

Was Avraham Responsible for the Egyptian Exile? PT 1

Source 1: Talmud Nedarim 32a

אמר רבי אבהו אמר רבי אלעזר: מפני מה נענש אברהם אבינו ונשתעבדו בניו למצרים מאתיים ועשר שנים? מפני שעשה אנגריא בת"ח שנאמר: וירק את חניכיו ילידי ביתו, ושמואל אמר: מפני שהפריז על מדותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, שנא': במה אדע כי אירשנה; ורבי יוחנן אמר: שהפריש בני אדם מלהכנס תחת כנפי השכינה, שנאמר: תן לי הנפש והרכוש קח לך.

R. Abahu said in the name of R. Elazar: Why was Avraham punished by having his descendants subjugated in Egypt for 210 years? Because he imposed a labor tax [angaria] on Torah scholars [i.e., pressed them into his service], as it is written ([Bereishit 14](#)), "He led forth his disciples, those born in his house..." Shmuel said: Because he went too far in questioning the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written ([Bereishit 15](#)), "By what shall I know that I shall inherit [the land]?" R. Yochanan said: Because he kept people away from entering beneath the wings of the Divine Presence, as it is written, ([Bereishit 14](#)), "Give me the people, and take the goods for yourself." ([Nedarim 32a](#))

"And Avraham placed the seven sheep..." – The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You gave him seven sheep; by your life, I will withhold joy from your offspring for seven generations." ([Bereishit Rabba 54](#))

Source 2: Bereishit Ch. 14

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם כִּי נִשְׁבָּה אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָק אֶת־חֲנִיכָיו יְלִידֵי בֵיתוֹ שְׁמֹנֶה עָשָׂר
וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וַיִּרְדֹּף עַד־דָּן:

When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers,^b born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.

וַיִּחַלֶּק עֲלֵיהֶם לַיְלָה הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו וַיִּכְּסוּ וַיִּרְדֹּפוּם עַד־חֹבָה אֲשֶׁר
מִשְׁמָאל לְדַמְשֶׁק:

At night, he and his servants deployed against them and defeated them; and he pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus.

Source 2: Bereishit Ch. 15

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָם יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לֵתֶת לְךָ
אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: ז

Then He said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur
of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה בְּמָה אֵדַע כִּי אֵירִשְׁנָה: ח

And he said, “O Lord GOD, how shall I know that I am to possess it?”

Source 3: Bereishit Ch. 15

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ־סֹדֶם אֶל־אַבְרָם תּוֹלִי הַנָּפֶשׁ וְהָרֶכֶשׁ קַח־לָךְ: כא

Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the persons, and take
the possessions for yourself.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל־מֶלֶךְ סֹדֶם הִרְמַתִּי יָדִי אֶל־יְהוָה אֵל עֲלִיוֹן קִנְיָה
שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ: כב

But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I swear^d to the LORD, God
Most High, Creator of heaven and earth:

אִם־מְחוּט וְעַד שָׁרוּף־נָעַל וְאִם־אֶקַּח מִכָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לָךְ וְלֹא תֹאמַר אֲנִי
הָעִשְׂרָתִּי אֶת־אַבְרָם: כג

I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours;
you shall not say, ‘It is I who made Abram rich.’

Source 4: Bereishit 21

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ אֶל־אַבְרָהָם מָה הִנֵּה שֶׁבַע כְּבָשֹׂת הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר הִצַּבְתָּ לְבִדָּנָה: כט

and Abimelech said to Abraham, “What mean these seven ewes which you have set apart?”

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֶת־שֶׁבַע כְּבָשֹׂת תִּקַּח מִיָּדִי בְּעֵבוּר תִּהְיֶה־לִּי לְעֵדָה כִּי חָפְרָתִי אֶת־הַבְּאֵר הַזֹּאת: ל

He replied, “You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well.”

עַל־כֵּן קָרָא לַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע כִּי שָׁם נִשְׁבָּעוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם: לא

Hence that place was called Beer-sheba,^c for there the two of them swore an oath.

וַיִּכְרְתוּ בְרִית בֵּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיָּקָם אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ וּפִיכֹל שָׂר־צָבָאוֹ וַיָּשָׁבוּ אֶל־אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים: לב

When they had concluded the pact at Beer-sheba, Abimelech and Phicol, chief of his troops, departed and returned to the land of the Philistines.

Source 5: Dr. Brachi Elitzur:

1. There is an enormous, seemingly unbridgeable gap between Avraham's character as depicted in the biblical text, and as reflected in the *midrash*.
2. The *midrash* complicates even further the question of Divine retribution on a nation that has not yet been born, which already pervades the decree of future subjugation.
3. Other *midrashei Chazal* illuminate in a positive light precisely the same areas of Avraham's character in which he stands accused in the *midrash* above.

