

## Abraham and Sarah in Egypt

Dr. Julia Blum

### SHOULD ABRAHAM HAVE GONE TO EGYPT?

The Torah portion called *Lech Lecha* – refers to God’s call to Abraham and Abraham’s extraordinary obedience. However, as we all know, right after this incredible act of unreserved and complete obedience, just after he arrives in the Land, Abraham goes down to Egypt to escape famine. Humanly speaking, it was a very natural and understandable thing to do: Egypt had the Nile river with its delta, therefore, it was always more fertile and there was always more food there than in the land of Canaan. But what about God’s will? Should Abraham have gone to Egypt?

Personally, I’m not sure that this little trip was approved by the Lord, but the Scriptures say nothing about that. It’s interesting that in [Genesis 26:1-2](#), in a very similar situation, God explicitly tells Isaac not to go to Egypt: *Then the Lord appeared to him and said: “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you.”* Then in [Genesis 46:2-3](#), God explicitly tells Jacob to go Egypt: *So He said, “I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there.”* In Abraham’s case however, God did not say: “Go”, and He did not say: “Don’t go”. Abraham made his own choice. There is not a word in Scripture to indicate whether God approved or disapproved of his decision. Maybe the Jewish texts can shed some light on this?

If we turn to Jewish tradition, we will find (as it is often the case) two completely different (in fact, opposite) approaches. The first one says that it was ok for Abraham to go to Egypt – he had to provide food for his family. The second claims that he had to stay in the Land no matter what: even though God didn’t explicitly say to him “Don’t ever leave” – God said “go to the Land,” and to obey God meant to stay in the Land. Yes, there was a famine in the Land, but who said that a famine is a legitimate reason to leave? People are facing much more dreadful threats in the Land today. Shouldn’t Abraham have trusted the Lord?

These two approaches are represented by two of the greatest medieval Jewish commentators, Rashi and Ramban. It was Rashi who said that what Abraham did was fine: “What do you expect from him, there was a famine in the land, he had to feed his family?” And it was Ramban who said: No, God told him to come to the Land, and even though circumstances were tough, he should have been faithful to what God had said.

What do you think – should Abraham have gone to Egypt or not? And why, after all, do we have this episode in the Torah?

## FOUR LEVELS

For me personally, this whole passage about Abraham going down to Egypt in the second half of Genesis 12 is absolutely precious: not only do we learn from this episode that being obedient to God and abiding in His will doesn't mean being safe from all difficulties, but we extract a lot of lessons from the different layers of this short story. I will use this example to show you, once again, how the PARDES technique of Jewish hermeneutic can be applied to the text of the Scripture.

In Jewish exegesis, the PARDES method describes four different levels of Biblical interpretation. The term PaRDeS is an acronym formed from the initials of these four levels, which are:

**Peshat** (פְּשָׁט) – “plain” and “straight”: the direct, literal meaning of Scripture;  
**Remez** (רְמִיז) – “hints”: the deeper, symbolic meaning, going beyond the literal sense;  
**Derash** (דְּרַשׁ) – from Hebrew root “*darash*” meaning “to inquire” and “to seek”: the comparative meaning, the meaning obtained from a passage by comparing it to similar passages in the Scripture;  
**Sod** (סוּד) – “secret”, “mystery”: the meaning of Scripture revealed through inspiration or revelation.

## THE PRICELESS LESSONS

We will begin with PESHAT – the literal interpretation of this episode. As for its plain literal meaning, most people would probably agree that this story doesn't look very nice – and this is the beauty of the Bible, which never tries to embellish, or whitewash the people it describes. I believe this is our main lesson of the PESHAT level: Scripture doesn't portray Abraham as a flawless hero of faith, as a sort of spiritual superman. Not only does he go down to Egypt, but while in Egypt, out of fear for his life, he does something that it is very difficult for us to justify or understand, let alone imagine somebody actually doing it: he passes off his wife as his sister. “*Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.*”<sup>[1]</sup> What does it mean – that *it may be well with me for your sake*? The question begs to be asked: Did he hope for financial reward, or was he just trying to save his life? In the very beginning of chapter 12, Abraham is willing and able to leave everything and everybody behind in order to obey God, yet just a few verses later, the very same man who just committed an act of incredible courage, seems to commit an act of incredible cowardice.

For me, however, Abraham's faith and obedience become even more precious *after* this story. Now we know, beyond any shadow of doubt – and this is what we see clearly on the PESHAT level – that he is no superman, that he has his

own weaknesses and fears, that by nature, he is neither very courageous nor very brave. What made him so special then? He had a unique and amazing faith as the strongest feature of his character, and because of this faith, he became an amazing person, doing incredible things for the Lord – and never using his emotions or fears as an excuse. How was he able to be so unreservedly and completely obedient to God, even when obedience implied uncertainty and a risk to his own life, yet still love his own life and fear for it while he was in Egypt? There is only one possible explanation: His love for God was even bigger and greater than this love for his own life. That is why God called Abraham His friend—greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends—and that is why he became the father of all those who love God more than their own lives.

