

# The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

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## Parashat Shemot

### What Can We Learn from Moshe About Defining Who is a Native Israeli?

#### Why Does Any Jew Living in Israel Deserve to be Called an Israeli?

When people, detecting my slight foreign accent, ask me where I'm from, I always answer, "I'm from Israel!" Most people don't really buy that and keep asking for my 'true' identity and place of origin. So, I must insist that I truly am from Israel. As a Jewish woman, I stem from the Holy Land and have deep roots here. I only happen to have been born in Denmark, which is completely inconsequential to who I am. It is a minute part of my extensive Jewish family tree. From the vast genealogy of our family, only my parents were born in Denmark, whereas each of my grandparents originated from somewhere else. Moreover, I gave up my Danish citizenship to become Israeli so I'm 100% Israeli and I will protest against anyone calling me a *chutznik* (someone from outside Israel). Actually, no Jew living in Israel should be called by that appellation. I object vehemently whenever I hear the term *chutznik*. Just as it is prohibited to remind a Ba'al Teshuva or a convert that s/he didn't always keep the Torah (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 58b*) so do I venture to say that calling any Jew who wasn't born in Israel a *chutznik* is included in the Torah prohibition of verbal mistreatment (*Vayikra 25:17*). Most people making Aliyah to Israel make great efforts and sacrifice much to be able to leave everything behind and join their people in the holy land. Therefore, rather than reminding them that they aren't born and bred Sabras by calling them *chutznikim* (outsiders), Israelis must acknowledge the loyalty of newcomers to Israel and their willingness to acquire the land of Israel through suffering, as taught in the Talmud: "The Holy One, blessed be He, gave Israel three precious gifts, and all of them were given only through suffering. These are they: The Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World to Come" (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 5a*).

#### How does Parashat Shemot Teach us the Importance of Calling Ourselves Israelis?

In *Parashat Shemot*, we learn the importance for any Jew to call himself Israeli even if he never set foot in Israel. The midrash admonishes Moshe for allowing himself to be called "an Egyptian man" without correcting Yitro's daughters, telling them he was a Hebrew. Therefore, as a consequence, he was not buried in his Land. When Yitro questioned his daughters why they were able to return home with the sheep so quickly his daughters replied:

**ספר שמות פרק ב פסוק יט ותאמרן איש מצרי הצילנו מיד הרעים וגם דלה דלה לנו וישק את הצאן:**

"An Egyptian man rescued us from the hand[s] of the shepherds, and he also drew [water] for us and watered the flocks" (*Shemot 2:19*).

Moshe said before Him: 'Yosef's bones will enter the land, but I will not enter the land?' The Holy One blessed be He said to him: 'The one who acknowledged his land will be buried in his land, and the one who did not acknowledge his land will not be buried in his land.' Yosef acknowledged his land; from where is this derived? His master's wife said: "See, he brought us a Hebrew man..." (*Bereishit 39:14*), and he did not deny it; rather, "I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews" (*Bereishit 40:15*). He was buried in his land. From where is this derived? As it is stated: "The bones of Yosef, which the children of Israel took up from Egypt, they buried in Shechem" (*Yehoshua 24:32*). 'You, who did not acknowledge your land, will not be buried in your land.' How so? Yitro's daughters said: "An Egyptian man rescued us from the shepherds" (*Shemot 2:19*), and he heard and was silent. That is why he was not buried in his land (*Midrash Devarim Rabbah 2:8*).

### Why did Moshe our Rabbi not Merit Being Buried in Israel?

When I mentioned this Midrash to my husband, he right away countered, asking how Moshe could know that Yitro's daughters called him an Egyptian man, which obviously didn't take place in his presence. The following Torah verse testifies his point: "He [Yitro] said to his daughters, 'So where is he? Why have you left the man? Invite him and let him eat bread'" (*Shemot* 2:20). As I was in the middle of preparing Shabbat salads, I retorted that I was just repeating what the midrash said. Later I read that it is still possible that the appellation "an Egyptian man" was given to Moshe at his first meeting with Yitro. Moshe, who was raised at Pharaoh's castle, most likely would give off the impression of an Egyptian, both through his dress and accent. Yitro therefore naturally would have assumed Moshe to be an Egyptian, and Moshe did not challenge Yitro's assumption by clarifying that he was a Hebrew. Furthermore, while Moshe may not have heard the daughters' reference to him as an Egyptian, Yitro - looking for a husband for one of his daughters - would undoubtedly have questioned Moshe about his national identity, allowing Moshe to respond that he was a Hebrew rather than an Egyptian. Therefore, since Moshe should have been aware that Yitro would assume him to be an Egyptian, without correcting this misconception, he didn't merit being buried in Israel. In contrast, the Rambam who lived his last 45 years in Egypt, is known to have signed his letters as, "Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, who violates the commandment not to dwell in Egypt every day." Indeed, there are many parallels between Moshe Rabbeinu and Moshe ben Maimon: Both lived most of their years in Egypt, both were great Rabbis and teachers who had concern for those much lesser than they, and they both acted on behalf of their emunah and their people - before the entire world - with dignity, wisdom, and sensitivity. Perhaps Rambam's public penitence for living in Egypt is a rectification for Moshe's tolerance of being called an Egyptian. This could be why Rambam did merit burial in Israel. The spiritual connection between Moshe Rabbeinu and Moshe ben Maimon is highlighted by the inscription on Rambam's tombstone stone in Tiberias, where it states, "From Moshe to Moshe, there arose no one like Moshe."

