

## Shabbat Shmot 5782 - How Long Were the Jews in Egypt? Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom!

Sometimes a short time can seem like a long time. Last week I put my young son to bed, and he *really* wanted to listen to a sleep story on the Calm app before he went to sleep. I didn't think it was necessary, so I said, "Try to go to sleep now. If you can't sleep after a long time, we can do it." *30 seconds later* he came to my room. He said, "Abba, I've been trying to sleep *for so long*. I can't sleep. Can I please have a sleep story?"

And other times, a long time can pass like a short time. Think back to a favorite summer at camp, or a wonderful family vacation. It might have lasted 8 weeks or 8 days, but when it was fun, the time zipped by.

Of course, time is objective too. We can clock it in minutes, hours, days, and years.

Which brings me to a relatively simple question with a complicated answer: how long were the Jews in Egypt? I ask this because today we began reading the story of the Exodus in Parashat Shmot. Last week we read about Jacob and sons moving down to Egypt permanently from Canaan to join Joseph and live out the famine. The Jews prosper under Joseph and a benevolent Pharaoh's watch.

And this week, after some undefined time passes, "a new king arises who did not know Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). Then we suddenly become slaves. So how much time passed? How long did the Jews live in Egypt, and for how long were they slaves?

I will share with you a few answers. Let's start with three data points. First, in Genesis 15, G-d gives Abraham a prophecy: "Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own - and they will serve them, and they will oppress them - *400 years*."

Meanwhile, in Exodus we hear a different number. Exodus 12 tells us explicitly: "The habitation of the Children of Israel during which they dwelled in Egypt was *430 years*."

However, if you add up the lifespans of the people who actually went to Egypt and their descendants, the numbers don't add up. According to the Torah's internal math - ages that are mentioned explicitly - the duration must be less than both 400 and 430 years. So the rabbis get creative. They interpret the duration of the Egyptian exile referred to in our verses as to the *decree* that the Jews will one day live in Egypt. In other words, the shadow hangs over their heads *even while Abraham and family are still in Canaan*. 430

years before the Jews left Egypt, G-d tells Abraham about this dark future, so that clock begins. Exactly 30 years later, Isaac is born, so the same clock continues. Recall that the Genesis verse refers to Abraham's *offspring*. So the rabbis understand that *Isaac* would be born exactly 30 years after this prophecy. Thus, these two numbers are reconciled.

Rashi and the other rabbis are well aware of the impossibility of either number and search for a more plausible answer. Rashi says that if you add up the ages of the different characters in the Torah, the Jewish length of stay in Egypt is really 210 years. We calculate this because the Torah tells us Isaac is 60 when Jacob was born, and Jacob is 130 when the family moves to Egypt. When we start with the 400 years from Isaac's birth and subtract 60 and 130, we get 210. This is closer to a real answer, but the problem is it starts with Isaac's birth, instead of when the Jews are actually in Egypt.

The truth is that the answer cannot be fully known because the Torah doesn't tell us in what year the slavery begins, or how many years pass between Joseph's death and the new wicked Pharaoh. We just don't know. The JPS Commentary says "it may be that the neatly balanced periods of time are intended to be rhetorical rather than literal; that is, they underline the biblical ideal of history as the fulfillment of G-d's deliberate design. In the world view of the Bible, history cannot be merely a series of disconnected and haphazard incidents."

I believe the Torah gives multiple durations for the Egyptian exile because there were in fact multiple starting points.

I think this can be understood when we examine another question, by way of example: When was the moment the modern State of Israel began? Let's start with May 14th, 1948 - Israeli Independence Day. Surely that's it, right? Well, no, because no book about Israeli history begins there. We wouldn't have arrived at that 1948 moment without the UN Partition Plan vote on November 29th, 1947, when the world effectively voted Israel into existence. But that was only possible because decades earlier the British gave the Jewish state its support in the 1917 Balfour Declaration. But we have to go back further to Herzl for organizing the First Zionist Congress in 1897. But we can't start there because when Herzl arrived on the scene there was already a pre-existing network of Hovevei Zion groups throughout Russia that were Zionist even before Herzl was! So you see, there is no simple answer because there are multiple true answers to when Israel really got its start.

Let's go back to the question about Egypt. I see these three answers - 210 years, 400 years, and 430 years - as referring to the Torah's three clear starting points. The most obvious is when the new Pharaoh arises over Egypt and enslaves the Jews. This

starting point is effectively the start of Sefer Shmot, the Book of Exodus, because this key verse occurs only eight verses into the book. Boom - meet the new king. It's truly all downhill from there. Without this wicked Pharaoh, there's no Jewish slavery in Egypt.

A second starting point is when Jacob and his family - 70 in all - move permanently to Egypt. When they go down it's a wondrous event. We are thrilled that the Jewish family will survive the famine and that Jacob will finally see his beloved son Joseph again. What could go wrong? At first things are quite rosy, but the stage is set for that new wicked king who would arrive later. This second starting point is alluded to at the beginning of the last Torah portion, Vayechi, which contains the narrative of the family going to Egypt. What's unusual about that Torah portion is that it's the only one in the entire Torah that begins not after a new line or a break in the text. There is literally no extra space between the end of the previous portion and this one, as if to say the walls are closing in. Something bad is coming, says Rashi. Without the Jewish family moving to Egypt, there's no Jewish slavery in Egypt.

A third starting point goes back even further to the moment when Joseph's brothers throw him in a pit and then sell him down to - guess where - Egypt. Recall what comes next: They take Joseph's colorful coat, slaughter a goat, and dip the coat into the blood to present to their father in an act of terrible deception. And recall a moment generations later which will signal the imminent freedom of the Jewish people. Remember that the Jews are to slaughter a lamb and place its blood on the doorposts of their homes for the angel of death to pass over them. These two acts are incredibly similar, and they serve as bookends of a sort, of the Egyptian experience. It's like the Jewish people slaughtering the lamb and placing the blood is a Tikkun - a correction - of the brothers selling Joseph and then covering it up. Without the brothers selling Joseph to Egypt, there's no Jewish slavery in Egypt.

Thus we have multiple starting points for the Jewish slavery in Egypt, not just one. Were the Torah to simply give one date, we might lose focus that multiple events set this in motion.

Time is a funny thing, subjective and objective. To really tell a story well - about the Exodus, about the birth of the modern state of Israel, about our own individual lives - we often have to go way, way back. The further back we can travel in a story, the more likely that story is to make an impact going forward.

Shabbat Shalom!