

The Great Crocodile: Egypt and Jewish History

Speak these words: Thus said the Lord God: I am going to deal with you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, great crocodile, sprawling in your channels, Who said, My Nile is my own; I made it for myself. (Ezekiel 29:3)

Timeline

15th century BCE Pharaoh Thutmose III conquers in Canaan

12th century BCE El Amarna letters

5th century BCE Elephantine temple

4th century BCE Alexandria founded

3rd century BCE Septuagint

2nd century BCE Onias temple

1138 - 1204 Maimonides

1479 – 1573 Rabbi David ibn Zimra

1956 Sinai Campaign

1979 - 1982 Israel's withdrawal from Sinai

כי הארץ אשר אתה בא שמה לרשתה לא כארץ מצרים היא. . .

For the land you are about to enter is not like the land of Egypt. . . (Devarim 11:10)

Food for the World

There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land (Bereshit 12:10)

There was a famine in the land—aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham—and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar.

GOD had appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land that I point out to you (Bereshit 26:1-2)

So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world. When Jacob saw that there were food rations to be had in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you keep looking at one another? Now I hear,” he went on, “that there are rations to be had in Egypt. Go down and procure rations for us there, that we may live and not die (Bereshit 41:57 – 42:2)

וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי אֶת־הַצִּרְעָה לְפָנֶיךָ וְגִרְשָׁה אֶת־הַחִי וְאֶת־הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְאֶת־הַחִתִּי מִלְּפָנֶיךָ:
I will send the tzirah ahead of you, and it shall drive out before you the Hivites,
the Canaanites, and the Hittites.(Shmot 23:28)

Ally or Enemy?

Solomon allied himself by marriage with Pharaoh king of Egypt. He married Pharaoh's daughter and brought her to the City of David [to live there] until he had finished building his palace, and the House of GOD, and the walls around Jerusalem. (Kings I 3:1)

This was the purpose of the forced labor that Solomon imposed: It was to build the House of GOD, his own palace, the Millo, and the wall of Jerusalem, and [to fortify] Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer. Pharaoh king of Egypt had come up and captured Gezer; he destroyed it by fire, killed the Canaanites who dwelt in the town, and gave it as dowry to his daughter, Solomon's wife (Kings I 9:15-16)

In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, King Shishak of Egypt marched against Jerusalem and carried off the treasures of the House of GOD and the treasures of the royal palace. He carried off everything; he even carried off all the golden shields that Solomon had made. (Kings I 14:25-26)

Refuge

If you remain in this land, I will build you and not overthrow, I will plant you and not uproot; for I regret the punishment I have brought upon you. . .
“But if you say, ‘We will not stay in this land’—thus disobeying the ETERNAL your God— if you say, ‘No! We will go to the land of Egypt, so that we may not see war or hear the sound of the horn, and so that we may not hunger for bread; there we will stay,’ then hear the word of GOD, O remnant of Judah! Thus said GOD of Hosts, the God of Israel: If you turn your faces toward Egypt, and you go and sojourn there, the sword that you fear shall overtake you there, in the land of Egypt, and the famine you worry over shall follow at your heels in Egypt too; and there you shall die (Jeremiah 42: 10-16)

Instead, Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers took the entire remnant of Judah—those who had returned from all the countries to which they had been scattered and had sojourned in the land of Judah, men, women, and children; and the daughters of the king and all the people whom Nebuzaradan the chief of the guards had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan, as well as the prophet Jeremiah and Baruch son of Neriah— and they went to Egypt. They did not obey GOD. They arrived at Tahpanhes (Jeremiah 43:5-7)

Or Place of No Return?

Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since GOD has warned you, "You must not go back that way again." (Devarim 17:16)

The history of Israel begins in two acts of rejection: the rejection of Mesopotamia in the days of Abraham and the rejection of Egypt in the days of Moses. In both cases, it was a rejection of political and spiritual sovereignty. (Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Prophets)

לֹא־יָשִׁיב אֶת־הָעַם מִצִּיְרָיִם לְמִצְרָיִם

He must not make the people return to Egypt: Ever since the start of Jewish history the country of Egypt had served as a place of asylum for people living in the land of Israel [in times of famine]... The reason for this phenomenon is that Egypt is blessed with naturally fertile soil, a geological feature that grants the country an advantage over the neighboring territories. This made the latter areas, especially the land of Israel, occasionally dependent on the Egyptians. This then is the sense of the present warning to the people of Israel: You must not go back that way again. In other words, the Israelites are not to ever leave their homeland and travel to Egypt as they have done in the past in order to acquire there items that their own country cannot provide for them. The Torah thereby demands that Israel sever any sort of dependence which they have had in the past on the Egyptians. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch)

Replacement Temples?

