

What's in an Enclave?

D'var for Vayigash (December 26, 2020); Beth Israel Center, Madison, WI

Thanks to Rayla, Mark, and the Ritual Committee for the chance to give this d'var. In it, I'm going to claim that in this week's parasha, Vayigash, we see the creation of the first Jewish enclave in history. To make that case, I'm going to pick up where Jon Pollack left off in his brilliant d'var last night; and I'm going to argue why we should care.

So. After Joseph's revelation of his survival to his brothers the entire house of Israel has arrived in Egypt. [Joseph shares his plan with everyone](#):

[W]hen Pharaoh summons you and asks, 'What is your occupation?'

you shall answer, 'Your servants have been breeders of livestock from the start until now, both we and our fathers' — so that you may stay in the region of Goshen. For all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians.

וְהָיָה כִּי־יִקְרָא לָכֶם פַּרְעֹה וַאֲמַר מַה־מַּעֲשֵׂיכֶם:

וַאֲמַרְתֶּם אֲנֹשֵׁי מִקְנֵה הַיּוֹ עַבְדֵיךָ מִנְעוּרֵינוּ וְעַד־לְעַתָּה גַם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַם־אֲבֹתֵינוּ בַּעֲבוּר תְּשׁוּבוֹ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן כִּי־תוֹעֵבִת מִצְרַיִם כָּל־רֹעֵה צֹאן:

What's this about shepherds being abhorrent to Egyptians? In Hebrew, the term is "toavat mitzrayim," and it's fascinating. Taken at face value, it suggests shepherds have dirty, smelly jobs, and Egyptians turned up their nose at them. [Rabbi Isaac Arama](#) (playing off [Rashi](#)) gives a different take. "Toavat" here means a deity, not an abomination.

Egyptians worshipped sheep, and were awed by people who took care of them.

Setting aside, for now, the question of how we interpret “toavat,” this leaves a question: why does Joseph want his family to settle in Goshen?

Rabbinic explanations generally fall into two categories.

The first category is **material**. Goshen was a fertile area on the outskirts of Egypt proper. Joseph correctly predicted the Israelites would thrive there, as evidenced by the [end of Vayigash](#):

Thus Israel settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly.

וַיָּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן וַיַּאֲחֲזוּ
בָּהּ וַיִּפְרּוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ מְאֹד:

To ensure this outcome, we might conclude, Joseph played on Pharaoh’s abhorrence of shepherds: “Welcome, now take your dirty, smelly clan away from us! And if that means you inhabit the fertile soils of Goshen, so be it.” Arama, by contrast, implies Joseph appealed to Pharaoh’s religion and respect. “My people tend to beasts your people find divine; thus we will need the rich pastures of Goshen.” Opposite takes, but for Joseph, the same game, the same aim: secure the best land possible.

The second category is **moral**. The [Bechaye](#) and the [Netziv](#) explain that Jacob and Joseph sought a space removed

from Egyptian politics and society: where the Israelites would remain autonomous and not assimilate. Removed from the Egyptian capital, Goshen sufficed.

There's no reason, of course, why all of these explanations can't be true. It's possible that the Egyptians both loved and loathed the house of Israel at the same time. And it's possible Jacob and Joseph seized an opportunity to maintain Israelite autonomy and avoid assimilation by acquiring wealth **and** stigma at the exact same time.

Did it work? Did the Israelites remain a people apart? Our sages say so. Rav Batya mentioned this last shabbes, citing a well known midrash which asserts that the Israelites kept their own names and language throughout their sojourn in Egypt. As Rav Batya noted, though, it's difficult to embrace this. Joseph himself had taken on an Egyptian name and married an Egyptian woman. And as Jon Pollack pointed out in his d'var last shabbes, Jewish immigrants to America took on new, non-Jewish surnames. Would Israelite immigrants to Egypt have acted any differently?

