

Two Torah Stories (that might be) About Eretz Yisrael

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Although Eretz Yisrael is of central importance in the Torah, most of what happens in the Torah takes place outside of Eretz Yisrael. Of course a story can take place outside of Eretz Yisrael and still be about Eretz Yisrael. I would like to examine two stories from the Torah and their history of interpretation: one of them seems to not be about Eretz Yisrael, but is often interpreted to be about it. The other one seems to be all about Eretz Yisrael, but is mostly interpreted to not be about it.

Avraham Travels to Egypt

Sefer Breishit contains three stories in which one of the Avot travels to a new place and says that his wife is his sister. The first of these three stories, in Breishit 12, takes place in Egypt. The other two, in Breishit 20 (with Avraham) and in Breishit 26 (with Yitzchak), take place in Gerar, which is within the borders of Eretz Yisrael. Yitzchak stays in Gerar rather than going to Egypt because God tells him to remain within Israel, so in that story Eretz Yisrael is clearly an important factor. But in the two Avraham stories, the fact that one is outside the borders of Eretz Yisrael and one is inside those borders seems irrelevant. The purpose of the two stories about Avraham seems to be to show God's active role in saving Avraham from trouble. In fact the first story, in Egypt, is the first time we actually see God acting as Avraham's protector, so it carries an important theological message. The stories may also come to explain how Avraham gained his great wealth and his good relationship with the people around him. While there are definite differences between the two Avraham stories – mainly in that Avimelech the king of Gerar seems like a more moral person than Paroh king of Egypt – their similarities seem most significant.

Midrashim on the story of Avraham in Egypt mostly see this story as a test of Avraham's faith in God despite the delay of the Divine promise. This experience is listed in Pirkei Derabbi Eliezer as one of the ten tests that Avraham passed. However, Midrash Rabbah also quotes opinions that in a famine, as long as any food is available to buy, even at exorbitant prices, one must remain in the Land of Israel, thus presenting a possible criticism of Avraham (only possible, as the Midrash does not elaborate on whether there was food available to buy or not). One other

Midrash also relates to the specific fact that this takes place in Egypt by describing this story as a paradigm of the future exile of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt:

God said to Avraham, 'go and conquer the way for your children'. You find that everything that is written about Avraham is written about his children, by Avraham [the Torah] states 'and there was a famine in the land,' and by Yisrael 'for there was a famine for two years in the land.' By Avraham 'And Avraham went down to Egypt to dwell' and by Yisrael 'and our ancestors went down to Egypt'. By Avraham 'to dwell there' and by Yisrael 'we came to dwell in this land.' ... By Avraham 'they will kill me and leave you alive' and by Yisrael 'all the newborn babies shall be cast into the river.' By Avraham 'Avram was laden with livestock' and by Yisrael 'and they were taken out with silver and gold.'

Bereishit Rabba Lech Lecha 40

אמר הקב"ה לאברהם אבינו צא וכבוש את הדרך לפני בניך, את מוצא כל מה שכתוב באברהם, כתיב בבניו, באברהם כתיב, (בראשית יב) ויהי רעב בארץ, בישראל כתיב (בראשית מה) כי זה שנתים הרעב בקרב הארץ, באברהם כתיב (בראשית יב) וירד אברם מצרימה לגור שם, ובישראל כתיב (במדבר כ) וירדו אבותינו מצרימה, באברהם כתיב לגור שם, ובישראל כתיב לגור בארץ באנו... באברהם כתיב (בראשית יב) והרגו אותי ואותך יחיו ובישראל כתיב (שמות א) כל הבן הילוד היאורה תשליכוהו... באברהם כתיב (בראשית יג) ואברם כבד מאד במקנה, ובישראל כתיב (תהלים קה) ויוציאם בכסף וזהב...

בראשית רבה לך לך פרשה מ

Just as Avraham goes down to Egypt because of a famine, is oppressed there, and is saved by God and leaves with great wealth, his descendants will have the same experience.

Rashi on this story follows the general direction of the Midrash but makes the Land of Israel figure more prominently. He, too, sees the famine as a test of faith for Avraham, but links that directly with Eretz Yisrael: God has only just told Avraham that he must go to Canaan, and now he must immediately leave it due to the famine.

Ramban, however, criticizes Avraham for leaving Israel in the time of famine. He insists that Avraham should have stayed in Israel and trusted in God. Ramban even asserts that the entire exile of the Jewish people in Egypt was in fact a punishment to the descendants of Avraham for Avraham's lack of faith in leaving Eretz Yisrael to find food. Although Ramban's approach is not widely adopted, it is widely addressed among later commentaries. Abarbanel defends Avraham leaving Israel, arguing that Avraham understood correctly that the command to come to Israel meant that it should be his permanent home, not that he should never leave. Furthermore, he argues, this was a case of Pikuach Nefesh. Maharam Alshech claims that Avraham actually left Israel for the purpose of foreshadowing the exile to Egypt that his descendants would experience, in order to give them hope when they were enslaved in Egypt. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch invokes the principle of not relying on miracles to defend Avraham's departure. Although each of these parshanim rejects Ramban's judgment of Avraham, they accept Ramban's premise that a central issue in this story is Avraham's departure from Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Yoel Bin Nun, in his article "פרשיות יצחק," sees Avraham's trip to Egypt, as contrasted with Yitzchak's staying in Eretz Yisrael, as reflective of Avraham's entire way of life and relationship to Eretz Yisrael. Rav Bin Nun shows that although the Torah describes Avraham as a shepherd, there are references to his riches and property that suggest that he also amassed wealth as a travelling merchant. Thus Avraham's leaving Israel in the time of famine was part of his lifestyle

