

Were the Forefathers Predestined to Descend to Egypt?

Mayim Rishonim

When considering the transition from Bereishit to Shemot, the process of Israel's absorption in a foreign land seems intertwined with the deliberate descent of Jacob's family to Egypt. The initial purpose of the descent was "to keep many people alive," as the brothers explained to Pharaoh, "for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks, the famine being severe in the land of Canaan" – but the consequence of this decision is ultimately enslavement and extreme physical labor. Was this process a predestined divine plan, or a process prompted by human action? Does the principle of free will apply when considering such a central nation-historical event?¹ These matters were addressed indirectly in [Do Not Fear Going Down to Egypt](#) with regard to Vayigash, and the discussion is relevant regarding any one of the parashot at the end of Bereishit or the beginning of Shemot; but this is the place to address the issues directly, as explained below.

On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob — making myself known to them in the land of Egypt — I swore to them, saying, I am the Lord your God ... And I said to them, Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; not one of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt (Ezek. 20:5-9).²

Shemot Rabbah 16:2: 'Withdraw and take unto you – withdraw from idolatry'

So too, when Israel were in Egypt, they engaged in idol worship and would not relent, as it is written, "Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on" (Ezek. 20:8). God said to Moshe: as long as Israel continue to worship the Egyptian gods, they shall not be redeemed. Go and tell them they should leave their evildoing and renounce idolatry. This is why it says, "withdraw out and take unto you" – withdraw your hands from idolatry, and take a lamb, and slaughter the gods of Egypt, and make the paschal sacrifice, and then God will pass over you; and thus, "In repentance and rest is your salvation" (Is. 30:15).³

¹ The possibility of Jewish history without the Exodus is hard to imagine: the formation of the nation of Israel is based entirely on the history of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, a formative event referenced constantly in liturgy and at the foundation of so many of the Torah commandments (see [Mitzvot Commemorating Yetziat Mitzrayim](#) on Pesach). Is there a theoretical possibility that such a formative historical event would not have occurred? Alternatively, assuming the process of assimilation in Egypt was the divine will for the purpose of forming the nation, creating a collective historical experience, and enabling the Exodus, is no less a problematic idea, and so we have to ask: what was the cause of the descent to Egypt, and the enslavement that followed?

² Another harsh description of the enslavement in Egypt and Israel's refusal to leave appears in Tehilim 106:7: "Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wonderful works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea." However, in Ezekiel's chilling description, God threatens to utterly destroy Israel: "I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt." This reinforces the question raised in the title of this page: how did our forefathers stoop to a level that would bring them to a land in which they would merit utter destruction? Was the slavery in Egypt really necessary? Was it a divine edict, or human choice, that led to such disastrous consequences?

³ The midrash continues (16:3): "When God told Moshe to slaughter the paschal lamb, Moshe said to him: Master of the Universe, how can I do this? Don't you know that sheep are the gods of Egypt? [...] If we offer sacrifices that are

Sforno, Introduction to Torah Commentary: Avraham's Covenant

[...] When there was no more hope for repentance by humankind, and He was prepared to destroy all divine creation for the third time, God chose a devotee from all species, and selected Avraham and his descendants as a means to achieving the ultimate purpose of mankind on earth, as explained. And the triple thread is Avraham and his offspring and descendants, who filled the earth with God's glory when they called His name. And he found favor in God's eyes to make them a covenant to become their God and the God of their descendants for eternity, and provided a place for their descendants when they will become numerous enough to be gathered, and in that place they will become united under His hand, to worship Him as one.⁴

Shemot Rabbah 5:22: Moshe's Grievance

Ordinarily, when one accuses his peer and says, 'why would you do this?' this indicates anger. But Moshe said to God, "why have you done evil to this people?" but what he meant to say was: I have read the Book of Bereishit and seen the deeds of the Generation of the Flood and the manner in which they were judged, with the divine attribute of strict justice (מידת הדין). I saw the story of the Generation of Disunity and the Sodomites, and the manner in which they were judged, with the divine attribute of strict justice. But this nation – what did they do to deserve subjugation more than all the generations that passed? If it is because Avraham said "how am I to know that I shall possess it [the land]," and you told him, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land," then Esav and Ishmael are his descendants too, and should also be subjugated! And even so, he should have subjugated the generation of Yitzhak or Yaakov, not this nation in my generation! And if you say, why should I care? In that case – "why then have you sent me?"⁵

"Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all" (5:23). R. Pinhas Hacoen ben Hamma said: Moshe said to God, Your name is great, mighty, and awesome, and feared by the entire world, but nonetheless the evil Pharaoh has sinned willfully against you! Why then did [did Moshe accuse God], "and you have not rescued your people at all?" R. Yishmael says, "and you have not rescued your people – for certain

detestable before the Egyptians, will they not stone us? So God said to Moshe, on your life, Israel will not leave here until they have slaughtered the gods of Egypt before their eyes, for I will inform them that their god is nothing." The patriarchs underwent a similar process twice before: Avraham destroyed his father's idols before departing for the Promised Land, and Yaakov removed the idols from his household when he returned to Canaan from Haran. Why do the Children of Israel have to rid themselves from idolatry once again? See [The Eleventh Plague](#) and [Withdraw and Take Unto You](#) in Parashat Bo.

⁴ The Sforno offers a positive answer to the question 'why were Bnei Yisrael enslaved in Egypt?' He explains that after the recurring evildoing described at the beginning of Bereshit, the patriarchs find favor in God's eyes, and so "he offered them a covenant to become their God and the God of their descendants forever, and gave their descendants a place to dwell until they are numerous enough for a national gathering to become united in worshipping God." However, the Rambam (Laws of Idolatry, 1:3) describes the descent to Israel as a move that almost reversed Avraham's reinstating of monotheism: "But after long years in Egypt, they regressed and learned from the Egyptians' deeds to serve the stars as they did [...] and they nearly uprooted the principle Avraham had rooted, and the sons of Yaakov would have returned the world to its mistakes."

⁵ Based on a broad tradition of midrash and commentary, the exile was decreed in the Covenant of the Parts (ברית בין הבתרים): "they will enslave them and torture them for four hundred years." Some attribute this to Avraham's sin of lack of belief in God, when he asked for a sign that God's promise would be kept: "how am I to know that I shall possess it," or other specific offenses (e.g. Bereshit Rabbah 44:21), and see [How am I to Know that I Shall Possess It](#) in Lekh Lekha. Moshe contests this concept: he wishes to leave Bereshit in the past and focus on his present: 'my generation.' Moshe's claim is that Avraham's offense should not have ramifications on Moshe's generation, and now that Moshe was appointed leader – the enslavement should cease. Alternatively, Moshe's claim may be understood not only as an argument against the present reality, but against the justification of human suffering, which can also be derived in the following text.

[and never will]." R. Akiva says, I know you intend to rescue them, but what about those who are stuck under the building now?⁶

Bereishit Rabbah 86, Vayeshev: Ropes of love instead of chains

I drew them with cords of a man, with ropes of love; and I was to them as those who lift the yolk from their jaws, and I gently fed him (Hosea 11:4).

A: "I *drew* them with cords of a man" (Hosea 11:4) – this is Yosef: "And they *drew* and raised up Yosef from the pit" (Gen. 37:28).

"With ropes of *love*" (Hosea 11:4)? "Israel *loved* Yosef more than all his sons"

"From their jaws" – due to something he let out of his mouth: "and Yosef brought a slanderous report [about his brothers] to their father."⁷

B: "And Yosef was taken down to Egypt" [...] he took our father Yaakov down to Egypt. R. Berakhya said in the name of R. Yehuda bar Simon: this is like a cow that was being pulled toward the slaughterhouse but would not go. What did they do? They pulled her calf before her, and she followed unwillingly, to her own detriment. This is how Yaakov our father should have descended to Egypt: in chains and collars. God said: this is my firstborn son, can I take him down with disgrace? In order to avoid humiliating him before Pharaoh, I will pull his son before him, and he will descend [to Egypt] unwillingly and to his own detriment.⁸

Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Vayeshev, 18: Yaakov was led with ropes of love, but what about Yosef?⁹

"And Yosef was taken down to Egypt" (Gen. 39:1), about this it is written, "I drew them with cords of a man, with ropes of love" (Hosea 11:4). Israel would have gone down to Egypt in chains and collars, just as they descended to Babylonia, if not for Yosef going to Egypt first.¹⁰

