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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #01:**

**Israel in Egypt;**

**The Stirrings of Morality**

Israel’s nationhood begins in slavery in Egypt. This point is remarkable for two separate reasons, each of which deserves its own treatment. First, why are Israel’s roots in slavery?[[1]](#footnote-1) Would it not be more beneficial to Israel’s future legacy if its beginnings were of a more exalted nature? Second, why does Israel experience its formative years in Egypt specifically? While undeniably a prosperous and powerful society, Egypt is not known for her commitment to the religious or moral values that Israel seeks.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Egypt in the Bible**

To answer these questions, it is necessary to understand the nature of ancient Egypt: her role in the Bible, and her role in the Ancient Near East. The Torah often refers to Egypt, in part due to the formative events that take place there with respect to the people of Israel.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet Egypt hovers in the backdrop of the biblical stories long before Jacob’s family arrives there. Abraham goes to Egypt to avoid famine, returning with an Egyptian maidservant (Hagar) whom he eventually marries. Lot accompanies Abraham to and from Egypt, and it remains for him an ideal destination, the reason he chooses to settle in the fertile plains of Sodom, which is “like the land of Egypt” (*Bereishit* 13:10). Joseph is forcibly taken to Egypt, and his brothers eventually make their way to Egypt to buy food.

Egypt is important in the Bible first of all because Egypt is important in the ancient world. Egypt reached the pinnacle of her power during the period of the New Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE),[[4]](#footnote-4) becoming a politically powerful and technologically advanced society. Archeological discoveries reveal Egypt’s wealth, monumental structures, early writing system, agricultural infrastructure, extensive commerce, and various art forms. Egypt’s knowledge of mathematics, medicine, glass technology, architecture, and methods of quarrying stones reflect her scientific sophistication. Egypt is both powerful and prosperous, an influential force in the ancient world.

**Egypt and Sodom: The Lures of Prosperity**

It is no wonder that Israel will find it difficult to leave Egypt and will continuously express its longing to return to the flourishing empire after the Exodus. Israel’s yearning for Egypt is compounded, to be sure, by their extensive sojourn in the difficult desert terrain. It seems clear, however, that Egypt itself is the object of their desire, not simply any settled land. The former slaves remember in detail Egypt’s fleshpots and plentiful bread (*Shemot* 16:3), the cucumbers, watermelon, scallions, onions, and garlic (*Bamidbar* 11:5). And even at the moment of their emancipation from slavery, they do not seem all that eager to leave; Pharaoh and the Egyptians have to actively expel the Israelites from the land of their torment (*Shemot* 12:33, 39; 13:17).

Israel’s reluctance to leave Egypt recalls an earlier narrative, in which the angels urge Lot to abandon the Egypt-like Jordan Plain (*Bereishit* 19). Sodom’s lush prosperity runs parallel to its moral corruptions; Sodom’s residents do not like visitors, preferring not to share the city’s rich resources.[[5]](#footnote-5) They do not seem inclined toward compassion or righteousness; indeed, Lot’s bid to prevent Sodom’s residents from mistreating a stranger (“Please, my brothers, do not do evil!”) is met with callous disregard for justice (19:7, 9): “Has one come to live [here] and he renders judgment (*va-yishpot* *shafot*)?” The use of the root *shafat* highlights its absence in Sodom; justice is absent because no one wants it.

Sodom’s evils produce a divine decree of destruction, which does not include Lot – angels come to rescue him from the city’s impending doom. Yet, although Lot is a victim of the depravity of the city’s residents, who surround his house and threaten him with violence (19:9), he does not depart eagerly from the city. While Lot calls to his sons-in-law to “get up and depart” (*kumu* *tze’u*, 19:14) – a call that is met with mockery – he himself hesitates to leave (*va-yitmahma*, 19:16). The angels therefore seize Lot (*va-yachaziku*, 19:16) and his wife and daughters, and pull them out of the city. When commanding Lot and his family to flee, the angel also tells them not to look back, lest they be swept up in the city’s destruction. God overturns the city, sowing it with salt, so that nothing can grow from there ever again (*Devarim* 29:22). Sodom’s negative influence has been terminated; no one is meant to look back in her direction. Famously, Lot’s wife gazes backward anyway, illustrating her longing for the depraved city. This backward glance has devastating consequences; Lot’s wife becomes a pillar of salt, doomed to the same fate as Sodom itself.

