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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-chavero:* Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

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**Shiur #16: Israel and Egypt – The Need for an Interpersonal Economy**

**Introduction**

In last week’s lesson we began discussing Moshe Rabbeinu’s directives to the Jews before they entered the Land of Israel, in which he contrasted their settlement of the Land with the sojourn in the desert. He warned the people that they must continue to see God’s hand in their sustenance even when the manna ceased to fall and they became obliged to work for their bread.

Life after the conquest of the Land would not be as it had been in the time of the Patriarchs. Indeed, Avraham had previously planted the seed of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel – but his presence there had not been of a permanent nature. With the words “*lekh lekha*” (“go”), God had removed Avraham from his home and separated him from all he knew, to go and sojourn in the Land in a *temporary* manner.

**“*Lekh Lekha*” – From Sedentary to Nomad**

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik describes the command of “*lekh lekha*” as a directive to Avraham, the charismatic personality, to disassociate himself from his natural environment –his previous home, his country, his childhood – in order to forge a new relationship with God:

The mission of Avraham did not only concern the land he was to go to but the necessary detachment from where he was. He would become an *ivri,* a “yonderman,” a nomad, in a land which was initially alien to him. (*The Emergence of Ethical Man*, p. 150)

Mesopotamia, where Avraham was born, was a civilized, urbanized society, while the Land of Israel was nomadic. These types of societies often clashed, as

the house-dweller hated and despised the nomad, the rover, the tent-dweller. Apparently, God preferred the latter and chose the shepherd as his confidant. Moreover, he selected a member of a stable society and converted him into a nomad. Severance of all ties with an urban, closed environment was the *condition sine qua non* for the realization of the covenant. (*ibid.*, p. 151)

The nomadic charismatic personality, says Rav Soloveitchik,

negates the authority of conventional institutions and man-made mores; he is not an ethical conformist who just subjects himself to an external authority which overpowers and enslaves him … (*ibid.*, p. 156)

In this way, Avraham’s nomadic existence allowed him to fulfill the godly directive, “Rise, walk about in the Land, along its length and along its breadth, for I will give it [all] to you” (*Bereishit* 13:17). Avraham’s travels enabled him to establish his presence throughout the Land, but prevented him from fully settling in any one place. He thus was able to throw off the societal mores of his day and forge a new bond with God.

Just as the time had not yet come for a sedentary Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, the time had not yet come for the agricultural economy characterizing sedentary civilization to coexist with the shepherding that occupied the Patriarchs. The Rav discusses why it is that shepherding remained the preferred profession at that time:

I believe that there is a serious reason for the preference given to the pastoral over the farming community. The land was promised to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov in the form of a covenant concluded between the Almighty and the patriarchs. However, there was a stipulation in the agreement: its implementation was contingent on the sojourn of Avraham’s children in a strange land as bondsmen and servants. Prior to the fulfillment of this stipulation, the gift was held in abeyance; the finalization and the full consummation of the covenant took place after the Israelites met the challenge of “Your seed shall be strangers” (*Bereishit* 15:13). Thus their rights to the Promised Land were limited. The most they had was a *kinyan peirot*, the right to use the land and enjoy its produce. Later, after the exodus, they acquired *kinyan ha-guf,* full ownership. Therefore, before the exodus they had no right to develop an agricultural economy, to dig, to build, to destroy, to change the structure of the land. All they possessed was the right to enjoy the fruit, and that is exactly what the pastoral community did. It did not exploit the land as would an agricultural society. It took whatever the land offered. (*Festival of Freedom*, pp. 127–128)

Before the sojourn in Egypt, the time for agriculturally building the Land had not yet arrived. After the exodus, as the people made their way from Egypt to the Land of Israel, Moshe began to prepare them for the new challenge they would face as they changed from shepherds into farmers, and as the nation transformed from a simple, pastoral society into a more complex, agricultural civilization.

