

May Jews Live in Egypt?

Introduction

This week's Torah portion, *Ki Tavo*, features a long list of frightening curses that will befall the Jews if they do not follow God's commandments. The last one is:

וְהִשִּׁיבְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִצִּיפֵי הַיָּם בְּאֵתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי לְךָ לֹא-תִסִּיף עוֹד לִרְאֹתָהּ

The Lord will send you back to Egypt in ships, by a route which, as I told you, you should not see again. [Deut. 28:68]

Implication: Being sent back to Egypt is punishment. Indeed, after the Exodus, Moses promised the Israelites they would never see Egypt again:

Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. [Ex. 14:13]

Later, in Deuteronomy, this was turned into an outright commandment:

[Your king] shall not ... send people back to Egypt ... since the Lord has warned you, "You must not go back that way again." [Deut. 17:16]

Maimonides later listed this triplicate injunction as the 601st commandment: Thou shalt never again dwell permanently in the Land of Egypt. He wrote:

וּמִתֵּר לְשֹׁפֵן בְּכָל הָעוֹלָם חוּץ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. מִן הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל וְעַד הַמַּעֲרָב אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת פָּרָסָה עַל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת פָּרָסָה כְּנֶגֶד אֶרֶץ כּוּשׁ וְכְנֶגֶד הַמִּדְבָּר. הַכֹּל אֲסוּר לְהִתְיָשֵׁב בָּהּ. בְּשִׁלְשָׁה מְקוֹמוֹת הִזְהִירָה תוֹרָה שֶׁלֹּא לָשׁוּב לְמִצְרַיִם. שְׁנַעֲמַר (דְּבָרִים יז טז) "לֹא תִסְפוֹן לָשׁוּב בְּדֶרֶךְ הַזֶּה עוֹד". (דְּבָרִים כח סח) "לֹא תִסִּיף עוֹד לִרְאֹתָהּ". (שְׁמוֹת יד יג) "לֹא תִסְפוּ לִרְאֹתָם עוֹד עַד עוֹלָם". וְאַלְכֶסְנֶדְרִיאָה בְּכָלֵל הָאֲסוּר

It is permissible to live anywhere in the world, except for Egypt, defined as the area extending west of the Mediterranean Sea, 400 parasangs by 400 parasangs [Pesachim 94a, Taanit 10a], in the direction of Ethiopia and in the direction of the desert. The Torah warned us in three places not to return to Egypt:

"And do not return in this way again" [Deut. 17:16], and

"And you shall no longer see it" [Deut. 28:68], and

"And you shall not ever again see it" [Exodus 14:13].

Alexandria is included in this prohibition. [Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 5:7]

The area he delimited includes today's Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and some of the Sahara Desert. He singled out Alexandria because it had a thriving Jewish community.

Why? Is the ban only on living there or also on visiting? Does it apply forever? What about the many Jews who lived there since the Exodus?

(Full disclosure: I was born and raised in Egypt.)

Why the prohibition?

-The people of Egypt were immoral, as the Torah states:

You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt ... nor shall you follow their laws. [Leviticus 18:3]

Living there would have a bad influence on us. [Rabbenu Bahya; Rambam, Sefer Hamitzvot, Negative Commandment 46]

-Returning to Egypt would offend God, who saved us from slavery there and took us out of there.

-The Arizal: A Jew must extract the holiness that is "hidden" where he lives and elevate it. But there is no holiness left in Egypt, as the Talmud says:

[When the Jews left Egypt, they emptied it of all holiness.] They made it like a [bird] trap that has no grain and like the depths [of the sea] in which there is no fish. [Berachot 9b]

So a Jew cannot accomplish his mission in Egypt. [The Arizal, Sefer Halikutim on Ki Tetze]

-Some view the prohibition in metaphorical terms: Return to Egypt or return to God?