These questions still resonate. Does it matter how we fit ourselves into the society around us, if we retain our distinctive Jewishness? Is there something to be said for ethnic enclaves? For remaining autonomous and unassimilated? For being both loved and loathed? Should we strive to create modern-day shtetls?

To help us think through these questions, let's consider Madison, and our history here.

In our most recent "Confronting Racism" session with the [Nehemiah Center](#), Harry Hawkins and Karen Reece Pfeiffer noted how racial segregation in Madison emerged from practices of [redlining](#) and [racial covenants](#) during the first decades of the 20th century. The manipulation of maps and mortgages, laws and leases and loans, [kept white neighborhoods white](#): preventing all those not considered white — which at the time included Italians and Jews as well as Black people — from living in them.

This is a key reason our synagogue is located where it is: the Greenbush neighborhood was a [redlined ethnic enclave](#), comprising mostly Jews and Italians and Black people.

When Jews discuss Madison's legacies of racism and segregation and oppression, this is the story we often tell. "We, too, were hated segregated, redlined. Through hard work, we overcame. And here we are today."

And there are many Jews still living in BIC's neighborhood. We celebrate that, and we capitalize on it: integrating local Jewish geography into our holiday festivities and shabbes routines.

But [the Old Bush is long gone](#). Through a combination of city

and university initiatives, it was paved under, providing the foundations of the eds-and-meds model of urban development that dominates present-day Madison. And what of the other Greenbush residents? If we position Greenbush as a Madisonian Goshen — if we were strangers there, just as we were in the land of Egypt — then what happened to the neighbors we were commanded to love as ourselves? [There aren't many Black people living near BIC today.](#) It's important to stop and ask ourselves why: why us, and not them? What is our relation to redlining, to urban development, to property, to profit?

In lieu of direct and definitive answers, I want to raise a series of questions inspired by a recent event that's shaken Jewish Studies.

Marc Dollinger is a historian whose book, "[Black Power, Jewish Politics](#)," has become a popular text in light of Movement for Black Lives, particularly for Jews trying to understand our present moment. Recognizing that, Dollinger's publisher, Brandeis University Press, asked him to write a preface reflecting on Black Lives Matter. Dollinger agreed. He wrote about how American Jews became bound up in our country's projects of white supremacy. He wrote about how we've become white — how we've accumulated wealth while striving to leave our stigma behind — and how we are still reckoning with that becoming.

[Dollinger's editors rejected the preface](#). They decried white supremacy as a "loaded term." Another Jewish historian, Jonathan Sarna, criticized Dollinger for unfairly linking American Jews to white supremacy, noting that our ancestors faced down racism and antisemitism and worked hard to earn our present privileges. Sarna accused Dollinger of advancing a "deeply hurtful" claim that "we got ahead because [our] skin was white."

Sarna's claim, here, is that we must be seen as Israelites, not Egyptians: the enslaved people, not the slave-owners. The immigrants who've gotten the job done, both abhorrent and awesome to those whose lands we've negotiated. Their gods are not our god; their sins are not our sins.

What if we thought back to Joseph? The effective ruler of Egypt, second to only Pharaoh himself? Possessor of an Egyptian name, husband of an Egyptian wife, and orchestrator of Israelite control of the finest land available? What if we thought of him in terms of us: of diaspora Jews, as Jon Pollack did last night? Would this give us pause?

What if we return to that last line of the parasha and examine it as [Bechaye](#) (and, later, [the Lubavitcher Rebbe](#)) did? He pointed to the word אֲרָבָה, "acquired," and observed a strangely passive grammar: it reads as if it was not the Israelites who possessed the land, but rather the land that possessed them: it took hold of them, materially and morally.

As we look at each other on our screens, each of us in our homes, spread across city and country and even continents: should this all cause us to reflect on whether ethnic enclaves are only specific, concrete places? Might they also be states of mind, even ways of life?

In that case, what have we earned, materially and morally, by having settled in Goshen? And what might we risk by unsettling it, and thus ourselves?

Shabbat shalom.