

Parshat Shemot
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“And these are the names of the children of Israel coming to Egypt; with Jacob, each man and his household came.” So begins our parsha this week. Some questions:

- 1) Why does the Torah here use the word “coming,” where in many other places it refers to “going down” to Egypt?
- 2) Why does it begin the sentence with the present tense “coming” and end with the past tense “came”?
- 3) We have a sentence in Vayigash that uses the exact same wording as the beginning of our sentence here: “And these are the names of the children of Israel coming to Egypt.” How and why do they differ?

Throughout the book of Bereishis, “Egypt” has a negative connotation. Our ancestors did not usually go to Egypt under pleasant conditions. They went to Egypt when there was no other choice. The term that the Torah associates with these events is some conjugation of the word “Reid” – which means “Go Down.” In Lech Lecha, Avraham went **down** to Egypt because there was a famine in his land. In Vayeshev, Joseph was taken **down** to Egypt to be a slave. In Miketz, Yaakov asked his sons to go **down** to Egypt because he had heard there was food there during the famine in their land. At the outset of Vayigash, Yehuda’s dialogue with the Viceroy of Egypt (Joseph) refers to being forced to bring Binyamin **down** to Egypt in order to prove the brothers were not spies.

But there was one instance in the book of Bereishis, where there was an association with joy in going to Egypt. In Vayigash, after Yehuda’s impassioned oratory, Joseph reveals himself as their brother. The brothers in turn let Yaakov know that Joseph is alive. Yaakov is so happy that the spirit of prophecy, the spirit of Hashem which was absent during his many years of mourning for Joseph, now returns. Hashem appears to him to assuage any hesitation Yaakov might have in leaving Eretz Yisroel. Hashem tells him not to fear going down to Egypt, that it is part of the bigger vision he has promised Avraham, Yitzchak and now Yaakov. Hashem then says a beautiful thing to Yaakov: “I will go **down with you** to Egypt; and I will surely bring you up again”.

A few sentences later in Vayigash, the Torah continues “And these are the names of the children of Israel coming to Egypt - Jacob and his children” and then lists the names of Jacob’s children and grandchildren. There is no use of the language of going **down** to Egypt, but rather the term **coming** to Egypt. In addition the present tense is used. The tone of this trip is a positive one, for not only will Yaakov see his son Joseph, but Yaakov has assurances from Hashem that He will be there with him. Yaakov was not going down to Egypt because he had no choice; he was reuniting his family.

Our current parsha, Shemot, starts off with the exact same language as we saw in Vayigash “And these are the names of the children of Israel coming to Egypt.” As in Vayigash, it is written in the present tense, its tone of hope reflecting the time they were coming to Egypt to reunite the family. But then it continues with a difference from Vayigash, which hints at a darker time to come: “with Jacob, each man and his household came.” Jacob’s children has shifted to the less intimate “each man and his household.” In addition, the present tense changes to the past. After listing Jacob’s children, the parsha goes on to say that Joseph died, as well as his brothers and all of that generation. And then the darkness descended as the peaceful existence that the Jews had was about to change. Jacob was respected by the people of Egypt. His children were also on a high spiritual level and were respected by the Egyptians. But when they died, the same spiritual level was not in place with their descendants, and the trouble began. A new Pharaoh rose to power who either was physically new or emotionally new in his willingness to forget about Joseph.

The story goes on to tell how the Egyptians enslaved the Jews and made their lives bitter. Until ultimately it was too much and they cried out to Hashem who heard their cries and remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In a few months we will recall this story at our Seder table. We’ll begin with the hardships, but ultimately the focus of Passover is about redemption. We begin with the story of enslavement, but end with praise for the redemption.

There have been times in my life when peaceful, joyous days were replaced with a descent into darkness — with situations that were beyond my control and sometimes my capacity to cope. I turned to Hashem, taking strength in the G-d that went down with Jacob to Egypt, and was within reach for me during my hard times. I cried out for help, and took comfort that with G-d’s help I would somehow come through it. It sustained me until I could see the first sparks of a new light.

May we all merit to see redemption. Shabbat Shalom.