

From Egypt to Canaan

By Rav Ezra Bick

Yaakov and Egypt

A. Burial

One of the clear sub-themes of our parasha is the contrast and tension between the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan. This is clear from the theme which connects the beginning and the end of the parasha - Yaakov's request that he be buried not in Egypt but in Canaan. Yaakov not only addresses this request to Yosef, but asks him to swear as well; later, on his deathbed, he charges his other children with the task of bringing his body to Canaan. The Torah then records at length the trip to Canaan and the burial in the Cave of Makhpela.

One might have imagined that the major motivating factor of Yaakov's insistence is his desire to be buried in the Cave of Makhpela, the resting-place of his parents and grandparents. This indeed is stressed by him when he speaks to his assembled sons AFTER the berakhot:

He commanded them, and said to them: I am being gathered unto my people; bury me with my fathers, in the cave which is in the field of Efron the Chitti. In the cave which is in the Makhpela field, against Mamreh in the land of Canaan, which Avraham bought from Efron the Chitti as a burial portion. There were Avraham and Sara his wife buried; there were buried Yitzchak and Rivka his wife, and there I buried Lea. (49:29-31).

Not only does Yaakov clearly indicate that the goal is the Makhpela cave, he even explains to his sons why that particular burial place is so important - it is the burial site of his fathers and mothers. However, when Yaakov gives the same instruction to Yosef at the beginning of the parasha, BEFORE the berakhot, there is a clear expression of another consideration which seems preeminent.

He called his son Yosef, and said to him: If I have found favor in your eyes, place your hand under my thigh, and act with me in kindness and truth - Do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie with my fathers, take me from Egypt and bury me in their burial place.... (47:29-30).

The mention of the Makhpela cave here is incidental and not even by explicit name, while the force and urgency, indicated by the pleading tone and demand for an oath, are directed at eliminating the possibility of burial in Egypt. In the second verse as well, where the cave is indirectly mentioned, this is preceded by an explicit request to "take me from Egypt;" and only subsequently to "bury me in their burial place."

The Sages noted this negative focus on Egyptian burial, and explained it in various ways. Rashi quotes three reasons why he did not want to be buried in Egypt.

- (1) For its dust would become lice (during the plagues);
- (2) and also for the dead buried outside of Israel will be resurrected only with the trouble of transporting through tunnels (the resurrection proper takes place only in Israel; the dead bodies buried outside will first move underground to Israel);
- (3) and also so that the Egyptians not make me into an object of idolatry.

The second reason does not appear as relevant as the first and third for two reasons. First, it is a reason to object to any place outside of Israel, and not specifically to Egypt. Secondly, it would not preclude the solution which Yosef eventually imposed on his brothers and children - that he be buried in Egypt but his body be taken with them when eventually they would all leave Egypt, during the Exodus. In fact, in our texts of Bereishit Rabba, this does not appear as an explanation why Yaakov asked Yosef not to bury him in Egypt, as the other two do, but in answer to the question, "why do all the forefathers desire to be buried in the Land of Israel?" (BR 96:4).

B. The sons of Yosef

The special sensitivity of Yaakov regarding Egypt appears in another context as well. Yaakov, as we know, tells Yosef that his two sons, Efrayim and Menasheh, will have the same status as the sons of Yaakov; in other words, they will be shevatim, tribes. If, as 48:6 implies, Yosef had other children, why do only these two receive special status?

One possible answer might be that at this time, when Yaakov is speaking to Yosef, there are no other children. 48:6 - "And your offspring which you HAD after them shall be yours" - seems to imply that this is not the case. However, Rashi interprets this verse as hypothetical: "IF you will have more children, they will not be counted as my children but will be included within the tribes of Efrayim and Menasheh." The Sforno goes even further and claims that the verse is referring to Yosef's GRANDCHILDREN. He apparently assumes that Yosef had no other sons, since they are never mentioned.

