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Between the Walls¹

What associations do you have with the phrase “between the walls?”

I think of a kind of double-border, or a no-man’s land. I imagine America’s southern border, where I think there are sometimes two sets of barriers, walls or fences. I think about the “security fence” in Israel that separates Israel proper from areas governed by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. I think about the no-man’s land around the Berlin Wall, between East and West Berlin, before the wall fell in 1989.

“Between the walls” is not a safe place to be; one can be subject to arrest or being shot for trying to cross from your side—for leaving. Sometimes one could be arrested or shot for trying to enter, for encroaching.

The bottom line is, you want to be “between the walls” for as short a time as possible, and you don’t want to get stuck or caught there.

Imagine being born “between the walls.” You in some sense might be stateless, or may understand acutely, in your spirit and epigenetics, the pressures exerted by the two different sides, the two different walls.

But there’s also a kind of freedom and possibility that exists in a liminal, undefined, “between the walls” space. There’s maybe even the possibility to imagine a life, or even a world, without walls.

Let me spend a moment to present the puzzle whose answer is “between the walls.”

When the Torah tells of Jacob leaving Canaan to join Joseph in Egypt, it lists by name in Genesis 46 (Parashat Vayiggash) all of Jacob’s descendants who go down to Egypt, and it concludes the count by saying, “Thus the total of Jacob’s household who came to Egypt was seventy persons” (Gen. 46:27). But if you count the people mentioned, there’s a problem. There are only sixty-nine.

So then, naturally, one wants to look to see which of the subtotals is incorrect. The descendants are grouped by mother—the descendants of Leah, then of her handmaid Zilpah, then of Rachel, and then of her handmaid Bilhah, and the totals are listed for each mother. The problem emerges right away with Leah: the total mentioned is thirty-three people (46:15). But if you count the number of names, there are only thirty-two. One is missing from the count of Leah’s descendants.

A midrashic tradition (Gen. Rabbah 94:9, Ex. Rabbah 1:19, among other places, also quoted by Rashi on Gen. 46:27) explains that there was another granddaughter of Jacob. She was conceived “on the road,” but born “between the walls,” or at the gates of Egypt, which is to say, on the border of Egypt, having left Canaan, but not in Egypt yet. So someone born “between the walls” is the answer to the riddle of the missing seventieth person who went down to Egypt.

¹ This is based on a d’var Torah from my teacher and colleague Rabbi Jan Uhrbach.

Any guesses as to who this seventieth soul is?

The scriptural proof for this additional grandchild, which reveals her identity, is found in Numbers 26:59: “The name of Amram’s wife was Yocheved the daughter of Levi, who was born in Egypt.”

So Yocheved, who then marries Amram and gives birth to Miriam, Aaron and Moses, was the growing seed that was counted as the seventieth soul that left Egypt.

There’s a chronological problem with this all though. The Israelites spent 210 years in Egypt,² and Moses was eighty when he talks to Pharaoh (Ex. 7:7). This means that he was born 130 years into the time in Egypt. So if his mother Yocheved was born when they arrived in Egypt, she was 130 years old when she gave birth to Moses (and only slightly younger when she had Miriam and Aaron).

Ibn Ezra (on Gen. 46:27) regards this all as completely ridiculous, and says the missing seventieth person is Jacob himself. He argues that the Torah would announce clearly a miracle of this proportion, as it did when it announced that Sarah was ninety when she gave birth to Isaac.

Ramban defends Rashi though, heckles Ibn Ezra, and identifies the miracles of Yocheved’s late-in-life births as “one of the hidden miracles that are the basis of the Torah.” Let’s just sit with that for a moment. “The hidden miracles that are the basis of the Torah.” It’s not the parting of the Red Sea or the plagues that are the Torah’s basis. It’s the hidden miracles, the miracles that we only notice if we look and analyze carefully.

The natural world is beautiful, but the more one learns about it, about any one dimension of it—about how ecosystems work and can come back to balance, about genetics, about cosmology, about virology and bacteria, and their critical roles in our world and our bodies, the more astounding and beautiful it all becomes.

What though, is the significance of Yocheved, mother of our redeemers, being born herself *בין החומות*, between the walls, at Egypt’s gates (but not in Egypt)?

Rabbi Chaim of Czernowitz, in the third generation of Chasidic rebbes (a student of the Maggid of Mezritch, the leading disciple of the Baal Shem Tov), in his work [Be’er Mayim Chaim](#) (on Ex. 2:1), writes about this. He explains that the Holy Blessed One creates the healing together with the *macah*, the blow or strike, or plague. Yocheved had to have been born before the Israelites entered Egypt, because she was the beginning of the redemption, because she gave birth to Moses (and Miriam and Aaron, I’ll add). So she, being the redemption, has to arrive simultaneously with the beginning of the oppression.

In that narrow place of Egypt, as the oppression increased and the hope decreased, the seeds of Israel’s redemption were already present. And those seeds of redemption themselves were born from the in-between, from the liminal, from the space that is not here or there, ours or theirs.

We have no idea how long oppression will last, in our lives, in our world. It outlasted many Israelites, and it may outlast us. But the hidden miracles of the Torah assure us, and

² See https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/617888/jewish/How-many-years-did-the-Jews-spend-in-Egypt.htm for a summary of how we arrive the calculation of 210 years. It is not straightforward, but is a standard, consensus view. For a different view, see <https://jbnqnew.jewishbible.org/jbnq-past-issues/2016/443-july-september-2016/long-sojourn-egypt-210-430-years/>.

bolster our faith, that the seeds of redemption are already present. We may not recognize them right away, however.

This all would have been a beautiful drash on Parashat Vayiggash a few weeks ago, when the problematic genealogy is mentioned. It would have been beautiful last week, for Parashat Shemot, when Moses is born. So why am I talking about it this week?

Yocheved is only first mentioned by name in the Torah at the beginning of this week's parashah, in the second aliya (Exodus 6:20). She is only recognized well into the flowering of redemption. Until then, her identity is hidden from us. This to say, the source of redemption was hidden until the very end.

It's important to remember that Yocheved was not alone in raising Moses—in conceiving him, in hiding him. Amram, Miriam, even Bitya bat Paro, Pharaoh's very daughter helped, and she surely had no intention of bringing about the downfall of her father's kingdom. Redemption is helped along by so many, with and without intention, sometimes even by accident.

May the redemption of all who are experiencing darkness, oppression, fear, and war come swiftly.

May all who suffer endure with the faith that redemption's seeds are already growing.

And may we look for every opportunity ourselves to help and speed redemption and those who bring it.

Shabbat shalom.