All that happened to Yosef later also happened to Zion [...] therefore, Yaakov was afraid to descend to Egypt, since he knew that God had decreed to Avraham, "You can be sure that your descendants

⁶ This cry by Moshe shows a deep identification with the sufferings of his generation, reinforcing his image as a moral leader willing to grapple with divine injustice. Moshe demands relief for the nation even before the final redemption (based on the order of the four words describing redemption in Ex. 6:6-7: וְהוֹצֵאתִי, וְהַצַּלְתִּי, וְגִאֲלֹתִי, וְלִקַּחְתִּי). The redemption will come eventually – but what about the suffering until that point? The motif of the desecration of God's name often utilized by Moshe later on is apparent here, as explicated in [Those under the building](#) in Parashat Shemot. Moshe's argument also touches on the question of the suffering in Egypt and the gentle paradox between divine providence and free will. Moshe argues here that the individual as well as the nation are not committed to global historical divine processes: each should be judged based on his own actions and circumstances. But how will the Covenant of the Parts be fulfilled? This is not Moshe's concern, just as Isaiah warns King Hezekiah (Berakhot 10a), "it is not your place to concern yourself with divine plans."

⁷ This midrash states unequivocally that the descent to Egypt was caused by the hatred between the brothers, which stemmed from the overemphasis of Yaakov's love for Yosef, "love upsets the natural order" (Bereshit Rabbah 55:8). The 'cords of a man' may have drawn Yaakov's family to Egypt, but the word "draw" (אִמְשַׁכְתִּי) and the verse in Hosea indicate that what seems to be orchestrated by man may very well be a divine plan.

⁸ This midrash categorically portrays the unwilling descent to Egypt by divine decree, without explaining whether Yaakov deserved to go down to Egypt. The chains and collars symbolize slavery (see [The collar hangs at their necks](#) in Parashat Miketz), and according to the midrash the only reason Yaakov was spared such humiliation was God's compassion, which turned the chains into ropes of love through Yosef's descent. But where does that leave the question whether or not the exile to Egypt was a divine decree?

⁹ Here as in other places, Midrash Tanhuma expands and elaborates on Bereshit Rabbah.

¹⁰ Bnei Yisrael would have descended to Egypt either way; through their actions, Yosef's brothers caused the divine edict to be realized earlier, in their generation.

will be strangers in a foreign land" (Gen. 15:13), and he dwelt in Canaan.¹¹ They came and told Yaakov that Yosef was sold, and Yosef is likened to a bull, as it is written, "His majesty is as a firstborn bull" (Deut. 33:17), and was now in Egypt. When Yaakov heard this he said – if so I will go down to Egypt, and pay Avraham's debt.¹² Only then, "Israel said, Enough! My son Yosef is still alive" (Bereishit 45:28), and only then all the brothers went with him. Who, then, was the cause of their descent to Egypt? Yosef; "I drew them with cords of a man" – this is Yosef: "and Yosef was taken down to Egypt."¹³

Israel said, Enough! My son Yosef is still alive. I must go and see him before I die. When Israel set out on his journey with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, Jacob; Jacob! And he said, Here I am. Then he said, I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again; and Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes. (Gen. 45:28 – 46:4).¹⁴

Pesikta Zutrata (Lekah Tov), Bereishit 46:3: God responded to Yaakov in kind

"He said, I am God, the God of your father; Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt" (Gen. 46:3). Our father Yaakov thought: my father Yitzhak wanted to go to Egypt, and God had told him: "Do not go down to Egypt" (Gen. 26:2), so how can I go down? Therefore, "he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Yitzhak" – for he had prevented Yitzhak from going, but commanded Yaakov to go. This was evidenced when God told him, "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt" – even though I prevented your father from going down, you should go down. And this seems correct, since God responded to Yaakov's thoughts in kind.¹⁵

¹¹ In other words, Yaakov knew there was an edict, and did what he could to prevent its realization.

