

Why Didn't Jacob Go Back to Israel?

Introduction

In last week's portion, Jacob and his entire family of seventy moved to Egypt because of the famine. They were invited by Joseph, now viceroy of Egypt. Joseph tells them:

It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. [Gen. 45:6]

This week's portion, *Vayechi*, opens with:

וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂר שָׁנָה

Jacob lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt. [Gen. 47:28]

So Jacob lived in Egypt for twelve years after the famine, and his clan stayed in Egypt after he died. Why did they? Why didn't Jacob and his family go back to Israel, where, presumably, God wanted them to live?

Because they were waiting for God to take them out

Jacob at first hesitated about going to Egypt. The Midrash says he was thinking:

Can I forsake the land of my fathers, the land of my birth, the land of the sojournings of my fathers, the land where the Shekhinah of the Holy One, blessed be He, is in its midst, and go to an unclean land where there is no fear of Heaven? [Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 39:1]

But God not only reassured him, but said that *He* will bring him back:

God called to Israel in a vision by night: “Jacob! Jacob!”

He answered, “Here I am.”

And He said, “I am God, the God of your father. Do not fear going down to Egypt, because there I will make you into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph’s hand shall close your eyes.” [Gen. 46:2-4]

-But the last comment seems to apply to Jacob's remains, not to him and his clan while living. [Sotah Y 1:10]

-Why could they not become “a great nation” in their own homeland? Because remaining in Egypt was necessary to enjoy the safety needed to become “a great nation”. Also, to appreciate something, in this case freedom, you have to lose it then reacquire it.

Because God commanded them to do stay in Egypt

Abravanel: Jacob stayed in Egypt after the famine because God commanded him to do so.

But the text says God only *allowed* him to go, at most *encouraged* him, but did not *command* him.

Because the Egyptians would not let them return

The Egyptians would not let them return. Joseph was too precious to them. And Jacob wanted a united Israel. Even to go bury his father in Israel, Joseph had to get Pharaoh's permission:

Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's court, saying: Do me this favor and intercede on my behalf with Pharaoh. My father made me swear, saying, “I am about to die. Be sure to bury me in the grave which I made ready for myself in the land of Canaan.” Now, therefore, let me go up and bury my father; then I shall return. And Pharaoh said, “Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath.” [Gen. 50:4-6]

Pharaoh sends a large delegation with Joseph, probably to ensure he would return:

Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the officials of Pharaoh, the senior members of his court, and all of Egypt's dignitaries. [Gen. 50:7]

But the children have to stay back in Egypt (as hostages?):

Their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the region of Goshen. [Gen. 50:8]

Because they could no longer travel as a group

When the Jews could have left, they had grown so much in number that they could not travel as a group. Even the original family of 70 had to wait for Joseph to help. Joseph gave his brothers wagons and supplies and instructed them not to even bring their belongings:

[Joseph told his brothers:] “Take from the land of Egypt wagons for your children and your wives, and bring your father here. And never mind your belongings, for the best of all the land of Egypt shall be yours.” The sons of Israel did so.

Joseph gave them wagons as Pharaoh had commanded, and he supplied them with provisions for the journey. [Gen. 45:19-21]

But could they not go back in individual families? No, because Jacob wanted the Israelites to remain united.

Because Jacob thought the time for slavery had come

Jacob was no doubt aware that God had told his grandfather Abraham:

Know for certain that your offspring will be strangers in a strange land, and will be enslaved and afflicted for four hundred years. But know with equal certainty that I will judge the nation that enslaved them, and that afterwards they will leave with great substance. [Genesis 15:13-14]

He also knew God did not say it was punishment for anything. So he concluded slavery was necessary to God’s plan, and he might as well get it over with. What reasons might have come to his mind?

1-Protection. In the Land of Israel, Jacob's clan was an easy target for its neighbors. In Egypt, a superpower protected the Jews, albeit to exploit them.

2-Building large numbers in safety. If 210 years equal ten generations, and if numbers double with each generation, assuming four children per couple, the original number would be multiplied a thousandfold: 2^{10} is 1024.

3-Building up identity and community spirit. All Jews were in the same boat and followed the same customs. The Midrash says that the Jews deserved redemption from Egypt because they kept their distinct names, dress, food and language. [Lev. R. 32:5 for names and language; Minor Pesikta, Devarim on Ki Tavo 41a for clothing and food]

4-Minimizing contact with the outside world. Such contact might have led to idolatry and other practices later forbidden by the Torah.

5-Eliminating the possibility of intermarriage. Egyptians wouldn't want to marry slaves, and Israelite women raped by Egyptians would raise their children as Israelites.

6-Creating a scenario that allows God to show the Jews and the whole world who was in charge, with miracles and wonders that make a big impression.

7-Creating feelings of gratitude that would make it easier for the Jews to accept the Torah.

