



# Vayeishev: Living in Israel and Living “Israel”

Yosef goes through a lot. Barely escaping death, he is sold into a bitter life a slavery, only to climb the ranks and become the “butler” of his master’s estate. He is spared from the hard labor which was typically imposed upon common slaves. Sadly, he is falsely accused of sexual misconduct and imprisoned in a dungeon. Once again, this slave can’t be repressed and he quickly rises to the top, becoming the assistant foreman of the jail – attending the needs of his fellow prisoners. After being almost entirely forgotten, he is liberated from jail, appearing before the supreme monarch of Egypt. Deciphering this emperor’s puzzling dreams, Yossef’s meteoric rise continues, and he is designated as viceroy of the largest superpower of ancient civilization. At every stage of his journey his talents are recognized, and he is eagerly embraced by his surrounding ‘society’. From the wealthy mansions of nobility, to a gloomy jail cell, to royal palaces, the country of Egypt has welcomed and adopted this man.

Egypt may embrace Yosef but he doesn’t

fully embrace Egypt. He always identifies as an “Ivri” – a person from a different Land, to the North of Egypt. He always remains “the other” belonging to a different Land and to a different culture. He is accused by his master’s wife as an עברי slave who has harassed her. Years later he is recommended to Pharo as an Ivri man or an איש עברי who can decode dreams and puzzling visions. Despite his uncanny success in integrating himself into Egyptian society, osef always retained an independent identity of an Ivri. He barely spent seventeen years in the Land of Israel, and he would never again return to his homeland. Yet he preserved his “Israeli consciousness” and his identity of belonging elsewhere. As the Midrash articulates he was מודה בארצו living with a sense of belonging elsewhere.

Where Yosef succeeded, Moshe – our greatest leader – did not. He too was warmly embraced by a foreign culture. Growing up entirely in Egypt, he never spent a day in his homeland of Israel. Furthermore, he was reared in the inner chambers of Egyptian royals – in the lap of Pharo. Yet despite all this, he, like Yosef, was expected to identify with a different Land and a faraway place. He may thrive in a local culture but he belongs elsewhere.

At a very early stage of his career, Moshe fails to fully succeed in this identity challenge. Something about him says he is an Egyptian and not an Ivri. Escaping with

his life to Midyan, he rescues shepherd girls from aggressive cattlemen. Reporting to their father, the girls relate that they were rescued by an Egyptian man or an איש מצרי. Moshe is immediately invited to their home, but he never corrects their error in referring to him as an Egyptian. He never contends that he isn't an "Egyptian" but rather an איש עברי. Living amidst Egyptian nobility, he doesn't "fully" identify with the Land of Israel and his Jewish identity- at least not as deeply as Yosef did. Years later, this minor miscue would come back to haunt Moshe.

Fast forward about 110 years, and Moshe is barred from the Land he so deeply yearns to enter. He pleads with Hashem to rescind the decree but to no avail. As a last-ditch effort, he argues that he should enter "along" with the bones of Yosef, which he had so lovingly guarded during forty years of desert hiking. If Yosef's coffin will enter, why shouldn't he? After all, neither he nor Yosef lived their adult lives in Israel. Yosef was driven from the Land at the age of seventeen and Moshe never actually lived there. Evidently, prior residence in Israel isn't a pre-condition for entering the Land. Why should Yosef's body enter and Moshe's be buried in a nondescript grave in the hills overlooking the border of Israel?

Hashem denies Moshe's request, justifying Yosef's entry. Although neither person actually resided as an adult in Israel, Yosef still deeply identified with his Land. By tenaciously maintaining his identity as an

איש עברי, Yosef reinforced his association with the Land of Israel. He was מודה בארצו. By contrast, by allowing himself to be designated an איש מצרי without objecting, Moshe did not sufficiently associate with the Land of Israel. Two people, neither of whom spent their adult lives in Israel. Yet, one deeply identified with the Land and one less so. Despite their being united through forty years of a tiring desert journey, their fates now part. Yosef's bones enter while Moshe remains at the doorstep, taking a loving glance of a Land he would never stride upon.

Not every Jew will enjoy the great privilege of living in Israel. It is the dream of every Jew, but until history is fully redeemed, it is an honor which not every Jew will realize. Some will be obstructed by external roadblocks while others may be inhibited by lack of desire. Either way, until our people are fully redeemed, it is a privilege of a select group of Jews who enjoy this historical award.

Those who don't actually live in Israel must face Yosef's challenge. Can they deeply live Israel even without actual residence IN Israel? Is Israel a deep part of their identity and Jewish consciousness? If it is, they have passed the Yosef test. They have walked down the trail which Yosef the איש עברי blazed- to live outside the Land while deeply affiliating with the Land. Those who don't live in Israel and also don't "live Israel" fail the test of Jewish history. ■

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