

The Length of the Sojourn in Egypt By Rav Michael Hattin

Introduction

The last plagues rain down on Egypt, the first born of the Egyptians are slain, and Pharaoh's resolve is finally shattered. The people of Israel, huddling in their hovels as the night of terror unfolds, calmly consume the Paschal Lamb and recount God's deliverance. Rising before daybreak, his fitful sleep punctured by fearful screams that reverberate through the august halls of his palace, Pharaoh summons Moshe and Aharon and bids them go. As the day of redemption dawns, the Egyptians impatiently drive the Hebrews out, and they journey forth to freedom.

"Bnei Yisrael traveled from Raamses to Sukkot, numbering some six hundred thousand men, besides the children. Also, a great mixed multitude left with them, besides immense herds of sheep and cattle. The people baked the dough that they had taken forth from Egypt into unleavened cakes of matzot, for it did not rise. The people had been thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry, nor had they time to prepare provisions. **The people of Israel had dwelt in Egypt for a period of four hundred and thirty years. It thus came to pass at the conclusion of four hundred and thirty years, on this very day, that all of the legions of God left the land of Egypt.** It had been a night of vigil for God to take them out of the land of Egypt. This night remains a night of vigil to God for all of Bnei Yisrael, for all generations" (*Shemot* 12:37-42).

In our mind's eye, we see the people of Israel haltingly journeying forth, still clothed as slaves, but with the proud bearing of vindicated free men. No longer burdened with bricks

and mortar, they now are laden down with their worldly possessions, and with vessels of gold and silver from their frightened former hosts. The Israelites press forward, accompanied by huge herds of sheep and cattle, now forming a bleating, bellowing, and braying mass. Their erstwhile taskmasters look on incredulously, as the disorganized throngs wind their noisy way through the thoroughfares, to impressively gather as one at the city outskirts. Finally, the interminable nightmare of enslavement and bondage draws to a climactic close, as over four centuries of exile are concluded.

The Length of the Servitude – A Chronological Difficulty

According to the Torah's account, "the people of Israel had dwelt in Egypt for a period of four hundred and thirty years." Lest the reader be taken aback by this unusually large number, the Torah repeats in the very next verse that "it thus came to pass at the conclusion of four hundred and thirty years, on this very day, that all of the legions of God left the land of Egypt." How difficult it is for us to imagine a period of state-sponsored enslavement extending over so many generations, with children, grandchildren and great grandchildren born into a hopeless future of backbreaking drudgery, endless toil and premature death! Surely no one can fail to appreciate the tragedy and injustice of that experience, for the Torah makes it abundantly clear that the enslavement in Egypt was characterized by suffering, anguish and distress. The stated period of four hundred and thirty years, however, is difficult to corroborate, for elsewhere the Torah indicates that the period of enslavement could not possibly have extended for so long. The commentaries strive to reconcile this number with the rest of the chronology that the Torah provides concerning this event, and we shall examine a number of their attempts.

Let us begin by demonstrating, as both Rashi and the Ibn Ezra did, that the sojourn in Egypt could not have lasted for much more than two centuries. According to the list provided in *Parashat Vayigash*, towards the end of *Sefer Bereishit*, Yaakov's extended family of children and grandchildren that descended to Egypt at Yosef's invitation, numbered seventy males. Counted among this group were Levi and his three sons Gershon, Kehat and Merari (*Bereishit 46:11*). Kehat, of course, as the genealogy list in *Parashat Vaera* indicates, was the grandfather of Moshe: "These are the names of Levi's descendents according to their birth, Gershon, Kehat and Merari. Levi lived for one hundred and thirty seven years...Kehat's sons were Amram, Yitzhar, Chevron and Uziel, and Amram lived for one hundred and thirty three years...Amram took Yocheved his aunt as his wife, and she bore him Aharon and Moshe. Kehat lived for one hundred and thirty seven years" (*Shemot 6:16-20*). The passage concludes by noting that "Moshe was eighty years old, and Aharon was eighty three years old, when they commenced speaking to Pharaoh" (*Shemot 7:7*).

Thus, if Kehat himself was counted among those that descended to Egypt, we may use his life span as the starting point for the sojourn in exile. Let us assume that Kehat was a young child when Yaakov and his children relocated. Simple arithmetic yields a period of two hundred and seventy years for the combined life spans of Kehat and his son Amram ($133 + 137 = 270$). Moshe, Amram's son, was eighty years old when he undertook his charge to free the slaves, and not much more than a year elapsed from the time that he first stood before Pharaoh until the Exodus. Therefore, we can account for approximately three hundred and fifty years ($270 + 80 = 350$). This number, of course, assumes the rather unlikely scenario that both Kehat as well as Amram did not have offspring until the final year of their lives! In all probability, we must subtract quite a few years from our total to account for the overlapping life spans of the three, as well as for the fact that Kehat may have been a grown man when the family went down. In any case, it should be quite obvious that we cannot account for a period of four hundred and thirty years for the sojourn in Egypt, as the above texts clearly stated,

and we must therefore look elsewhere for the starting point of the computation.