Historical consequences

The Midrash and the Jerusalem Talmud say that three times the Jews ignored these three verses, and each time catastrophe ensued: [Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 14:13; Sukkah Y 5:1]

-When the Jews of the Northern Kingdom of Israel asked Egypt to help them against the Assyrians, the prophet Isaiah warned them:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, and who rely on horses and trust in an abundance of chariots, and on very strong riders; and do not rely on the Holy One of Israel, and do not seek God... Now the Egyptians are men and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit, and when the Lord stretches out His arm, the helper shall stumble and the helped one shall fall, and both shall perish together. [Isaiah 31:1,3]

The Assyrians interpreted this call for help as a threat, invaded the Northern Kingdom and exiled its ten tribes, who were never heard from again.

-After the First Temple was destroyed in 597 BCE, the prophet Jeremiah warned the Jews not to go to Egypt. He said:

And now, therefore, hear the word of God, O remnant of Judah! The Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, said: If you turn your faces toward Egypt and you dwell there, the sword that you fear will overtake you there... and the famine that you are worried about shall overtake you there also, and there you shall die. All the men who turn their faces toward Egypt, in order to sojourn there, shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. They shall have no surviving remnant of the disaster that I will bring upon them. [Jeremiah 42:15-17]

Many Jews went to Egypt anyway [2 Kings 25:26, Jeremiah 43:5-7]. They settled in Migdol, Tahpanhes, Noph, and Pathros [Jeremiah 44:1]. They quickly lapsed into idolatry. A few years later, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt and laid waste to it, and most of these Jews died.

-After the Second Temple was destroyed, many Jews went to Egypt. Fifty years later they staged a massive rebellion against the Romans (114-117, between the two revolts in Israel in 70 and 135). Emperor Trajan suppressed it and slaughtered 50,000 Jews. [Josephus, the Jewish War 2.495ff]

Talmud links killings to violation of commandment:

Whoever has not seen the Double Colonnade of Alexandria in Egypt has not seen the glory of Israel. It was like a huge basilica that contained twice the number of men who went out from Egypt [2 x 600,000], and there were 71 golden armchairs for 71 Sages, and each chair was no less than 21 talents of gold. And a wooden pulpit was in the middle of the palace where the attendant of the congregation stood with a scarf in his hand, and when the time came in the prayer to respond "Amen," he raised the flag, [so those who couldn't hear because of the large crowd could know when to respond] and the whole people said "Amen." And they did not sit mixed; rather the goldsmiths, silversmiths, blacksmiths, coppersmiths and weavers all sat separately. And when a poor man went in, he recognized his fellow-tradesmen and went to them, and received work to support himself and his family.

Abaye said: And they were all killed by [Emperor Trajan in 117]. Why were they so punished? Because they transgressed the passage, "You shall not return [to Egypt] any more" [Deut. 17:16] and they did return. [Sukkah 51b]

This, and extensive assimilation, caused Alexandrian Jewry to disappear.

Note: All three instances involved Jews leaving *Israel* for Egypt.

Yet many Jews lived in Egypt since biblical days

-Documents in Aramaic describe the lives of a community of Jewish soldiers stationed in Egypt for the Persian Empire, about 650 BCE.

-Josephus: When Alexander's general Ptolemy I took Judea in 318 BCE, he expelled 120,000 Jews to Egypt. Other Jews went there of their own accord, when they heard how fertile the soil was and how liberal Ptolemy was.

-When Alexandria was founded (332 BCE) Jews got 2 of the 5 districts. Their wealth caused intense antisemitism among their neighbors. Sources give a million Alexandrian Jews ~2000 years ago, under Greeks then Romans. Times of persecution alternated with times of peace. They served in the Army (sources speak of 30,000 Jewish soldiers at the time of the Ptolemies).

-The Cairo Genizah covers 1,000 years (870 to 1880) and attests to a long unbroken Jewish presence in Egypt. It is a treasure trove of some 280,000 Jewish manuscripts.

-Some Jews from Arabia came to Egypt with the Islamic conquest. Amr ibn el As, Arab conqueror, reported 40,000 Jews in Alexandria in 641 CE.

-Karaism, founded by Anan ben David about 760 CE, flourished in Egypt, one of its largest centers.