It is similarly difficult for the Israelites to extricate themselves from the prosperous land of Egypt, despite the prevalence of wickedness (of which the enslaved Israelites are certainly victims). Egypt’s prosperity does not inspire her to generosity or compassion.[[6]](#footnote-6) Instead she enslaves the Hebrew foreigners, fostering a society that promotes injustice and brutality.[[7]](#footnote-7) The brief glimpses that the biblical narrative offers of Israel’s experiences in Egypt (in *Shemot*, chapters one and five) illustrate the violence, absence of justice, and disdain for the other that define the conditions of slavery.

Egypt’s culture tarnishes all who live there. Even the Hebrew slaves do not manage to maintain a superior standard of conduct, but are drawn into the ethos of the surrounding amoral society. When Moses sees two Hebrew men fighting, he turns to one and asks, “Why do you strike your friend?” By using the word friend (*rei’ekha*), Moses evokes the solidarity that should draw people together in common fellowship and empathy for the other.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Hebrew slave disdainfully rejects Moses’ bid to encourage good relations, however, uttering a statement that recalls the callousness of the Sodomites: “Who placed you as the man who acts as officer and judge (*ve-shofet*) over us?” Once again, the use of the root *shafat* highlights its glaring absence; justice is lacking in Egypt as in Sodom, because no one seeks it.

Despite Egypt’s moral corruptions, Israel does not appear eager to leave. The language of Israel’s reluctant departure recalls Lot. During the devastating plague of the firstborn, Pharaoh eagerly urges the Israelites to depart (*kumu* *tze’u*, *Shemot* 12:31). Apparently, their response is not fast enough for the panicked Egyptians, who seize (*va-techezak*, 12:33) the nation, in order to “rapidly send them from the land.” The unfortunate Israelites have to leave with unleavened bread because of the Egyptian’s fervor to expel them, and the verse informs us that, “They could not hesitate” (*le-hitmahmei’a*, 12:39), although it seems that they would have liked to linger for a while longer in Egypt.

Although God does not explicitly command the Israelites not to look back at Egypt, this may well be the intent, at least figuratively. Israel must cut ties with Egypt, turning its back on a society defined by moral depravity.[[9]](#footnote-9) Egypt has certainly not created a just society. More significantly, the powerful Egypt has not used her considerable leadership role to create a good world. Instead, it appears that Egypt wields a deleterious influence upon all those who come under her sphere of influence.[[10]](#footnote-10) God will therefore bring ten plagues upon Egypt, designed to unravel her infrastructure and weaken her influence upon the world.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Egypt must be relegated to the past.[[12]](#footnote-12) In her stead, God will bestow leadership upon Israel, who is given a mandate to build a moral society, one that rejects Egypt’s assistance or guidance. Israel will now assume responsibility for spreading God’s teachings outward, influencing the world to a new moral vision.[[13]](#footnote-13) Tasked with creating something new, Israel must not look back at Egypt.

Unfortunately, like Lot’s wife, the generation that exits Egypt does look back, repeatedly expressing its longing to return to the depraved yet prosperous society. This generation of Israelites cannot be part of the future: their gaze remains fixed upon the past; they will vanish into the desert sands, becoming a “pillar of salt.” Only when a new generation arises, one that does not yearn for Egypt, can Israel begin to fulfill its task of replacing a corrupt society with a new set of values, consciously rejecting the prevailing immorality fostered by Egypt.