Avraham's Character – Simple Pshat of the pesukim:

Source 6: Bereishit Ch. 12 – Summoned by Hashem

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלֶדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ: ^א

The LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

Source 7: Bereishit 22 – the Final Test

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי: ^א

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.”

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶשְׂרֵ־אֹהֲבָתְךָ וְלֵךְ
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר
אֵלַיךְ: ^ב

And He said, “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”

Source 8: Bereishit Ch. 20 – Educating for ה'ראת

וַיִּקְרָא אַבִּימֶלֶךְ לְאַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מַה־עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ וּמַה־חָטַאתָ לָּךְ
כִּי־הִבַּאתָ עָלַי וְעַל־מַמְלַכְתִּי חֲטָאָה גְדוֹלָה מַעֲשִׂים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָשׂוּ
עָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי: ^ט

Then Abimelech summoned Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? What wrong have I done that you should bring so great a guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.

What, then," Abimelech demanded of Abraham, "was your purpose in doing this thing?"

“I thought,” said Abraham, “surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.”

וַיִּטַע אֱשֵׁל בִּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא-שָׁם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה אֵל עֻלָּם:

What of the people he handed back to the King of Sdom?

Source 10: Bereishit Ch. 18

אולי יש חמשים צדיקים בתוך העיר האף תספה ולא תשא למקום
למען חמשים הצדיקים אשר בקרבה:

נד

What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?

Regarding Avraham abandoning others and exploiting Torah scholars, Dr. Elitzur points out:

R. Elazar accuses Avraham of exploiting Torah scholars for his own needs. But if Avraham were to accept R. Elazar's position and abandon Lot to his fate at the hands of his captors so as not to disturb the Torah scholars immersed in their study, wouldn't R. Yochanan's accusation of Avraham concerning his "keeping people away" from God become even stronger? Does the text not emphasize Avraham's meticulous care in supporting his disciples: "... except only that which the young men have eaten and the share of the men who went with me – Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei – let them take their share" (*Bereishit 14:24*)? This is a far cry from a "pressing into service," where there is no repayment of contributions of time and assets.

Source 11: Bereishit 14:24

בלעדי רק אשר אכלו הנערים וחלק האנשים אשר הלכו אתי עיר
אשכול וממרא הם יקחו חלקם: {ס}

נד

For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—let them take their share."

A key theological issue on the subjugation and affliction of Am Yisrael, with no clear explanation of the reason for the decree or its purpose, is one of the central questions that has preoccupied our mefarshim

It can be phrased as Source 12: Yechezkel 18:2:

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: א

The word of the LORD came to me:

מִה־לָּכֶם אַתֶּם מְשַׁלִּים אֶת־הַמָּשָׁל הַזֶּה עַל־אֲדָמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר ב
אֲבוֹת יֹאכְלוּ בֹסֵר וְשָׁנֵי הַבָּנִים תִּקְהֶינָה:

What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel,
“Parents eat sour grapes and their children’s teeth are blunted”?^a

12b) Metzudat David

אבות - וזהו המשל שאמרו הנה האבות אכלו בוסר החמוצה המקשה את השנים ועכ"ז לא קהו שניהם ושני הבנים תקהינה עם כי לא אכלו הבוסר ור"ל היתכן אשר אבותינו חטאו והיו כל ימיהם בשלוח ולא קבלו גמול ואנחנו בניהם שאין אנו מרבים בחטאים כמוהם נהיה נלקים בעוונם :



Source 13: Rabbi Zvi Shimon, The Exile in Egypt – Process or Punishment?

"These interpretations are not only problematic, each, in and of itself, but they also share one common flaw; Abraham who perpetrated the sin was not punished as is written: "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a ripe old age" ([Genesis 15:15](#))

Although the Abrabanel does not elaborate on the individual drawbacks of each interpretation, I would venture to guess that he questions whether the examples construed by our Sages to be sins should be viewed in such a

light. The major difficulty in our Sages' interpretations is that Scripture does not intimate any negative evaluation of Abraham's behavior in the examples cited. If anything, the opposite is the case (see [Genesis 15:1,18](#)). The Abrabanel then offers his own novel explanation for the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt:

"If we should hold that the exile in Egypt came about as a result of sin, it is improper that we should blame our father Abraham; God forbid that he would sin. It is much more plausible to attribute the sin to the sons of Jacob. The Torah testifies to the fact that they sinned a horrible sin in their unjustified hatred towards their brother Joseph and in their plot to kill him upon his visiting them, and in their throwing him into a pit and in their selling him to the Egyptians ... and since they sinned they deserved to be punished, and since they sinned in Egypt by selling their brother as a slave there, it was only appropriate that they should also be punished in Egypt and be slaves there, they and their offspring for many years. And just as they threw Joseph into the pit, all their newborn males were thrown into the Nile, and just as they caused Joseph to be brought down to Egypt, Joseph caused them to move to Egypt"

