

Parashat Shemot 5775, 2015:

What's in a Name?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

Now all those descended from Jacob were seventy souls, and Joseph was in Egypt. (*Sefer Shemot* 1:5, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Since the time of the earliest *Midrashim*, our Sages have endeavored to explain the meaning of the words “and Joseph was in Egypt.” At first glance, we are completely stymied as to why the Torah would include this phrase. After all, the Torah has already taught us that Yosef was in Egypt in the final eleven chapters of *Sefer Bereishit*! If so, what can possibly be gained by this seeming repetition?

The *Sifrei*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Devarim*, is one of the first sources to address our question. It derives an ethical message from our phrase:

And don't we already know that Yosef was in Egypt! [The underlying reason for stating this idea once again] is to publicize Yosef's righteousness. He had been the shepherd of his father's flocks – and even though he was appointed the king of Egypt, he remained the same “Yosef” in regards to his righteousness. (Parashat Ha'azinu, 334, translation my own)

Significantly, Rashi (1040-1105) quotes this Midrashic passage virtually verbatim, suggesting that it is, indeed, the authentic *peshat* (direct explanation) as to why the Torah re-informs us, “and Joseph was in Egypt.”

Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoach was a 13th century Torah exegete from Northern France. He is famous for his Torah commentary entitled, “*Hazzeḳuni*.” While his work is based primarily upon Rashi’s explanations, he followed his own interpretive path in his natural language explanation of our phrase:

Regarding all of the others [i.e. Yaakov’s children and heirs] it is written: “who came to Egypt,” (*Sefer Shemot* 1:1). Yet, this one [i.e. Yosef] was not with them [on their journey from the Land of Israel to Egypt] since he was already there. [At the same time, however,] he was counted in the number [of the 70 individuals who came to Egypt]. Therefore, the Torah states, “and Joseph was in Egypt.” (Translation, brackets and emphasis my own)

In sum, Rav Manoach maintains that it was necessary to repeat, “and Joseph was in Egypt,” so that we would know with certainty that Yosef was included in verse 1:5 of *Sefer Shemot*, “Now all those descended from Jacob were seventy souls.”

Rashi addresses another seemingly unnecessary repetition in the Torah in his very first explanatory gloss to *Sefer Shemot*. *Sefer Bereishit* 46:8 contains the expression, “And these are the names of the children of Israel who were coming to Egypt: Jacob and his sons...” A complete citation of Yaakov’s sons and descendants follows this initial statement. If so, why does *Sefer Shemot* need to begin with the words, “And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt; with Jacob, each man and his household came,” replete with another listing of Yaakov’s family? Rashi provides us with a famous Midrashically–based explanation that focuses upon the importance of “the names”:

Although [G-d] counted them in their lifetime by their names (*Sefer Bereishit* 46:8-27), He counted them again after their death, to let us know how precious they are [to Him], because they were likened to the stars, which He takes out [from beyond the horizon] and brings in by number and by name, as it is said: who takes out their host by number; all of them He calls by name (*Sefer Yeshiyahu*. 40:26). [*Midrash Tanchuma* Buber, *Sefer Shemot* 2; *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 1:3] (Underlining my own)

Midrash Vayikra Rabbah (Vilna) 32 further elaborates upon the importance of “the names of the children of Israel” in the following statement, “And they did not call Yehudah ‘Rofeh,’ nor Reuven ‘Luliani,’ nor Yosef ‘Listis’ – and neither did they call Binyamin ‘Aleksandri.’” In other words, Yaakov’s children kept their original Hebrew names in Egypt, and radically opposed the powerful assimilatory pressures of the time.

The second Bobover Rebbe, HaRav Ben-Zion Halberstam *zatzal* (1874-1941), known as the “Kedushat Tzion” after the name of his Torah commentary, quotes the above-cited Midrash in the context of his analysis of our phrase, “and Joseph was in Egypt.” He, too, emphasizes that Yosef maintained his original Hebrew name, even after Pharaoh renamed him “Tzafnat Paneach” (*Sefer Bereishit* 41:45). Moreover, HaRav Halberstam stresses that Yosef was so successful in maintaining his “Yosef identity” that even Pharaoh, himself, referred to his viceroy as “Yosef.” This notion is explicitly found in *Sefer Bereishit* 45:16-17: “And the voice was heard [in] Pharaoh's house, saying, ‘Joseph's brothers have come!’ And it pleased Pharaoh and his servants. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Tell your brothers, “Do this - load up your beasts and go, enter the land of Canaan.’” (Underlining my own) As such, opines the Kedushat Tzion, Yosef was deserving of singular praise and recognition for both continuing to use his Hebrew name and for guarding his Jewish persona. Therefore, the text teaches us, “and Joseph was in Egypt” – no matter how inimical Egypt was to the sanctity and holiness that Yosef personified.

How, we might well ask, did Yosef persevere in being “Yosef” in the uniquely hostile environment of Egypt? What was the secret to his Jewish survival? Rav Moshe Feinstein

zatzal (1895-1986) discussed this question in his posthumously published homiletic work, *Darash Moshe*. Therein, he suggests that Yosef was able to not only survive, but also thrive, as a “stranger in a strange land” (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:13) precisely because of the unique *chinuch* (education) he had received from his father, Yaakov. As a result, “and Joseph was in Egypt” comes to teach us that even though Yosef was in Egypt, he was no less beloved, and no less a valued member of Yaakov’s beloved family. Clearly, suggests Rav Moshe, Yaakov’s formidable educational and spiritual influence upon Yosef remained the ultimate regenerative force in his life - so much so that the vision of Yaakov’s very face was ever before him. Consequently, “and Joseph was in Egypt,” is far more than a statement of mere fact as to where Yosef was. It is, instead, a statement that speaks to Yosef’s existential being and reality. In short, he ever remained, *Yosef ben Yaakov*, Yosef the son and scion of *Yaakov Avinu* (Our father Yaakov).

With Hashem’s help, may we, too, be *b’nai* and *banot* Yaakov (the sons and daughters of Yaakov), and, like Yosef, ever see Yaakov’s countenance before us as we travel upon the challenging road we call our lives. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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