YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT VAYIGASH**

Descent to Egypt

By Rav Shimon Klein

Introduction

In our *parasha*, Yosef reveals himself to his brothers and then sends them to bring their father:

“Make haste and go up to my father, and say to him, ‘So says your son, Yosef: God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. And you shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me – you, and your children, and your children’s children, and your flocks, and your herds, and all that you have…’ And you shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that you have seen; and you shall make haste and bring my father down here.” (*Bereishit* 45:9-13)

Yosef extends an eager invitation – “Come down to me, do not delay;” “Make haste and bring my father down here.” Pharaoh, too, lends his backing:

And Pharaoh said to Yosef, “Say to your brothers: Do this – load your beasts, and go, get yourselves to the land of Cana’an, and take your father and your households, and come to me, and I will give you the good of the land of Egypt and you shall eat the fat of the land. Now you are commanded, do this – take wagons out of the land of Egypt for your children and for your wives, and bring your father and come.’” (45:17-19)

The question we will be examining here regards the process that actually takes place beginning with the brothers’ announcement to their father – “Yosef is still alive” – up until the description of Yaakov’s descent to Egypt. The verses in between point to a significant event, a profound process, that I experienced by Yaakov and his family, who embark on this journey.

Yaakov vs. Yisrael

And they told him, saying, “Yosef is still alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt.” And his heart fainted, for he did not believe them. And they told him all the words of Yosef, which he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons which Yosef had sent to carry him, the spirit of Yaakov their father revived; and Yisrael said, “It is enough; Yosef my son is still alive, I will go and see him before I die.” (45:26-28)

The brothers come to their father and tell him that “Yosef is still alive” and that he is ruler over Egypt. Yaakov’s reaction is one of incredulity; his heart almost stops.[[1]](#footnote-1) How do the brothers go about convincing him? First, they convey to him all that Yosef had told them.[[2]](#footnote-2) Then they show him the wagons that had been sent to carry him and the extended family down to Egypt. To this he responds differently: “And the spirit of Yaakov their father was revived.” Instead of his heart stopping, his heart now beats faster. But he does not stop there: “And Yisrael said, ‘It is enough; Yosef my son is still alive, I will go and see him before I die.’” He is overwhelmed by the unanticipated good of this news, and he expresses his intention to go down to Egypt.

The discrepancy between the two formulations is notable. The first time, it is “Yaakov” who reacts; the second time, it is “Yisrael.” Likewise, the nature of the response is different: the first is a quickening of his heartbeat, while the second is an assessment, along with a practical decision. The text records both reactions, and they serve to introduce the two different characters that are active here – Yaakov and Yisrael. What takes place in each of them? The answer to this question is to be found in the verses that follow.

First, let us consider these two names. The name “Yaakov” is given to him by his father, and in this sense it expresses a human perspective that looks to the natural, human dimension. This name expresses a “following after” (literally, coming “on the heels of”) Esav.[[3]](#footnote-3) The name may also allude to a certain measure of cunning that he deployed in reality.[[4]](#footnote-4) The name “Yisrael” is given to him by an angel and by God, and in this sense the name expresses a higher perspective that looks towards his life and its higher meaning. This name represents his destiny as declared by God.[[5]](#footnote-5) The name “Yisrael” represents the supernal qualities that Yaakov possesses in relation to God and man alike.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We can now go back and translate the two names into action. The text has previously described Yaakov’s reaction upon seeing the coat dipped in blood:

And Yaakov tore his garments and put sackcloth upon his loins, and he mourned for his son many days. And his sons and daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted, and he said, “For I will go down to my son mourning into Sheol.” Thus his father wept for him. (37:34-35)

Yaakov has until now been in mourning, refusing to be comforted and heading for Sheol. Now, upon hearing the news, his spirit is revived. At the same time, there is a revival of “Yisrael.” His higher dimension understands that Yosef is still alive, and thus the great vision that he had nurtured in relation to Yosef is aroused once again.[[7]](#footnote-7) This awakening and awareness is translated into a practical plan – going to him to see Yosef before Yisrael dies. As of yet, there is no parallel awareness on the natural, worldly playing field – the playing field of “Yaakov.”