and livelihood. He contrasts this to Yitzchak, who not only stays in Eretz Yisrael but actually farms the land. Rav Bin Nun points out that Yitzchak's commitment to working the land leads to some negative consequences: greater strife with neighbors, as he can't just move elsewhere if people aren't getting along, and possibly times in his life in which he experiences poverty. (This is based on the commentary of the Ibn Ezra on Breishit 25 who suggests that Yitzchak was poor at times.) It is difficult to read Rav Bin Nun's contrast between Avraham and Yitzchak without thinking of his contemporary context, in which choosing to permanently settle in Israel often requires some material sacrifice and entering a more tense security situation. So Rav Bin Nun views Avraham's entire relationship with Eretz Yisrael in light of his trip to Egypt.

Avraham's journey to Egypt, which at first glance is a story about faith in God and about God's power to save, is interpreted, especially beginning with Ramban, as a story about the negative consequences of leaving Eretz Yisrael. Perhaps, we could argue, the parshanim simply like to insert Eretz Yisrael whenever they can. But that is certainly not the case in the next story we will discuss.

Moshe Yearns for Eretz Yisrael

As Moshe leads Bnei Yisrael through the desert towards Eretz Yisrael, it seems clear that he is quite excited about entering the promised land. When he sends spies to check out Eretz Yisrael, his questions go far beyond the normal reconnaissance questions asked of spies (which are the questions that Bnei Yisrael themselves asked in the Devarim version of the spies story). He asks them explicitly to find out whether the land is good or bad and various other questions related to the quality of the land. He even asks them to bring back the fruit of the land. Parshanim assume that Moshe was trying to generate enthusiasm among the people, but it also seems that he is quite enthusiastic about this himself.

Moshe's personal enthusiasm about Eretz Yisrael comes through in some of the most emotional passages in the Torah, in which he begs to be allowed to enter the land, his request is denied, and he is shown the land from afar.

And I prayed to the Lord at that time, saying: O Lord God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness, and Your strong hand; for what god is there in heaven or on earth that can do according to Your works and mighty acts? Let me go over, please, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill-country, and Lebanon.' But God was angry with me for your sakes, and did not listen to me; and God said to me: 'Enough; speak no more to Me of this matter. Go up into the top of Pisgah, and lift your eyes westward, and northward, and southward, and eastward, and behold with your eyes; for you shall not go over this Jordan.

Devarim 3:23-27

ואתחנן אל ה' בעת ההוא לאמר: אדני ה'
אתה החלות להראות את עבדך את
גדלך ואת ידך החזקה אשר מי אל
בשמים ובארץ אשר יעשה כמעשיך
וכגבורתך: אעברה נא ואראה את הארץ
הטובה אשר בעבר הירדן ההר הטוב
הזה והלבנון: ויתעבר ה' בי למענכם ולא
שמע אלי ויאמר ה' אלי רב לך אל תוסף
דבר אלי עוד בדבר הזה: עלה ראש
הפסגה ושא עיניך ימה וצפנה ותימנה
ומזרחה וראה בעיניך כי לא תעבר את
הירדן הזה:

דברים ג:כג-כז

On two other occasions in Sefer Devarim, in chapters 32 and 34, these themes appear again. Each time the irony of Moshe looking but being unable to cross over and enter is emphasized. Also, especially in the last passage, God shows Moshe the whole land, and the psukim seem to

linger lovingly over every detail of the land that God shows him, emphasizing Moshe's great desire to experience Eretz Yisrael directly. This story seems to describe a deeply committed Jew who longs to enter Eretz Yisrael but cannot, a proto-Zionist episode.

According to the Midrash, however, the main issue in this story is not Eretz Yisrael at all! Different Midrashim offer many different explanations of this story, but the most common one is that Moshe's request here is not really to enter Eretz Yisrael; it is to not die. His debate with God is in fact a debate about his own mortality, in which Moshe begs to continue living forever and God refuses.

Another explanation that appears in a few different collections of Midrashim gives a parable of a king who punishes two of his servants by forbidding them to drink wine for a month. The servant who does not love the king says that this is not a big deal, that he could even go without wine for a year or two, all in order to make light of the king's decree. The one who loves the king complains loudly that he cannot last even a moment without drinking wine, all to give honor to the king's command. According to this Midrash, Moshe had no particular longing to enter Eretz Yisrael at all. He simply begs, pleads, and repeats his sadness about not entering the land as if he did care, just to give respect to God's decree.

