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A B C  C L I O

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Jeremiah mentions several communities of Jews living in Egypt in the sixth century BCE (Jeremiah 44:1), which would have been in addition to the community at Elephantine on the upper Nile. The Jews at Elephantine had their own temple and followed syncretistic worship practices. Jeremiah probably had the former communities in mind when he lumped together “those who are living in the land of Egypt” and those remaining in the homeland, including Zedekiah, the last Judean king, and likened them all to bad figs (Jeremiah 24:8).

Intellectual wrestling with the circumstances that created the Diaspora had produced an array of theological responses, but biblical prophets and writers held fast to the notion that the homeland was central to Jewish identity and destiny for Jews everywhere. Diaspora Jews, no less than Jews in the homeland, maintained close ties to the Land of Israel, a relationship expressed in the Bible’s concluding exhortation: “Any one of you of all His people, the Lord his God be with him and let him go up [to Jerusalem]” (2 Chronicles 36:23).

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The Concept of Diaspora in Talmudic Thought

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The Talmuds and related works recognized that many Jews in their time were in the Diaspora—or as they saw it, in a state of exile (*galut*). The discussions often took the form of biblical exegesis. Therefore, their comments relate to biblical exiles more than to their contemporary situation. Although the existence of a Diaspora was generally considered a deplorable situation to be remedied in the messianic redemption, some rabbis, especially in Babylonia, found positive features in the situation.

In keeping with biblical teaching, the sages of the Talmud and midrash believed Israel was scattered as punishment for her sins. The correspondence between crime and punishment was a stock theme of rabbinic preaching. Accordingly, exile was blamed on Israel’s commission of the gravest cardinal sins and sacrileges. In TB

Menahot 53b, God informed Abraham that his children would be exiled for their sins, and these sins would be deliberate and prevalent and would be committed despite ample opportunities offered to them for repentance. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai compared Israel’s exile to Babylon, Abraham’s birthplace, to an adulteress being sent back to her father’s house (Tosefta Baba Kamma 7:3; cf. TB Pesahim 87a). “Exile comes to the world on account of idol-worship, sexual crimes, and bloodshed” (M Avot 5:9; see also TB Shabbat 33a). Lamentations Rabbah 1:1: “. . . Israel were not exiled until they denied the one God of the universe, the decalogue, circumcision . . ., and the five books of the Torah . . . Said Rabbi Levi: Israel were not exiled until they had transgressed the thirty-six prohibitions whose punishment is *karet* [‘excision].”

Occasionally, the rabbis identified lesser sins and transgressions as the causes of Israel’s exiles. In most cases, this homiletic trope, though supported by scriptural proof-texts, was used by rabbis to chastise their contemporaries for laxity in the observance of specific precepts. The catalogue of violations and transgressions that provoked the exile included sabbatical years (M Avot 5:9), heave-offerings and tithes (Avot de-Rabbi Natan A 20), circumcision (TJ Sanhedrin 10:5 [29c]), propagation of illegitimate offspring (*mamzerim*), heresy, drunkenness (Genesis Rabbah 36:4), and accepting the hospitality of the government (TB Pesahim 49a). According to Lamentations Rabbah 1:28–29, “they ate leaven on Passover . . . they seized the pledge of the poor within their houses . . . they withheld the wages of a hired servant . . . they robbed the poor of their portions . . . they consumed the poor tithe . . . they worshipped idols . . . because they held the Hebrew bondman in servitude . . .”

According to rabbinic teaching, Israel’s dispersions were thematically prefigured in earlier generations of the Bible. Genesis Rabbah 19:9 depicts Adam’s banishment from paradise as the archetype for Israel’s eviction from the Land of Israel for transgressing commandments. The dove sent out by Noah prefigured Israel’s homelessness among hostile nations (Genesis Rabbah 33:6). In Genesis Rabbah 36:4, developing a wordplay on the Hebrew of Genesis 9:21, the rabbis interpreted it in the sense of “he was exiled,” implying that Noah was the origin of exile for subsequent generations. In TB Menahot 53b; Exodus Rabbah 51:7, and elsewhere, Abraham is informed of the future exiles of his descendants—Babylon, Media, Greece, Rome—and he pleads on their behalf. He is allowed to choose whether his children will be punished by Gehinnom or exile and is induced to choose the latter. “Because Isaac saw through the holy spirit that his children were destined to be exiled, he said to [Jacob]: Come, and I shall give you a blessing fitting for the exile” (Genesis Rabbah 75:8). Because Jacob foresaw that the exiles would pass by the Ephrath road, he buried Rachel there so that she might pray for mercy on their behalf” (Genesis Rabbah 82:10). Rabbi Joshua ben Levi interpreted Jacob’s instructions to his sons in Genesis 43:14 as a portent about their future exiles (Genesis Rabbah 92:3). The Israelites’ enslavement in Egypt was a prototype for subsequent exiles, and the divine descent into the burning bush prefigures God’s participation in their sufferings (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai pp. 1–2; TB Berakhot 9b; and elsewhere, see below). The Israelites’ needless weeping in the desert provoked God to

scatter them in the future (TB Ta'anit 29a). In Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:22, "Moses instructed Israel that if they sinned, they would one day be exiled, how they would repent, and how they would be redeemed."