The Covenant Between the Pieces – "Four Hundred Years"

Fortunately, there is another textual source that provides us a clue to unravel the confusion, and it concerns the Patriarch Avraham. Recall that in a shadowy vision that unfolded as the day waned and darkness fell, God indicated to him that his descendents would be enslaved in a land not theirs, but would eventually emerge from the encounter a triumphant people. In this 'Covenant Between the Pieces,' God swore an oath to the aged progenitor that his children would in fact possess the land of Canaan. The narrative states: "As the sun was setting, a deep slumber fell upon Avraham, and a great, dark and fearful gloominess seized him. God said to Avraham: 'You shall surely know that your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs, they shall be enslaved and oppressed, for four hundred years. The nation that they shall serve I will judge, and afterwards they shall go forth with great substance. You shall be gathered to your ancestors in peace, and shall be buried after old age. The fourth generation shall return to here, for the iniquity of Amorite is not yet full'" (*Bereishit 15:12-16*).

According to this text, Avraham's descendents are to be sojourners for a period of four hundred years, and are to be enslaved and oppressed during that time. But to which descendents does the Torah refer? Does it speak of Avraham's distant descendents, such as Kehat, Amram, and Moshe? Or can we perhaps understand it as a reference to Avraham's immediate descendent, namely his own son Yitzchak? There is as well an inherent ambiguity concerning the 'four hundred years.' Does this phrase modify the first part of the verse ('You shall surely know that your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs...for four hundred years') in which case it describes the period of 'sojourning'? Or does it instead modify the second part of the verse ('they shall be enslaved and oppressed, for four

hundred years'), in which case it describes the period of 'enslavement and oppression'?

The traditional sources, though mindful of the verses in *Parashat Bo* that speak of a period of four hundred and thirty years, nevertheless remain cognizant of the fact that this time period is an impossibility if we start the count from the actual descent to Egypt. This is particularly so when we recall that the sojourn in Egypt did not at all begin as an experience of enslavement and bondage, for as long as Yosef and his policies were alive, the children of Yaakov enjoyed a privileged status. Thus, all of the traditional commentaries understand the 'descendants' in question as a reference to Yitzchak.

Beginning with Yitzchak's Birth

If we begin the count of four hundred years from the birth of Yitzchak, we can achieve plausible results. When Avraham was one hundred years old, Yitzchak was born ([Bereishit 21:5](#)). We know that Yitzchak was sixty years old at the birth of Yaakov ([Bereishit 25:26](#)), and that Yaakov in turn was one hundred and thirty years old at the time of the descent, for so he relates his age to Pharaoh at their audience ([Bereishit 47:9](#)). Thus, a total of one hundred and ninety ($60 + 130 = 190$) years elapsed from the birth of Yitzchak, until the descent to Egypt. This would leave two hundred and ten years ($400 - 190 = 210$) for the duration of the actual sojourn in Egypt, and could account for the genealogy of Levi, Kehat, Amram, and Moshe mentioned earlier. In addition, it would explain God's promise to Avraham that 'the fourth generation shall return to here,' for that is roughly the number of generations that actually passed in Egypt from the time of the descent until the Exodus.

Accordingly, the 'four hundred years' must be understood not as the period of enslavement (which as we have seen, could not have been even two hundred years), but rather as the period of 'sojourning.' Considering the Covenant of the Pieces in this light, we can begin to understand it as a great test

of Avraham's faith and resolve. Earlier, he heeded the Divine call to leave behind home and hearth in order to build a new nation in a new land, and now he waits patiently for the fulfillment of God's promise of offspring. Here, he is informed that indeed he will have children, but that from the moment that his child is born, his tenuous hold on the land of Canaan will begin to slip away. He and his children, and his children's children, will be transient sojourners in Canaan, and the land will not be theirs. They will wander as nomads and suffer exile in a foreign land, until they are remembered by God and restored. Nevertheless, Avraham perseveres in his trust in God, for like a true and sincere revolutionary, his commitment is buoyed by a far-off vision of triumph, though he knows full well that he will not live to see it unfold.

