

# Dimensions in Chumash

## Parshas Bo

### Examining the Relationship between the Sale of Yosef and the Exile in Egypt

#### Introduction: Drawing Forth Redemption

A central feature within the Exodus from Egypt – and one which commemorates it in every subsequent year – is the Pesach offering. Moshe’s instructions to the Jewish people regarding this offering open with the words:

*Draw forth and take for yourselves [one of the] flock for your families and slaughter the Pesach offering.*<sup>1</sup>

The commentators ponder the meaning of the first instruction “draw forth”. What does it add to the subsequent command of “take for yourselves”? Rashi, for example explains:

- **Draw forth** – One who has flock shall draw from among his own.
- **Take for yourselves** – One who does not have shall take, i.e. acquire from the market.

A most fascinating explanation of this matter is found in the commentary of Rabbeinu Bachye. He writes:

*Since our forefathers’ initial descent to Egypt was through “drawing forth,” as it says: “They drew Yosef forth and raised him out of the pit.”*<sup>2</sup>

The verse cited describes the lifting of Yosef out of the pit into which the brothers had cast him, and selling him to Egypt. According to Rabbeinu Bachye, the first step in the Pesach offering, “drawing it forth” from among the flock, is a response to that initial “drawing out”, and the subsequent sale!

---

<sup>1</sup> Shemos 12: 21.

<sup>2</sup> Bereishis 37:28.

The implications of this statement are profound in the extreme, for it identifies an entirely new dimension within the Pesach offering – and, by extension, the entire Egyptian exile. For if the Pesach offering, heralding the redemption from the Egyptian exile, represents a recovery from the sale of Yosef, the exile from which we are redeemed itself is thereby identified as a consequence of that sale. In other words, we are being informed that the relationship between the sale of the Yosef and the ensuing Egyptian exile is not merely *sequential*, it is *causational*.

### **From the Sages**

Indeed, the notion that the exile in Egypt was on account of the sale of Yosef appears to be stated clearly in the Gemara. In Maseches Shabbos<sup>3</sup> we find the following:

*“Rava bar Machsia said... in the name of Rav, one should never favor one child over other children, for on account of two shekels’ weight of fine wool [the special coat which Yaakov made for Yosef], the brothers became jealous, and the matter resulted in our ancestors descending to Egypt.”*

The Gemara here seems to be clearly implicating the tensions between Yosef and the brothers, resulting in his sale to Egypt, as the matter which *caused* our eventual descent there. Likewise, Midrash Tehilim<sup>4</sup> states: “Said the Holy One, Blessed is He, to the tribes, “You saw to it that Yosef was sold as a slave, by your lives, *you will say about yourselves every year [on Pesach] that ‘we were slaves’.*”

### **Causing an Event that had Already been Caused?**

However, there is a basic question here. The exile had already been foretold to Avraham many years prior, seemingly on account of the doubt he expressed regarding whether he would receive the land of Israel.<sup>5</sup> In the episode known as the *Bris Bein Habesarim* (Covenant Between the Pieces) Hashem informs Avraham:<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> 10b.

<sup>4</sup> Chap 10 s.v. *bega'avas*

<sup>5</sup> Bereishis 15:8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. verse 13.

*You shall surely know that your descendants will be strangers in a land which is not theirs, and they will enslave and oppress them for four-hundred years.*

Naturally, we are moved to ask: “If the exile was already foretold to Avraham, many years before Yosef and his brothers were born, how can the Gemara identify the sale of Yosef as the cause of that exile?”

This question is raised by the Tosafos in the above-mentioned Gemara.<sup>7</sup> They answer that even though the exile had already been decreed (and thus would have happened regardless of the sale of Yosef), nonetheless, perhaps the persecution would not have been as difficult as it eventually was. We know, for example, that the four hundred years of exile actually began with the birth of Yitzchak. This means that the first one hundred and ninety years of the decree took the form of Avraham’s descendants being regarded as ‘strangers’ *in the Land of Israel!* While this was undoubtedly an unpleasant situation, it did not entail any exile, enslavement or persecution. This tells us that there was no fixed time for those additional elements to begin, nor was there a fixed level of persecution that had to accompany those four hundred years. Thus, the sale of Yosef contributed to exacerbating the conditions set down in the original term of exile.