Yisrael Journeys to Egypt

Two channels now proceed in parallel, and we will now examine the following verses with a view to understanding what happens to Yaakov at each stage, as well as what happens to Yisrael.

And Yisrael journeyed with all that he hand, and came to Beer Sheva, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Yitzchak. And God spoke to Yisrael in the visions of the night, and said, “Yaakov, Yaakov,” and he said, “Here I am.” And He said, “I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you into Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again, and Yosef shall put his hand on your eyes.” And Yaakov rose up from Beer Sheva, and the children of Yisrael carried Yaakov their father, and their children, and their wives, in the wagons which Pharaoh had sent to carry him. And they took their cattle, and their goods, which they had acquired in the land of Cana’an, and came to Egypt – Yaakov and all his seed with him, his sons, and his sons’ sons with him, his daughters, and his sons’ daughters, and all his seed he brought with him to Egypt.” (46:1-7)

These verses describe a series of actions undertaken by Yaakov/Yisrael: there is a journey to Beer Sheva, an offering of sacrifices; God speaks to him in a night vision and encourages him, and then his children carry him, taking along all their property and coming to Egypt. What is the meaning of all this activity? What is the subject here? To put it differently, we might ask: what would we miss if the first verse of the above quote started with the words, “And Yisrael journeyed with all that he had…,” and then continued with the description of their arrival in Egypt? We will now read the verses, paying close attention, and seek to decode what is happening, with attention to the dual identity that is present in these verses – “Yaakov” and “Yisrael.”

“And Yisrael journeyed with all that he hand, and came to Beer Sheva, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Yitzchak” – In keeping with the plan, it is “Yisrael” who journeys, in the context of his destiny. “With all that he had” – they are all secondary to him. Yisrael’s first stop is Beer Sheva. Why does he not continue all the way to Egypt? Why does he offer sacrifices? Seemingly, the answer is to be found at the end of the verse – “to the God of his father Yitzchak.” Yitzchak had been commanded by God not to leave the land, and now Yaakov was about to transgress the command of the God of his father Yitzchak.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is with these words that the Torah introduces Yisrael’s journey down to Yosef. The expression “*va-yisa’*” (“and he journeyed”), in the singular, indicates his dominance and the secondary status of all those accompanying him. In this sense, he occupies a position of leadership for “all that he had.” We will shortly consider another position, more distant, that makes its presence felt in these verses.

“And God spoke to Yisrael in the visions of the night” – it is “Yisrael” who sets out on the journey, and God addresses him. “In the visions of the night” – perhaps in the context of the “night” that awaits him as he descends into the long exile. The “visions” tell of the ability to see, even when the context is one of “night.” “And He said, ‘Yaakov, Yaakov’, and he said, ‘Here I am.’” God addresses Yisrael, but He calls him ‘Yaakov’. What does this convey? God does not speak to “Yaakov” from a personal place, but rather from a higher position, as though holding out a hand to Yaakov, to his personal dimensions. Why does God not then speak to “Yaakov”? Seemingly, at the stage there is no one to talk to. His position in the human realm is, at present, unclear.

Why is there no “Yaakov” to talk to? We must go back and look at what Yaakov’s situation, and that of his family, has been. As noted, in view of Yaakov’s belief that Yosef has been devoured by wild beasts, all his children have tried to comfort him. His reaction has been one of rejection on two fronts: He refuses to accept consolation, and at the same time he utters a statement: “For I will go down to my son mourning into Sheol.” He will go down, in his mourning, to join his son, in Sheol. This expression of intent is tantamount to choosing Yosef once again. While Yosef was alive, Yaakov displayed preferential treatment towards him, and the brothers felt rejected. Now, after his death (to the best of Yaakov’s understanding), he chooses him again – and again the brothers are rejected. The reaction of Yehuda, the natural leader, who “goes down from his brothers” and draws away from the family, is not all that surprising. Now, after many years, the brothers come with news for Yaakov. His inner voice of “Yisrael” responds and prepares to head for Egypt, for the long-awaited reunion with Yosef.[[9]](#footnote-9) But his inner voice of “Yaakov” is anxious: his family has, to a considerable extent, fallen apart; the level of trust between him and his children is low.[[10]](#footnote-10) In addition, there is real concern for their survival in a difficult exile, and the fact that a renewed connection between the family and Yosef may be a very complex affair. All of this deters “Yaakov.”

