



**Parashat Vaera**  
**The Land of Egypt and the Egyptian People in Jewish Law**  
**By Amichai Levy**

In the twelfth chapter of Hilchot Issurei Biah, the Rambam teaches the law called “the law of the four nations”:

Any gentile who converts to Judaism and accepts upon himself all the mitzvot of the Torah and slaves who are freed from slavery, attain the status of a Jew as the verse says: 'As for the congregation, there shall be one statute, both for you and for the stranger that sojourneth with you' (Numbers 15:15). And such a person is allowed to enter the congregation immediately except for an individual of the following nations: Amon, Moab, Egypt and Edom. When an individual from one of these nations converts to Judaism, he is a complete Jew in every respect except for the aspect of marriage into the congregation (12:17).

The four nations that the Rambam mentions are divided into two categories. Females from Amon and Moab are permitted to marry into Israel immediately after conversion. However, never are any males allowed to intermarry. Egyptian and Edomite males and females who convert to Judaism and the children of those converts are barred from ever intermarrying into the Jewish nation. However their grandchildren are permitted to intermarry.

In the twenty third chapter of Devarim, the Torah is explicit as to why Amonites and Moabites are denied full assimilation into the Jewish community:

An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the assembly of the Lord forever; because they met you not with bread and with water on the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam, the son of Beor from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse thee (23:4-5).

Amon and Moab may not intermarry into Judaism because they are enemies of Israel who sought the detriment of the Jewish people from the time of the exodus from Egypt. In the same chapter, the Torah also address the prohibition of marrying Egyptians and Edomites:

Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite, for he is thy brother; thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, because thou wast a stranger in his land. The children of the third generation that are born unto them may enter into the assembly of the Lord.

When explaining this prohibition, the Torah doesn't explain why such a union is prohibited; instead, the Torah justifies the permissibility of marrying into these nations after three generations. The Torah tells us that we are not to abhor the Egyptian or Edomite nation despite a natural instinct to do so.

The discomfort surrounding Egyptian-Israeli marriages is natural. This week's and next week's parasha describe the struggle between the Jewish and Egyptian nations and Moshe's wrestling with Pharaoh to actualize the exodus of the Israelite nation from Egypt. The characterization of Egypt in this

week's parasha is that of a cruel oppressor. The Torah's injunction not to abhor the Egyptian nation is surprising and remarkable.

The uniqueness of our relationship with the Egyptian nation is manifest in an additional prohibition of returning to the land of Egypt. During the climax of the exodus, the Torah tells us:

And Moses said unto the people: 'Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord which He will work for you today; for whereas ye have seen the Egyptians today, **ye shall see them again no more**' (Shemot 14:13).

In the section of the Torah that describes the laws pertaining to kingship, this injunction is reiterated:

Only he shall not multiply horses to himself, **nor cause the people to return to Egypt**, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you: '**Ye shall henceforth return no more that way**' (Devarim 17:16).

What is the nature of the prohibition to return to Egypt? What is the scope of this prohibition today? What does it say about our relationship with Egypt following the exodus? Is this commandment similar or dissimilar to the prohibition of marrying one of the four nations described earlier?

The Rambam codifies the prohibition of returning to the land of Egypt in his Mishneh Torah and Sefer Hamitzvot. In Sefer Hamitzvot, this prohibition is codified as negative commandment number forty-six. The Rambam writes:

The forty-sixth negative prohibition is the prohibition of dwelling in the land of Egypt. This is so that we will not learn from their actions and we will not follow in their ways that are disgusting in the eyes of the Torah.

In Sefer Hamitzvot, the Rambam codifies this prohibition as pertaining to the negative influence of Egyptian culture on the individual dwelling in that society. The prohibition of returning to Egypt is in place as a defense against the idolatrous ways of Egyptian culture. This is consistent with the overall organization of the Rambam's Sefer Hamitzvot. Immediately following this prohibition, the forty-seventh negative commandment of the book is the prohibition of straying from the beliefs prescribed by the Torah. The negative commandments that immediately precede the forty-sixth commandment all prohibit behaving in the manner of idolaters. Based on the presentation of this prohibition in the Sefer Hamitzvot, this injunction of the Torah emerges to distance us from the abominable and idolatrous practices prevalent in Egyptian culture.

In the Mishneh Torah, this same prohibition is presented in a wholly different context. The prohibition of returning to Egypt is codified in the fifth chapter of Hilchot Melachim, the book of the Mishneh Torah pertaining to kings and government. The Rambam writes:

It is permissible to dwell any place in the world except for the land of Egypt, from the Yam Hagadol, four hundred parsa by four hundred parsa to the west, bordering the land of Cush and bordering the desert (5:7).

Unlike the formulation in sefer hamitzvot, which is explicitly motivated by the idolatrous behavior of Egyptians, in the Mishneh Torah, this prohibition is presented in the context of the laws pertaining to the military conquests of the Jewish government in the land of Israel. More precisely, this prohibition seems to be intrinsic to the geographical boundaries of Egypt which the Rambam makes a point to define. The idea that the behavior of the Egyptian people is despised by the Torah is mentioned only at the end of the eighth halacha. Hence, the prohibition of settling in Egypt appears to be less

contingent on the idolatrous influence there.

