The Meaning of the Prohibition

Against Returning to Egypt

By Rav Yoel Bin-Nun

"It happened that when Pharaoh sent the nation forth, God (E-lokim) did not guide them along the way of the land of the Philistines, which is close; because God said, 'Lest the nation have a change of heart when they see war and return to Egypt.' So God led the nation roundabout, along the way of the desert by the Red Sea; and the Israelites left Egypt armed." (Shemot 13:17-18)

Despite the many interpretations that have been offered, the meaning of these verses is very problematic and they seem as baffling as ever. There are three basic questions:

1. What is the meaning of "which is close" (KI karov hu)?
2. Which war is being referred to in the phrase "if they see war"?
3. Why is the phrase, "the Israelites left Egypt armed," included in this context?

There are three further difficulties we must raise:

1. Why do these verses refer to God as E-LOKIM, the only such instance in the exodus narrative, rather than God's "personal" or "historical" name Y-K-V-K, the only Name which appears from the burning bush story onward?
2. The goal of the exodus has been repeatedly defined in relation to Sinai, which lies on the "way of the desert" and not the "way of the Philistines." For example:

"When you bring the nation out of Egypt, you will worship the Lord on this mountain." (Shemot 3:18)

Indeed, Pharaoh's permission to worship at Sinai is the expressed goal of all Moshe's negotiations, threats, and wonders, and it is with this understanding that Pharaoh finally gives his permission:

"Get up and leave my nation - you and the Israelites; go and worship the Lord as you say." (Shemot 12:31)

But this directive of Pharaoh is diametrically opposed to our verses, which imply that the Revelation at Sinai was virtually accidental, merely an outcome of God's concern that "the nation would have a change of heart" if they encountered war on the shorter, more direct coastal road.

1. The basic assumption in all the traditional interpretations is that God wanted at all costs to avoid confronting Israel with war, at least at the outset, since He was concerned that this would inspire them to abandon their cause and physically turn around and return to Egypt.

The difficulty in this assumption is that, in actuality, the alternate route through the desert led them INTO war with Egypt almost immediately, causing an instant public outcry to return to Egypt. God's action seems to have achieved the opposite of its intention. Furthermore, why could God not have saved them from disaster on the desert route in exactly the same miraculous manner that He saved them at the Sea? After all, the reaction of the Jews when the Egyptian army caught up with them - "for it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert" - was exactly the reaction that God feared "should they see war," and God nevertheless dealt with it - "God will fight for you and you shall be still." This repeated itself several times during the journey to the land of Israel, so that it is clear that changing the route did not solve the problem. The longer route did not, in fact, lead them away from war.

The classical commentators, noting the third difficulty, proposed solutions which seem somewhat contrived. For example:

"If the circuitous route resulted in their saying: 'Let us ... return to Egypt,' how much worse would the direct route have been!" (Rashi, based on the Mekhilta)

According to Rashi, the phrase "which was close" means "close to Egypt," making it easier to return there. Taking the nation to Canaan along the more distant desert road would deter the people from returning.

The Rashbam reads "close" - to Eretz Yisrael; the shorter route would have brought the war for the Land of Israel earlier. By delaying the Canaanite wars, the people were less psychologically connected to Egypt when the crisis struck.

The Rambam is of a similar opinion:

"It is contrary to human nature that a person be raised in slavery, doing the most menial of tasks, and promptly wash the filth off his hands and go wage war with the gigantic Sons of Anak ... God's wisdom led them roundabout, through the desert, until they learnt to be brave. It is well-known that traveling in the desert without luxuries such as washing and the like gives rise to bravery, while the opposite gives rise to cowardice. Furthermore, men not habituated to subservience and slavery were born in the desert." (Guide 3:32; see also chap. 24)

The Ramban, on the other hand, interprets "which was close" as referring to the path traversing the land of the Philistines. Even though this route was shorter, God wished to avoid war with the Philistines. However, the Ramban is confronted with the difficulty that on the longer route they met Amalek instead of the Philistines.

All of these interpretations contain important points but do not address the cardinal problem: the war at the Red Sea with Egypt, the superpower to whom they had been enslaved for centuries and with whom they had struggled for independence. This war was potentially far more deadly than any war with the Amalekites, Canaanites or Philistines could have been. This war came immediately, and at a time when Israel was weak and confused.

Modern scholars offer a different solution to our problem, which resembles the Ramban's interpretation. Bas reliefs on the walls of the temple at Karnak, dating to the rule of Pharaoh Seti I (toward the end of the thirteenth century BCE), show that the entire northern Sinai coastal region was under direct Egyptian sovereignty, with Egyptian military outposts all along the way. Israel, fearing a trap, avoided the coastal road from the outset. Plausible though this theory may sound, the reason it proposes for the change of route is not that mentioned in the Torah. God did not fear an Egyptian trap but rather the desire of the Jews to return to Egypt.