Many sources stress the severity of exile as a harsh and humiliating punishment. "After all the torments that I inflict upon you, I will send you into exile. Exile is difficult, since it is weighed against them all" (Sifré Deuteronomy 43). "Said Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: When the wicked Nebuchadnezzar sent Israel into exile to Babylon, their hands were bound behind them in iron chains, and they led them naked like beasts" (Tanhuma Yitro 5). The dispersion pollutes Jews with sin (Midrash Shir Ha-Shirim 8:19). "Even though the nations of the world go into exile, their exile is not true exile. Since the nations of the world may eat their bread and drink of their wine, their exile is not true exile. However, for Israel, who may not eat of their bread and may not drink of their wine, their exile is exile . . . For Israel, who walk barefooted, their exile is exile. . . . When they were exiled their strength was enfeebled like a woman's" (Lamentations Rabbah 1:28).

Several rabbinic homilies describe with touching pathos God's anguish that his justice compelled him to exile his children. "Three times every night the Holy One sits and roars like a lion [or coos like a dove], saying: Woe to my children, because on account of their sins I destroyed my house and burnt down my sanctuary and I have sent my children into exile among the nations of the world" (TB Berakhot 3a; cf. TB Sukkah 52b).

Basing themselves on biblical sources such as Isaiah 43:14, "For your sake I was sent to Babylon," or Isaiah 63:9, "In all their affliction he was afflicted," rabbinic traditions relate how God himself participates and suffers in Israel's exiles. "Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai said: Come and see how beloved are Israel in the sight of God! Every place to which they were exiled the divine presence accompanied them. They were exiled to Egypt and . . . to Babylon, and the divine presence accompanied them . . . And when they will be redeemed in the future, the divine presence will be with them" (TB Megillah 29a; Mekhilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai pp. 1–2; Lamentations Rabbah 1:32; Exodus Rabbah 23; cf. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 13:9).

Nevertheless, some traditions found positive aspects to the situation. God's love for his children caused him to punish them in ways that would minimize the harm and increase the benefits of their predicament. Sifra Behukkotai 6:5 observes that the devastation of the land is actually a blessing in that it prevents Israel's enemies from establishing a foothold. The hostility of their neighbors prevents Jews from assimilating to paganism and will facilitate the Jews' eventual repentance (Sifra Behukkotai 8:5; cf. Genesis Rabbah 33:6). By distributing Jews throughout many lands, God was safeguarding them against total destruction in times of local persecutions (TB Pesahim 87b; Genesis Rabbah 41:9; Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 11:4). Exile possesses an atoning power (TB Ta'anit 16a). According to Rabbi Eleazar (TB Pesahim 87a), "the only reason why Israel was exiled among the heathens was so that proselytes might be joined to them." It is praiseworthy that Israel continued to observe and study Torah in their dispersion (TB Yoma 9b, etc.).

Although some rabbis maintained that "the subjection to Babylon was harsher than the subjection to Egypt" (TJ Sukkah 4:3), a widespread view in the Babylonian

Talmud held that the Babylonian Diaspora was especially benign and compassionate. "Rav Huna said: The exiles in Babylon are at ease like sons and the exiles in other lands are uneasy, like daughters" (TB Menahot 110a, expounding Isaiah 43:6). "Rabbi Hiyya taught . . . The Holy One knows that Israel is incapable of withstanding the edicts of Esau or of Ishmael. Therefore he sent them as exiles to Babylonia . . . Rabbi Hanina says: Because [Babylonian Aramaic] is akin to the language of the Torah. Rabbi Yohanan says: Because he sent them to their mother's house . . . Ulla said: In order that they might eat dates and occupy themselves with the Torah" (TB Pesahim 87a). Babylonian sages interpreted 2 Kings 24:16, describing the captivity of "the craftsmen and the smiths" as an allusion to an early wave of rabbinic scholars who established Torah learning and institutions in Babylonia (TB Pesahim 88a).

TB Ketubbot 110b–111a relates an exchange between two third-century Babylonian scholars: "Rabbi Zera used to avoid Rav Judah, because he wished to immigrate to the Land of Israel, but Rav Judah maintained: Anyone who emigrates from Babylonia to the Land of Israel is violating a positive commandment, since it says (Jeremiah 27:22): 'They shall be carried to Babylon and remain there until the day when I give attention to them, says the Lord.'" Judah was likely fearful for the adverse impact on the Babylonian academies and on the social fabric of the local communities. In the Talmud's expansion of the dispute, the three occurrences in Song of Songs of "I have charged you . . . that you do not rouse or wake my love" (2:7, etc.) are interpreted in accordance with a teaching of Rabbi Yosé bar Hanina (cf. Song of Songs Rabbah 2:20): "Why was there a need for those three oaths? One was so that Israel should not go up *en masse* ['in a wall']; one indicates that the Holy One charged Israel that they should not rebel against the nations of the world; and one indicates that the Holy One charged the nations of the world that they should not oppress Israel excessively." In other traditions (e.g., Song of Songs Rabbah 8:9; TB Yoma 9b), the failure of the Babylonian exiles to return to Zion "in a wall" is regarded as a fundamental national failure: "If Israel had brought up a wall from Babylon, then the holy Temple would not have been destroyed a second time."

Rabbinic teachings and prayers speak in glowing terms of the final ingathering of Israel's exiles in the messianic redemption. TJ Sanhedrin 10:5 (29c): "Rabbi Berekhiah and Rabbi Halabo in the name of Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman: Israel were exiled to three captivities . . . And when they return, they will return from three captivities" Tanhuma Noah 12: "Said Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani: There is a haggadic tradition to the effect that Jerusalem will not be rebuilt until all the exiles have been gathered. And if a person should tell you that all the exiles have been gathered, but Jerusalem has not been rebuilt, do not believe them. Why?—Because thus is it written (Psalm 147:3): 'The Lord builds up Jerusalem'; and afterward: 'he gathers the outcasts of Israel.'"

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