These two formulations give rise to various *nafka minot* (practical differences). Firstly, does the prohibition of return to Egypt similarly prohibit the dwelling in places other than Egypt where an individual will be exposed to similar deleterious and idolatrous influences? If the prohibition of return is a function of the idolatrous Egyptian culture (*Sefer Hamitzvot*), then the answer would have to be yes. If the prohibition is a function of geographical Egypt (*Mishneh Torah*), then this extension of the prohibition would not apply. Secondly, what category of sojourn in Egypt is required to violate this prohibition? If the prohibition of return is a function of the idolatrous Egyptian culture (*Sefer Hamitzvot*), then the minimum exposure to these negative influences should be prohibited. If the prohibition is a function of geographical Egypt (*Mishneh Torah*), it is likely that only a more permanent settling in the land would fall under the scope of this prohibition. This suggested distinction is supported by an additional distinction between these two sources. In *Sefer Hamitzvot*, the Rambam writes that all residence in Egypt is prohibited unless it falls under one of two categories: “business or traveling through Egypt to get to a different land.” However, in the *Mishneh Torah* the Rambam further qualifies the prohibition of settling in Egypt by writing: “It is only prohibited to take up permanent residence there.” Due to the differing reasons behind the prohibition as presented in *Sefer Hamitzvot* and *Mishneh Torah*, they each prescribe different levels of stringency in observing it.

These two formulations each reflect a unique component of the relationship between the Jewish nation and the nation of Egypt. There is no question that the struggle between Moshe Rabbenu and Pharaoh described in this week's parasha and in subsequent parshiyot is ideological and theological in nature. The subduing of the Egyptian Empire embodies a victory of monotheism over polytheism, social justice over cruelty. In this week's parasha, God tells Moshe that the vindication of the one Jewish God is an essential component of the Exodus:

**And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord**, when I stretch forth My hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them (7:3).

Egypt as an ideological opponent to Israel is captured by the Rambam's formulation of the prohibition of return in his *Sefer Hamitzvot*. There, the prohibition is characterized as the residence within the idolatrous Egyptian culture.

In the opening verses of this week's parasha, an additional component of our relationship with Egypt is conveyed:

Wherefore say unto the children of Israel: I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments; and I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. **And I will bring you in unto the land**, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for a heritage: I am the Lord (6:6-8).

The children of Israel are told by Hashem that the objective of the exodus from Egypt is the subsequent arrival at the land promised by God to the forefathers- the land of Israel. The exodus from Egypt is not merely a liberation from slavery, it is not merely a victory over idolatry, it is a means of attaining the land of Israel as a Jewish homeland and the subsequent fulfillment of Jewish historical destiny. The most tragic and severely punished event in the Torah is told over in chapter thirteen of Bamidbar. When Moshe's spies return from the land of Israel and the Jewish people express that they prefer the land of Egypt to the land of Israel, that entire generation is punished with forty years of wandering in the

desert<sup>1</sup>. The exodus from Egypt was an exodus to the land of Israel. Hence, it was an exodus of no return.

This is the aspect of our relationship with Egypt captured by the Rambam's presentation of the the prohibition of return in the Mishneh Torah. There the prohibition is characterized by the returning to geographical Egypt, to a locus from our history that is antithetical to the fulfillment of our national and spiritual agenda. With this in mind, it is little wonder that in the Mishneh Torah the prohibition of return is immediately followed with a description of the importance of residing in the land of Israel:

It is always forbidden to leave the land of Israel to go elsewhere, except to learn Torah, marry a woman and to save one's self from oppressive gentiles and then return to the land. It is also permissible to leave the land of Israel for business but it is not permissible to dwell outside of Israel... (5:9).

In the Mishneh Torah, the prohibition of return to Egypt is integrally related to the national significance of the land of Israel- the motivation of our redemption from Egypt in the first place.

At the end of the twelfth chapter of Hilchot Issurei Biah, the Rambam writes that the prohibition of intermarrying one of the four nations is no longer applicable today:

When Sanherib, the king of Ashur, went up [and conquered the Middle East] he mixed up all the nations, combined one with the other and exiled them from their territories. The Egyptians that currently reside in Egypt are different people [from the Egyptians of biblical times] and so to the Edomites in Sdeh Edom, and since the four nations have been mixed up with all the other nations of the world who are permissible [to marry], they too [the four nations] are permissible [to marry] (12:25).

If the nature of the prohibition of returning to Egypt is similar in nature to the prohibition of intermarrying with the four nations, then the same permissibility might apply to the prohibition of return<sup>2</sup>. Like the other *nafka minot* described above, the answer to this question differs with each of the two formulations in the Rambam. If the prohibition of return is related to the idolatrous practices of the Egyptian nation, then this prohibition is indeed analogous to the prohibition to intermarry with the four nations. Furthermore, given that the current residents of Egypt are not the Egyptians of biblical times, it would be permissible to return to Egypt nowadays. If however, the prohibition is defined by Egypt as the geographic entity described by the Rambam, this prohibition is entirely distinct from the prohibition of intermarrying with the four nations and would remain applicable today.

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1 For a thematically parallel and equally telling narrative, see Jeremiah chapter forty-two.

2 It is interesting to note that the Rambam lived in Egypt for almost forty years and died there. The suggestion that we are making here can potentially be used to justify this fact of the Rambam's life. Of course, that the Rambam lived in Egypt is not a proof that he thought it was permissible to do so. See the Radbaz on Hilchot Melachim 5:7 for an alternative justification of this biographical fact.