According to the Abrabanel, it is not Abraham, but rather, the sons of Jacob, who are responsible for the nation's suffering in Egypt. The Abrabanel buttresses his position with many examples of poetic justice, of punishment which parallels the sin which was committed. This explanation sheds new light on the significance of the final chapters of the book of Genesis. The conflict between Joseph and his brothers does not just describe HOW the Israelites arrived in Egypt but also WHY. The lengthy narrative of Joseph illustrates the moral depravity for which the family was exiled and eventually oppressed by the Egyptians. The relationship between the end of the book of Genesis and the book of Exodus is not just one of chronology but also of crime and punishment.

Our Sages, as cited in Shemot Rabba (a compilation of homiletical interpretations of our Sages on the book of Exodus) have a different understanding of the sin for which the Israelites were oppressed in Egypt:

"When Joseph died, they [the Israelites] abolished the covenant of circumcision, saying: 'Let us become like the Egyptians.' You can infer this from the fact that Moses had to circumcise them on their departure from Egypt. As soon as they had done so, God converted the love with

which the Egyptians loved them [the Israelites] into hatred."

A similar idea is echoed in a different interpretation of our Sages on the verse "And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly ... and the land WAS FILLED WITH THEM" ([Exodus 1:7](#)):

"The amphitheaters and circuses were full of them" (Yalkut Shimoni, an anthology of homiletical interpretations of our Sages on the whole Bible, dated to the 13th century).

Upon settling in their new abode in Egypt, the Israelites began to conceal their Jewishness. They wished to obscure any physical manifestations of their being different from the Egyptians and therefore did not circumcise their boys. In addition, they were immersed in Egyptian culture, enthusiastically attending Egyptian cultural events and adopting their modes of entertainment. Egyptian sports and theater were popular pastimes amongst the new Jewish immigrants.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, Lithuania, 1817-1893) adds another dimension to the Israelites' assimilation:

"And the land WAS FILLED WITH THEM" ([Exodus 1:7](#)) - They settled not only in the land of Goshen which had been set aside for them and was predominantly Israelite, but in the whole of Egypt even in the areas populated by Egyptians Wherever they were able to acquire a dwelling, there they resided. This is attested to in the plague of the firstborn where Scripture states that God passed over the door-posts of the Israelites in Egypt implying that many Israelites dwelled amongst the Egyptians ... Scripture informs us of the reason for the Egyptians' hatred and the royal decrees against them [the Israelites] ... All this came about because they violated Jacob's wish that they should live apart from the Egyptians in Goshen ... and this is the reason why we suffer persecution in every generation, because we do not desire to keep apart from the nations."

The Israelites assimilated both culturally and physically. They left the Jewish neighborhoods and preferred to dwell in Egyptian ones. Although their father Jacob was wise enough to foresee the dangers and therefore requested that they dwell separately in Goshen, they did not comply with their father's wish and settled in all sections of Egypt. According to our Sages the

reason for the oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians is their turning their backs on their Jewish heritage and their desire to ape Egyptian culture. The Netziv adds that this is the reason for our persecution not only in Egypt but also throughout all of Jewish history.

We have so far seen several different rationales offered for the persecution of the Israelites in Egypt. Shmuel the Sage and the Ramban believe that the enslavement of the Israelites is rooted in Abraham's sin. The Abrabanel suggests that it was a punishment for the brothers' treatment of Joseph, while our Sages and the Netziv considered it a punishment for the nation's assimilation in Egypt. The common denominator of all these interpretations is that they consider the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt a punishment.

However, the Abrabanel, citing Rabbi Crescas (Rabbi Chisdai Crescas, Spain, d. 1412?) raises a totally different possibility of understanding the Israelite experience in Egypt. The enslavement may be understood not as a punishment but rather a stage in the development of the people of Israel. God desired that the formation of the nation as His chosen people include their sojourn in Egypt and eventual divine salvation. The experience of the people in Egypt is a preparation for receiving the Torah and inheriting the land of Israel. According to Rabbi Crescas, God desired to save the people in a supernatural manner thereby revealing Himself and His might so that the people could have no doubt in His existence. The people's enslavement set the stage for God saving them with His "outstretched arm," by displaying the awesome ten plagues and other mighty miracles. Only after witnessing these miracles, are the people ready to become the people of God and commit themselves to the performance of God's commands. This conception of the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt is intimated by Scripture:

"I have hardened his [Pharaoh's] heart and the hearts of his advisors in order that I may display these miraculous signs among them, and that you may recount to your sons and your sons' sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I performed miraculous signs among them - in order that you may know that I am the Lord" ([Exodus 10:1,2](#)).