**Israel’s Journey Forward**

Israel must begin its journey as a nation in Egypt in order to witness the behaviors and attitudes that it must reject to create a new society, one that fosters justice and righteousness. Founded in slavery and suffering, the nation of Israel is charged with the task of reinvigorating the world with a new moral order, one defined by camaraderie and justice, an aspiration for social equality, and compassion for strangers, servants, and the weak. The chapters following the Exodus, and the laws presented at Sinai, illustrate how the young nation begins to transition out of Egyptian culture and build each of these core values.

**Camaraderie and Justice**

Shortly after the nation emerges from Egypt, Yitro journeys to Israel’s encampment to greet his son-in-law, Moses. Moses is overtaxed, engaged in judging the people from dawn to dusk (*Shemot* 18:14). In response to Yitro’s query, Moses explains that he is focused upon his goal: “To judge (*ve-shafatati*) between a person and his friend (*rei’eihu*),” thereby creating a society of fellowship and justice. Moses’ words recall his unpleasant encounter with the Hebrew slave who struck his “friend” (*rei’ekha*, 2:13) and rejected Moses as an arbiter of justice (*shofet*). Seeing Moses’ exhaustion, Yitro advises him to set up a more effective system: “You should seek men (*anshei*) of valor, who are god-fearing, men (*anshei*) of truth, who hate profit. And you should place (*ve-samta*) over them (*aleihem*) [i.e., the nation] officers (*sarei*) of thousands, officers (*sarei*) of hundreds, officers (*sarei*) of fifties, and officers (*sarei*) of tens. And they should judge (*ve-shafetu*) the nation” (18:21-22). Yitro’s words, too, recall the brazen words of the Hebrew who rebuffed Moses’ bid to promote justice: “Who placed you (*samekha*) as the man (*le-ish*) who acts as officer (*sar*) and judge (*ve-shofet*) over us (*aleinu*)?” (2:14).

Moses was unable to change the behavior of the Hebrews when they were enveloped by Egypt’s corrupt values. Following their departure from Egypt, however, he embarks on a program to steer the nation toward a new future. Together with Yitro, Moses endeavors to rectify the attitude of the Hebrew slaves who were negatively influenced by the injustices of Egyptian culture.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Social Equality**

Social inequality in Egypt finds expression in the distribution of resources. Although Egypt generally has plentiful food, when famine strikes, the inequality of Egyptian society comes to the fore. In his role as viceroy of Egypt, Joseph appears to implement the inequitable Egyptian system.[[15]](#footnote-15) As food supplies dwindle, Joseph sells food to the people (referred to as *lechem*, *Bereishit* 47:15), and eventually gathers up (*va-yilakeit*) all the money in the land and delivers it to Pharaoh’s house (47:14). Having depleted the Egyptian commonfolk of their money, Joseph then steadily buys up their livestock and land in exchange for food (47:16-17, 20). In a final act of desperation, the starving populace sell themselves into indentured servitude to Pharaoh, who will now receive a portion of all food grown by the Egyptians (47:23-25). Yet even as bread disappears from Egypt (47:13), Joseph provides plentiful food for his own family (each according to his needs – *lechem lefi ha-taf*, 47:12). In Egypt, the family of the powerful can thrive, even as others flail. In another example of the social inequality that prevails in Egypt, Pharaoh makes special provisions for the elite priestly caste, who receive special allotments of food and retain the absolute rights to their land (47:22, 26).

Leaving Egypt entails leaving behind a system that endorses disparity in the manner of distribution of food. Evoking some linguistic features of *Bereishit* 47, which describes the unequal food allotments in Egypt during the famine, the story of the manna (also referred to as *lechem* – *Shemot* 16:15, 22, 29, 32) emphasizes equality among the released Israelites (16:16-21). Each person gathers (*va-yiklatu*) the manna daily, each individual according to his needs (*ish* *lefi* *okhelo* – 16:17, 18, 21).[[16]](#footnote-16) The passage repeatedly emphasizes the equality of the portions; Israel’s initial journey to nationhood launches with the principle of equal distribution of food.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Ideally, Israel’s laws and values oppose a system that promotes inequitable distribution of wealth. All societies are susceptible to inequalities of wealth and resource distribution, but some societies are set up in a manner designed to maintain these inequalities, while others promote the value of basic equal rights and equal access to resources. Several biblical passages seem designed to guide Israel to avert the disparities found in Egypt. Once they enter Israel, all land is initially divided equitably among the tribes, in a bid to promote equality (*Bamidbar* 26:54). The Torah also makes provisions for circumstances that force a family into poverty, stipulating that even if a family must sell their land, it automatically returns to its original owner in the Jubilee (fiftieth) year (*Vayikra* 25:13-17, 23-28). This ensures that unforeseen situations do not leave families in a perpetual state of penury; returning land to its original owner regularly levels social disparities.