My dear readers, every time I use the PARDES technique, applying it to a particular Scripture text, I always tremble in excitement and anticipation when I reach the final level – SOD, secret or mystery. So far, I have never been disappointed: the things that are revealed on this level, for me, indeed have been mind-boggling. So, what is the SOD, what is the mystery of the strange Egyptian episode we’ve been discussing for the last few weeks? Why did this episode happen – and even more importantly, if it did happen, why was it recorded in Scripture? What is the secret message hidden for us in this text?

## REMEZ

Now, in Genesis 12, we began to apply to this episode, four levels of Jewish Biblical exegesis, PARDES, and we spoke about the first level – PESHAT – the plain, literal meaning of the text. Today we will be dealing with two deeper levels of the PARDES technique, going beyond the literal sense – REMEZ and DERASH.

The second level of this technique is REMEZ (“hint”)—“the meaning at which the texts hint, although it is not stated obviously.”<sup>[1]</sup> What is the REMEZ meaning of our story? What is the meaning that our text “hints” at?

There is an expression in Judaism: *ma’asei avot, siman l’banim*, meaning “the deeds of the fathers are a sign to the sons.” This is how the rabbis describe the Genesis narratives. “Ma’asei avot, siman l’banim” means that the stories about the Patriarchs tell us not only about the Patriarchs, but also about their descendants – about what will happen to the nation of Israel in the future. According to this concept, in Jewish tradition Abram’s journey down to Egypt foreshadows the future Egyptian exile. Whilst “Abram went up out of Egypt” foreshadows the future redemption of Israel—the Exodus. So we see that, just as Abraham left Egypt “*weighed down with cattle, silver and gold,*” so too did the Israelites leave Egypt “*with great wealth*”. Jewish tradition sees the subsequent history of the children of Israel rehearsed and foreshadowed in Abraham’s wanderings,

But what about scripture itself, does it support this understanding of the rabbis? Does Abram's journey indeed "hint" at the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt?

"There are ... commonly accepted and recognized criteria for making the claim that one text was intentionally written as an analogy, or foreshadowing, of another text: (1) shared words and phrases (lexical parallels); and (2) shared plot (thematic parallels)."<sup>[2]</sup> If we compare the description of Israel's exodus and the description of Abram's journey, we will see a lot of common words, phrases and themes. First of all, Abram goes down to Egypt for the same reason that later, in the time of Joseph, the children of Israel would go down to Egypt: because of a "famine" in the land. God strikes Pharaoh with plagues, just as He would do later, in the story of Exodus. And the additional detail we already mentioned, Abram leaves Egypt with great riches, just as the children of Israel would leave Egypt "with great wealth" in the time of their exodus. All these shared words and phrases prove that the story of Abram's sojourn in Egypt foreshadows the story of Exodus. Thus, the Remez meaning, the meaning at which this Scripture "hints," supports the tradition: the paradigm of the great national story of Exodus is first presented in the story of Abram.

## DERASH

The third level of PARDES, DERASH, "examines not only the main text that is being studied or expounded, but also any other sacred texts that are associated with the main text."<sup>[3]</sup> Here, in order to understand the meaning of Abram's going down to Egypt, let us compare our text with God's initial call to Abram— *Lech Lecha*. You might remember that in our first article on this Torah Portion, we said that *Lech Lecha* might be read as: "go to yourself"—as God's call and God's commission to Abram and to everyone. God says to everyone: "Lech Lecha"; He calls everyone to embark on this inward journey of faith: towards our soul's essence, towards our ultimate purpose, towards our self-fulfillment.

Now, if we understand *Lech Lecha* as Abram's personal journey of faith, we will also understand that his going down to Egypt and lying about his wife exposed his lack of trust, which needed to be dealt with. It's not insignificant that after his Egyptian experience we find him "between Beth-El and Hai" ([Gen.13:3](#)). In English, these names mean nothing, and probably most of you have never paid any special attention to them – but in Hebrew, this text is very profound and the names reflect Abraham's spiritual journey. Abraham was torn between "House of God" ... and "Heap of ruins", because these are the meanings of these biblical names: Bethel = "house of God"; Ai or Hai = "heap of ruins"

We asked earlier if it was it God's will that Abram went down to Egypt. Probably, God's perfect will was for Abram to trust Him. However, this descent became a preparation for (and therefore part of) an ascent – preparation for and part of a

deeper transformation process. Maybe Abraham would never have reached those heights of obedience and trusting the Lord if he not gone through this painful “heap of ruins” experience. What seemed to be an interruption was in fact an integral part of his initial journey, designated by the words, “Lech Lecha” – the journey towards the deepest parts of his soul. We read in Scripture: “*There Abram called on the name of the Lord*” [4] – and the following chapters tell us the story of how the Lord transformed his ‘heap of ruins’ into the ‘House of God’. Aren’t we all thankful that God can transform our ‘Heap of Ruins’ into a ‘House of God’?

What is the SOD – the secret, hidden meaning – of Abram and Sarai’s sojourn in Egypt?