Aside from completing the acquisition of the Land, the shift to agriculture would allow the people to put down roots, so that they would not easily give up their place even in the face of adversity:

As an agriculturalist, man will be connected to his environment. He will not willingly leave it in famine, as Yitzchak who planted and did not leave Israel in the face of famine. The farmer will defend his property because it is his lot, but the Torah teaches the Jew how to be involved in the land while maintaining the kind and gentle demeanor of the legendary shepherd. (*ibid.*)

**Moshe’s Message**

In view of the great change that would come upon the return to the Land of Israel, Moshe pointed out to the people that their transitory desert existence, which echoed the life of the Patriarchs in the Land, would be short-lived. Upon entering the Land, the people would be obligated to build not only a home for God, but a homeland. While their behavior and actions would serve to consecrate the Land spiritually, they would also have to create a model physical society in which they could live a life of acquisition while maintaining a sterling character.

The nomadic existence of the desert had helped the people to distance themselves from the unholy philosophies of Egyptian society, in favor of developing a covenant with God and becoming God’s mouthpiece to the world.

As long as the Jews were nomads, roving and wandering from place to place and pitching their tent everywhere, building houses nowhere, God’s sanctuary was just a tent – the *ohel mo’ed*. When the Jews gave up their nomadic civilization and became a settled, agricultural people, the divine tent was converted into a house – *Beit Hashem*:

“For I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but I have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle” (*Shmuel II* 7:6). (*Festival of Freedom*, p. 161)

Moshe was well aware that the difference between the sojourn in the desert and the settlement of the Land was not all the people needed to understand in order to develop a civil agricultural society. At the time of the Exodus, the people had emerged from Egypt while displaying, at least outwardly, only a small part of their unique national character. The Jewish people could easily be physically removed from Egypt, but obliterating their Egyptian mentality would take much longer. The period in the desert did serve to mitigate the people’s Egyptian mindset, but forty years was not enough.

When the Torah speaks about *yetzi’at Mitzrayim* [the Exodus from Egypt], it is careful to say, “who took you out *me-eretz Mitzrayim* – from the land of Egypt,” not simply “from Egypt.” What is the difference between the two?

*Me-eretz Mitzrayim* means from a certain geographical zone, from a certain spot called the land of *Mitzrayim*. On the other hand, *Mitzrayim* alone means the people, the Egyptians. There are actually two exoduses. One is from the land of *Mitzrayim*; the other is from the people of *Mitzrayim*, from their culture, their ideas, their philosophy, their way of life, their mores …

What took place in one night was the liberation from *eretz Mitzrayim.* But leaving *Mitzrayim* is a long road which the Jew has been travelling for thirty-five hundred years without yet arriving at his destination.” (*ibid.*, pp. 107–108)

Obliterating the Egyptian culture and mindset to which the nation had become accustomed during the 210 years in Egypt would not be easy. In particular, there was one area that the Jewish people would find especially difficult. The Patriarchs, though materially successful, had not built an entire economy. The returning Jews, who were tasked with creating an economy, settling the Land, and building it up, were familiar with only one model for building a national economy: the Egyptian model.

A nation amassing wealth might very well be tempted to mimic the Egyptian economy, to work the fields in the way it knew only too well from Egypt. It was this Egypt, this agricultural economy, from which Yosef had warned his brothers to keep their distance. Yosef had dreamt of an agricultural future for the Jewish people, but he was well aware that it must be built upon the principles of fairness and justice that had characterized the lives of the Patriarchs, and not the corruption of the Egyptian economy.

Egypt was an agricultural land; Egyptian society was technically advanced past the stage of a pastoral society. The Jew, a shepherd, went to Egypt and stayed there. Usually, in such a case the assimilation process is quick and effective; the people with a less developed economy assimilate with great speed into the more advanced economic community. The Jews should have abandoned their pastoral traits and adopted the way of life of the agriculturist, the farming tradition. This is not what happened. The Jews continued to tend their flocks and remained attached to an old tradition they had brought from Canaan many years before. (*ibid.*, p. 126)

Although the Egyptians did not succeed in transforming Yosef’s brothers into acquisition-minded farmers, the brothers’ children, whom the Egyptians later subjugated and who even took some of Egypt’s wealth upon leaving, had a soft spot for the Egyptian way of life. During the sojourn in the desert – for instance, in the episode of the Spies – the people frequently desired to return to Egypt:

“Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? … Would it not would be better for us to return to Egypt?”

They said one to another, “Let us head back to Egypt.” (*Bemidbar* 14:3–4)

This attraction to Egypt was due not to a lack of appreciation of Moshe’s beautiful descriptions of the Land of Israel, but to failure to recognize the Land’s incomparable spiritual superiority, which would make the difficulties of its settlement worthwhile (see *Reflections of the Rav*, Chapter 11).