Four Hundred vs. Four Hundred and Thirty

We have succeeded in accounting for the 'four hundred years' of God's promise and the 'four generations' of His oath, but there remain two further complications. The verses in *Parashat Bo* declared that Bnei Yisrael 'dwelt in Egypt' for a period of four hundred and thirty years. We know that at most we can account for four hundred of those years, if we take the exegetical liberty of beginning the count from the birth of Yitzchak. This leaves us with an unresolved thirty years. Also, we demonstrated that Yaakov's descendants certainly did not 'dwell' in Egypt for much more than two hundred years!

We are therefore forced to adopt the reading of the Septuagint, preserved in the Talmudic tractate [Megilla 9a](#), that the 'dwelling in Egypt' is not to be interpreted narrowly as signifying a geographic location. Instead, the 'dwelling in Egypt' is to be understood thematically as the 'state of being homeless and unconnected to the land,' for Yitzchak and his descendants never succeeded in establishing permanent settlement in Canaan. As the above-cited Talmudic passage reads the verse, "the people of Israel had dwelt in Egypt [and other lands] for a period of four hundred and thirty years."

With respect to the other thirty years, there are a number of solutions. Rashi, based on the much earlier *Seder Olam* (an early Midrashic source that traces Biblical chronology), explains that the four hundred years are to be reckoned from the birth of Yitzchak, as explained above. The additional thirty years are to be counted from the Covenant between the Pieces, for Rashi maintains that Avraham was seventy years old at that time. Since Avraham was one hundred years old at the birth of Yitzchak, it can be easily calculated that thirty years elapse from the time of the Covenant until Yitzchak's birth ($100 - 70 = 30$), and these are our missing thirty years. The difficulty with Rashi's interpretation, however, is that the Torah explicitly states that Avraham left Charan to journey to Canaan at the age of seventy-five (*Bereishit 12:4*)! How then could the Covenant Between the Pieces, which plainly occurs after Avraham's arrival, have taken place five years before he left Charan?! This dilemma forces the *Seder Olam* to adopt the highly unconvincing explanation that Avraham in fact undertook TWO journeys to Canaan. The first one, when Avraham was seventy years old, witnessed the Covenant between the Pieces. Afterwards, Avraham returned to Charan and only ventured forth again five years later, at the age of seventy-five. There is no textual evidence to support this explication.

The Resolution of Ibn Ezra and Conclusion

Much more convincing is the argument of the Ibn Ezra, who maintains that in fact Avraham departed for Canaan the one and only time at the age of seventy-five, as the Torah states. The additional five years are to be reckoned from the time that Avraham left the city of Ur his birthplace, for that is where his journey properly began. In other words, Avraham was seventy years old when he left Ur to journey towards Canaan. He, his wife, nephew and aged father arrived in Charan and remained there for a time, as the verses at the end of *Parashat Noach* suggest (see *Bereishit 11:31*). Five years later, at the age of seventy-five, the odyssey towards Canaan

was resumed, and soon after his arrival, God sealed the Covenant Between the Pieces with him. It should be pointed out that Ibn Ezra's explanation is somewhat conjectural as well, for the Torah nowhere records Avraham's age when he left Ur, but only when he left Charan. "The period of four hundred years begins with the birth of Yitzchak. The additional thirty years cover the period from the time that Avraham left behind his birthplace of Ur Kasdim and arrived with his father in Charan...There, Avraham remained with his father for a period of five years. Avraham arrived in Canaan at the age of seventy-five, and at no time returned to Charan. Thus, the birth of Yitzchak concluded thirty years from the time that Avraham left his land, for his role is central, and the land of Canaan was given to him..." (commentary to *Shemot 12:42*).

What is perhaps most striking about Ibn Ezra's interpretation, aside from its mathematical elegance, is that it allows us to neatly close the circle of the Exodus story. As it now turns out, the beginning of the sojourn in Egypt properly finds its source in Avraham's initial journey from his birthplace of Ur. It is at that moment that the promise of Canaan is first extended to him, and it is that Divine oath that sustains him throughout his trek. The story of the descent to Egypt and the enslavement is thus recast as part of a much larger matrix, one that is characterized by the unsettled state of wandering and homelessness. Egypt is not an independent experience, but is the condition of being away from the land of Canaan, or of lacking an enduring footing while yet in it. Therefore, the Torah properly begins the count of the sojourn in Egypt not from the time of Yaakov's arrival, nor even of Yitzchak's birth, but rather from the time of Avraham leaving Ur forever. His life of trust, of trial and of eventual triumph is thus reflected in the lives of his descendents, who eventually emerge from the crucible of Egypt as a nation.

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