### Why is Every Jew a Child of *Eretz Yisrael*?

Rabbi Meir Yechiel of Ostrovtza asserts that from the moment G-d promised the Land to Avraham Avinu, every Jew must regard himself as a native of *Eretz Yisrael*. Therefore, whenever we are asked where we are from, we must answer "I am from *Eretz Yisrael*." The Rabbi is known for introducing himself as follows: "I am from *Eretz Yisrael*, though as the result of our sins we were exiled from her, and I find myself in Ostrovtza (*To Dwell in the Palace, Feldheim Publishers*, p. 135). Thus, Hashem expected Moshe to say something like this: "Although I have lived all my life in the land of Egypt, my true ties are to the Land of Israel. Like Yosef before me, I have unfortunately been exiled by circumstance. I am not an Egyptian at all" (*ibid.*, p. 116). In the speech he gave upon receiving the Nobel Prize for literature, Shai Agnon paraphrased the Rebbe of Ostrovtza: "Due to the historic catastrophe in which Titus, king of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and exiled Israel from its Land, I was born in one of the towns of the diaspora. However, I have perpetually considered myself as one as born in Jerusalem..." The connection between every Jew and *Eretz Yisrael* is so deep and so basic that even one who was not born in her or never visited the Land is indeed a (spiritual) native of *Eretz Yisrael*. Thus, we understand that *Eretz Yisrael* is not merely a geographic location, or simply the dwelling place of *Am Yisrael* (the Nation of Israel), where the nation established its state. Israel is the spiritual homeland of every single Jew. "*Eretz Yisrael* is an independent unit, bound with a living attachment with the nation, bound with inner *segulot* (auspicious properties) with the nation's existence" (Rav Kook, *Orot* 1). Even if certain circumstances require a child to be raised by a foster family, won't that child always be connected to and identify with his biological parents? This is the connection between every Jew and *Eretz Yisrael*, and the reason why every Jew is from *Eretz Yisrael* as Rav Kook teaches, "Every Jew is a Child of *Eretz Yisrael*."

### What is the Halachic Implication of “Every Jew is a Child of Eretz Yisrael”?

During the First World War, the Ottoman Empire decreed that citizens of countries at war with her would be exiled from Israel. However, one born in Israel was entitled to Ottoman citizenship and would be allowed to remain in Israel after filing an affidavit that he was in fact born in Israel. Rabbi Y. L. and his friend Rabbi Citron were both Russian-born; the rabbis neither wanted to be exiled from Israel nor to swear falsely that they were born in Israel. Rabbi Citron addressed the question to his father-in-law, the Rogatchover Gaon (Rabbi Yosef Rosen 1858-1925). Who explained that the Talmud elucidates the verse “Of Tzion it shall be said, this man and this man were born in her...” (*Tehillim* 87:5) as follows: “Both one who was (actually) born in her and one who looks forward to seeing her (are equally considered children of Tzion),” (*Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot* 75a). Thus, the Rogatchover ruled, as a practical halacha, that regardless of where he was physically born, a Jew may honestly swear that he was born in *Eretz Yisrael*. (Based on Avrum Leeder and Ori Engelman, *Eretz Yisrael Yomi, Why Moshe was not privileged to be buried in Eretz Yisrael*).

### Where is the Mitzvah of Making Aliyah to Israel Hinted in Parashat Shemot?

Rabbi Meir Yechiel of Ostrovtza pointed out that the first commandment ever given to a Jew (Avraham Avinu) was to go to Eretz Yisrael. Similarly, the very first mitzvah that G-d mentioned to Moshe Rabbeinu was Aliyah to Eretz Yisrael:

סַפַּר שְׁמוֹת פְּרָקָה פְּסוּקָה וַיֹּאמֶר הַשֵּׁם רָאֵה רְאִיתִי אֶת עַבְדִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת צַעֲקוֹתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נִגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת מַכְאֲבָיו: (ח) וַאֲרֵד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וְלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל אָרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה אֶל אָרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ אֶל מְקוֹם הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִי וְהַיְבוּסִי:

“Hashem said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their slave drivers, for I know their pains. I have descended to rescue them from the hand[s] of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land, to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Chittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Chivites, and the Yebusites’” (*Shemot* 3:7-8).

Only afterward did Hashem allude to Matan Torah, saying, “This is your sign that I have sent you: when you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain (*Shemot* 3:12). Why did Hashem make the giving of the Torah secondary to bringing the Children of Israel to the Land of Israel? As is well-known, many mitzvot cannot be fulfilled outside the Land, and the rest are more complete in the Holy Land. Therefore, when Hashem promised to bring the Jews out of Egypt to a Land flowing with milk and honey, He promised, in essence, to enable the Jews to keep the entire Torah. This clarifies why *Matan Torah* is considered merely a preliminary sign to entering the Land, for without the Land, the Torah is incomplete (Rabbi Moshe Tzuriel, *Eretz Chemda*). Even if our lives in exile seem quite safe and comfortable, we should yearn to be with our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land, despite the suffering we might have to endure for the privilege (Rabbi Moshe D. Lichtman, *Lights on Shemot*). How heartwarming it is to learn about the massive increase in the opening of Aliyah files in Western countries. About 35,000 Jews from a hundred different countries (but of course from Israel 😊) have made Aliyah between October 7, 2023, and December 2024, according to figures published by the Jewish Agency for Israel. A third of all immigrants were aged 18-35 years old. The Massa organization, jointly created by the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government, has meanwhile continued to bring thousands of young Jews to Israel despite the war ([35,000 Jews immigrated to Israel since the October 7 massacre](#)). We pray that more and more of the Children of the Land of Israel will truly return to our homeland so everything will keep getting better and better!