“And the children of Yisrael carried Yaakov”

Twice God calls to him: “Yaakov, Yaakov.” Why the repetition? The first call to a person by name serves to shift his attention from the place where his consciousness is directed to the caller, focusing it on his appeal to him. The second call, to a person who is already focused on the matter at hand, slices into his world, into more inner places, inviting them to make themselves felt. In the context of the event, God’s double call to him gives him a presence as “Yaakov,” and intensifies his essence. In effect, God is addressing Yisrael – his higher dimension, in a situation in which “Yaakov” does not possess sufficient presence. The repeated call, “Yaakov, Yaakov” empowers Yaakov, and he is also strengthened from the Divine word to “Yisrael.” To put it more simply, the Divine word comes with the vision of “Yisrael,” and from this perspective, there is a call that arouses and exposes his human dimension.

“And He said, I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there.” God identifies Himself as “the God of your father.” Prior to this, Yaakov had offered sacrifices to “the God of his father Yitzchak” – on the basis of his connection to “his father” and on the basis of God’s instruction to Yitzchak not to leave the land of Cana’an. Now, God omits mention of Yitzchak’s name, and this would seem to indicate a new focus. The emphasis is on the family structure, with the patriarch at the helm. What is the role of the patriarch? The verse continues: “Do not fear to go down to Egypt” – Yaakov is fearful and God reassures him. “For I will make of you a great nation there” – the reason why he need not fear is because God will make a great nation of him in Egypt. Yaakov, as the head of the family, in its human dimension, fears going down to Egypt; he fears an encounter with the culture there and with a spiritual reality that may shatter the family unit. God’s response to this is an empowerment of Yaakov as the head of the household (through the repeated call to him), an empowerment of his connection with his father (i.e., the family dynasty); and finally the promise – “I shall make you a great nation” – in the dimension of the physical entity that will grow increasingly great. God empowers Yaakov even further: “I will go down with you into Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again, and Yosef shall put his hand on your eyes” – Yisrael is journeying, but it is Yaakov who must actually go down, and down there he may become lost. Therefore, God will go down with him, to the lowly places where he is headed, and He will also bring him up from there.

“And Yaakov rose up from Beer Sheva” – in the wake of this empowerment (the repeated call and the promise), Yaakov rises up, with the strength that he has imbibed from God’s words to him in Beer Sheva. “And the children of Yisrael carried Yaakov, their father” – like “Yisrael,” also his children, the “children of Yisrael,” carry themselves; they need no support. This description brings the reader back to the “children of Yisrael” who parted from Yosef, headed on their way to bring their father:

And the children of Yisrael did so, and Yosef gave them wagons, according to the command of Pharaoh, and gave them provision for the way. (45:21)

It is not “the children of Yaakov” who take upon themselves the mission of bringing their father, but rather “the children of Yisrael.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Yisrael embodies this dimension as someone destined by God, and so do his children – as the heirs to the family’s vision and destiny. Now, they join the effort to support and strengthen Yaakov, in order to establish the family upon natural, normal foundations. “And their children and their wives, in the wagons which Pharaoh had sent to carry him” – Yisrael’s children carry their own continuity in the wagons sent to carry Yaakov. Their offspring come along by virtue of Yaakov.

“And they took their cattle, and their goods, which they had acquired in the land of Cana’an” – now, the activity of the children of Yisrael extends to the family’s cattle and other property. The result is, “And [they] came to Egypt – Yaakov and all his seed with him” – this is the general outcome, placing the structure of Yaakov’s family upon its foundation. In effect, the mission has been accomplished. Yaakov is now established at the center of the family; everyone has come to Egypt, he and his offspring with him.

The following verses offer a sort of summary of the process described thus far.

“And these are the names of the children of Yisrael”

And these are the names of the children of Yisrael who came to Egypt, Yaakov and his sons: Reuven, Yaakov’s firstborn. And the sons of Reuven – Chanokh and Palu, and Chetzron and Karmi… These are the children of Leah, whom she bore to Yaakov in Paddan-Aram…

And the sons of Gad: Tzifyon and Chaggi, Shuni… These are the sons of Zilpa, whom Lavan gave to Rachel, his daughter, and these she bore these to Yaakov – sixteen souls.

