END OF EXILE?

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Exodus 10:1-13:16 marks the end of the beginning of the redemption process. Soon after, Israel leaves Egypt and the long, hard years of slavery. But, before we go forward, it's useful to look back. The early Joseph years and then the years of Egyptian slavery was the first *galut* [exile] in Israelite/Jewish history. The question arises: Why did this predicament befall us? What brought it on, what caused it?

Tradition gives specific reasons for the other, later exiles. For example, the Musaf Amidah of the holidays declares: "*Umipnei ha'ta'einu galinu me'artzenu* [We were exiled from our land because of our sins]. And what were the sins? The major ones: *avodah zarah* [idolatry]; *gilui arayot* [sexual sins]; and *sh'fichut damim* [premeditated murder]. These are cited in connection with the destruction of the First Temple, and the Babylonian Exile. The destruction of the Second Temple and the 2000 years of exile were explained by the sin of *sin'at chinam* [causeless hatred] between Jews.

But there is no generally accepted reason for the first exile, the one in Egypt. Though, in looking for a reason, the Talmud, Shabbat 10b, says:

> Because of two selas worth of wool [that were made into a fancy coat] that Jacob gave to Joseph, and not to his other sons, the brothers were filled with jealousy, and one thing led to another, until the whole family went down to Egypt.

This seems like a reasonable explanation but it stumbles up against a verse from the time of Abraham: *The Lord said to Abraham: 'You must surely know that your descendants shall be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years.'* (Gen. 15:13).

Now this was recorded many years before the great famine, and Joseph's rise to high position, and Jacob's decision to go down to Egypt with all his family. The verse is complicated, especially the phrase about the 400 years. But, the main thing is that Israel's enslavement is foretold in a Divine prophecy. No explicit reason is given. It's not because of any sin. It is God's decision, for His own reasons.

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The most we can say is that it may have something to with Israel's eventually becoming a nation, and perhaps building its national character. The least we can say is that – for a change – when something bad happened to us it was not our fault. The cause was not our sins. So the question remains: Why was Israel exiled to Egypt? Was there some purpose? Was it part of some unrevealed mission or objective that was hidden in the mind of God?

Yehuda Halevi takes up the question in his work *Kuzari* III:11:

> If an evil thought makes the Jew despair, saying: *ha'ti'h'yena ha'atzamot ha'aileh*, Can these bones live? *Zachrenu nishkach*, our memories are forgotten, our hope is lost . . . . *yach'shov al nes yetziat mitzraim*, let him think about the miraculous deliverance from Egypt . . . . The Jew should recall and reflect on God's greatness, and the innumerable favors He has bestowed upon us – and he will then have no difficulty in picturing how we may recover our stature and place in the world, *af ka'asher lo yi'va'ter me'ita'nu ki im ish echad*, even though
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> only one of us may have remained.

That is Yehuda Halevi, 10 centuries ago. The purpose of the Egyptian experience was to enable us to defeat despair and gloom, and never to give up faith and hope in the future. We have a place in God's unfathomable plan for the world.

I asked myself: Is it possible to put Yehuda Halevi's idea into more modern language, without becoming too mushy or dreamy? And I thought this: This people! Israel! This land! For all that has happened to us – Holocaust, pogroms, persecution, expulsions, wars, terrorisms, and three exiles – this people and this land combine in a powerful, compelling, enthralling idea transformed anew into reality. Is this not, perhaps, the Hand of God at work? To have been mired in the mud of unrelenting death and despair, and yet to rise up to win and build a sturdy country, which is the embodiment of an enduring people, and a shining example of light and hope to the whole world (though the world may never admit that). If the Jews can make it, so can they. We are not yet the embodiment of our dreams – and God's dream – but, the realization will come, for it is the Divine plan for us and the world. And it all started long ago, with a man named Abraham, and even in an inexplicable exile.