¹² The concept of 'Avraham's debt' was developed extensively by medieval commentators as a justification for the exile to Egypt, and by implication, to the exile the commentators experienced in their time. For example, the Ohr HaHaim on the first verse of Shemot: "These are the names [...] the early ones knew and recognized the exile and accepted it upon themselves and their descendants [...] and they understood this to be a debt of exile. And it is written, These are the names – that is, those who were willing to suffer the yoke of exile [...] as one who prepares oneself." The context there hints to a justification of the commentator's acceptance of the penance of his own exile. However, this midrash has Yaakov accepting this edict as fate (the price of reuniting with his son), not as an active decision to fulfill the prophecy.

¹³ This is a well-explored motif in the Covenant of the Parts; see [The Covenant of the Parts throughout the Generations](#) in Lekh Lekha. Midrash Tanhuma expressed the position that Yaakov had to be manipulated to go down to Egypt one way or another; therefore, better with 'ropes of love.' But the midrash ends with the critique of the brothers for sending Yosef down to Egypt; Yaakov was led with ropes of love following Yosef. Yosef, in contrast was led with hatred and slander. This midrash refuses to attribute the entire process solely to a divine decree.

¹⁴ One central axis in the ultimate descent to Egypt was Yaakov's journey to meet Yosef. Despite the touching situation, wasn't there a more minimalistic way for Yaakov to reunite with Yosef? Why did Yaakov have to take his entire family along to Egypt to meet with Yosef? God encourages Yaakov, "do not be afraid to go down to Egypt" – what exactly does Yaakov fear? The hazards of the journey, or something greater? Perhaps he remembers his previous journey to his personal exile in Haran? Or his father, who never left Canaan? Or his grandfather, who descended to Egypt, and all that happened to him there? This was addressed extensively in [Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt](#) in Parashat Vayigash, with regard to the personal and national perspectives.

¹⁵ Yaakov is hesitant about going down to Egypt, and expresses second thoughts after his initial excitement and spontaneous decision to go see Yosef; but God encourages him to go to Egypt. Midrash Sekhel Tov (Bereshit 46:1) describes: "And he came to Beera-Sheba and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Yitzhak: he said to himself, My father wanted to go down to Egypt but God prevented him, how can I go down without His command? Therefore it says, 'the God of his father Yitzhak,' to tell him whether or not he should go. And it seems that God responded in kind." Another approach may critique Yaakov, similarly to the midrashic take on Bilaam and others: "one walks in the way in which one wishes to be led" (Makkot 10b; Bemidbar Rabbah 20:12). According to this approach, while Yaakov hesitated because of his father, what he really desired was to see Yosef, and God was not going to stand in his way, as

Psikta Zutrata (Lekah Tov), Bereishit 47: We descended temporarily, not permanently

"They said to Pharaoh, we came to dwell in the land temporarily."¹⁶ He asked them, what is your profession? And they responded, your servants are shepherds. He asked [himself], and what benefit is it to me that you should come to my land, when shepherds are an abomination to Egypt? But before he could speak, they said: "we came to dwell in the land temporarily" – we did not come to stay permanently, but only temporarily, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks. If there had been pasture, we would not have come to Egypt. And if you say perhaps the famine was not so great – the Torah states explicitly, "the famine is heavy," to make it clear that we went down involuntary.¹⁷

Sekhel Tov, Introduction to Shemot: from ropes of love to evil ways

Pharaoh should have come and conquered Hebron by siege and taken Yaakov and his family down to Egypt with iron chains in fulfillment of the Creator's edict, as it is written, "your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land" (Gen. 15:13).¹⁸ But instead the Creator drew them with "cords of a man, with ropes of love," as it is written, "he sent a man before them – Yosef was sold as a slave" (Ps. 105:17). And because of Yaakov's love for Yosef he said, "I must go and see him before I die" (Gen. 45:28). And they were endeared to Pharaoh and his servants, as it is written, "in the best of the land you may settle your father and brothers" (47:6). And when they turned their ways to evil before their Creator and betrayed logical thinking, and defiled themselves in the detestable things of their eyes and committed to the idolatry of Egypt as traitors, God turned on them with a strong and fickle king who renewed his edicts and enslaved them with extreme physical labor.¹⁹

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 10b: One should never prefer one child over another

Hillel stated: "To the place which my heart desires, that is where my legs take me" (Tosefta, Sukkah 4; Avot DeRabbi Natan I, 12). This is the application of free will.

