reflect a new and enhanced status or event, such as the changes from Avram to Avraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel and Esau to Edom, the re-identification of the rainbow as a covenanted symbol of divine protection, and the non-consumption of the sinew of the thigh as a reminder of Jacob's deliverance from the threat of his enemies.

The prophet Isaiah's affirmation of God's inscrutability - 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor My ways your ways (55:8) – is nowhere more manifest than when attempting to fathom the logic of His reward and punishment. After all, while in no way attempting to diminish the seriousness of the sin of the spies and the understandable reaction of despair on the part of the nation, it begs the question of its seriousness when compared with the most heinous sin of idolatry into which the Israelites were immersed throughout the time they were in Egypt (Lev. 17:7; 18:2; Deut. 32:17, *et al*.), and for at least 600 years afterwards, on the evidence of the

prophet Ezekiel! He provides the most forceful denunciation of the idolatrous objects that the Israelites had carried out of Egypt with them, and which they had continued to venerate down until his own day (See Ezek. 20:7). So ingrained was this that the Midrash attributes 'the enmity created between God and His people' to that sin (Mid. *Vayyik. Rabb.* 7 (1), 22 (5). It is rather mystifying, therefore, that the loss of faith engendered by the report of the spies should have outranked Israel's all-pervasive idolatry as the prime cause of their delayed entry into the Promised Land!

Some other commentators viewed the Egyptian exile and oppression as a punishment for Patriarchal sin, the precise nature of which is not disclosed by the Torah. For Moses Nachmanides (1194-1270), it lay in Abraham's deception of Pharaoh when he passed off his wife, Sarai, as his sister. Abraham displayed a lack of faith in God's protective power, for which his offspring were deprived of that protection and exposed to the tyranny of Pharaoh. This is in conformity with the principle *Ma'asei avot siman l'vanim*, "the action of the parents redounds upon their offspring" as we have expounded in a previous Torah thought.[1]

In a similar approach, the Talmud (*Nedarim* 32a) also relates the bondage to a lack of faith on Abraham's part, specifically when God promised him that his offspring would one day possess the land of Canaan (Genesis 15:7), and he retorted, "But how will I know that I shall inherit it?" (v.8).

Other commentators suggest that the Egyptian bondage was punishment for the kidnapping, ill-treatment, and sale, of Joseph by his brothers. The bondage, they argue, was to inculcate into the Israelites a national characteristic of empathy and peaceful coexistence with their brethren, a lesson which was an essential prerequisite

if they were to evolve from a group of disparate tribes into a unified nation characterised by a strong sense of brotherhood and collective identity.

I find this approach problematic, however, for two reasons: First, that the Genesis 15:13-15 verses, quoted above, refer specifically to an external sin, that of the Amorites. Furthermore, if one did wish to attribute the bondage to a Patriarchal sin, the most obvious one would have been Sarah's ill-treatment of her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, something that Abraham should never have countenanced. In that situation, the hard labour suffered by the Israelites might be construed as a punishment that perfectly fitted the crime!

From a theological perspective, it may be suggested that any such attempt to link later generations' suffering to the misdeeds of their ancestors is directly in conflict with the Torah's insistence that, 'fathers shall not die for the sins of children, nor children for the sins of parents; a man shall die for his own sin' (Deut. 24:16). This may be discounted, however, on the basis that Judaism's Oral Law relates that verse to the specific context of the prohibition of witness testimony against members of one's family (See Mish. *San.* 3:4; 27b), and makes no attempt to link it to the moral and theological issues of cause and effect, reward and punishment.

We cannot escape the reality, however, that what we do – whether good or bad – leaves its imprint and leaves an effect upon following generations. We may leave either positive or negative legacies. We do change perspectives and mores, and move society in positive or negative ways. Again, at the personal level, if we inflict harm on others, or discriminate against them, we may never know the effect it might have, and who, among their descendants, may seek redress or take revenge on their behalf. This is exemplified by the bitter millennial history of conflict between the (Muslim)

descendants of Ishmael and those of Isaac, and between the (Christian) offspring of Esau and those of Jacob, whose effects are felt to the present day. And hence the justification of attempting to find a 'cause' for the Egyptian bondage.