Various early commentators hinted that there is a hidden reason for the change of routes - God's plan to drown the Egyptians. For Abarbanel, God's motive was not concern for Israel's fear, but rather His will to give the Torah at Sinai (see Abarbanel, the second question; Mekhilta, ad loc.).

I would like to propose a different interpretation for these verses:

"which is close" - and therefore should have been the route of travel (following the Ramban),

"God said, 'Lest the nation have a change of heart if they see war'" - any war, whether for the Land or at any point in history,

"and return to Egypt" - to request aid and patronage from Pharaoh;

"so God led the nation roundabout, along the Way of the desert by the Red Sea" - SO THAT Pharaoh would pursue them, guaranteeing that war would take place,

"and the Israelites left Egypt armed."

Contrary to the accepted opinion, God's intention was not to avoid war and save Israel undue fear, but precisely the opposite - to drag them straight into a confrontation, and achieve final, total independence at the Red Sea. The Jews needed to be liberated not only politically and economically, but also mentally, as is evident from their demand:

"Leave us be and we will serve Egypt, because we prefer serving Egypt to dying in the wilderness." (Shemot 14:12)

Their complete liberation would result from the experience of war ("the Lord will fight for you") and the rejoicing and singing of victory.

The expression "to return to Egypt" refers to seeking support from Egypt, as is clear from the repeated words of the prophet Yeshayahu:

"Woe to those who descend to Egypt for aid, who rely on their multitude of chariots, and on the immense power of their horsemen, but did not desire Israel's Holy (God) and did not consult the Lord." (31:1)

"They who go and descend to Egypt and did not consult Me, to be powerful in Pharaoh's power, and be safe in Egypt's shadow." (30:2)

"Egypt is human, not divine; her horses are flesh, not spirit; God will spread out His arm; helper will fail, and helped will fall - all will be destroyed together." (31:3)

This last quotation contains more than one allusion to the Parting of the Sea.

The prophet Hoshea also condemned reliance on Egypt, probably referring to King Hoshea's request for the protection of So, king of Egypt (II Melakhim 17:3):

"Ephraim is like a silly dove without a heart; they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria." (Hoshea 7:11)

"Now their sin will be remembered and their error recalled; they will return to Egypt. (8:13)

Yirmiyahu offers a similar condemnation:

"You will be shamed by Egypt as you were shamed by Assyria. From this one too you will depart with your hands on your head, for the Lord has rejected those you trust; you will not prosper with them." (2:36-37)

These prophecies do not see returning, or "going down," to Egypt as the physical emigration of all or part of the nation to Egypt. Suffice it that an Israelite king send messengers to Pharaoh saying, "I am your servant and son" (I Melakhim 16:7), and the prohibition against "returning" has been violated.

The Torah itself, in describing the duties of the king, commands that he "not return the nation to Egypt in order to acquire many horses" (Devarim 7:16). It is clear that this refers to seeking military support from Egypt. King Shlomo, for example, disobeyed the commandment not by sending his entire royal house to Pharaoh, but rather by dispatching to him a handful of merchants (I Melakhim 10:28,29).

"Returning to Egypt" not to dwell there but rather to gain support and patronage is the spiritual opposite of the independence gained via the exodus.

The tokhecha (rebuke) of Sefer Devarim ends with the same theme:

"The Lord will return you to Egypt in ships, on a route I told you that you would never see again; there you will be offered to your enemies for sale as slaves, but no one will buy you." (26:68)

But did Israel leave Egypt in ships, that God is threatening them with return along the same route? The Torah is not describing the route of return to Egypt, but rather the implication of return to Egypt - renewed bondage. The common denominator of a request for Egyptian protection, physical return to Egypt of one's own free will, and sale into Egyptian captivity, is forfeiture of independence. The route God said Israel should never see again is the route of slavery.

The Rabbis understood this point as being the crux of the commandment to pierce the ear of the voluntary slave:

"An ear which heard (at Sinai), 'I am the Lord your God,' and went and bought itself a master - should be pierced." (Rashi to Shemot 21:6, based on Yerushalmi Kiddushin 1:2; Sifra Vayikra ad loc.)

At this point, we can take a new look at the prohibition against returning to Egypt and serving her:

"…and the Lord said you would never return this way again" (Devarim 17:16);

"…on the road I told you that you would never see again." (28:26)

Where and when did God previously tell Moshe that they would not return this way? The recurring theme of "never seeing Egypt again" leads us to Moshe's words to Israel before the parting of the Sea, as they cried out, in their panic, that they preferred slavery:

"The Lord will fight for you ... for as you have seen Egypt today, you will never see them again." (Shemot 14:13)

In my opinion, the verse reads thus:

"as you have seen Egypt today" - in the MANNER that slaves look up to their masters - "you will never see them again."

