

Torah Talk - מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Vayigash
December 15, 2018

פרשת ויגש
ז' בטבת תשע"ט

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 44:18-47:27

In this *parasha*, Yosef reveals his identity to his brothers, prompting the entire family to move to Egypt, where Yosef reunites with his father, Yaakov.

Why did God arrange for the Israelites to end up in Egypt? In *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 4:20, the text refer to Egypt as כור הברזל – *cur habarzel* (an iron furnace). This description of Egypt as *cur habarzel* also appears in *Melachim Aleph* (I Kings) and *Yirmiyahu* (Jeremiah). Rashi defines a *cur habarzel* as “a vessel in which gold is purified.” *Cur habarzel* can also mean a “smelting furnace” or a “kiln;” an oven that gets very, very hot. Perhaps this characterization of Egypt as a *cur habarzel* can help explain why the Jewish people had to come to fruition as a nation in Egypt. The Jacobian clan needed to refine itself into a cohesive nation before it could enter into a covenant with God at Sinai. Egypt provided the heat in which this refining process had to take place.

What was the nature of this metaphorical heat? Egypt was, in many ways, the antithesis of Israel. Whereas Jews value their time on earth, the ancient Egyptian culture venerated death. Whereas the Jews recognize one God as Creator and Controller of the universe, the ancient Egyptian culture worshipped many gods. Whereas the Jews believe in a direct connection to God, the ancient Egyptian culture believed that a priestly intermediary was necessary. Whereas the Jews believe in a knowable God, the ancient Egyptian culture believed that the gods were unknowable.

Why the need for the metaphorical heat? In order for the Israelites to figure out what they believed, they needed to encounter that which they rejected; they needed to be thrown into the fire, so to speak. In order to become a nation, they

needed to be pressed – enslaved – from the outside, have the metaphorical heat applied, so that they could coalesce into one distinctive whole.

There is an oft-quoted *midrash* (which actually never appears in the form people think it does) that says that the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt because they never gave up their mode of dress, their Hebrew names, or the Hebrew language. I think what the *midrash* is telling us is that in Egypt, the Israelites became a distinctive people, different from the Egyptians and indeed, different from all of the ancient Near Eastern cultures around them. They would go on to create a covenant with God at Sinai. But first, they needed to become a people. And so, the sojourn of Yaakov and his family down to Egypt begins in this *parasha*.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What is the difference between a clan or a tribe and a nation?
- How did the Jewish people go from being one to being the other?
- Are Jews different from others around us? If so, how? If not, what makes us Jewish?