Onias was jealous of his brother Shimi. Onias said to Shimi: Come and I will teach you the order of the service of the High Priest. And Onias dressed Shimi in a tunic and girded him in a ribbon and stood him next to the altar. Onias said to his fellow priests: Look what this man, Shimi, vowed and fulfilled for his beloved, that he had said to her: On the day that I serve in the High Priesthood I will wear your tunic and gird your ribbon. His fellow priests wanted to kill Shimi. Shimi then told them the entire incident, so the priests wanted to kill Onias. Onias ran away from them, and they ran after him. Onias ran to the palace of the king, and they ran after him. Anyone who saw him would say: This is him, this is him, and he was not able to escape unnoticed. Onias went to Alexandria in Egypt and built an altar there, and sacrificed offerings upon it for the sake of Heaven. As it is stated: "In that day shall there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at its border, to the Lord" (Isaiah 19:19). (Menachot 109b)

The Great Synagogue of Alexandria

One who did not see the great synagogue of Alexandria of Egypt never saw the glory of Israel. They said it was like a large basilica with a colonnade within a

colonnade. At times there were six hundred thousand men and another six hundred thousand men in it, twice the number of those who left Egypt. In it there were seventy-one golden chairs corresponding to the seventy-one members of the Great Sanhedrin, each of which consisted of no less than twenty-one thousand talents of gold. And there was a wooden platform at the center. The sexton of the synagogue would stand on it, with the scarves in his hand. when they reached the time to answer amen, the sexton waved the scarf and all the people would answer amen. And the members of the various crafts would not sit mingled. Rather, the goldsmiths would sit among themselves, and the silversmiths among themselves, and the blacksmiths among themselves, and the coppersmiths among themselves, and the weavers among themselves. And when a poor stranger entered there, he would recognize people who plied his craft, and he would turn to join them there. And from there he would secure his livelihood as well as the livelihood of the members of his household (Sukkah 51b)

A Controversial Translation

There was an incident involving King Ptolemy of Egypt, who assembled seventy-two Elders, and put them into seventy-two separate rooms, and did not reveal to them for what purpose he assembled them. He entered and approached each and every one, and said to each of them: Write for me a translation of the Torah of Moses your teacher. The Holy One, Blessed be He, placed wisdom in the heart of each and every one, and they all agreed to one understanding. (Megillah 9a)

You Think You're Busy?

I live in Fostat, and the Sultan lives Cairo. The distance between them is 4000 cubits [a mile and a half]. My duties to the Sultan are very heavy. I must see him every morning to check on his health. If one day he doesn't feel well, or one of the princes or the women of his harem doesn't feel well, I cannot leave Cairo that day. It often happens that there is an officer or two who needs me, and I have to attend to healing them all day. Therefore, as a rule, I am in Cairo early each day, and even if nothing unusual happens, by the time I come back to Fostat, half the day is gone. Under no circumstances do I come earlier. And I am ravenously hungry by then. When I come home, my foyer is always full of people – Jews and non-Jews, important people and not, judges and policemen, people who love me and people who hate me, a mixture of people, all of whom have been waiting for me to come home.

I get off of my donkey, wash my hands, and go out into the hall to see them. I apologize and ask that they should be kind enough to give me a few minutes to eat. That is the only meal I take in twenty-four hours. Then I go out to heal them, write them prescriptions and instructions for treating their problems.

Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes – I swear to you by the Torah – it is two hours into the night before they are all gone. I talk to them and

prescribe for them even while lying down on my back from exhaustion. And when night begins, I am so weak, I cannot even talk anymore.

Because of all this, no Jew can come and speak with me in wisdom or have a private audience with me because I have no time, except on Shabbat. On Shabbat, the whole congregation, or at least the majority of it, comes to my house after morning services, and I instruct the members of the community as to what they should do during the entire week. We learn together in a weak fashion until the afternoon. Then they all go home. Some of them come back and I teach more deeply between the afternoon and evening prayers.

That is my daily schedule. And I've only told you a little of what you would see if you would come. (Maimonides in a letter to Shmuel ibn Tibbon)

Rabbi David ibn Zimra (1479-1573) and Ethiopian Jews

And even though there is a doubt in our minds, since all these Habashish who live in the land of Cush behave according to the religion of the Karaites, who are like Zadok and Beitus, and we are not commanded to redeem them or to revive them, in any case it seems to me that they live among the rabbis, and they see the words of the sages and mock and ridicule them, about whom and the like they said they lower and not elevate, and they are the accursed family that the late Maimonides wrote. But those who come from the land of Cush are undoubtedly from the tribe of Dan. And because there were no sages among them who possessed the tradition, they grasped the plainness of the Scriptures. But if they had taught them, they would not have broken the words of our rabbis, and woe to them as a baby that was taken captive among the Gentiles. . . . David ibn Zimra

Treasures of the Genizah

It is a battlefield of books, and the literary production of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their disjecta membra are now strewn over its area
Solomon Schechter

אֲנִי בְּיָמַי הָיִיתִי מְבַרְכֵם בְּשׁוֹפְרֵי גְדוֹלֵי וְזָאוּ הָאֲבָדִים בְּאַרְץ אֲשׁוּר וְהַנְּדָחִים וְהַיָּהָבִים
בְּאַרְץ מִצְרַיִם וְהַשְּׂתַחֲוִי לַיהוָה בְּתַר הַקִּדְשׁ בִּירוּשָׁלַם : (ישעיהו כז: יג)