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Parasha & Herzl: To Egypt or to Israel?

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As the Israelites depart Sinai, a debate erupts about the direction of travel. This debate comes to a dramatic showdown in Parashat Shelah.

A significant portion of the Torah takes place during a period of one year and in one venue – Sinai. In Sinai, the Israelite nation was shaped. Much of its spiritual, religious and national ethos were formed: Receiving the Torah, revelation by God, the Ten Commandments, learning of worship, instilling a national administration, including judges and rules. The year in Sinai comes to an end with the inauguration of the Tabernacle. The mission in Sinai has been completed and the Israelites depart.

Yet upon departure, a surprising debate erupts about the direction of travel – to Israel or to Egypt? A coalition emerges that advocates for the return to Egypt. Moses sends presidents of the 12 tribes to tour the Land of Israel and draw courage from it, but upon their return, 10 of the presidents stun Moses and make the case for going back to Egypt.

In every generation, we are asked to place ourselves as if we left Egypt. Perhaps we should also place ourselves, a year later, as if we left Sinai. Which direction would we support? To Israel or to Egypt? The answer may not be as obvious as it sounds.

Not only did the presidents support the return to Egypt, but let us also not forget the stated purpose of travel in the first place – to worship God in the desert. It could have been understood through Moses's early engagement with Pharaoh, that it would be for a finite period of time. Indeed, much of the negotiations that ensue between Moses and Pharaoh were about the terms of this journey – who goes, what to bring. The Israelites in Egypt were told by Moses about the land of their fathers, but when he explains the magnitude and permanency of this departure, the Torah explicitly states that the Israelites did not hear him “due to shortness of spirit and hard labor”.

In both cases, the Israelites were about to undergo a radical transformation

In addition, there is a precedent likely rooted in the ethos of the Israelites: The previous exodus! The stated purpose of travel, back then, was Jacob's funeral. The entire nation of Israel left Egypt, and then once completing the mission, the entire nation of Israel returned.

Moreover, the danger in Egypt has dissipated. The king that enslaved the Israelites is dead, and so are the Egyptians who chased them – they drowned in the sea. Also, Moses himself departed Egypt in the past, and once the danger to him was dissipated, he returned. The remain camp reminds the Israelites that Egypt has been good to them: the fish, the flesh, the watermelons. On the other hand, the Land of Israel

consumes its inhabitants, as reported by the 10 presidents who spread ill on the land. Under these circumstances, it seems understandable that the Israelites drew a decisive conclusion: “Let us appoint a head and return to Egypt.”



THEODOR HERZL (center) with Mountain Jewish delegates at the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, 1897. (Wikimedia Commons)

TO TRY to understand the mentality of the Israelite back then, perhaps we can extrapolate human behavior from the 1920s.

Once the Great War ended and conditions in Europe dramatically improved, some of the Israelites who previously left Europe to that same Land of Israel, returned to Europe! Others who planned to leave, decided to remain.

Just as the old Pharaoh died, so did the new Pharaoh: antisemitism. Gone were the days that Germans in Moravia would break the windows of Jewish homes. Gone were the days that the French government, military and press would conspire against the Jews, such as through the Dreyfus Affair. Emancipation in the 1920s was official and universal for the Jews of Western Europe. The dangers in Europe has dissipated. In fact, Germany had a Jewish foreign minister! The French were soon to have a Jewish prime minister.

Heading back to Europe seemed as natural as heading back to Egypt back then. Theodor Herzl, founder of Zionism, predicted this. Internalizing the lessons

of Moses, he wrote, “The proximity to Europe is bad, because in the first 25 years of our existence we need, for our development, some rest from Europe, its wars and social complications.” In Sinai, the proximity of Egypt was indeed detrimental. The Torah states that God himself refrained from directing the Israelites through the shorter Philistines road out of a similar fear that the Israelites would return to Egypt once there is trouble “for it is near.” So when a credible coalition of establishment Israelite presidents advocated for the return to Egypt, it indeed seemed as logical as the 20th century return to Europe.

But there is a deeper layer that is missing. In both cases, the Israelites were about to go through a radical transformation. Such transformation, once fully-recognized, would make old logic outdated.

This transformation is recognized by Caleb and Joshua in the parasha and later recognized by Herzl. They understood what establishment Israelite leadership at both the Exodus from Egypt and from Europe failed to internalize – that the exit from Egypt is the return to Judaism even before it is the return to the land of the Jews.

“We shall go up at once, and possess it, for we can indeed overcome it,” declared Caleb. Joined by Joshua, they dismissed old outdated logic about the enemies and stated, “The Lord is with us; fear them not.”

As the Israelites continue their journey, the upcoming parashot of the Torah will explore this original biblical transformation, and the upcoming Parashot of the contemporary Israelites will explore the current Zionist transformation. In both cases, once the Israelites internalize that a transformation is indeed occurring, the direction of travel becomes abundantly clear. ■

The writer analyzes trends in Zionism, Europe and global affairs, focusing on long-term shifts and applying historical perspectives. For more of his articles visit: Europeandjerusalem.com