

70 PERSPECTIVES BUT ONLY ONE TORAH

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Eretz Mitzrayim, Am Yisrael and Torah

Our experiences in Egypt have repercussions throughout our religion, its rituals and its philosophy. Was the slavery essential to our national formation? Did it have to be in Egypt? These are only 2 of the many questions which have been raised repetitively throughout our sources and innumerable answers given.

The slavery may be seen as essential for our understanding of our national humble beginnings, even perhaps insignificance. A nation born in slavery and only freed by the Hand of Hashem is thereby made totally dependent on Him for eternity. This was foretold in the Brit with Avraham, however, the land of that slavery was not. Was Egypt just an accident so that the first exile could have been anywhere or was Eretz Mitzrayim just as important as the slavery? There is not a prayer nor a ritual which does not mention that land or with which it is not connected. So it seems that the land itself constitutes a religious and spiritual factor. Indeed, the contrasts between it and our Promised Land has been seen as highlighting the religious contrasts between the 2 worlds.

Religion in Ancient Egypt was intimately connected with death; the pyramids are nothing more than tombs

and embalming suggests an attempt to defeat death. In contrast, our Avot are not buried beneath a mausoleum but in a cave wrought by nature, while the grave of Moshe, our lawgiver and teacher, is unknown. We continue this tradition by our burials in a simple grave. All this befits a religion devoted to life; our kaddish for the dead is not mourning but unlimited praise for Hashem, the Perfect Judge.

Mitzrayim was a country where everything depended on slavery of one form or another. In Sefer B'reishit we saw how the Egyptians sold all their land, except that of the priests, to Yosef in return for food. These developments were results of the country's dependence on the Nile which made massive irrigation projects essential and so private ownership of land impossible. Pharaoh became a deity because of his lordship over the Nile, his citizens had no powers except the right to enjoy the fruits of the river and strangers had to buy these. So the Jewish People had to experience there the role of the slave, the stranger and the homeless. These experiences are reflected repetitively throughout the Tanach in the care, consideration and protection afforded to these classes. Above all, these experiences mean that only free men and women can worship Hashem. This is succinctly expressed by our becoming slaves of Hashem who redeemed us from the slavery of Egypt.

Eretz Yisrael has no great lakes nor a mighty river and so is dependent for its prosperity solely on rain. This dependence is not merely on the rainfall but even on its correct timing;

rainfall out of season has proven to be an even greater tragedy than none at all. Divine reward or punishment of the nation are constantly referred to in these terms as in the Sh'ma and the last chapters of the Chumash. Our summer and winter tefillot continue to reflect this. There is tefilat Geshem for growth on Sukkot, and Tal on Pesach to keep that growth alive, Tal is just as important as Geshem given our long, dry and summers and often the dry fall or spring as well.

When people are dependent on rain they constantly keep their eyes on the skies but when they are dependent on the rising of a river then their eyes are always lowered. In Mitzrayim which has always regarded itself as the gift of the Nile, there seemed to be no connection with Hashem. Thereby not only that country but even the people, could become identified both with all forms of sexual immorality and of idolatry. In contrast, the eyes of Hashem are constantly on Eretz Yisrael, whether Israel is in its homeland or not. "In the desert, water had to be given through miracles, whereas in Eretz Yisrael rain came through prayer" (Netziv). Israel was thereby taught to always turn to Hashem, both as individuals and as a nation. However, they first had to be exiled to Mitzrayim, the country where there seemed to be no connection between land and heaven, between people and Hashem. 🌹