

Goshen

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Of course, word of Joseph's family reaches Pharaoh. And they are welcomed by everyone thanks to Joseph's reputation. The story of a family reconciled is heart-warming. Then Joseph has to go to speak to Pharaoh to confirm the arrangements. But beforehand he tells the brothers that when they meet Pharaoh and he asks them what their occupation is, they should say they are shepherds. This will ensure that they are allowed to stay in Goshen because Egyptians do not like shepherds. More than that, shepherds offended their religious and cultural sensibilities. The word Toevah is often used in the Torah to express religious disapproval.

Now this sounds problematic. One of the pet theories of those who look for archaeological or historical confirmation of Bible stories, is that the Israelites came down to Egypt during the Hyksos era. There was a period some three and a half thousand years ago when the nomadic Hyksos invaded Egypt and took it over. They were shepherds. They certainly would not have objected to other shepherds on cultural or religious grounds.

The theory goes that when the Hyksos were finally ejected, this was when sentiment changed. The Israelites were no longer privileged and then enslaved. And that's why the new Pharaoh will say that if they get too strong they will defeat the Egyptians and leave the land. Why leave? Why not stay? The trouble is that dates, time lines are difficult to reconcile. And we have archaeological evidence that the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenotape referred to Israelites living in Canaan at this time.

Whatever the historical facts, Joseph is arranging for two things. First a location away from the main urban centers of Egyptian life. They were further upstream towards Thebes and Aswan.

Then Joseph arranges for only some of his brothers to be presented to Pharaoh. The word the Torah uses its "Miktzey" the edge of, the marginal, perhaps the least impressive or smallest! Again, we rely on Midrash to suggest that he did not want Pharaoh to employ brothers either to manage his herds or to fight in his army. In other words, Joseph intentionally wanted to keep his family separate, insulated from Egyptian society and able to preserve their identity, their traditions and religion.

Finally, Jacob appears. And in good Jewish fashion he complains about not having lived as long as his parents and that his life had been hard, fraught and painful. A good "kvetch."