God did not bring the Jewish people out of Egypt to mimic degenerate Egyptian society (see *Vayikra* 18:3), nor did he want to recreate the Egyptian economy or outlook in the Land of Israel. Therefore, Moshe detailed just how different it is from Egypt, so that the people would understand that God had tailored the Land of Israel to facilitate the formation of a relationship with God and a spiritually empowered physical economy.

**Moshe’s Contrast of the Land with Egypt**

Three chapters after Moshe uses a contrast of the Land of Israel and the desert to warn the Jews not to forget God when they live prosperously in the Land, he contrasts the Land of Israel and Egypt:

You shall observe all of the *mitzvot* that I command you today, in order that you be strong, and come and possess the land to which you are passing over to take possession of it, and in order that you prolong your days upon the land that God promised your Patriarchs to give to them and their seed, a land flowing with milk and honey.

For the land to which you are coming to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you came out, where you sowed your seeds and watered with your foot, like a vegetable garden. The land to which you are passing over to inherit it is a land of mountains and valleys; it drinks water from the rain of heaven. It is a land for which the Lord, your God, cares: the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (*Devarim* 11:8–12)

The Land, Moshe points out, is irrigated in a very different manner from Egypt, one that makes clear the need for God constantly to tend to it. In the Land of Israel, creating an immoral, slave-driven caste society would bring about not agricultural success, as in Egypt, but total destruction.

This is not the first instance in the Torah in which the Egyptian mentality and economy are contrasted with those appropriate for the Land of Israel. The aura and attractiveness of the Egyptian economy are already presented much earlier, albeit subtly, and there serve to test the first member of the Jewish people, whose experience foreshadowed those of his descendants.[[1]](#footnote-1) Then, as in Moshe’s day, resisting the lure of the Egyptian economy was not easy, but it was essential for developing the correct outlook for building an economy in the Land of Israel.

**Avraham and LotLeaving Egypt**

Just as his descendants had to go to Egypt and then strive to free themselves of it upon leaving, Avraham was compelled to go to Egypt after fulfilling God’s commandment to travel to the Land of Israel. Even this first time the covenantal community stepped foot in that country, the temptation to mimic Egypt and live by its rules plagued Avraham’s family.

At Avraham’s departure from Haran, Lot is described as an integral part of his family (*Bereishit* 12:5). Yet when Avraham returns to the Land of Israel from Egypt, Lot is only an appendage:

Avram went out of Egypt – he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him – toward the south. (13:1)

Could it be that something happened in Egypt that changed the perspective of one, or both, of them?

We might venture to say that Avraham’s stay in Egypt reinforced for him the need to create a different type of society in the Land of Israel, whereas Lot was entranced by the wealth of Egypt. Perhaps the experience of seeing people take what they wanted from others – as Pharaoh, who had to have the most beautiful woman, to the point that Avraham felt justified in asking Sara to pose as his sister – had captured Lot.

Four verses later, we are again told of Lot’s separateness. In the following verse, we are told of the inability of the two camps to dwell together:

And the land was not able to bear them so that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. (13:6)

While the most straightforward explanation of the ensuing quarrel might be an inability to find sufficient grazing land for the flocks of two extremely wealthy individuals (see Ramban there), there is room to believe that the real cause of friction was a spiritual divide. Nechama Leibowitz notes:

Our Sages of old did not regard the quarrel between the shepherds referred to here as merely an economic or political one. The Torah devotes space to this quarrel for a deeper reason. Their strife symbolized the opposition between the world of Abraham and between one who wished to be a part of it but did not wholeheartedly share the moral principles and outlook of the Patriarch referred to … as “He will command his children and household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment” (*Bereishit* 18:9). (*New Studies in Bereishit*, p. 124)

To support her analysis, Leibowitz cites two *midrashim* that describe how Avraham’s animals were muzzled, so that they would not graze in others’ fields, but Lot’s animals were not. Avraham’s shepherds had internalized his value system, and therefore were apprehensive when Lot’s shepherds robbed others.

Simply stated, by choosing to live elsewhere from Avraham, Lot parted ways with his uncle’s moral compass (see Rashi on 13:11).