¹⁶ The Sforno emphasizes Yaakov's intention regarding visiting Yosef: "I shall go and see him – but not to settle there, as he says," contrary to the brothers who tell Yosef, "we have come to live in the land."

¹⁷ According to the text in Bereishit, Pharaoh received Yosef's brothers kindly: "When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house saying Joseph's brothers have come, Pharaoh and his servants were pleased; Pharaoh said to Joseph, Say to your brothers, Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan; Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land" (Gen. 45:16-18). However, the midrash creates a conflict in order to emphasize that Yaakov's family intended to reside in Egypt temporarily, not to settle permanently. The author of the Haggadah reinforces this idea: "this teaches us that Yaakov did not go down to Egypt to settle, but rather to dwell temporarily." However, the midrash does not address the process the nation underwent from unwilling descent to staying in Egypt; Rashi comments: "He [Pharaoh] prophesied, but did not know what he had prophesied." While the biblical text described Pharaoh as a gracious host, the midrash portrays him as self-serving. Pharaoh invited Yaakov and his family to come to him, and so they do: "Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they settled there and were fruitful and multiplied." Whether by Pharaoh's invitation or threat, it was the brothers who decided to return to Egypt after burying Yaakov; and this snowballed into the beginning of the enslavement.

¹⁸ Many conquerors took interest in Canaan which is the seam between the northern superpowers of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia, and the southern superpower of Egypt. The author of the midrash, who is aware of the historical conquest of Israel by Assyria and Babylonia, imagines the possibility that the Egyptian exile might have been initiated under similar circumstances. Egypt could have conquered Canaan and exiled its inhabitants, just as Assyria and Babylonia did to the kingdoms of Judah and Israel centuries later. Haameq Davar on Gen. 25:18 comments that Pharaoh initiated the descent of Yaakov's household: "Pharaoh wanted the children of Israel to come to him and settle in Egypt, but he could not have forced them since they are not from his land; however, he ensured that no grain would be sent to Canaan, and so they were forced to come to Egypt for the years of the famine."

¹⁹ This midrash creates a clear divide between the descent to Egypt and the enslavement, and only perceives the latter as a punishment; compare this position with the verses in Ezekiel and the first midrash in Shemot Rabbah cited above. This midrash does not focus on whether the exile was a divine edict, but rather on what happens after the descent to a foreign land: Yaakov's descendants settle and forget the Promised Land.

Rava bar Meḥasseya said in the name of Rav Ḥama bar Gurya in the name of Rav: one should never prefer one of his sons over his other sons; as due to the weight of two *selā* of fine wool that Yaakov gave Yosef more than his other sons – his brothers became jealous of him, and the matter unfolded, and our forefathers descended to Egypt.²⁰

Ramban, Bereishit 47:28: The Egyptian exile as an archetype

"And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years" (Bereishit 47:28). I have mentioned (43:14) that Yaakov's descent to Egypt is our exile today in the hands of the fourth creature (Dan. 7:7), that is the evil Rome. For Yaakov's sons were instrumental in creating the reason for their descent to Egypt by selling their brother Yosef.²¹ And Yaakov descended there because of the famine, and thought he would be saved by his son in a home in which he is loved, for Pharaoh loves Yosef and is as a son to him. And they believed they would ascend from there when the famine in Canaan ended [...] but they did not ascend, and their exile was prolonged [...] This is how it is for us with Rome and Edom. It is our brothers who have caused our downfall in their hands, for they forged a covenant with the Romans. The latter King Agrippa of the Second Temple fled to them for assistance, and because of the famine, the Jerusalemites were captured, and the exile has been lengthened a great deal, without our knowing when it will end like the other exiles. In it, we are like the dead, saying, "Our bones are dried up; we are indeed cut off" (Ezek. 37:11).²² Nevertheless, all the nations shall bring us up as an offering to God, and will have severe mourning when they see our glory. We will witness God's vengeance, for "He shall lift us up, and we will live before Him" (Hosea 6:2).²³