The sons of Rachel, Yaakov’s wife: Yosef and Binyamin. And to Yosef there were born in the land of Egypt, [those] whom Asnat, daughter of Poti-Fera, priest of On, bore to him: Menashe and Efrayim… These are the sons of Rachel, who were born to Yaakov: all the souls were fourteen.

And the sons of Dan: Chushim. And the sons of Naftali – Yachtz’el and Guni, and Yetzer and Shilem. These are the sons of Bilha, whom Lavan gave to Rachel his daughter, and she bore these to Yaakov; all the souls were seven.

All the souls that came with Yaakov into Egypt, who emerged from his loins, besides Yaakov’s sons’ wives, all the souls were sixty-six. And the sons of Yosef, who were born to him in Egypt, were two souls; all the souls of the house of Yaakov who came into Egypt were seventy. (46:8-27)

At this stage, the text lists the names of those who come to Egypt, and they are counted. Who are the “children of Yisrael” who appear as the heading to this count? Is this a reference to the twelve sons of Yisrael, as described previously, when they carried Yaakov their father (v. 5)? This cannot be the case, for they are listed as “Yaakov and his sons,” and Yaakov cannot be included among the “children of Yisrael.” We must therefore conclude that “the children of Yisrael” refers to the group as a whole. Just as later on the concept of “*Bnei Yisrael*” serves to indicate the collective identity of the nation, here it is used as a general name for a more elementary group – the “family of the children of Yisrael.” From here until the end of the unit, the text uses the name “Yaakov” rather than “Yisrael.” Why is this so? Seemingly, the text is reflecting the process that has taken place in the preceding verses. As stated, it is Yisrael who journeys, but Yaakov who is afraid. He is not confident in his ability to lead his household to Egypt and to survive there. For this reason, “Yaakov” is strengthened by means of a sort of “reformatting” of the life tissue of the family. The basis, or innermost circle, is a father and his sons (“Yaakov and his sons”); the next circle consist of the sons of Yaakov’s sons, and these too are enumerated (“And the sons of Reuven: Chanokh…”). Another circle is that of the matriarchs, including Leah, Zilpa, Rachel and Bilha – if a matriarch and her maidservant are a faithful reflection of the structure of the family and its hierarchy.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As noted, this description represents a summary of the process over the course of which the family has orientated itself towards the great challenge awaiting it: going down to Egypt, being built up there, and being ready to deal with the complex reality of being a nation subjugated by Egypt and required to provide a response to existential questions in different areas of life.

This summary now serves as the introduction to *Sefer Shemot*.

The introduction to *Sefer Shemot*

And these are the names of the children of Yisrael who came to Egypt: with Yaakov, every man came with his household. Reuven, Shimon, Levi and Yehuda; Yissakhar, Zevulun and Binyamin; Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher. And all the souls that emerged from the loins of Yaakov were seventy souls; for Yosef was already in Egypt. (*Shemot* 1:1-4)

It is with these words that *Sefer Shemot* opens, as though pointing backwards, towards events that had taken place many years earlier, when Yosef made his identity known to his brothers and the family came to Egypt. The text returns to that seminal event, “when everything started,” and that point now serves as a first station in a new story: the birth of a nation that will be described in *Sefer Shemot*. The very first verse already indicates the presence of two stories: “the children of Yisrael who came to Egypt,” on the one hand, and “with Yaakov, every man came with his household,” on the other.