Perhaps still more shocking is a passage in the Gemara (that also appears in a few Midrash collections) that directly rejects the simple meaning of the Torah:

R' Simlai expounded: Why did Moshe desire to enter the land of Israel? For did he need to eat of its fruit, or satisfy himself with its goodness? Rather, this is what Moshe said: There are many mitzvot that the Jewish people received that can only be fulfilled in the land of Israel. I shall enter the land so that they are all fulfilled by me.

Sotah 14b

דרש רבי שמלאי: מפני מה נתאוה משה רבינו ליכנס לא"י? וכי לאכול מפריה הוא צריך או לשבוע מטובה הוא צריך? אלא כך אמר משה: הרבה מצות נצטוו ישראל ואין מתקיימין אלא בא"י, אכנס אני לארץ כדי שיתקיימו כולן על ידי.
סוטה דף יד.

What Rabbi Simlai presents as an absurd proposition, that Moshe wished to enjoy the fruits and goodness of Eretz Yisrael, actually sounds a good deal like the Moshe we know from the psukim themselves, the Moshe who asks the spies to bring back fruits of the land, inquires about the goodness of the land, specifically asks to enter "the good land", and looks over the country in great detail from the mountaintop. Instead, the Midrash says that Moshe is looking for rewards for mitzvot, which he thinks he can only receive in Eretz Yisrael. This passage goes on to say that God assures Moshe that he will receive a reward as great as if he had entered Eretz Yisrael. So according to this Midrash, Moshe's request is granted even though he does not enter Eretz Yisrael.

Finally some Midrashim do see this request as being about Eretz Yisrael, but limit it to the spiritual aspects of the land, for example, interpreting הַלְבַנוֹן as the Beit Hamikdash. Rashi follows this approach in his interpretation. So too does Rav Menachem Leibtag, who infers from the fact that God instructs Moshe to look west, north, south, and *east*, that God virtually places Moshe in Jerusalem, where he can look over the whole land and specifically see the Temple Mount.

Other parshanim mostly follow the lead of the Midrash, and reject the possibility that Moshe simply wanted to enjoy the good land, all seeing that motivation as far beneath the high level of

Moshe Rabbenu. Abarbanel adds one psychological factor, Moshe's desire to complete his mission and see its resolution, which still has little to do with Eretz Yisrael itself.

In one other form of "parshanut", however, this story is about Eretz Yisrael: modern Zionist poetry. A number of Zionist and Israeli poets, including Yaakov Fichman, Avraham Shlonsky, and Rachel Blobstein all wrote poems about Moshe's frustrated desire to enter Eretz Yisrael. The contemporary poet Yehuda Amichai even puts the words of Yehuda Halevi, לבי במזרה ואני בסוף, into the mouth of Moshe as he stands on Har Nevo. For these poets Moshe is a proto-Zionist and this story is about Eretz Yisrael.

Conclusions

Why does the story about Avraham, which seems to not be about Eretz Yisrael, get interpreted as being about Eretz Yisrael, while the story about Moshe, which seems to be about Eretz Yisrael, get interpreted as being about anything but Eretz Yisrael? I would like to propose one possible answer, which is the different goals of the Torah, on the one hand, and the Midrash and Parshanim on the other. The Torah focuses on the material benefits of Eretz Yisrael: it lists them at great length (milk and honey, the seven species, etc) and uses them as the motivation for Bnei Yisrael's journey out of Egypt from start to finish. The Midrash and Parshanim, on the other hand, focus on Eretz Yisrael's spiritual status as the Holy Land.

Since the Torah focuses on the material benefits of Eretz Yisrael, Avraham's leaving Eretz Yisrael in a time of famine is not worth mentioning. It goes without saying that when the bountiful land lacks bounty, leaving is appropriate. Also it makes sense for the Torah to elaborate on Moshe's desire for the goodness of the land and on all the physical beauty that Moshe was missing out on by not entering the land.

However, the Midrash and Parshanim's focus is elsewhere, on the holiness of Eretz Yisrael. Eretz Yisrael's holiness remains "for richer or poorer", so it is problematic in that worldview for Avraham to leave just because there was not enough food. And since the holiness of Eretz Yisrael is paramount, Moshe could not have been begging simply to enjoy the material benefits of the Land.

For much of Jewish history, the spiritual benefits of Eretz Yisrael have been extolled and portrayed as far more important than the material benefits. However, since the founding of the State of Israel, and especially in the last few decades with massive aliyah from North America, religious Jews are beginning to talk seriously again about the material benefits of Eretz Yisrael, whether it is the beautiful landscapes, free Jewish education, or other benefits. Often the spiritual reasons, though compelling, are not enough to keep people motivated to make such a major life change as aliyah. As James Kugel humorously explains in his book "On Being a Jew:"

"So if they ask you why you wish to stay [in Israel], you must tell them it is because of the tomatoes. They are very tasty there, not at all like the durable, tasteless variety that is sold in New York... in my experience it is the Zionists who return to America and only the tomato lovers who stay."

As a recent immigrant to Israel, this rings true to me. Of course, coming from the plenty of America, the material benefits of Israel alone are insufficient motivation and the spiritual benefits have to be part of the attraction. But what gets us olim through the day-to-day realities of moving here and adjusting to life here is the fact that indeed, טובה הארץ מאד מאד.