8-Creating a slave mentality that would make it easier for the Jews to accept the Torah. Indeed, after being a slave for so many generations, the first instinctive response when given a command is to say "Yes, sir!" However, once we accepted the Torah, the slave mentality became a burden, so God waited until the generation of the Exodus died out in the desert before letting us into the Promised Land.

Because of the danger of intermarriage

Sforno: "I am the God of your father" means "I am the God who told your father not to go to Egypt [Gen. 26:2], yet I am telling *you* to go." God was telling him: If you remain here your offspring will intermarry with the Canaanites. This will not happen in Egypt because the populace will not even eat with the Hebrews. The Torah says:

The Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to them. [Gen. 43:32]

Because they were too comfortable in Egypt

They were too comfortable in Egypt -- until it was too late. The same happened to the Jews of Europe, of Babylonia, of the Diaspora in general. Even 4/5 of the Jews of Egypt refused to follow Moses in the Exodus, even though they were enslaved; and 4/5 of the Jews remained in Babylonia when permission was given to go back to Israel. They were born there, were used to the place and to their condition, and wanted to stay. Changes are hard.

Herzl's most difficult battles were with Jews, too assimilated to follow his dream of a revived homeland in Eretz Yisrael. He wrote:

Even the Jew-haters have more respect for the Zionists than do other Jews. [Die Welt, 4 March 1898]

Why did Jacob want to be buried in Israel?

About Jacob's death and burial, the Torah says:

And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, "Do me this favor ... please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial-place." He replied, "I will do as you have spoken." [Gen. 47:29-30]

Why did Jacob want to be buried in Israel?

Let us begin with the prophecy of Ezekiel:

Thus said the Lord God: "I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel... I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil." [Ez. 37:12-14]

The Sources add that the dead in Israel will be first to be resurrected and enjoy the Messianic Age; the others have to roll or tunnel underground to Israel:

Midrash:

Our sages said... that there were two reasons why the patriarchs longed to be buried in the land of Israel: The dead in the land of Israel would be the first to be resurrected in the Messianic Age, and they would be the first to enjoy the years brought by the Messiah. [Tanhuma Vayechi 3:4]

Zohar:

We have learned that all the dead in the land of Israel will be resurrected first, because the Holy One, blessed be He, will arouse them and revive them... This is because the spirit of life dwells only in the Holy Land of Israel... The bodies of those outside [the Land] will be created, but they will be resurrected as a body with no spirit. Thereafter, they will roll under the soil until they reach the land of Israel, where they will receive a soul. [Zohar 1:131a]

Talmud:

The righteous outside of Eretz Yisrael will be resurrected and roll [until they reach Eretz Yisrael]... Rabbi Abba Salla Rava strongly objects to this: Rolling entails suffering for the righteous. Abaye said: Tunnels are prepared for them in the ground. Karna said...: Our Patriarch Jacob knew that he was completely righteous, and that the dead outside of Eretz Yisrael are resurrected [anyway], so why did he trouble his sons [to bury him in Eretz Yisrael]? Because he thought he may not be worthy of the tunnels. [Ketubot 111a]

This explains why a lot of Jews want to be buried in Israel, even if they don't live there. Not all Sages agreed with the practice:

Rabbi bar Kiri and Rabbi Elazar were strolling in Istrina, and they saw coffins arriving in the Land of Israel from the Diaspora. Rabbi bar Kiri said to Rabbi Elazar, "What are they achieving? I apply to them the verse [from the Book of Jeremiah]:

You made My inheritance desolate [in your lives], and you came and defiled My land [in your deaths]. [Jeremiah 2:7]"

Rabbi Elazar replied, "When they arrive in the Land of Israel, a clod of earth is placed in the coffin, as it is written:

וְכִפֶּר אֶדְמָתוֹ עֲמֹו -- His land will atone for His people. [Deut. 32:43]"

[Kilayim Y 9:3, Ketubot Y 12:3]

Rabbi Elazar's view is the halacha: The Land atones for the people. In fact, a common substitute is to put some earth from Israel in the coffin of a Jew buried outside Israel.

“Jacob did not die”

A rabbi in the Talmud made this extraordinary claim: Jacob did not die:

Rabbi Yitzhak said to Rav Nahman that Rabbi Yohanan said as follows: Our patriarch Jacob did not die.

Rav Nahman asked him in surprise: And was it for nothing that the eulogizers eulogized him and the embalmers embalmed him and the buriers buried him?

Rabbi Yitzhak replied to Rav Nahman: I am interpreting this verse [in Jeremiah]:

Therefore do not fear, Jacob My servant, says the Lord, neither be dismayed, Israel, for I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity. [Jeremiah 30:10]

This verse juxtaposes Jacob to his seed: Just as his seed is alive, so too, Jacob himself is alive. [Ta'anit 5b]

Jacob was Israel. We, the Jews, are Israel. Israel did not die and will not die.

Shabbat shalom.