Ramban, Bereishit 12:11, Lekh Lekha – Avraham Descended and Returned

And he said "so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you" for the length of time we will dwell in this land until the famine passes. For Avraham came to live in the land because of the famine, and after the famine he would return to the land to which God had commanded him and given him and his offspring. And he believed they would revive themselves

²⁰ See also Bereshit Rabbah 44:8: "And he made him a multicolored robe – Resh Lakish said in the name of R. Elazar ben Azariah: one should not show preference among his children, since the multicolored robe Yaakov made for Yosef caused his brothers to hate him." According to this approach the exile was not the result of the Covenant of the Parts nor a historical reckoning, but rather a result of brotherly hatred and jealousy, rooted in Yaakov's questionable parenting philosophy, who himself suffered a hateful relationship with his own brother, in a cycle that is difficult to break out of. Even if there was a divine decree, it was realized in that generation by an act of brotherly hatred. See also Sekhel Tov, Gen. 44: "The brothers would not have gone down to Egypt, only their descendants should have. And who caused them to go down to Egypt? They did, because of their hatred for their brother Yosef." Hatred and sin caused the edict to be realized earlier.

²¹ Midrash Tehillim, Psalm 10: "God said to the brothers: you sold him to slavery, as it is written, "Yosef was sold into slavery" (Ps. 105:17), on your lives you will read every year: We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt." On Seder night each year, we remember the reason "we were slaves."

²² See Ramban's introduction to Bereshit, where he states the purpose of his commentary was "to soothe the minds of the students who are weary from the exile with simple explanations and pleasant words when they read the appointed sections of the Pentateuch on Sabbaths and festivals." Ramban is not one to present a distant objective perspective on the Torah; he connects his commentary directly with his time and situation.

²³ Sforno continues Ramban's line of thought: "And they sold Yosef to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver [...] the same happened to us in the Second Temple, when some of us sold others to the nations. This refers especially to the Hasmonean kings who placed Israel under the Roman yoke and caused this exile, just as the selling of Yosef caused our forefathers to descend to Egypt." This approach is penitent (see [But we are guilty](#) in Parashat Miketz), accepting the fact that another option was possible, but perhaps also accepting that there was a decree. Ramban and Sforno tend toward acceptance that it was decreed instead of internal historical introspection.

throughout the famine until they are given relief and deliverance from God to return, or perhaps they would escape to Canaan when they had given up.²⁴

Abarbanel, Devarim 26:6: The Patriarchal Contribution

Some interpreted the verse "my father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt," similarly to the *Maggid's*²⁵ interpretation: that the reason they were brought to Egypt was not an evil ordained by divine edict, but rather they brought it upon themselves. As Moshe Rabbeinu said, "our forefathers descended to Egypt."²⁶ And Yehoshua said, "and Yaakov and his sons went down to Egypt."²⁷ So it is known that the brother's jealousy and hatred of Yosef was the reason they ultimately descended to Egypt. But that jealousy and hatred, which were inferior traits, were not drawn from their patriarchs Avraham and Sarah [...] indeed the indecent traits were drawn from the nature of their matriarchs, who were descendants of Laban the Aramean. For their grandmother Rivka was his kin [...] the *Maggid* responded to this idea by saying that the father of their mother, who was an Aramean, caused damage and devastation in the house of her father, and due to the bad attributes inherited by his sons they did as they did, which is the reason they descended to Egypt.²⁸

²⁴ Ramban goes farther back and sees the roots of Avraham's descent to Egypt in Parashat Lekh Lekha as the key to the Egyptian exile. He opens his commentary with a fatalistic tone: "Behold, Avraham descended to Egypt because of the famine to dwell there and revive himself throughout the drought, and the Egyptians exploited him to take his wife for no reason, and God avenged him by bringing great afflictions upon them, and he left with cattle and silver and gold [...] This was a hint that his children will descend to Egypt due to the famine to dwell there in the land, and that the Egyptians will torture them and take their wives [...] and God will avenge them with great plagues until they emerge with silver and gold and multitudes of cattle [...] and everything that occurred to the father happened to the sons. This is addressed in Bereshit Rabbah (40:6): R. Pinhas in the name of R. Oshaya said: God said to Avraham, go and conquer the way before your sons." Subsequently, Ramban continues his critique of Avraham's descent to Egypt: "And you should know that our father Avraham committed a great sin unintentionally, in which he brought his righteous wife to stumble into transgression because of his fear of getting killed, and he should have trusted God to have saved him, his wife and all that was his, because Elohim has power to help and to save. Also his leaving the land due to famine was a transgression that he committed, because Elohim would have saved him from dying (even) in a famine. And because of this deed it was decreed that his seed would be in exile in Egypt under the hand of Pharaoh." Despite this harsh critique, Avraham did return to Canaan; perhaps the same could have been expected of Yaakov, as the Ohr HaHaim suggests; but on the other hand, Yaakov's exile may be a punishment for Avraham's sin. The cycle of sin, choice, and inability to amend the situation are all present in Ramban's commentary. Ramban lived through the exile of Ishmael and that of Edom, and so had a personal perspective on the state of Israel's exile.