That the Halakha understood patronage to be the true meaning of "returning to Egypt" is clear from the following midrash:

"The Torah warned Israel three times against returning to Egypt [here the Talmud quotes the three verses we saw above]... but Israel returned to Egypt three times, and as is written, 'Woe to those who descend to Egypt for aid;' three times they failed. The first was in the time of Sancheriv; the second was in the time of Yochanan ben Kere'ach; and the third was in the time of Torginos." (Mekhilta Beshalach, mas. 2, par. 2; Yerushalmi Sukka 5:1; Bavli Sukka 51)

Three prohibitions and three "returns" mean three different kinds of submission. The first is asking for Egyptian patronage, as Chizkiyahu did when he was threatened by Sancheriv (according to the prophecies quoted earlier). The second is actual physical emigration to Egypt, as did the Judeans, led by Yochanan ben Kere'ach (Yirmiyahu 40-43). The third kind of "return" is that of the Jewish community of Alexandria, which lived under Egyptian patronage from the time of Alexander the Great (c. 333 BCE) until the period of the Roman emperors Trajan (evidently the Torginos of our text) and Hadrian. The defeat spoken of is the decimation of the Alexandrian community after they revolted in response to hatred and persecution, forty-five years after the destruction of the Temple.

It is submission that the Rabbis see as the true meaning of "return," as is evidenced by the conclusion of the Yerushalmi:

"One may not return to Egypt to live there, but one may return there for trade, for business, and for conquest." (Sanhedrin, end of ch. 10)

Financial dealings do not imply submission, and are therefore permitted.

We can now return to the story of the exodus.

In the episode of the Egyptian pursuit of the Israelites at the Red Sea, God is called E-LOKIM, the "general" or "international" name known to all nations. This name is used, as a rule, when the Torah presents dialogue with gentiles (see Bereishit 20, 31:40-41; Shemot 5:1-4; see also Ibn Ezra to Shemot 3:15; Kuzari, IV). The reason for its use here is precisely because the Jews finally left Egypt with Pharaoh's permission. This account of the exodus describes a political-historical event, which takes place along natural, political lines; its goal is not revelation at Sinai.

Only when the Torah returns to describe the "other" exodus, the journey towards complete freedom, with no foreign protection whatsoever, and where the goal is the Torah, does it speak of Divine Revelation and Lawgiving. Here God reveals Himself through His transcendental, historical attribute: "Y-K-V-K went before them by day..." (13:21).

The "Way of the Land of the Philistines" was an official route under Egyptian jurisdiction, as were considerable portions of Canaan. Had Israel taken Pharaoh's road, they would have displayed good faith to him, and de facto recognition of his protection. At every checkpoint along the road, they would have shown Pharaoh's letter of safe passage; the sentries would have passed them through, and entered in their logs that Pharaoh's SUBJECTS passed through according to his instructions. Israel would have sent Pharaoh a letter of thanks. Whenever they found themselves in danger, especially in situations of war, they would have sent Pharaoh letters similar to the petition for aid sent to Pharaoh by Biridia, king of Shekhem:

"To my king, my lord and my sun: So speaks Biridia, the King's faithful servant. Beneath the feet of my king, my lord and my sun, I grovel on my belly and on my back." (from the Tel El-'Amarna letters)

Had Israel left Israel in this fashion, Pharaoh would never have pursued them at all. He could have granted them the mountain region and even made them his representa­tives there. In times of war, the people would have returned to Egypt to seek protection. Needless to say, this exodus would not have been conducive to Revelation. A slave-nation which progressed from slave status in Egypt to vassal status in Canaan would not have achieved true freedom, even if it would have been freed from hard labor. A nation which is not free could not have received the Torah. God's sovereignty is possible only after all other sovereignties have been renounced: "I am the Lord your God ... you will not have other gods beside Me."

Moshe's prophecy and leadership - including God's revelation at Sinai and giving of the Torah - stem from a state of complete independence from Pharaoh. For this reason, God led them on the desert route, into confrontation, into war, into salvation and singing, and into complete freedom -

"You will never see them [through the eyes of slaves] again." (14:13)

[An expanded Hebrew version of this article appears in Megadim, vol. 3.]

For further study:

1. According to the above, the purpose of the splitting of the Sea was to change the attitude of the Jews to Egypt. Is this contradicted by 14:31?

2. Does the repeated request of the Jews in Sefer Bamidbar contradict the conclusion of this shiur?

3. Does 15:14-16 suggest another purpose for the splitting of the Sea? Can this be introduced to the verse at the beginning of the parasha? (See Yehoshua 2:10.)