Another view, that is far more charitable to the Patriarchs and does not focus upon any crime, sin, or misdemeanour at the dawn of our history, has it that the Egyptian slavery was a necessary training period, to toughen Israel physically and mentally for the many confrontations and battles they would endure while travelling through the desert and attempting to conquer the Holy Land and banish the war-like tribes that inhabited it. In other words, the Egyptian experience was for Israel's ultimate benefit, although they would never have appreciated it at the time.

That positive dimension of adversity may also be extended to the spiritual and creative spheres. This may be illustrated with reference to the famous Booker Prize-winning author, Salman Rushdie, whose book, *Satanic Verses*, written in 1988, offended Muslims to such an extent that they issued a *fatwa*, banning it and offering a prize of £2.5m to any Muslim who succeeded in assassinating him for his blasphemy. To escape such a fate, Rushdie spent ten years in hiding, with two armed Special Branch men protecting him at all times. He only emerged on rare occasions, to give an important lecture, attend a literary gathering, or for the launch of one of his books.

Now, a review of a book written by Rushdie after the *fatwa* was lifted in 1998 contains an observation that is germane to our subject of the purpose of Israel's enslavement in Egypt. The reviewer surveyed and contrasted the many books that Rushdie had written since the appearance of his first in 1975 - and including the most recent books produced since the *fatwa* was lifted, and concluded that - 'oddly and

impressively, the books Rushdie published during his time in hiding showed a marked upsurge of imaginative flair, creativity and liveliness, which is absent from those which he wrote as a free man!' (*The Sunday Times Books Section*, 4 April 1999, p.7).

That unique resilience, character-training, mental and spiritual stimulus to creativity and self-scrutiny - coupled with the development of a heightened sense of purpose and the ability to reassess ones values and priorities, as offered by a period of the curtailment of one's freedom - has been superbly chronicled, from personal experience, by Natan Sharansky (and Gil Troy) in his book, *Never Alone: Prison, politics, and my people* (PublicAffairs: NY, 2020).

The moulding of our people into a nation began in a place where our rights were curtailed and our freedom of movement denied. The only place where we were totally unfettered was in our unbounded creative imagination, our monotheistic beliefs, and our pride in *Bet Ya'akov*, the unity of our families (See the phrase *ish* ***uveito*** *ba'u* – 'they came down there, each man as part of ***a family***: Ex. 1:1)[2] - all inspired and undergirded by a cherished set of Abrahamic values and traditions.

Ironically, it was in the hostile environment of Egypt that the Israelites prepared the ground to become the most creative and educated nation of the ancient world, capable, but three months after leaving Egypt, of receiving a Torah, absorbing the loftiest of ideas and spiritual concepts, and of creating a society rooted in equity, morality, and equal opportunity.

The lengthy exile also taught our people the meaning of *savlanut*, 'patience' - the handmaid of self-discipline - the understanding that life is not a slot-machine, that

great achievements neither fall into one's lap nor are bestowed as a gift, but have to be struggled and waited for, and are, more often than not, reached only after years, centuries – even millennia - of dashed dreams, multiple set-backs, and invariably in the face of the hostility of envious competitors and their determination to frustrate one's efforts, if not to destroy vulnerable minorities without trace.

There was no better training-ground for our nation than the servitude of ancient Egypt. No wonder that one of the recurring motifs in our prayers and rituals is *Zecher litzi'at Mitzrayim,* 'in remembrance of the going out of Egypt.' It is a clarion call for the patience that became the hallmark of our people, and which enabled us never to give up the fight and to achieve our independence once again after a two-thousand-year interregnum.

Shabbat shalom,
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NOTES

1. See Jeffrey M Cohen, "On deception in the book of Bereshit," Torah Thoughts, *Vayyigash/Vayyechi* (9th & 16th Dec. 2021).

2. For our exposition of the phrase *ish uveito* (Ex 1:1), see Torah Thoughts, *Shemot* (2021).

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