

**Sermon | Parshat Shoftim**  
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As an undergraduate at Brandeis University, I had hoped to spend a semester studying abroad in Egypt. There was something about the pyramids, the archaeology, the history of the place that piqued my curiosity. My parents were less than thrilled with the idea, and encouraged me to consider something else. “Why not Israel? Why not somewhere in Europe? You know, places where normal people study abroad.” I would have studied abroad in the spring of 2010, and I probably would have wound up in Israel as my parents wished, but in the aftermath of the Bernie Madoff financial scandal, Brandeis changed their study abroad policies, which would have required me to forfeit my scholarship for the semester abroad, and so my plans changed. To this very day, I have not set foot in Egypt.

And I tell you all of this to say that, by not having gone to Egypt, I have apparently been fulfilling one of the 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah. Parshat Shoftim warns us that the king of Israel, “shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since Adonai has warned you, **לֹא תִסְפֹּן לְשׁוּב בְּדֶרֶךְ הַזֶּה עוֹד**, You must not go back that way again.”<sup>1</sup> It sounds as if this has been an instruction all along, that God had previously warned us not to return to Egypt, the land from which we were liberated. There is only one problem with that idea—you would be hard-pressed to find another place in the Torah where such a warning is given! There are a *few* verses which may be candidates for this warning, but nowhere in the Torah do we find this particular formulation as it exists in this *parsha*.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 17:16.

In two weeks we will read Parshat Ki Tavo, where Moses warns the people of the horrors that will befall them if they turn away from God and spurn the Torah, “Adonai will send you back to Egypt in galleys, by a route which I told you you should not see again.”<sup>2</sup> That is a threat of punishment, a reminder that there are consequences for our actions, not a commandment of the Torah. Way back in Parshat Beshalach we read, “Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.”<sup>3</sup> Again, this is not a commandment, but a concern that the Israelites will return to Egypt in fear. And finally, one chapter later, Moses says to the Israelites, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which Adonai will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again.”<sup>4</sup> This is a promise, a promise that the Israelites will never have to endure their oppressors ever again. This is *not* a commandment never to return to Egypt. Nevertheless, the *mitzvah* is given here in this week’s *parsha*. Apparently, we are never to return to Egypt.

In the Talmud, the ancient rabbis offer us a narrative to support their interpretation of the text.<sup>5</sup> Once upon a time, there was a Great Synagogue in Alexandria of Egypt. The Great Synagogue was as magnificent as the world’s finest basilica, and it could accommodate hundreds of thousands of worshippers each day. The synagogue was not only massive, but also adorned with incredible beauty and wealth. There were 71 golden chairs to seat the 71 members of the Great Sanhedrin, the supreme rabbinical court housed in the Temple of

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 28:68.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 13:17.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 14:13.

<sup>5</sup> Bavli Sukkah 51b.

Jerusalem. One day, the conqueror Alexander the Great visited the synagogue, and heard the Jews reading a verse from Parshat Ki Tavo: “The Lord will bring a nation against you from far, from the end of the earth, as the vulture swoops down; a nation whose tongue you shall not understand.”<sup>6</sup> Imagining that the verse was speaking about him, he fulfilled this terrible prophecy by destroying the synagogue and all of the worshippers within. Abaye, one of the sages of the Talmud, says that this was their punishment for violating the *mitzvah*: **לֹא תִסְפּוּן בְּדֶרֶךְ הַזֶּה עוֹד**, You must not go back that way again.

It is a depressing narrative, but it illustrates for us how the rabbis took seriously the Torah’s injunction not to return to Egypt, not to resettle in the land from which we were redeemed, even if we could build for ourselves an extraordinary synagogue and flourishing Jewish life. But an important question remains: Why? Why is returning to Egypt considered so problematic? What was so terrible about going back there?

The *Sefer HaHinnukh*, an anonymous composition from 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain, enumerates and describes all 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah. Regarding our *mitzvah*, the *Hinnukh* teaches:

At the root of the precept lies the reason: The people of Egypt are bad and sinful, and God took us out from there and rescued us with loving-kindness from their hands... God wished that we should never again return to become defiled in their midst, so that we should not learn their heresies nor walk in their ways...

The ban on returning to Egypt is to prevent us from being negatively influenced by its inhabitants. These were the same people who enslaved us, who witnessed and participated in the atrocities ordained by Pharaoh, who sat idly by and enjoyed the fruits of our labors as we

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 28:49.

yearned for freedom. According to the rabbis, ancient Egyptian society was rotten at its core. The prohibition on returning to Egypt was about protecting us and setting us up for success.

This commandment has evolved over the millennia. There is no ban on visiting Egypt as a tourist, or even studying abroad for a period of time. There is room for a longer *halakhic* discussion about whether this *mitzvah* is still operative thousands of years after it was given. After all, the *Sefer Hinnukh* was not talking about present-day Egypt but ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, the essential lesson of this *mitzvah* is certainly still relevant, and appropriate for us to consider during this auspicious season of the year. Today is the second day of Elul, the month on the Jewish calendar which immediately precedes Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur, the most sacred days of the year. Beginning on the first of Elul, we recite Psalm 27 twice each day. Psalm 27, known as the “Psalm for the Season of Repentance,” says, “Teach me Your way, O Adonai, and guide me on the level path in order to confound all those who are watching my every move.”<sup>7</sup> The psalmist here prays that God will protect them from those who seek to harm them, and the psalmist acknowledges that we do this by learning God’s way, by following the right path. When the Torah warns us not to go back *that way* ever again, it is not referring only to the physical place called Egypt. Rather, it is a warning to us as individuals: Do not go back to a place where you will not thrive. Do not put yourself in a situation that will be harmful to you. Instead, seek out an environment in which you will succeed.

In their book, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, brothers and coauthors Chip and Dan Heath write, “What looks like a people problem is often a situation problem.” In other words, when we see that people are struggling to change a particular habit

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 27:11.

or behavior, we are too quick to blame them personally for their inability to change. A more thoughtful approach, however, considers the environment in which these people are operating. Is it reasonable to expect people in this situation to change? Or, should we focus instead of changing their situation, and in so doing help them to make a particular switch? A common Hebrew phrase, based upon a Talmudic passage, teaches the same idea, משנה מקום משנה מזל, “Change your place, and change your luck.” Another Talmudic passage tells us that one of the ways to tear up the Divine decree set against us is to change our place, שינוי מקום.<sup>8</sup> If you want to change, or if you want to avoid negative influences in your life, change your environment, alter your setting, create a new space within which to succeed.

This is the meaning of the *mitzvah* from Parshat Shoftim as we understand it today. It is not meant to be read literally, and it is certainly not meant to be understood as a condemnation of modern Egypt. Rather, we read the phrase on its own and understand its origins: לא תָסֵפִין לָשׁוּב בַּדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה עוֹד, You must not go back *that way* again. Do not return to a place where you will struggle to succeed. Instead, seek out a place where you will thrive, where you will achieve your goals and realize your dreams, where you will flourish in the year to come.

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<sup>8</sup> Bavli Rosh Hashanah 16b.