

Sh'mot 5784  
We Don't Belong in Egypt  
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Egypt looms large in the Jewish psyche, appearing some seven hundred times in our TaNaKh and throughout rabbinic literature, far and above what simple proximity to and influence on the Land of Israel necessitate.

Biblical Egypt is a land of abundance that draws out and supports moral mediocrity, in contrast to the agriculturally and militarily vulnerable Israel, where spiritual concerns interweave with the existential: Is our fidelity to God's mitzvot sufficient that rain will fall in its season? Will we have food? Will God fight our battles or deliver us to our foes?

In the TaNaKh, Egypt serves as a refuge for Israelites and other nations at times of famine and military siege. When the rest of the region is uninhabitable, Egypt takes in all who need a place to survive. The Torah describes Egypt in idyllic terms, likening it to the God's own garden:

”לִפְנֵי שַׁחַת יִשְׁחַת וְאֶת־עֲמֹרָה, כִּגְן יִי כְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם“

“Before the L-rd destroyed Sodom and Amorah, it was like the Garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt ” (Gen. 13:10). Even slaves there can eat from pots filled with meat (Ex 16:3). Egypt's agricultural bounty yields wealth and power, and a formidable army. Our ancestors sojourn there repeatedly, despite it being the only place where the Torah forbids us to live.

Not by their merit do the Egyptians earn this land from God. Undertones of moral depravity and questionable sexual practices run all the way back to Noah's son Cham, whose descendents founded Egypt, insinuations that continue through the Middle Ages.

In his book *Redeeming Relevance*, Rabbi Francis Nataf writes, “The Torah purposefully portrays a naturally inverse relationship between Divine bounty on the one hand and human virtue on the other” (p. 25).

That is confounding! God's proverbial “firstborn” and cherished nation of Israel gets a land that often is inhospitable and militarily vulnerable, yet the morally off-kilter Egyptians get a paradise? How are we to understand this?

In Egypt—at least until the Plagues—citizens could do whatever they wanted without fear of natural consequences. They were rich and did not live with existential fear. Israel lacks the natural advantages of Egypt. Thus her inhabitants were more aware of their vulnerability, more likely to seek favor of and alignment with the One who brings life. In

the face of intermittent drought and conquest, they were more often in a position to ask, “Why me? Why us?” and to seek meaning based on their relationship with the Divine. Our prophets testify to the linkage of our thriving with adherence to the Divine will and the moral weakness that tends to accompany wealth and ease.

It seems we are not meant to be too comfortable. And yet we are taught that God wants us to feel joy and offer praise regularly for our blessings and the gift of being alive in a magnificent world.

As we follow our ancestors’ descent into slavery, redemption, and 40-year trek through the wilderness, we experience what Egypt is meant to teach us. And one of its lessons is that stability, wealth and comfort bring spiritual challenges. They were meant to take that learning with them as they envisioned what life would be like when they established sovereignty in their own land. It seems obvious to me that we, too, are meant to carry the lesson forward in our own day.

Our ancestors needed a long time to learn this, and it can be argued that they never fully did. Once freed, they grumbled and erred over food and faith in the desert. Their religious fidelity was weak from the time they set up life in Israel throughout the First Temple period. But they kept trying to do better, and they did do better. Judaism, the religion our sages, in their wisdom, evolved and continue to evolve, from the late second Temple period to this day, shows that growth. And we are still learning, still growing into the dream of freedom, still trying to find the proper balance of joy and worry, security and moral fortitude.

The Jews have almost never had it easy. Yet we have been at our best—and our most stable—when we were willing to risk, gambling on our belief that we have a way of life worth preserving, that we’re more than a bloodline, that we have the potential to “be the light” —that is, the “light unto the nations”—אור לגויים—that God asks us to be. According to the 14th century Spanish commentator Rabbi Vidal of Tolosa, that should bring us joy. “[We should perform the mitzvot], he says, because [we are] required *and* because doing them makes [us] happy. Do the good because it *is* good, and choose truth because it *is* truth. Thus [whatever] burden [the mitzvot] bring will be a light in [our] eyes, and [we] will understand that we are created in order to serve...” (Hilchot Lulav 8:15).

There are indeed times when our performance of mitzvot and the service we bring in this world fill us with joy. But not always. And right now it may be more difficult for us to feel that pure joy.

The 19th Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Epstein knew this feeling well. He taught that we can and should hold God accountable for a measure of security and comfort in the Land of Israel. It is unreasonable, he said, for us to experience full joy when physically insecure, and without joy, we lack the psychological wherewithal to manifest our spiritual potential. God sees us and hears our pain and we should not feel the need to pretend we are whole when we are broken, to find joy when we are grieving. There will be times, he teaches, when we must find it in our hearts to serve as we are called to do, to do our best even when we cannot possibly find joy in our doing.

This is a time when heightened awareness of our precarious position in the world may diminish our joy. On a deep level, we may love being Jewish as much as ever, but on a practical level, being part of this world is hard for the Jews generally and especially now.

Perhaps there is a message for us in our ancestors' yearning to get out of Egypt. In their crying out they know that in order to thrive we must be empowered to make conscientious choices based on our best understanding of what is true and right and good. And, we must make those choices. On the broad canvas of the Jewish experience, that is where our power lies. As a people we seem not to be meant for a life of settled complacency. We are meant to be on our toes, aware, accountable, responsible, and, when possible, joyful. Our vulnerability is meant to fuel our purest and most moral intentions. Only from a vulnerable place can we experience connection and love.

It is not easy to be vulnerable as individuals or as a People in the world. It is often frightening. Easy, though, is for Egypt. It's alluring but ultimately not good for us. Our inheritance is Israel—an ongoing wrestling toward the next, better way to be. May we be blessed with faith and courage as we wrestle our way to the joy of fully lived freedom.