²⁵ The author of the Pesach Haggadah.

²⁶ Moshe's address to the king of Edom, when he asks to pass through his land (Bemidbar 20:1-15): "Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the adversity that has befallen us; how our ancestors went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians oppressed us and our ancestors." See Bemidbar Rabbah 19:15, where Bnei Yisrael remind the Edomites that the Egyptian exile was the fulfillment of the decree to their forefather Avraham, and Esau's descendants are unconcerned with this.

²⁷ Large portions of Yehoshua's farewell address are cited in the Haggadah; "Then I took your father Avraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Yitzhak; and to Yitzhak I gave Yaakov and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Yaakov and his children went down to Egypt.

²⁸ We discussed the Abarbanel at length in [My father was a wandering Aramean](#) in Parashat Ki Tavo; see Rashbam there, who interprets 'Aramean' in reference to Avraham, and similarly Ramban, Sforno, and others. The displacement of the Aramean from Lavan and Bilaan to the patriarchs Avraham and Yaakov has profound ramifications on the question at hand: was the exile to Egypt a divine decree? The two matters are linked and shed a different light on Israel's descent to Egypt and its significance for future generations. The Egyptian exile is an extension of the patriarchal self-imposed 'Aramean exile,' and the difficulty or unwillingness to break away completely from their land and family, to complete the divine imperative לך לך . Accusing the Aramean matriarchs of bequeathing negative qualities and causing damage and jealousy is harsh; perhaps Abarbanel's personal experience in the expulsion from Spain affects his own negative view of the descent to Egypt. After all, it was Avraham who sent to Aram to bring a wife back for Yitzhak from his own homeland. Either way, the exile was brought about by human action, not by divine edict, and is rooted in the misdeeds of the Aramean patriarchs and matriarchs. The final disengagement from one's past and roots takes more than one journey.

Kli Yakar, Shemot 21:2, Mishpatim: The Hebrew Slave and the Selling of Yosef

"If you buy a Hebrew slave" (Ex. 21:2). The reason all the laws begin with the release of the slave after six years, is that the commandments begin "I am Hashem, your God, who has taken you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." By this he said, just as you were a slave and you were given freedom because I redeemed you from the house of bondage, so too you should pronounce freedom for your slave who is sold to you for thievery. For you too were sold for the thievery of Yosef, since the brothers sold him, and it happened that he was the reason they descended to Egypt to the house of bondage. But nonetheless, you went free. So too, you must set your slave free.²⁹

Kli Yakar, Bereishit 47:27: They settled and didn't want to leave

"And Israel settled in Goshen [...] and they were fruitful and multiplied" (Gen. 47:27). This verse is accusative of the Children of Israel; God had decreed "your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land," but they wanted to become permanent residence instead of foreigners [...] the verse accuses them of this settlement, since they wanted a stronghold on a land that was not their own. And did they not say to Pharaoh "we came to dwell in the land temporarily?" This teaches us that initially they did not descend in order to settle in Egypt, but rather to live there temporarily, and now they changed their minds. And they became so established there that they did not want to leave Egypt, until finally God had to pull them out with a strong hand, and those who did not want to leave died in the three days of darkness.³⁰

Alsheikh, Shemot 1: Does redemption justify bondage?

This matter should be addressed and explored by every wise man: why did God do this to the righteous in the land, to place Yaakov and all those who descended to Egypt into the bondage of Egypt, their children and grandchildren for 210 years, with brick and mortar and all manner of work in the fields? What was their sin and wrongdoing? For God is not suspect of judging unfairly.