Israel’s laws seem designed to limit the power and wealth of its most powerful figures. Consider Israel’s protocols regarding its priests, which directly contrast with the economic privilege of the priests in Egyptian society.[[18]](#footnote-18) The entire priestly tribe in Israel (the tribe of Levi) is not given an inheritance in the land (e.g. *Bamidbar* 18:23-24; 26:62). This constricts their power, making it more difficult for the powerful religious elite to accrue undue wealth. Another biblical passage likewise limits the amount of wealth that the king may accrue (*Devarim* 17:17). This is an especially surprising provision, given that monarchies are not typically founded on an expectation of economic equality; a king is usually entitled to excessive economic privilege. In these ways, Israel’s laws place restrictions on the powerful strata in society, those who often use their power to accrue wealth at the expense of the weaker members of society.

Even if the above provisions do not always result in a just distribution of wealth, they aspire to a society with clear values. No one should have the ability to accumulate vastly disproportionate wealth; societies should aim for parity that reflects the perception that all humans are of equal worth.

**Compassion for** **Strangers, Servants, and the Weak**

Israel is constructed on the bitter memory of servitude and disadvantage. Many biblical injunctions instruct Israel to act with compassion toward the weak, linking these laws to their experiences in Egypt:

Do not oppress the **stranger**, for you have known the soul of the stranger, **since you were strangers in the land of Egypt**. (*Shemot* 23:9)

Do not oppress the [Hebrew **slave**] with hard labor (***be-farekh***)…[[19]](#footnote-19) and your brethren, the children of Israel, each person his brother, you shall not oppress him with hard labor. (*Vayikra* 25:43, 46)

And on the seventh day is a Sabbath for God, do not do any work; neither you nor your son and daughter and your **menservants** and **maidservants**… so that your **menservants** and **maidservants** can rest like you. **And remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt.** (*Devarim* 5:14-15)

When you reap the harvest in your field and you forget a sheaf in the field, do not return to fetch it; leave it for the **stranger**, the **orphan,** and the **widow**... **And remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt.** (Ibid*.* 24:19-22)

A nation formed in a crucible of injustice must surely remain attuned to the needs of the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

A homiletic reading of *Shemot* 6:13 hints to the goals of the Exodus from Egypt. The verse itself is vague; on the cusp of the opening of the Exodus story, God instructs Moses and Aaron to command Israel, without specifying the content of that command. A Rabbinic source offers the following suggestion:

“And God said to Moses and to Aaron, **and He commanded them** over the children of Israel.” About what did He command them? About the subject of releasing slaves. (*Yerushalmi* *Rosh Ha-shana* 3:5)

Prior to the launch of Israel’s liberation from slavery, Israel had to commit itself to a new approach, one that builds into its system a way to liberate slaves, rectifying the injustice wrought by Egypt. Jeremiah recaps this lesson when he explains why the Judean kingdom is slated for destruction:

So says the Lord, the God of Israel, “I convened a covenant with your forefathers on the day that I took them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying: ‘At the conclusion of every seven years, each person should release his Hebrew brother who has been sold to him.’”[[20]](#footnote-20) (*Yirmeyahu* 34:12-14)