What differentiates these stories from each other? The first describes “the children of Yisrael” as a unit of identity; they come to Egypt. The second describes the life story of the family, over the course of which “the sons of Yaakov” join Yaakov, and “the household” of each of them joins him. In the first they are described as “coming” (*ba’im*), in the present tense, as an ongoing event that has not yet concluded from a broad perspective, as appropriate to an historic destiny. In the second, the descent of Yaakov and his sons is described in the form of a snapshot of a certain reality, in which each of Yaakov’s sons brought his household along with him.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The two stories indicate the existence of two arenas. One belongs to the greater, historical picture of “the children of Yisrael.” In the context of this picture, the descent to Egypt must be evaluated in its historical context, and it beckons the reader to the Covenant Between the Parts;[[14]](#footnote-14) to the sale of Yosef – which is perceived by Yosef himself as part of the Divine plan (50:20); to the prophecy for the future that is stated explicitly in God’s words to “Yisrael” in our *parasha*: “And He said, ‘I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I shall make you a great nation there’” (46:3); and to a view of “the children of Yisrael who come to Egypt” as an historical process brimming with profound meaning. The existence of such an arena is seemingly obvious, and to some degree there is nothing new in its appearance as part of the Torah. The bigger news concerns recognition of the existence of another arena – that of Yaakov’s natural, human life and the fact that it serves as a real entity in the verses of the Torah. In the context of our *parasha*, Yaakov is called upon to go down to Egypt, and this idea arouses within him an existential anxiety. A similar sense extends to the “children of Yaakov,” who do not play a leading role in this unit.[[15]](#footnote-15) Such weaknesses are part of life, and the Torah does not skip over them. On a covert level, it exposes the weaknesses of people – of Yaakov and of his sons. The response to this comes in the description, “And these are the names of the children of Yisrael…,” which serves as a sort of summary of the preceding unit. And then this summary ends up serving as the introduction to *Sefer Shemot*. Once again, the two arenas are presented at the outset, with a sort of introduction to a chapter whose subject will be the process of *Am Yisrael* coming into being. This chapter, too, is played out in two arenas: that of vision and that of reality. It serves as the introduction to a *sefer* in which *Am Yisrael* stand at the center. It is in the tension between them that the nation’s habitat is located – in between reality and a vision of destiny.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Ibn Ezra comments on this verse: “‘And his heart fainted (*va-yafag*)’ – derived from the same verb as ‘do not give yourself rest (*pugat*)’ (*Eikha* 2:18).’ Meaning, his heart failed, it stopped; his heart almost died, for he did not believe.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The expression “**all** the words of Yosef” tells us that they concealed nothing of what Yosef had said to them. The first part of his speech upon revealing his identity made mention of the story of his sale and their part in it: “And Yosef said to his brothers, ‘Come near to me, I pray you;’ and they came near. And he said, ‘I am Yosef, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt’” (45:4). In other words, it is at this stage that the brothers reveal their secret to their father – their role in what happened to Yosef. This is most remarkable, in view of the fact that the text does no more than hint to this in describing the brothers’ persuasion of Yaakov, rather than treating it as a subject in its own right. We deduce from this that Yaakov hears the story, he hears what the brothers did, but he conducts no inquiry, much less punish them. He suffices with the knowledge of what happened. What occupies him now, seemingly, is the fact that Yosef is alive; he does not spend time and energy on accusing his sons. Besides, so many years have gone by, with so many crises and challenges; at this stage, identifying culprits is not the issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The name “Yaakov” is given to him in his childhood: “And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red, all over like a hairy garment, and they called his name Esav. And after that his brother emerged, with his hand holding Esav’s heel, and his name was called Yaakov, and Yitzchak was sixty years old when they were born” (*Bereishit* 25:24-26). These verses describe the birth of the twins: the first emerges “red, all over like a hairy garment,” and his name is given to him by both his father and mother (“**they** called his name…”). Their agreement on the name suggests that the name is well suited to their son, almost self-evident: he is עשיו – “ready-made,” complete (see Chizkuni). “And after that his brother emerged” – he emerges in relation to his elder brother, with his hand grasping his heel. Yaakov follows after Esav, reacts to his movements. This name reflects Yaakov’s initial life movement. Later on, Esav will interpret the meaning of Yaakov’s name thus: “And he said, ‘Is he not rightly named Yaakov? For he has supplanted me (*ya’akveni*) these two times: he took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing’” (27:36). Following the pattern set at the time of their birth, Yaakov has “stalked” or “followed on the heels of” Esav, “breathing down his neck,” twice more – not just grasping his heel, but actively taking his birthright and his blessing. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “But he did this in subtlety (*be-akva*), in order that he might destroy the worshippers of Ba’al” (*Melakhim* II 10:19). Rashi explains the word *be-akva* as meaning, “in subtlety,” or “with deception.” Another example of this usage of the same root is, “For every brother acts deceitfully (*akov ya’akov*) and every neighbor goes about slandering” (*Yirmiyahu* 9:3). Radak explains that the expression “*akov ya’akov*” is “a reference to deception and cunning, as in, ‘He has supplanted me (*ya’kveni*) these two times.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “And God appeared to Yaakov again when he came out of Paddan-Aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, ‘Your name Yaakov – your name shall not be called Yaakov any more, but Yisrael shall be your name;’ and He called his name Yisrael. And God said to him, ‘I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be from you, and kings shall emerge from your loins, and the land which I gave to Avraham and Yitzchak – to you will I give it, and to your seed after you I will give the land’” (35:9-12). Here God sets down Yaakov’s destiny. First, he blesses him, giving him the name Yisrael and then telling him “a nation and a company of nations shall be from you.” Furthermore, “kings shall come forth from your loin.” Finally, he promises him the land as the place where this destiny can be fulfilled. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As viewed from the perspective of the angel: "And Yaakov was left alone, and there a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he did not prevail against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Yaakov’s thigh was put out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ And he said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ And he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Yaakov.’ And he said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have contended with God and with men, and you have prevailed.’ And Yaakov asked him, and said, ‘Tell me, I pray you, your name.’ And he said, ‘Why is it that you ask after my name?’ And he blessed him there” (32:24-30). Yaakov is journeying from Charan back to Cana’an, and this “man” appears and wrestles with him. The man turns out to be an angel of God, as we deduce from the words, “for you have contended with God and with men, and you have prevailed.” In addition, in *Sefer Hoshea*, he is described as an angel: “He strove with an angel, and prevailed; he wept and made supplication to him; he would find him in Beit El, and there he would speak with us” (*Hoshea* 12:5). In many *midrashim* (for example, *Bereishit* *Rabba* 77:3) he is referred to as “the prince of Esav.” In contrast to the “following in the heels” and/or the “cunning” that are associated with “Yaakov,” here he appears as a spiritual presence that wrestles and prevails. In contrast to the name “Yaakov” given to him by his father, his name is now given to him by an angel of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The love for Yosef is described as the love of “Yisrael” towards him, perceiving him as being destined for greatness: “And **Yisrael** loved Yosef more than all his sons, for he was the son of his old age, and he made him a coat with long sleeves” (37:3). The dispatching of Yosef to his brothers is likewise at the request of “Yisrael” rather than “Yaakov”: “And Yisrael said to Yosef, ‘Are your brothers not feeding the flocks in Shekhem? Come, and I will send you to them.’ And he said to him, ‘Here I am.’ And he said to him, ‘Go, I pray you; see whether it is well with your brothers, and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me.’ And he sent him from the valley of Chevron, and he came to Shekhem” (37:12-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Avraham. And Yitzchak went to Avimelekh, king of the Pelishtim, to Gerar. And the Lord appeared to him, and said, ‘Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell you of; sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you, for to you and to your seed I will give all these countries and I will fulfill the oath which I swore to Avraham your father, and I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these countries, and through your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed’” (*Bereishit* 26:1-4). The *midrash* offers the following elaboration: “‘And Yisrael journeyed with all that he had’ – for all of his household was in his possession. ‘And he came to Beer Sheva and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Yitzchak’ – He said, My father, Yitzchak, sought to go down to Egypt, but the Holy One, blessed be He, stopped him; how, then, can I go down without His [explicit] word? Therefore it says, ‘To the God of his father Yitzchak’ – that He might make it known to him whether or not he should go down. And indeed this was appropriate, for he received word that corresponded to his question” (*Sekhel Tov, Vayigash* 46:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Perhaps this also reflects the awareness of the Covenant Between the Parts, in which Avraham is told that his descendants will be strangers in a foreign land: “And He said to Avram, Know with certainty that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will serve them, and they will afflict them for four hundred years. And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge, and afterwards they shall come out with great substance” (15:13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is expressed in different ways. When the brothers tell Yaakov that Yosef is still alive, “His heart fainted, for he did not believe **them**.” The text could simply have said, “He did not believe” – the report; after all, the news was, indeed, difficult to digest. However, the additional word, seemingly emphasizing the source of the report - “them” – suggests a lack of faith between the father and his sons. The brothers continue in their attempts to persuade Yaakov: first they tell him “all the words of Yosef”, but even this does not convince him. Only after he sees the wagons that Yosef himself sent to carry him does he respond in a positive way: “And the spirit of Yaakov, their father, revived”. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As the children of Yaakov, the descent is difficult for them by all accounts. They are headed for a foreign land, and they do not know whether Yosef is biding his time, waiting to exact revenge at some stage. As “the children of Yisrael,” they understand the historical situation that they are in and they cooperate. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In this context, it is interesting to note that there is a different formulation for each of the matriarchs, indicating that each occupies a different place. For example, the special love for Rachel is reflected in the fact that she is mentioned in the introduction to the list of her descendants: “The sons of Rachel, Yaakov’s wife: Yosef and Binyamin,” and in the conclusion – “These are the sons of Rachel who were born to Yaakov; all the souls were fourteen.” The other wives appear only in the conclusion of their respective lists. In addition, Rachel is referred to as “Yaakov’s wife,” in contrast to Leah, concerning whom the text simply records, “These are the sons of Leah whom she bore to Yaakov”. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Even slight nuances are reflected in this story. We might have expected a structure that could be formulated with the words, "With *(im*) Yaakov, each man came with his household” – meaning, Yaakov came to Egypt, and they are secondary to him, coming with him – each man and his household. Instead, the verse reads, “*et* Yaakov.” The difference between these two prepositions is similar to the difference between the expressions “*imo*” and “*ito*,” both meaning “with him.” “*Imo*” suggests a profound sharing or cooperation. “*Ito*” denotes physical proximity, with each occupying his own space; the hearts are not one. In other words, in this unit Yaakov is weak; he is not really leading, and hence his sons, who are walking behind him, are not truly “with him” – they are not “*imo*.” By the end of the process, the text summarizes: “And they came to Egypt, Yaakov and all his seed with him (*ito*)” (46:6). Beyond the fact that the verse says “*ito*” rather than “*imo*,” this verse appears as the summary of a process over the course of which there is a sort of “artificial respiration” for Yaakov – repeated words of encouragement that allow him to take his position at the center, and that allow his descendants to belong to him. For more on the difference between “*imo*” and “*ito*,” see our *shiur* on [*Parashat* *Vayeshev*](http://vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha75/09-75vayeshev.htm). Other examples include: “And it was, when Yisrael dwelled in that land, that Reuven went and lay with (*et*) Bilha, his father’s concubine, and Yisrael heard it; and the sons of Yaakov were twelve” (*Bereishit* 35:22). The context of this “lying with” is the death of Rachel, and Reuven’s concern lest the distance between Yaakov and Leah, Reuven’s mother, become further exacerbated in the event that Yaakov is drawn to Bilha, Rachel’s maidservant. Reuven performs an act involving Bilha with the intention of causing her to be rejected. This is expressed in the text in the proposition “*et*” instead of “*im*.” In contrast, we find: “And Yaakov came out of the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, ‘You must come in to me, for I indeed I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes;’ and he lay with her (*imah*) that night” (30:16) – here Leah is a full partner, and hence it is appropriate that the proposition “*im*” appear. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “And He said to Avram: ‘Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will subjugate them and afflict them for four hundred years. And the nation that subjugates them, too, I will judge; and afterwards they will emerge with great wealth’” (15:13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It is the “children of Yisrael” who bring the wagons, and it is they who carry Yisrael and the family with all its possessions. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The verses of the first chapter of *Sefer Shemot* use the expressions “*Bnei Yisrael*” (the children of Yisrael) and “*am*” (“nation”), and through this alternation the text describes the creation of the nation of Israel. There is a transition from the family that comes to Egypt, in the introduction, via Pharaoh, who refers to them as a nation – “Behold, the nation of the children of Israel…” (1:9) – to the stage at which “the people multiplied and grew very mighty” (1:20). It should further be noted that the very fact that *Sefer Shemot* is introduced with the names of those who come to Egypt is not to be taken as self-evident. This introduction, to a *sefer* whose subject is the establishment of the nation of Israel and its special path, points to a structure that is grounded in reality. In the background we sense the question of what the proper attitude should be towards the concept of a “generality,” a “collective.” One might have imagined an abstract concept and its fulfillment within human society. The Torah chooses to describe the process of the creation of the nation from a point of departure that gives attention to the names of people – a person and another person and another, who collectively comprise the greater picture. This structure applies both in the context of “the children of Yisrael” and in the context of “[with] Yaakov, each man and his household.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)