Another answer explains the choice of only two of Yosef's children, even though there were more, as deriving from the prophecy Yaakov quotes as a preamble to his claiming the two of them as his sons.

Yaakov said to Yosef: Kel Shakkai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me. He said to me, behold I shall make you fruitful and multiply you; AND I SHALL MAKE YOU INTO A MULTITUDE OF PEOPLES. (48:3-4).

Rashi: He informed me that I would yet produce in the future a multitude and peoples.... "a multitude of peoples" refers to two, other than Binyamin.

The first explanation goes against the simple meaning of the verse, which seems to clearly imply that Yosef had other offspring besides Efrayim and Menasheh. The second leaves open the question: WHY does God limit the choice of Yosef's children to two. The usual answer to this question is that the election of Efrayim and Menasheh represents the "bekhora" of Yosef - he receives the status of "firstborn," who inherits a double portion. By declaring Efrayim and Menasheh to be tribes, Yaakov gives Yosef, in effect, a double portion, relative to the other sons.

This is a constant theme in Chazal, and is supported by several references to Yosef as a "bekhor" in Tanakh. Nonetheless, there is an additional point here, which becomes evident when reading the verses carefully.

And now, your two sons WHO WERE BORN TO YOU IN THE LAND OF EGYPT BEFORE I CAME TO EGYPT, they are mine; Efrayim and Menasheh shall be to me like Reuven and Shimon. (48,5)

Is this phrase, "who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to Egypt," merely a figure of speech, without special significance? From Yosef's answer to his father's next question, it would appear not. Yaakov asks Yosef who are the two children whom he has brought. Yosef answers, "These are my children, whom God has given me HERE" (48:9). The Hebrew reads, "asher natan li Elokim BA-ZEH." The last word, "ba-zeh," literally means "with this," and appears to be inexplicable. Rashi quotes the midrash which explains that Yosef showed his ketuba to Yaakov - he was defending the legitimacy of his children. The pshat however, as supported by the Targum, means "here." Yosef was answering his father's stipulation - these are the children born IN EGYPT, as you defined it in your previous statement. These are the two, Efrayim and Menasheh, who are to receive berakhot as though they were the children of Yaakov, since they are the two who were "born in the land of Egypt."

[In fact, the midrash is building on this explanation as well, adding the story of the ketuba to understand the unusual choice of words to indicate geography. Why does Yosef have to prove the legitimacy of his children? - Because they were born in Egypt before his father came. Yosef was living as an Egyptian far from his father's house and ways, in a land which Chazal considered to be "rife with licentiousness." Since these are the children who were "born in the land of Egypt" - ba-zeh - it is important to stress that were born from a legitimate union - ba-zeh!, with a ketuba!]

Hence, the equation of Efrayim and Menasheh with Reuven and Shimon is the equation of the children born in Egypt (before Yaakov joined Yosef) and the children born in Aram. Here again we see a special sensitivity to Egypt and its effect on Yaakov's house. What we do not yet understand, in this case, is what exactly the connection is between the Egyptian birth of the first two sons of Yosef and their election to the status of tribes of Israel.

C. Goren Ha-atad

Let me bring one last case of Egyptian-Canaanite tension, this time not only geographical but personal-political.

After someone dies, a funeral is conducted. Yaakov's instructions are to bury him in the Cave of Makhpela. What actually happens is as follows:

1. Yaakov, at Yosef's orders, is embalmed by Egyptian doctors (50:2)
2. Yaakov is mourned for seventy days by Egypt, including forty days of embalming, for "thus are the days of the embalming fulfilled" (3).
3. "The days of his crying end," and Yosef requests permission from Par'o to take Yaakov to Canaan (4).
4. Yosef takes Yaakov's body to Canaan, and all the elders of Egypt accompany him (50:7), as well as his father's house (8).
5. At a place called Goren Ha-Atad, "which is over the Jordan," Yosef conducts a mourning ceremony which attracts the attention of the Canaanites, who then call the place "the mourning of Egypt" (10-11).
6. Yaakov is brought to the Makhpela Cave by his sons, "as he had commanded them" (12-13).