Indeed, the first of the ten commandments, the obligation to believe in God, is based on God's having taken the nation out of Egypt: "I am God your

Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" ([Exodus 20:2](#)).

The Abrabanel adds that the sojourn in Egypt was not only aimed at the Israelites but also at the Egyptians. Egypt was the center of idolatry and witchcraft. God wished to impress upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians that He is the only God and destroy their skewed idolatrous beliefs. The exile of the people of Israel in Egypt aims at impressing upon both the Israelites and the Egyptians the existence and supremacy of God. Support for this position may also be found in Scripture:

"And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst" ([Exodus 7:5](#)).

This approach considers the oppression a tool for setting the stage for God's miraculous intervention. The purpose of the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt is their eventual salvation. This position attaches no inherent importance in the actual enslavement. I believe that if we wish to adopt a position which does not view the enslavement as a punishment but rather part of a divine plan for the creation of the people of Israel, we must search for an explanation which attaches significance not only to the salvation of the people but also to their enslavement.

The sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt is indeed part of God's plan to create a chosen people. However, the enslavement is as important as the salvation. The enslavement infuses God's deliverance of the people with added significance. It defines the relationship between God and the people of Israel after they are delivered. By freeing the Israelites from their taskmasters God acquires rights over them; the delivered become the "slaves" of God. This idea is expressed in the following verse:

"For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I am God your Lord" ([Leviticus 25:55](#)).

The exile of the Israelites in Egypt is part of a divine plan for the establishment of the nation of Israel, the nation of God. It is in part to stall the inheritance of the land of Israel till the indigenous population loses its rights to the land. However, it is also internally motivated. The nation must be deserving of inheriting the promised land. The right of the people to the land

rests in its covenantal relationship with God. The nature and character of this relationship is forged in God's deliverance of the people from Egyptian bondage. The people of Israel are now the servants of God. Just as a slave's existence is totally directed towards the fulfillment of tasks determined by his owner, so too is the people's existence completely dedicated to the fulfillment of the divine will. However, while Egyptian slavery was characterized by hard physical labor, oppression and degradation, the servitude of God is one of spiritual growth and refinement. Obedience and commitment to the performance of God's commandments, of His moral code, free every individual and the nation, as a whole, from servitude of one's fellow man. Paradoxically, once Israel commits itself to total servitude of God, it acquires its liberty and independence.

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*Other statements of our sages that seem to be in opposition to the view of R. Yochanan and Shmuel, with Avraham as the classic believer and outreach person:*

"But a good man shall find satisfaction from himself" – this was Avraham, who recognized the Holy One, blessed be He, on his own. There was no one who taught him how to recognize God; rather, he arrived at this on his own, and he was one of four people who arrived at faith in God on their own. ([Bamidbar Rabba 14:2](#))[2]

"And the souls that they had made in Charan" – Even if all the people in the world were to gather together to create a single gnat and imbue it with a soul, they could not; [surely, then, Avraham and Sarah could not have "made souls" – i.e., people – in Charan]. What this teaches is that Avraham would convert them and bring the under the wings of the Divine Presence." (Sifri, [Devarim 32](#))

#### **SOURCE 14: Otzar HaGeonim, Sanhedrin 111b; Chagiga 14a**

R. Sherira taught: Those things that were learned out from the verses and are called Midrash and Aggada are approximate. There are some that are literally true... and many that are not literally true. And so too the aggadot taught by the students of the students, such as R. Tanchuma and R. Oshiya and others. Most are not literally true and we therefore do not rely on words of Aggada. Those that are correct [can be identified because they] are have logical and textual support, and there is no end to possible aggadic interpretation. Know that words

of Aggada are not comparable to Halakha. Rather, everyone interprets according to his desire, as [if to say], "It is possible," or, "We can suggest" – not as absolutes. We therefore do not rely upon them.

### Source 15: Drashot in Public during the Talmudic Period

Joseph Heinemann, (1915-1978, originally Hans) was the preeminent liturgy and Aggadah scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was born in Germany and went to Mir for yeshiva. He served as rabbi on the kinder transport and for the kibbutz training. He spent the end of the war in Manchester. Heinemann became a leading ideologue of the German Religious Zionist Orthodoxy. He eventually got to Israel in 1949. His most famous work was [\*Tefilah in the Era of the Tannaim and Ammoraim \[Hebrew\]\*](#), translated decades later as *Prayer in the Talmud, Forms and Patterns*.

By expounding in public, the Sages attempted to teach and instruct the public... concerning the foundations of Jewish faith. Homiletic teachings served as opportunities to address current issues, to respond to the views of non-orthodox sects and of heretics; to shed new light on the words of the Torah and to reveal its meaning for "these generations."