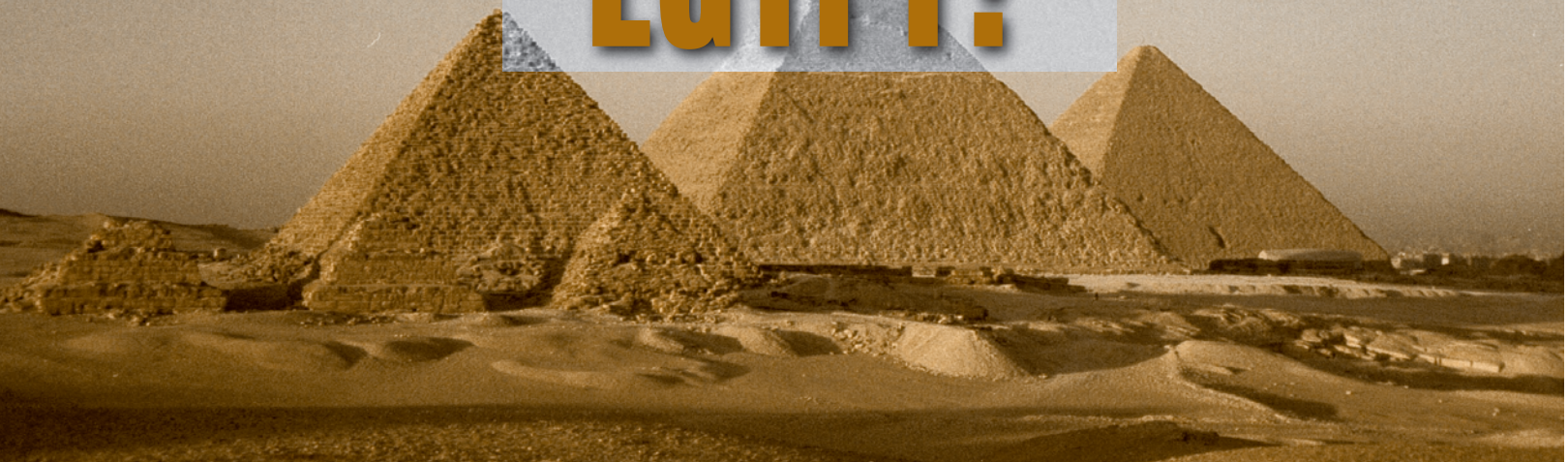


# RETURNING TO EGYPT?



RABBI YIRMIYAHU ULLMAN

*Does the Torah contain a prohibition against returning to Egypt? If so, how is it that Jewish communities – and great rabbis, including Rambam (Maimonides) – lived there for so many years?*

The Torah prohibits returning to Egypt in three different verses: “You shall never see the Egyptians anymore” (Ex. 14:13); “You shall not return on that way anymore” (Deut. 17:16); “You shall not see Egypt again” (Deut. 25:65). The following excerpt from the Talmud is a poignant example of the severity of this prohibition:

Whoever has not seen the Double Colonnade of Alexandria in Egypt has not seen the glory of Israel. It was like a huge basilica that contained twice the number of men who went out from Egypt [2 times 600,000], and there were seventy-one golden armchairs for seventy-one sages, and each chair was no less than twenty-one talents of gold. And a wooden pulpit was in the middle of the palace where the attendant of the congregation stood with a scarf in his hand, and when the time came in the prayer to respond “Amen,” he raised the flag [to enable those who couldn’t hear on account of the great crowd, to see when to respond], and the whole people said “Amen.” And they did not sit mixed, rather the goldsmiths, silversmiths, blacksmiths, coppersmiths and

weavers all sat separately. And when a poor man went in, he recognized his fellow-tradesmen and went to them, and received work to support himself and his family. Said Abaye: And they were all killed by Trajan<sup>1</sup>. Why were they so punished? Because they transgressed the passage, “You shall not return on that way any more” (Succah 51b).

The Jews of Alexandria were punished despite their apparent commitment to misvot and charity, solely on account of being in Egypt. If this is the case, how did loyal Jews throughout the centuries, including leading rabbis, justify moving to and remaining in Egypt?

---

1 The Babylonian Talmud (Succah 51b) says it was Alexander of Macedon (the Great) who killed the Jews of Alexandria. But the commentaries note that he lived in Greek times and actually encouraged Jewish settlement in Egypt. According to the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, more than a million Jews lived in Egypt of his day with 250,000 in Alexandria alone. This was more than the Jews of Jerusalem who numbered about 200,000.

Abarbanel writes that it refers to a different Alexander in Roman times. The Gr”a writes that it should say “Trocinus,” based on the same account brought in the Yerushalmi (Succah 5:1) referring to the massacre of the Jews in Alexandria under Trajan in 116 recorded by Eusebius.