By linking the release of slaves to the Exodus narrative, Jeremiah clarifies the intrinsic connection between the two. To justify the Exodus, Israel must recalibrate the prevailing attitude to slavery. Unfortunately, Israel does not internalize these lessons and fails to release its slaves. The continuation of the above passage from the *Yerushalmi* explains that this failure leads to their catastrophic punishment (the collapse of the Judean kingdom; see *Yirmeyahu* 34:17-22):

Israel was only punished because of the case of their [failure to] release their slaves, as it says (*Yirmeyahu* 34:14): “At the conclusion of every seven years, each person should release his Hebrew brother.” (*Yerushalmi Rosh Ha-shana* 3:5)

Israel’s survival as a nation in the land is predicated on the nation’s commitment to a new moral vision, one that leaves Egypt behind.

Israel’s departure from Egypt is not simply an emancipation from slavery or a geographical migration. Israel must deliberately turn its back on a widespread set of values, spearheaded by Egypt, the predominant civilization of the time. Israel’s experience as slaves lays the groundwork for constructing a new type of society, steeped in compassion and morality and designed to lead the world to justice and good fellowship.

1. This question assumes that God guides history and *could* have designed Israel’s origins differently if He so desired. The Bible is not so much a book about history as it is a book about how (and perhaps why) God shapes history in a certain way. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In *Bereishit* 18:19, God explains that the reason He has chosen Abraham is that He knows Abraham will teach his descendants “to observe God’s path and to act with righteousness and justice.” Why are Abraham’s descendants forced to dwell for an extended period amidst a society that seems the very opposite of the family’s declared values? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A cursory search reveals that Egypt is mentioned 336 times in the Pentateuch. For comparison’s sake, the land of Israel (referred to variously as the land of Canaan and sometimes, “the land”) is referenced approximately 364 times in the Pentateuch (it is difficult to offer an exact number, given the various appellations used). The near equivalence of these numbers suggests that the Torah looks back and forth from Egypt to the land promised to Israel, inviting a comparison between them. This comparison is confirmed by *Devarim* 11:10-12, which defines the land of Israel in terms of its contrast to Egypt: “For the land that you are coming to inherit, is not like the land of Egypt that you left.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While it is difficult to date the early biblical stories with certainty, the story of the Exodus is certainly situated at some point during this period. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Sanhedrin* 109a (cited by Ramban): The [Sodomites] said, “Since the land produces bread and gold dust, what need have we of passersby, who come only to divest us of our money? Let us cause the protocol of treating travelers to be forgotten from our land!” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to *Bereishit* 43:32, the Egyptians would not eat together with the Hebrews because they considered them repulsive. While some commentaries (see, e.g., Onkelos, Radak) maintain that this has to do with the food the Hebrews ate (namely sheep, which the Egyptians regarded as deities), others adhere more closely to the simple meaning of the text, which suggests that mingling with the lower-class Hebrew shepherds is distasteful to the Egyptians (see Rashbam). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Earlier references to Egypt sketch a sustained portrait of debauchery. Consider the story of Abraham’s descent to Egypt, and his assumption that anyone who sees his beautiful wife will murder him in order to seize her (*Bereishit* 12:11-12). Egypt’s sexual immorality becomes a cautionary example in *Vayikra*, where Israel is told not to adopt the sexual immorality of the Egyptians (*Vayikra* 18:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Moses will eventually help forge a just society. As is clear from its many laws that protect the disadvantaged, the Torah strives to create an equitable society that cares for its weaker members. At its pivotal center (the middle section of the middle book), the Torah contains the categorical imperative: “Love your fellow (*rei’akha*) as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Devarim* 28:68 indicates that God prohibits “seeing” Egypt again, a prohibition that coheres well with the thesis above. The idea that Israel must limit its dependence upon Egypt appears quite frequently in later biblical passages. See, e.g., *Devarim* 17:16; *Yeshayahu* 31:1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Archeological evidence suggests that Egypt directly influenced the area of Canaan