In other words, although the sale of Yosef was clearly not the *initial* cause of the exile itself, it was, however, a *corroborative* cause of how it was eventually experienced.

In a similar vein, another of the Rishonim, the Ritva,<sup>8</sup> points out that Hashem did not originally specify to Avraham in which “land that is not theirs” the exile would take place. It could have happened in some other country which may not have been so oppressive for the Jewish People. The eventual location of Egypt as the setting for the exile, says the Ritva, with the particular harshness experienced there, was the product of the sale of Yosef, as observed by the Gemara.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> s.v. *nisgalgel*

<sup>8</sup> Commentary to Shabbos *ibid.* This explanation is also advanced by later commentators, see e.g. Iyun Yaakov to Ein Yaakov, Shabbos *ibid.* and Torah Temimah to Bereishis 37:3.

<sup>9</sup> The Vilna Gaon (Commentary to Shabbos *ibid.*) has a different approach to this Gemara. According to his view, the Gemara does not mean to say that the exile in Egypt happened *as a result* of the sale of Yosef, for it was destined to happen anyway. Nevertheless, the very fact that the event which inaugurated this difficult time was the favoring of Yosef, and his ensuing sale into slavery, should be enough to tell us that favoring one child is an incorrect practice; for to be the trigger for such a terrible exile reflects negatively on the trigger itself.

Indeed, identifying the sale of Yosef as one of two causes for the exile finds expression in the words of the Sages as well. Midrash ha'Chofetz to Bereishis 15:13<sup>10</sup> comments on the double expression “יָדַעַ תְּיָדַעַ (you shall surely know),” with which Hashem told Avraham about the exile, explaining that the two words are referring to the two causes of the exile: 1) The doubt originally expressed by Avraham over receiving the land, and 2) The sale of Yosef.

### **Cementing Jewish Unity**

Having arrived at an understanding of the sale of Yosef as a contributory cause for the Egyptian exile, we now to proceed and ask: How was the exile deemed a fitting consequence of that act, and did it in any way serve to fix it?

The answer is, the sale of Yosef represented a level of fragmentation that had developed between the brothers, which the exile in Egyptian was aimed at treating. The experience of being subjugated and persecuted as a people by an external oppressor served to diminish the internal differences which divided the Children of Israel, foster a sense of unity among them and bring them closer together. In this regard, the “smelting furnace” of the Egyptian exile<sup>11</sup> served not only to refine us as *people*, but also combine us as *a* people.

This will help us resolve a simple question that arises from this understanding of the Exile, namely, why would Yosef's descendants also need to undergo it? They are descendants of *the victim*! By the same token, Binyamin, who was not involved in the sale at all, should not need to have his descendants go into exile. And yet, as we know, the exile in Egypt was experienced by the *entire* Jewish people. For the point is it is not the incident of selling Yosef *per se* which was responsible for the exile, but rather to the lack of unity among the brothers which it represented, which came to the fore in the sale. This was something which constituted a problem for *all* of the brothers. The divisiveness which was present in the formative years of what would later become the Jewish people would have disastrous consequences as the nation developed. This breach in unity had to be repaired, and the exile experience in Egypt was part of what would repair it, at least on a fundamental level.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Torah Sheleimah loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup> See Devarim 4:20.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of the connection between the sale of Yosef and the Exile in Egypt, see Rabbeinu Bachye Bereishis 44:17, Abarbanel Bereishis 15:12 and Devarim 26:5, and Maharal, Gevuros Hashem chap. 9.