What seems to be taking place here is two parallel mourning rites, one by Egypt and one by the house of Yaakov. First, Yaakov's body is embalmed in the Egyptian manner, according to Egyptian rites. Embalming in Egypt is not only, or even mostly, a practical means of preserving, but rather a religious ritual designed to ensure the existence of the dead in the nether world. This is hinted here by the phrase "for thus are the days of the embalming fulfilled" (3), which has a ritualistic tone to it. Forty days is what the prescribed ritual calls for. The body is then transported to Canaan by Yosef, who is accompanied by Par'o's servants and elders (and only secondarily by his own family). Finally, a great ceremony is held, which is identified by the local inhabitants as "the mourning of Egypt."

At this point, the Torah states, "And his sons did for him exactly as he commanded them" (12). This verse is a typical introduction verse, which should precede a description of what they did. In fact, the next verse states, "His sons carried him to the land of Egypt and buried him in the Cave of the Makhpela field...." The Torah clearly differentiates between all that took place between Yaakov's death and this point, which is not included in "as he commanded them," and what follows. The sons of Yaakov were not involved in the embalming, the seventy days, or the mourning at Goren Ha-atad. A different ritual begins at this point, one according to Yaakov's instructions. In other words, Jewish ritual takes over after the end of the Egyptian ritual.

There is an undercurrent of conflict here. The Egyptians seem to be claiming Yaakov as one of their own. It is clear from the way Yosef has to go and ask permission of Par'o, using the oath he swore to his father to convince the king to agree, that there is an assumption that Yaakov is supposed to be buried in Egypt. Par'o agrees, but only because of the oath: "Par'o said: Go up and bury your father AS HE MADE YOU SWEAR" (50,6; see Rashi). Even so, although the burial will not be in Egypt, Par'o sends the Egyptian court along and eventually they conduct what can only be described as a state funeral. The spectators exclaim, "This is a heavy mourning of Egypt" (11). The location of the Egyptian funeral receives a name

forever implanting it in the minds of all as a national site of mourning. What the Egyptians are doing is adopting Yaakov and making him an Egyptian national hero. (Rashi [50:3] explains that they imputed to him the prosperity of Egypt in the years following the famine.)

The sons of Yaakov patiently, or perhaps helplessly, wait. For reasons which are unclear, the Egyptian entourage does not cross the Jordan river. As soon as Yaakov crosses into the Land of Canaan, the Egyptian character of the funeral disappears. Canaan is not subject to Egyptian assimilation. Now Yaakov's instructions are paramount, and the sons act exactly as he commanded, burying him in the grave of his fathers, i.e., returning him to the Jewish heritage and rescuing him, as it were, from the Egyptian embrace.

It is noteworthy that Yosef told Par'o that he was required by the oath to bury Yaakov in the grave "which (Yaakov) had dug for himself in the land of Canaan" (50:5), but did not mention anything about the fact that it was the grave of Yaakov's forefathers. When Yaakov is buried there, the verse emphasizes (once again) that this is the cave bought by Avraham to be an "achuzat kever" - not just a grave of Yaakov, but a family (national) cemetery. Avraham bought this piece of land from Efron the Chitti, and it was, to some extent, already Jewish national land. It had already, as Yaakov emphasized in his request of the sons, been turned into historical-national territory, for it had been paid for and generations of Avraham's family had been buried there.

