

Geulas Yisrael #143

Welcoming the Lost "Egyptian" Jews

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Throughout our history there have been periods of fervent halachik commitment and other periods, during which halachik fidelity declined. Human nature is weak and a just few weeks after receiving the Torah we committed the horrific sin of avoda zara. At Har Sinai we enthusiastically declared our loyalty by declaring "na'aseh v'nishmah", but throughout our history we weren't always completely faithful to the na'aseh part of this pledge.

However, until recently, even Jews of diminished halachik commitment still maintained strong Jewish identity. Powerful communal bonds and enforced cultural insularity assured that Jewish identity would remain stout within Jews from across the religious spectrum. For much of Jewish history, it was almost impossible to walk away from Jewish identity and disappear into broader society.

In the modern era, a range of factors has caused widespread erosion of Jewish identity. Millions of Jews have become completely unaffiliated or very loosely affiliated with our heritage and history. To many, it appears as if large sections of our people have become irrevocably lost to history.

Netzach Yisrael

Belief in netzach Yisrael and the eternity of our people also demands belief in the eternal nature of *each Jew*. Despite significant identity erosion, each and every Jew, as far as they seem to wander, still harbors inherent and deep-seated Jewish identity which, one day, will be amplified and fully reconstituted.

That day has come. Part of the reconstitution we envision is already beginning. The war has awakened Jewish identity and Jewish belonging in Jews who were, previously, unconnected to anything Jewish. Venomous antisemitism and our existential battle for our land and our peoplehood have ignited a renaissance of Jewish identity and a renewed interest in the expression of Jewish identity. We knew it would happen, we just didn't know *how* it would happen and *when* it would happen.

Our nevi'im already predicted this. The Pew studies predicting the extinction of Jewish identity were premature. Statistics don't generally include prophecy in its surveys and algorithms.

### Jews of Assyria and Jews of Egypt

Yeshayahu, the great believer in netzach Yisrael, coined his famous prediction about a great shofar beckoning lost Jews home to Yerushalayim:

ובאו האבדים בארץ אשור והנדחים בארץ מצרים והשתחוו לה' בהר הקודש בירושלים

In this buoyant vision, Yeshayahu speaks of two groups of Jews: those lost in Assyria and those sidetracked in Egypt. Evidently, there are many varieties of lost Jews. They all hear the same shofar sound, but they return to Jewish identity along different routes.

### Severed Away

Most commentators claim that the "lost Jews of Assyria" refer to the ten tribes. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Assyrian kingdom conquered the entire Northern kingdom of Israel, evicting 10 of 12 tribes from our homeland, scattering them within foreign populations. Tragically, in an instant, millions of Jews became historical casualties, having been completely severed from Jewish history. As the past 2500 years of Jewish history and masorah have bypassed them, were they to be discovered today they would bear little resemblance to us. The gemara in Sanhedrin (110b) even debates whether they will be reinstated in the Messianic era.

In addition to the actual 10 tribes who were dispersed by Assyria there were many other "lost Jews of Assyria" who met a similar fate. Jews were forcibly converted to other religions and detached from Judaism through intermarriage. Sadly, most of these Jews hardly know that they are Jewish, and we will have to wait for Moshiach and for the heavenly shofar to see if and how they are rejoined with our people.

### Reclaiming "Jews of Egypt"

Though "lost Jews of Assyria" will have to wait for Moshiach, many Egyptian Jews are already returning home. Of course, the phrase "sidetracked Jews of Egypt" or the "nidachim mei'erezt Mitzrayim" is a metaphor and doesn't only refer to Jews who actually live in Egypt (of which there are only a few dozen). The "diverted Jews of Egypt" refers to different groups of Jews, whose historical Jewish identity has been sidetracked in metaphorical Egypts.

### Competition of Cultures

The Torah specifically warns against returning to Egypt in part, because of the natural nostalgia we felt for a country which hosted us for over two hundred years. Despite enduring brutal slavery, we still yearned for our native Egyptian culture. How else to explain our bizarre craving for Egyptian fish and vegetables, even though we enjoyed daily heavenly manna?