I have heard it said that the purpose of this was for the glorification of His great strength, or so they would believe in Him when He gives them the Torah. For their eyes saw His great and mighty hand perform all the signs and miracles in Egypt.

²⁹ In Parashat Mishpatim we discussed the reason the Torah chooses to [Open with the Hebrew slave](#) and the question of [What they heard at Sinai](#) with regard to Mishpatim, which immediately follows the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntschitz, 16th century Poland) suggests that the laws of the Hebrew slave offer a reminder, warning, and solution for the story of Yosef. The Kli Yakar explains that the Hebrew slave is not only a reminder that we were once slaves, but also of the reason behind the enslavement, and a warning of repeating the mistakes that resulted in the exile to Egypt. If one might say the Hebrew slave is sold for his crime, and therefore doesn't deserve to go free, Israel too were sold for their crime of stealing Yosef, but ultimately God let them go free. The solution to this possibility is creating an appropriate legal framework that prevents the mistreatment of a fellow Hebrew. The exile from Israel in the time of Yirmiyahu touches on the mistreatment of fellow Hebrews slaves in particular, and this is read as the haftarah of Parashat Mishpatim.

³⁰ After completing the first draft of this page we came across this comment by the Kli Yakar, which accuses Yaakov's sons of settling in Egypt! Instead of remaining in Egypt temporarily they settled in as permanent residents. Due to assimilation, many of Yaakov's descendants never returned; see [Mixed multitudes ascended with them](#) in Parashat Bo. According to the midrashic assumption that only 20% of Bnei Yisrael left Egypt in Yetziat Mitzrayim, 80% assimilated in Egypt! Perhaps this is what Ezekiel is referring to in the text above. Moreover, the few that left Egypt were accompanied by mixed multitudes. So who precisely was saved at the Splitting of the Sea, or received the Torah at Sinai? The story of Yosef and his brothers begins in Parashat Vayeshev: "And Yaakov dwelt in the land where his father had stayed," and the midrash comments: "Yaakov wished to dwell peacefully, when the trouble of Yosef came upon him." The story ends with the verse "Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they settled there and were fruitful and multiplied" – both attempts to 'dwell' ended unsuccessfully.

This is supported by the verse "I am Hashem your God who has taken you out of the land of Egypt," and the verse, "so that you will tell this to your son and grandson..."³¹ But all this is insufficient. For if taking them out of Egypt with a powerful hand with all those great signs was for Israel to know the glorification of God, this is an internal contradiction: why did Israel go into exile? Is it possible that God arranged their exile of brick and mortar for 210 years just so that they may see the plagues of the Exodus? And what did the first and second generation gain, since they were enslaved and died in Egypt? Just so that the third generation may see that they are redeemed from Egypt with the plagues? It would have been better for the first generation to see God's awesome deeds, and know God, and they would be comforted for their troubles in the benefit of the Exodus.³²

Shabbat Shalom,

Mehalkei Hamayim

³¹ See the full verse in Shemot 10:2: "and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how severely I dealt with the Egyptians when I performed miraculous signs among them, so that all of you may know that I am Hashem." As stated earlier, many commandments are based on the concept of commemorating *Yetziat Mitzrayim*.

³² This is Moshe's argument in Shemot Rabbah (above): what did my generation do to suffer this fate? A lofty objective cannot justify human suffering and enslavement! The matter of unjust judgment demands exploration. After the fact, the Exodus is perceived as a central and foundational event in the history of the nation. But what justification is there before the fact? Subsequently, the Alsheikh suggests a number of possible answers, rejecting some offhand, such as the exile as a punishment for selling Yosef or distressing Yaakov. He ultimately argues on a mystical plane that the exile was a correction of the 'serpent's impurity' which was diminished during the patriarchal generations, but had to be eliminated entirely before the Torah could be brought to earth. Regardless of this answer, which addresses mystical realms that are beyond our understanding, the Alsheikh's question, which no doubt echoes the injustice and suffering of his generation, is timeless and powerful. The question he raises has ramifications to countless acts of *Kiddush Hashem* throughout the generations.