D. Yaakov and Egypt

Yaakov fears that after his death, Egypt will attempt to take over his identity. Egypt represents for Israel the power of assimilation, the imperial power that would swallow up the Jews. When the exodus takes place, Moshe tells the Jews, "But God took you, and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt" ([Devarim 4:20](#)). Chazal express this fear when they state that the redemption came about because the Jews did not change their names, clothing, or language. Egypt is a melting pot. We saw how easy it was for Yosef to take on an Egyptian identity. Yaakov fears that the same will take place with him, posthumously. Throughout the parasha, we find this struggle between the embrace of Egypt and Yaakov's resistance. (The prohibition of the Torah to live in Egypt is illuminated by this point; see also [Yeshayahu 30:2](#))).

It is worth noting that during the struggle over his burial, the actions of the Egyptians are orchestrated by Yosef. He orders the embalming, the original journey is described as "Yosef went up ... and with him ... and with him" (50:7-9). The funeral at Goren Ha-atad includes the statement, "and he made for his father a seven-day mourning" (10), clearly referring to Yosef. But when they go to Canaan, it says only that "his sons" took him," and Yosef is not mentioned.

This is not because Yosef is on the side of the Egyptians. On the contrary, Yaakov has entrusted to Yosef the job of extricating him from the Egyptians. This is not only because he has the power, as regent, but also because Yosef has in fact become something of an Egyptian - though he has preserved his character and remained Yosef Ha-tzadik. Hence, the difference between Yaakov's charge to Yosef and the corresponding charge to the sons. To Yosef he commands, Do not bury me in Egypt! Yosef is in charge of maneuvering the

Egyptians in such a way that Yaakov is not physically attached to Egyptian soil and thereby adopted by the Egyptian nation. (This is the meaning of the midrash which states that Yaakov feared that his burial would lead to his becoming an Egyptian god.) To the assembled sons he commands, bury me in the grave of my fathers, in the field Avraham bought. Yosef is in charge of defense against the Egyptians, the sons as a whole, the house of Yaakov, are in charge of fulfilling the national destiny.

This is also the background to the adoption of Efrayim and Menasheh. The sons born to Yosef in Egypt BEFORE YAAKOV CAME THERE have been born completely into Egyptian culture. When Yaakov was in Canaan with his entire household, Yosef was divorced from them. He is married to the daughter of an Egyptian priest, he has an Egyptian name (41:45), he wears Egyptian clothes (41:42), and presumably he speaks Egyptian. In fact, he says so explicitly when naming Menasheh, whose name means, "for God has made me forget all my toil and ALL MY FATHER'S HOUSE." Without a direct connection to Yaakov, these children will suffer the fate that Yaakov fears for himself. And so, Yaakov takes them and makes them his own sons (thereby also fulfilling the bekhora of Yosef), like Reuven and Shimon. Yaakov rescues them from the grasp of Egypt. That is why his blessing to them is so different from the usual promises of prosperity and victory we find in Bereishit. "My name shall be called on them, and the name of my fathers, and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of THE LAND." He was blessing them with a Jewish name, with Jewish identity. He is so successful that he can add, as a second blessing, that they will be the archetypal Jewish names, and generations of Jews will bless, saying: May God make you like Efrayim and Menasheh.

With Yaakov safely buried in Canaan, his children and grandchildren, the house of Yaakov, can remain in Egypt, in anticipation of redemption.

Post script for further study:

Parashat Vayechi is characterized by frequent changes between the name Yaakov and the name Yisrael. I think it is correct to say, especially in Vayechi, the parasha of the berakhot and the transition from avot (individuals) to am (people), that the name Yisrael has national implications. A clear indication of this is the verse, "With you shall Yisrael bless, saying: May God make you like Efrayim and Menasheh" (48:20), and the verse, "These are all the twelve tribes of Israel" (49:28). With this in mind, together with the theme of the shiur, check out and consider the following:

1. Yaakov lives in Egypt (47:28), but Yisrael tells Yosef not to bury him there (29).
2. Yaakov adopts Efrayim and Menasheh (48:3-6), but Yisrael does not recognize them (8). After Yisrael kisses them, he blesses them.
3. The Egyptians embalm Yisrael, but afterwards he is called only "his (Yosef's) father."

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