

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Vayigash

Israel lived in Egypt, in the district of Goshen. VAYEI'ACHAZU BA - they were grasped there, and they greatly multiplied in number (47:27).

These words conclude Parashat Vayigash. The meaning VAYEI'ACHAZU BA is unclear. Midrashic sources translate: 'they were grasped there', they were not able to leave and return to where they came from. This fits in with the prophecy that G-d gave to Avraham Avinu: that his descendants would be first strangers, then slaves, then endure great suffering, and then finally the tables would turn and they would leave with the wealth of their captors and enslavers.

Rather differently, the Kli Yakar translates VAYEI'ACHAZU BA: 'they acquired property there.' Though Yosef gave his brothers and their families territory in the best part of Egypt (47:11), it did not prevent them from obtaining more real estate in that country.

Perhaps we can put both explanations together as two sides of the same coin. It was their increasing ownership of land in Egypt and their flourishing in that country that ensured that 'they were grasped

there', that they remained there. But, as the Torah recounts in the following parashiot, bad times were ahead. They would indeed 'be grasped there'. For even Yosef in his lofty position would have to obtain special permission from Par'o to temporarily leave the country and bury his father in Chevron. And after his death, things would immediately take a sharp turn for the worse.

Indeed, in connection to why the Sefer Torah does not leave the usual gap between Parashat Vayigash and the next one, Parashat Vaychi, the Chizkuni explains that with the death of Ya'akov Avinu, his family and descendants slowly became closed to their spiritual role in the world, as by degrees they sensed themselves as part of Egyptian society. We can add that owning estates was part of that process. And that this culturally-engaging alien environment had its attractions. It was something new, and out of character. None of the three Avot had ever settled down as members of an established community. They had always been outsiders, living as a clan of pastoral nomads ready to be on the move. Their wealth had always been in liquid form: camels, cattle, or cash, they could run with their hand on the money at a moment's notice.

But the descendants of Ya'akov Avinu, like all landowners, are in a

sense possessed by their lands. They cannot take it with them. And they are vulnerable as threatening outsiders when things turn ugly. Slowly, they become angrily envied by the serf class and despised by the indigenous landowning elite. Chizkuni emphasizes that with the death of Ya'akov Avinu, his family and descendants slowly became closed to their spiritual role in the world, as symbolized by the closure of the space between the two sedras. For their new environment did not seem to be such a bad distraction. Unlike Ya'akov Avinu, they were not able to say that they were living in a foreign land and were not learning from their ways (Rashi to 32:5). Their interactions with Egyptian culture were not confined to what the future Yirmiyahu HaNavi would declare in his Letter to the Exiles: 'Seek the welfare of... where I have exiled you and pray to G-d on its behalf, for you will prosper when it does' (Yirmiyahu 29:7). On the contrary, they were moving beyond those limits towards assimilation with the host culture.

The Ramban repeatedly emphasizes MA'ASEH AVOT SIMAN LABANIM, what happened to the fathers, our patriarchal ancestors, is a sign for the children. A main purpose of the narratives of the Torah is that the things that occurred were destined to repeat themselves, or more broadly, these stories are meant to teach us

how G-d designed the world to work. Am Yisrael exists for one particular purpose: to be an AM KADOSH, indeed a MAMLECHET KOHANIM V'GOI KADOSH, a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation. We are in a sense the world's kohanim. The 613 mitzvot and the teachings based on them are there to show us where we belong and how we serve and function in the matrix of the Creation. And even though they had not yet been formally revealed in the days of the Avot, the Avot greatly contributed to the culture that would make it possible for the descendants to formally accept their position in the Creation at Matan Torah when that finally happened.

In contrast, Egypt was given to the Egyptians. The descendants of Israel, Ya'akov Avinu, did not belong there, neither physically nor culturally. They may have not let it enter their thinking: "they were possessed by it". But the Egyptians sensed it, it made them feel awkward in their own country, and in due course it would lead them to declare that the Israelites were becoming "too many and too powerful for them" (Sh'mot 1:9).

Indeed, it is a pattern that was destined to repeat itself many times in Jewish history... and rarely without serious and typically tragic consequences.

In addition...

And to that end, the Meshech Chochma emphasized, assimilated nineteenth century Jews of Europe saw their roots as being in Berlin, the cultural and social capital of time rather than Jerusalem. They found it very much to their liking, to such a degree they sensed that they belonged there, and what they had of Judaism was fully reconcilable with that setting.

That was amongst the reasons that Ya'akov Avinu requested that on his death he should be carried back to Chevron for burial within the family plot. Not only because were he to be buried in Egypt the Egyptians might turn his shrine into a place of idolatry, but that his final place of rest should be where he and his descendants truly belonged. And when the time came, the long procession back to Chevron accompanied by distinguished Egyptians of Par'o's household (50:7) not only paid respect to Ya'akov whose presence brought an end to the famine (Rashi to 47:19), but it could well have been planned by Yosef to impress that however important they were in Egypt, it was the land that contained Chevron and not Goshen that was to be their home.

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or culturally, even though "they were possessed by it". But the Egyptians sensed it, making them feel increasing disharmony in their own country, and in due course declaring that the Israelites were becoming "too many and too powerful for them" (Sh'mot 1:9).

Indeed, "substituting Berlin for Jerusalem" as the Meshech Chochma warned in his generation, was a long-standing pattern that was destined to repeat itself many times in Jewish history... and rarely without eventual serious consequences. 🌿📖