## PHARAOH WAY FROM HOME

One explanation suggests that the prohibition against returning to Egypt is based on the verse, “You shall never see the Egyptians anymore”, which intends to outlaw living among the ancient Egyptians who were a wicked and immoral people. Since our sources say that Sancherib uprooted and mixed all the peoples of the Near East, the inhabitants of Egypt are not the same people as the ancient Egyptians, and it should be permitted to live among them. This explanation is not satisfactory though, since the above account of Alexandria refers to a period long after Sancherib, and yet the community was held accountable (Hagahot Maimoniot).

Another explanation is based on the specific wording in the verse prohibiting returning to Egypt “on that way.” According to this, the prohibition is only to return the way the Jews left, namely from Israel to Egypt. But to move to Egypt from other countries would be permitted (Yireim ch. 309). However, this explanation is also lacking. If the problem is specifically returning the way we came, perhaps it should only apply to the track they took. Another route on land, or by sea should be permitted. Anyway, it seems quite arbitrary to limit return to Egypt from Israel and not from other places. Perhaps the



## A GLATT KOSHER ASSISTED LIVING COMMUNITY

### THE LAKEWOOD Court yard

*The Lakewood Courtyard* ✿ *Bringing Families Together!*

A Passover  
Hotel = 1 Week

The Lakewood Courtyard  
"Hotel" = 52 Weeks

## How Would You Like To Be On Vacation All Year Long?

Private Luxurious Apartments • Social, Cultural & Recreational Activities  
3 Kosher Meals Daily • On-site Nursing Care  
Housekeeping & Laundry Services • Synagogue on Premises



emphasis is more spiritual than geographical, and the intention is that one may not leave the Land of Israel for Egypt. But if so, why should leaving Israel to Egypt be worse than to any other country?

In any case, the general prohibition of the third verse, "You shall not see Egypt again," seems to be independent of who is living there or how you get there. So how did the faithful Jewish communities and their rabbis settle and remain there?

A third explanation is based on the teaching of our sages in the Jerusalem Talmud (Sanhedrin 10:7), "to dwell there you may not return, but for the purpose of business or to conquer you may return." Accordingly, all those Jews who initially moved to Egypt did so not with the intention of staying there permanently, but only temporarily for the purpose of making a living. Once they were successful, they should have left. But since at that point staying entailed only a minor infraction, logistic difficulties in leaving and lack of significantly greater economic opportunities elsewhere resulted in their staying (Radbaz). The case of those who were later born there was even less problematic. This is apparently different than the account of Alexandria above, where perhaps with their great wealth, they could have returned and brought prosperity to the Land of Israel.

### RAMBAM IN CAIRO

Maimonides may serve as a case in point<sup>2</sup>. Rambam was not born in Egypt, but moved there later in life. Born in Cordova, Spain in 1135, he learned Torah from his father, Rabbi Maimon, who was in the chain of disciples of the great Rabbi Yizhak Alfasi (the Rif). In 1148, his family fled the Inquisition, eventually reaching Fez, Morocco. There, as a result of helping the Marranos, his family was endangered and they fled to the Land of Israel. The dire living conditions they found there resulted in the family's moving to Cairo. There he served as rabbi for the Jews of Egypt until his death; but as a result of his family's loss of estate, he was forced to earn a living as a doctor, eventually becoming the Sultan's court physician.

Rambam himself writes about the prohibition to settle permanently in Egypt,

2 Other well-known rabbis who lived in Egypt were R' Saadya Gaon (b. 882, Egypt) and R' Ya'akov Beirav (b. Spain). R' Betzalel Ashkenazi (Shita Mekubetzet) and the Arizal (b. Jerusalem) learned in the yeshiva established by Radbaz.

and implies that remaining after the initial permission to do business is not just a minor infraction but an outright transgression. If so, according to his opinion, how was he able to stay there? Radbaz explains, "He was forced to stay by the government, since he was the doctor of the king and the ministers. And I also settled there for a long time in order to learn Torah, to teach it, and to build a Yeshiva, which is permitted, and then I returned to Jerusalem."<sup>3</sup> Despite this explanation and perhaps more to express his longing for the Land of Israel, Rambam

3 Rambam, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 5:7-8; Hagahot Maimoniot 2, 3; Radbaz 7.

purportedly signed his name, "Moshe ben Maimon, he who transgresses the prohibition 'You shall not return on that way anymore'"<sup>4</sup>. **OM**

Rabbi Ullman teaches in Yeshivat Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem and writes the "Ask the Rabbi" column for the yeshiva's weekly publication "Ohrnet" and website, [ohr.edu](http://ohr.edu). For other interesting and informative articles and audio lectures by R' Ullman, see [RabbiUllman.com](http://RabbiUllman.com)

4 Caftor v'Perach (ch. 5, v'Omer) writes that R' Shemuel, a descendant of Rambam, said he signed as mentioned above. However, Sede Chemed, vol. 3, 'maarechet yod', 'klal' 46 doubts this.