



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Vayigash: Jewish Survival?

In *Parshat Vayigash*, the family of Jacob move to Egypt; the first “diaspora community.” And here, our *midrashim* and commentaries give us pause to think about how Jews keep their identity as a minority amongst a majority culture.

I would like to refer to two very different sources:

1. Positive Identity: Torah Study

He sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph, to direct him to Goshen... (46:28)

Why is Judah sent ahead of the family? Rashi explains:

The *Aggadic* interpretation of [להורת] is [that there should be teaching of Torah]: to establish for him a house of study, from which teaching would emanate. [Tanhuma]

In the mind of the Midrash, Jacob wants a *bet midrash* set up even before the family arrives. That is the most pressing need for the family when it settles in Egypt.

The Midrash expresses the idea that the most critical ingredient in the founding of a Jewish community is its Torah base, its continued engagement in Torah study.

2. Negative Identity: An “Abhorrent” Profession

When Joseph introduces his brothers to Pharaoh, he instructs them in precise language what to say to the great leader.

When Pharaoh summons you and asks, 'What is your occupation?' you shall answer, 'Your servants have been breeders of livestock from the start until now, both we and our fathers' – so that you may stay in the region of Goshen. For all shepherds are abhorrent to Egypt. (46:34)

But this seems rather counterintuitive. Why inform Pharaoh that you are in the shepherding trade if that profession is abhorrent to the Egyptians? What was Joseph trying to achieve? (Many commentators translate the verse differently due to this difficulty!)

The Netziv – Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin (1816-1893) – Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin comments:

Abhorrent to the Egyptians: And **therefore**, he will not want you to reside in the main population center. This was Joseph's plan, to arrange things to the desired aim – of cultural seclusion. Even if it were to mean that Pharaoh would see his father and brothers in a negative light, it was certainly worth the cost so that the family preserve and protect 'the holiness of Israel'.

In this interpretation, Joseph is willing to suffer “antisemitism,” to have the family of Israel seen in a negative light, as an “abhorrent” shepherding clan rather than holding a more dignified Egyptian occupation, so they would live in a secluded enclave and preserve their identity. Their unsavory status would limit cultural intermingling.

And this is remarkable if it is true. But certainly, a rule of diaspora living. We live, thank God, in one of the most tolerant eras that Jews have ever experienced, however, assimilation is one of the heavy prices we pay for the open and equal societies in which Jews mostly live. The Pew Report of 2013 put US Jewish intermarriage at 58%. The Netziv suggests that the hostility of Egyptian society towards Jacob’s family ensured that they remain apart!

So, here is our discussion for this week:

- How can we keep our robust identity as a minority group?
- How have Jews survived as a minority over the centuries and millennia?
- Is assimilation inevitable?
- How did the Jews retain their identity in Egypt for 400 years?
- What is the most critical ingredient for Jewish survival: a “positive” identity – Torah study and a distinct way of life – or a “negative” identity – the animosity of the majority culture?

Shabbat Shalom!