Beyond the strong pull of nostalgia, Egypt attracted us because it was such an impressive and competing culture. Egypt was always an epicenter of scholars, philosophers, artists, and mathematicians which produced monumental achievements in architecture, art, literature, science, astronomy, and geography. The Greek and Roman conquest of Egypt beginning in 332 BCE produced a blending of two cultures and a rich intellectual environment best epitomized by the vibrant city of Alexandria, which became the academic center of the ancient world.

Hashem knew His nation of literate and intellectual people would be ineluctably drawn to this flourishing Egyptian culture and therefore warned us against return and against assimilation in Egypt. No Jews were ever lost to Assyria due to its attractive culture or due to its intellectual character. Assyria was a military state, not a center of science or progress. Jews in Assyria were lost because of population displacement. The concept of "lost Jews of Egypt" however, refers to a process whereby the Jewish imagination becomes sidetracked by a competing culture with conflicting values.

In the modern period millions of Jews were sidetracked by a modern Egypt- namely by a modern society with attractive and sometimes competing value systems. Unable to reconcile modern values with

traditional faith and ritual, many Jews became alienated from Judaism, while dedicating themselves to building a modern multicultural city of democracy, equality, and tolerance. They became sidetracked by "other" values which, at least in their minds, were dissonant with Judaism. These competing values occupied their personalities and displaced Jewish identity.

This war is a wake-up call. Maybe it isn't the great shofar of Yeshayahu, but it certainly is a wake-up call. It has exposed the underbelly of modern culture, and the distortion of values, many of which have been hypocritically weaponized to savagely attack our people, our state, and our just war. Hopefully, the "lost Jews of Egypt" will see through the façade of modern Egypt and begin the long road home.

### Fleeing Violence

Historically, the first Jews who relocated to Egypt fled the Babylonians in the final stages of the destruction of the first Mikdash, in 586 BCE. The Babylonians demolished the Mikdash and established a Jewish puppet government in Yerushalayim, directed by Gedalya ben Achikam. When Gedalya was assassinated, the remaining Jews, terrified of Babylonian retribution, fled to Egypt. Frightened for their lives, they moved to Egypt.

Sidetracked "Jews in Egypt" then, is also a metaphor for Jews who flee from Jewish identity because of fear of violence and hatred. Running away from violence and persecution is not just a physical escape but a mental transformation. Throughout our history many Jews, when faced with hatred, violence and religious persecution just ran away – geographically and emotionally. So many Jews, especially in the last two hundred years, have had their Jewish identity beaten out of them by history. Thousands of years of hatred, and discrimination capped off by the nightmare of the holocaust caused many Jews to simply check out of their Jewish identity.

Hopefully, renewed Jewish pride and our current heroic efforts to defend good against evil and to protect humanity from its darker demons will help frightened Jews trace their way back to our people. Hopefully, their fear will be replaced by faith, and their terror by Jewish pride.

### Thriving "Egyptian Jews"

But Jewish identity isn't binary. Even Jews with healthy Jewish identity often hear the sound of the shofar and the sound of Jewish history calling. They comprise a different group of "Jews of Egypt". The initial Jewish community in Egypt was composed of refugees who ran there for their lives. In time, however, the Jewish community in Egypt became well established as a successful and thriving community. It is one of the oldest Jewish communities formed outside of Israel and hosted such great scholars as Rabeinu Sa'adia Gaon, the Rambam, and the Arizal Hakadosh just to name a few.

The Jewish community felt so comfortable that they constructed a pseudo Mikdash called the Mikdash of Chonyo which they saw as a parallel Mikdash to the real one in Yerushalayim. The gemara describes a shul in Alexandria so large that hand signals were necessary to inform the audience of when to answer "amen".

This war is also beckoning that group of "Jews of Egypt". Jews around the world who live in modern-day Alexandrias, who have built prosperous and vibrant Jewish communities. They may not need to, or want to immediately return to Israel, but this war has begun to call them back. Back to Jewish history and back to Jewish destiny. Back to the ancient echo of our people and land, which is deeply lodged within Jewish consciousness, and which reverberates in the heart and soul of every Jew and resonates within every recital of Shema.

They are starting to return from Egypt. One day I'll see them return from Assyria as well.