### LET THE JOURNEY BEGIN

We know that Abraham was a man of faith and obedience: he loved God with all his heart, he had great faith, and had proved his faith many times by being completely and unreservedly obedient. And even though, as we see from the Egyptian episode, he also loved his own life and feared for it, his love for God was even greater than this love for his own life. That is why he was still able to obey God so unreservedly and completely, even when this obedience implied uncertainty and risk. God called Abraham his friend – and this friendship, this relationship, began with a personal encounter in Genesis 12. Abraham met God – and ever since then, he had been growing into “God’s friend”.

But what about Sarah? Sarah didn’t hear *Lech Lecha*. She didn’t have the same personal encounter with God that her husband had. Have you ever thought what she must have been going through when her husband (not so young anymore), suddenly decided to move – and he was not even sure where they were going. Of course, as a loving and obedient wife, she followed him – and yet, the difference between these journeys is very profound: if Abraham’s going to Canaan was based on his love for and obedience to God, Sarah’s going to Canaan was based on her love for and obedience to her husband.

We don’t hear much from her in these first chapters of Abraham’s saga; in fact, the first time we hear her, she asks her husband to *go in to* [1] Hagar. Before that, Sarah is completely silent – silent and obedient – perhaps a bit too silent and too obedient. An attentive reader cannot miss the fact that she traveled more in those first few chapters than any wife would normally agree to (unless she had special reasons to agree). Not only did she move to Canaan, but in Canaan we see Abraham wandering endlessly throughout the Land, and it goes without saying that his wife followed him everywhere:

*Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem...  
And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel...*

So Abram *journeyed, going on still toward the South.*

Eventually, after all this wandering around the Land, they go down to Egypt:

...and Abram *went down to Egypt.*

Why was she so silent? Why didn't Sarah ever question or argue with Abraham's decisions (at least, Scripture doesn't mention her doing so)? Why don't we hear anything from her in these chapters?

## SORE SPOT

We are touching Sarah's sore spot now –a sore spot that had been aching for years. For most of her life, Sarah had lived with a terrible pain in her heart. Have you ever noticed that the very first thing we hear about Sarah is the fact that she was barren: *But Sarai was barren; she had no child.*<sup>[2]</sup> This short message (repeated twice) occurs in Genesis 11, even before *Lech Lecha*, and speaks volumes: for a married woman to be barren at that time was a terrible calamity and, in everyone's eyes, a clear sign of God's (or gods) displeasure. It meant that the pain of inadequacy, shame, and guilt was something that Sarah had lived with, and no doubt struggled with, for many, many years, since the very first years of her long marriage.

Now perhaps we can understand why she was so silent: even a regular woman in that society was not supposed to be heard; how much more then, should a woman humiliated by "barrenness" be silent and obedient! And Sarah was indeed silent and obedient. She continued to follow her husband, not only out of obedience, but also out of shame and guilt. It's interesting that the Hebrew word אָכָרָה (*akarah*) "barren" – "is not only connected with such words as "unfruitful", but also "displaced", "destroyed" and "uprooted". The ancient linguistic logic is as follows: "If a woman has no children she has no roots and therefore has a sense of displacement."<sup>[3]</sup>

## EGYPT

If we were puzzled by Abraham's behavior in the "Egyptian episode," we are stunned when it comes to Sarah. What happened between the husband and the wife on the way there? How did she react to Abraham's suggestion (although she had probably heard it before as well<sup>[4]</sup>)? Was she offended? Upset? Mad? Disappointed? Whatever her emotions were, whatever storms shook her heart, outwardly she remained absolutely silent—we don't hear anything from her throughout the whole story.

Everything went exactly as Abraham had planned: *the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house. He treated Abram well for her sake.* Can you imagine? Not only did her husband fail to protect her, he actually used her to save his life and to

become rich! This would be an incredible offense to any woman – and I think it must have been an incredible offense to Sarah as well!

And then, God Himself did what her husband failed to do. God Himself saved Sarah from Pharaoh. Scripture doesn't tell us exactly what happened there, exactly how Pharaoh realized that all those *great plagues were because of Sarah, Abram's wife*. It's not that important, after all. What is important, however, is that in Egypt, out of her Egyptian misery, when God Himself interceded for her, Sarah's own faith was born. When she followed Abraham in chapter 12, she was just acting as an obedient wife (all the more so, since she felt guilty, humiliated, and ashamed because of her barrenness), but in Egypt, for the first time in her life, she had a personal encounter with God. She experienced firsthand the truth that God Himself protects those who are left without human protection, that *the Lord executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed*. He Himself saved her, and the gratitude, the overwhelming feeling of safety and protection, and the deep inner knowledge that she could always rely on Him, would stay with her forever. From that time in Egypt forward, she knew that she could trust God completely. Her husband might fail her, as happened in Egypt, but the Lord would never fail her. That is why later, she could say to Abraham: "*The Lord judge between you and me*" because she knew she could always rely on Him.

I believe that from this moment on, God becomes the main passion of Sarah's life – and her journey also becomes a journey of faith. And, for me, this is the SOD of this Egyptian episode – it is not just one journey of faith that begins in Genesis 12, but two: while Abraham's journey starts from *Lech Lecha*, Sarah's journey begins in Egypt. "*Now we believe not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard and know*" ...