-After the expulsion from Spain in 1492, many Jews went to Egypt.

-Beginning in the middle of the 19th century, more Jews were invited to Egypt by viceroy Mohammed Ali and his successors. They numbered close to 100,000 in 1948, when Israel was created. Nasser tightened the noose around their collective neck, and within 20 years practically all were gone. I was one of the last ones to leave (Nov 1967).

-And then there were none.

Great Jewish Sages lived in Egypt

-Maimonides himself (1138-1204) emigrated to Egypt in 1168 and did his most significant work there. So did his descendants.

-The Rambam's grandson said that the Rambam signed some letters "Moshe ben Maimon, who violates the commandment not to dwell in Egypt every day".

[reported by Rabbi Ishtori Haparchi (1280-1366), in Kaftor v'Ferah, ch. 5] But no such letters have survived.

-Saadia Gaon (882-942), born and raised in Egypt;

-Yaakov Berav (1474-1546), born in Spain, rabbi in Cairo;

-Betzalel Ashkenazi (1520-1592) born in Israel, spent most of life in Egypt;

-Isaac Luria (the Arizal) (1534-1572), famous mystic, born in Jerusalem, grew up in Egypt;

-The Radbaz (רדב"ז) (1479-1573), born in Spain, Chief Rabbi of Egypt for 40 years (1517-1557).

-Ovadiah Yosef, influential former Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, was vice-Chief Rabbi of Egypt and head of the Cairo bet din (1947-1949).

Would they have lived in Egypt if it was totally banned?

There is no permanent prohibition for Jews to reside in Egypt. Had the Torah intended these words as a permanent prohibition it would be inconceivable that so many Torah scholars, pious individuals, made their home in Egypt after the destruction of the Temple. Even if individual Jews had ignored this prohibition and settled in Egypt, the Sages would have spoken out against this and we would have records of their protest. The only people who were forbidden to dwell in Egypt were Jews who left the land of Israel to do so. [Rabbenu Bahya (14th-century) on Deut. 17:16]

How was the presence of Jews in Egypt justified?

-The prohibition to live in Egypt applied only in biblical times. [Rabbenu Bahya on Deut. 17:16; Semag, Lo Ta'aseh 227]

-The prohibition no longer applies because today's Egyptians are not the descendants of those who lived in Pharaoh's day. Indeed, most Egyptians

were exiled by Sennacherib and the Assyrians. [Semag, Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, Negative Command 227; Ritva on Yoma 38a]

-But the ban refers to “Egypt”, not “the Egyptians”.

-The prohibition applies only to those who leave Israel to go to Egypt. Jews who go to Egypt from any other country may settle there. [Sefer Yere'im 309]

-The prohibition is only on using the same path through the desert as the path Jews used in the Exodus, because the Torah says:

You must not go back that way again. [Deut. 17:16]

[Ritva (14th-century Spain); Eliezer of Metz, Yere'im s309]

-The prohibition is in the plural, so it does not apply to an individual. Individual settlement is allowed, mass migration is not.

-The prohibition is only on “settling”. Going to Egypt with *intention* only to conduct business, study, sightsee, or visit is allowed. Deciding afterwards to stay there is also allowed if prospects of making an equivalent living elsewhere are dim. [Radbaz; Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 5:8; Sanhedrin Y 10:7]

-The prohibition applies only when the Jews rule the Land of Israel. When non-Jews rule Israel, Jews may live in Egypt or any other country [Ritva on Yoma 38a].

-This reason no longer applies today since Jews rule Israel.

-Radbaz: The prohibition does not apply if forced to live in Egypt:

Maimonides was forced to stay [in Egypt] by the government, since he was the doctor of the king and the ministers. And I also settled there for a long time in order to learn Torah, to teach it, and to build a Yeshiva, which is permitted, and then I returned to Jerusalem. [Radbaz]

Concluding thought

Egypt is practically *judenrein* today, for the first time since biblical days.

Maybe the commandment not to dwell in Egypt meant exactly what it said.

God always ultimately gets what He wants.

Shabbat shalom.