at various periods in history. A world with Egypt at its helm may have influenced the attitudes and behavior of Sodom, a city whose members jealously guard their own wealth and resources and unabashedly band together to collectively rape an unwanted visitor. Egypt’s influence may also extend to other problematic behaviors strewn throughout *Bereishit*. Consider Sarah’s problematic treatment of her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar (while some commentaries exonerate Sarah for her behavior, Radak and Ramban both regard it as sinful). This incident (which occurs after Sarah returns from Egypt), uses the word *inuy* to describe Sarah’s torment of Hagar (*Bereishit* 16:7); the same word appears later to describe the Egyptian treatment of the Israelite slaves (*Shemot* 1:11-12). This behavior may reflect a norm cultivated by Egypt. Likewise, Joseph’s decision to enslave the Egyptians in exchange for bread, while providing plentiful food for his own family, stems from an environment in which social stratification and apathy toward the disadvantaged is common (we will soon examine this incident further). Even while these figures remain responsible for their own behavior, Egypt’s leadership in the region burdens her with some measure of responsibility for the prevailing decadence and moral corruption. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is not a historical point; I have not tried to identify a time in Egyptian history when Egypt’s influence unraveled due to a series of plagues. My point is that God’s destruction of Egypt illustrates His intention to overturn her influence and replace it with a powerful and influential Israel, who will bear a moral message for the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Later, *Yechezkel* 29:16 similarly prophesies regarding the final cessation of Egypt’s influence. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Israel’s objectives are beautifully encapsulated by Isaiah’s prophetic centerpiece (*Yeshayahu* 2:1-4), where he describes how Israel will spread God’s moral message to the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Perhaps for this reason, a famous *midrash* describes an incident in which Yitro runs away from Egypt, having protested Pharaoh’s immoral decision to enslave the Israelites. See, e.g., *Sota* 11a and *Shemot Rabba* 1:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Joseph certainly may be making the best of a bad situation, implementing Pharaoh’s cruel policies in the most humane manner he can (see Rav Yair Kahn’s article: [“Tzafnat Pa’aneach – Prince of Egypt”](about:blank)). As R. Samson Rephael Hirsch notes (*Bereishit* 22:21), the desperate Egyptians are the ones who propose selling themselves into slavery in verse 19. Even so, we cannot ignore the fact that Joseph, as a representative of Egypt, brings about the enslavement of the Egyptians. See also Rav Yair Khan, “[Clouds of Galut](about:blank).” *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Beshalach* 2) describes Joseph’s interment in Egypt, his coffin sunk in the depths of the Nile River. As the Nile is Egypt’s most acclaimed emblem, the *midrash* hints to Joseph’s integration into Egypt, perhaps also foreshadowing Israel’s eventual assimilation, as we shall discuss. The process begins to reverse when Moses, who began his life floating in the Nile reeds, makes the decision to depart from Egypt, taking Israel and Joseph’s bones with him. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Possibly, the value of sharing food equally has already begun to be established by guidelines that accompany the eating of the Pesach sacrifice together in a communal setting, each person according to their needs (*ish* *lefi* *okhelo* – *Shemot* 12:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In an online article entitled, “[The Wanderings of Benei Yisrael in the Desert](about:blank),” Rav Medan suggests that the “statute (*chok*) and law (*mishpat*)” given when Moses sweetens the water (*Shemot* 15:25) refer to a ration implemented to ensure equal distribution of water among the nation. If this is so, then the word statute (*chok*) serves as an additional contrast to the statute (*chok*) that prevails in Egypt, which seeks to retain economic disparity between the wealthy priestly caste (along with the Pharaoh) and the indigent nation (*Bereishit* 47:22, 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. R. Samson Rephael Hirsch (*Bereishit* 47:22) makes this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The word *be-farekh* appears in *Shemot* 1:13 to describe the labor that the Egyptians impose upon the Israelites. *Yechezkel* 34:4 will employ the same word in describing the corruption of Israel’s leaders that precipitates the Babylonian exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jeremiah does not cite directly from the Torah, but rather paraphrases the idea of *Shemot* 21:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)