This idea is further developed by Rav Soloveitchik:

With Avraham’s departure from Egypt, Lot was a new individual. “Avraham had reared Lot and certainly tried to implant his Weltanschauung in him .… Egypt was the world’s most advanced country, and Avraham was a shepherd. Lot was completely overwhelmed by the stupendous Egyptian culture, civilization, and technology. He could not resist the influence of the environment .… Here is the acid test of a Jew: can he resist environmental pressures, can he withstand the impact of a culture that is materially great, but morally and ethically very primitive? (*Abraham’s Journey*, p. 119)

In short, Avraham lost his disciple while in Egypt. Lot’s acquisition of the Land involved leaving Avraham and what he stood for. When he lifted up his eyes, he saw the pasturelands of Sodom (*Bereishit* 13:10), unlike Avraham, who lifted up his eyes to see Mount Moriah (22:4; see *Abraham’s Journey*, p. 125).

Yet, we might wonder, why did Avraham have to go down to Egypt at all? The Rav explains that the famine that led Avraham to Egypt served as a test to see how he would react to Egyptian culture. The test was repeated when Yaakov had to go to the alien culture of Haran, and again when Yosef went to Egypt. The Jew had to show that he could live in exile and still retain his spiritual identity.

Avraham not only passed this test, but emerged with an even greater disdain for what Egypt stood for, and a greater appreciation of God. Lot, on the other hand, was mesmerized by Egypt, and his desire to live that type of life, with that approach to wealth, meant that he could no longer live together with Avraham. He took his flocks to the Sodom region, later (19:1) becoming a Sodomite dignitary, seated at the gate of the city.

**The Fertility and Destruction of Sodom**

We can take this concept even further. The Ramban (*Hassagot Le-sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *shoresh* 2) refers to Avraham’s trip to Egypt as “the Exile of Avraham.” Perhaps by returning from Egypt without being enamored of its Egyptian culture, Avraham set the stage for the Jewish people to do much the same thing at the time of the Exodus. Lot, meanwhile, served to illustrate the danger of trying to recreate the Egyptian economy in the Land of Israel.

As Lot searched for a place to settle, he specifically sought to recreate Egypt in Israel. Despite knowing that “the people of Sodom were very evil and sinful to God” (13:13),

Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the entire plain of the Jordan, all the way to Tzo’ar, was extremely fertile … like the Garden of the Lord, *like the land of Egypt* … (*Bereishit* 13:10–11)

This verse establishes a fascinating new set of equivalencies: Sodom equals Egypt; Egypt equals the Garden of the Lord (i.e. the Garden of Eden).

The juxtaposition of the evil of Sodom with its prosperity, and its comparison to Egypt, seem intended to warn the Jewish people of mimicking the Egyptian economy. Fertile Sodom was the recipe for a merciless society that refused to share its wealth and openly battled hospitality (*Bereishit* 19:5; Rashi on 18:21, 19:26; *Sanhedrin* 109a). The ultimate destruction of Sodom for the utter lack of fairness and justice that characterized it is indicative of the moral decay of a prosperous society that is unwilling to share with others. Much as the Garden of Eden was not maximized by Adam, the prosperity of Egypt was not good for the spiritual needs of Avraham’s descendants.

The Land of Israel, Moshe taught the Jews, is fundamentally different from Sodom of old, whose physical makeup was one cause of its destruction. Sodom’s fertility kept its people prosperous even as they became more and more evil, to the point of destruction. There was no hope of rehabilitation, no hope for Avraham’s prayers to save the city, where even ten righteous individuals were nowhere to be found. The fertile valley, which was not conducive to a moral, righteous economy, became a wasteland.

Moshe warns the people to follow Avraham’s lead and not to attempt to recreate the Egyptian wealth regime in the Land of Israel. The Land is indeed beautiful and fertile, but its geography, uniquely suited for spiritual growth, requires a certain kind of work.

In the next lesson, our final one on the interpersonal elements of the *mitzvot ha-teluyot ba-aretz* (*mitzvot* that are dependent on the Land of Israel) and the Torah’s model for a just economy, we will examine the contribution of geography and the interpersonal *mitzvot* to a just society where one can relate to God while building a beautiful land – physically, spiritually, and interpersonally.

1. On this concept (*ma’aseh avot siman la-banim*), see Ramban on *Bereishit* 12:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)