## A Unique Offering

This brings us back to the Pesach offering. As we have seen through the words of Rabbeinu Bachye, aside from having the Jewish people express their rejection of the idolatrous ways of the Egyptians, this offering had the additional element of addressing the sale of Yosef. When we consider the Pesach offering in light of the issue of Jewish unity, we will uncover an entirely new dimension within it, which can be discerned by noting a number of unique laws that apply to this offering:

- 1) The Pesach offering in Egypt had the requirement of taking a bundle of hyssop and dipping it in the blood of the Pesach.<sup>13</sup> This is reminiscent of an earlier act of dipping into blood, where the brothers took Yosef's coat, dipped it in goat's blood, and brought it back to their father.
- 2) The verse specifies that the Pesach offering be taken "*for your families.*"<sup>14</sup> The Pesach is to be offered and eaten as a family. This event is meant to strengthen the family unit, which was ruptured all those years ago with the sale of Yosef. This is especially significant when we consider that as soon as the brothers completed the sale, the verse relates that "*they sat down to eat bread*"!<sup>15</sup> The Pesach meal as a *unifying* experience for the family serves to counteract the original meal which took place following the event which left the family fragmented.<sup>16</sup>
- 3) The Pesach offering can only be eaten *in one place*. It cannot be divided.<sup>17</sup>
- 4) Unlike all other offerings which may be cooked in any fashion, the Pesach offering must specifically be roasted.<sup>18</sup> Whereas all other forms of cooking serve to 'loosen' the meat and weaken its consistency, roasting has the effect of contracting the particles and bringing them closer together.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Shemos 12:22

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 12:21

<sup>15</sup> Bereishis 37:25

<sup>16</sup> R' Leib Heyman, Chikrei Lev Shemos sec. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 12:46

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 12:9

<sup>19</sup> Maharal, Gevuros Hashem chap. 60.

Thus, the theme of unity pervades the laws of the Pesach offering which we ate on the eve of the Exodus; for achieving this state was one of the core goals of the Egyptian Exile, and a matter of utmost priority in order for us to merit our deliverance from there.

### **Redeeming Considerations**

This idea will explain to us an additional feature of the redemption from Egypt. The Torah relates that when Hashem tells Moshe to go and serve as the agent for the deliverance from Egypt, Moshe does not wish to go.<sup>20</sup> The reason for this is that he is sensitive to the fact that his older brother, Aharon, may feel slighted at the younger brother assuming the role of redeemer. Indeed, it is only after he is assured by Hashem that Aharon will in fact be truly happy for him, that he finally agrees to go.

In light of our discussion, these sentiments of Moshe take on an entirely new significance. Given that one of the primary goals of the exile in Egypt is to strengthen feelings of unity and goodwill between Jews, it would have been *categorically antithetical* to their redemption for Moshe to appear as the redeemer if the result would be for his brother Aharon to feel slighted. To do so would merely be giving entry to the type of ill feeling which was responsible for their exile in the first place!<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusion: Synergy and Sanctity**

It is important to note that although the goal of unifying the Jewish people appears to be distinct from the primary focus of the Exodus – i.e. leaving Egypt in order to become Hashem’s people – in reality the two are very much connected. It is only when the Jewish people themselves are united as one that they are able to fully realize their connection with Hashem.<sup>22</sup> As we say in the Mincha prayer on Shabbos afternoon:

אתה אחד ושמך אחד ימי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ

---

<sup>20</sup> See Shemos 4:13-14

<sup>21</sup> Chikrei Lev ibid. In fact, there is a prior point of resonance in Chumash Shemos. The Torah relates how when Moshe was set afloat the Nile, his sister, Miriam stood from afar to watch over him (2:4). The last time someone was watched “from afar” was when Yosef approached his brothers in Dosan (Bereishis 37:18), on which occasion they plotted to kill him, eventually settling on selling him. This time, a brother was watched from afar in order to protect him. (R’ Moshe Chesir).

<sup>22</sup> Gevuros Hashem ibid., Ramchal, Maamar HaChochmah.

*You are One, Your Name is one; and who is like Your people Israel,  
one nation on earth.*

In other words, the Jewish nation fully actualize their unique relationship with the One God as His people when they, like Him, are one people!