

The Length of Exile - The Mechanism of Time and a Discrepancy in the Torah

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

When examining the length of time that the Israelites sojourned in Egypt one is struck by a contradiction between what is explicit in the verse and the reckoning of the years.

When Israel is to leave Egypt, the verse (Shemot, 12:40-41) clearly articulates the sum of the years of exile stating:

“And the habitation of the children of Israel, that they dwelled in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years. It came to pass at the end of four hundred and thirty years, and it came to pass in that very day, that all the legions of the Lord went out of the land of Egypt.”

Rashi—the foremost biblical commentator—expresses the impossibility of this reckoning in his statement:

“It is impossible, however, to say that [they spent 400 years] in Egypt alone, because Kehath [the grandfather of Moses] was [one] of those who came with Jacob. Go and figure all his years, all the years of his son Amram, and Moses’ 80 years; you will not find them [to be] that many, and perforce, Kehath lived many of his years before he descended to Egypt, and many of Amram’s years are included in the years of Kehath, and many of Moses’ years are included in Amram’s years. Hence, you will not find 400 years counting from their arrival in Egypt.”

The amount of years that Israel was actually in Egypt is alluded in the verse (Bereishit 42:2): “And he said, “Behold, I have heard that there is grain being sold in Egypt. Go down (יִרְדּוּ) there and buy us [some] from there, so that we will live and not die.”

There, Rashi comments, based on the medrash (Bereishit Rabba 91:2) that in this verse is alluded the amount of years the Israelites were in Egypt.

“[He said] יִרְדּוּ “go down,” but he did not say, “Go (לָכוּ).” He alluded to the 210 years that they were enslaved in Egypt, according to the numerical value of יִרְדּוּ.¹”

Counting from Avraham

In explaining the discrepancy Rashi explains that the reckoning of 430 years commences from the moment G-d stated (Bereishit 15:13) “that your seed will be strangers.” However, the *actual* amount of time of the exile was only 210 years. Indeed the Talmud (Nedarim 32a) explicitly expresses that Israel was exiled in Egypt for a period of 210 years.

¹ י=200 + ד=4 + ו=6 = 210

However, on this explanation there are two essential questions that were already posed by Rabbi Saadia Gaon in his work *Emunot Ve'deot* (8:4):

The verse (Shemot 12:40) states “And the habitation of the children of Israel, that they dwelled in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years.” It a) stresses that this was the length of time that the “Children of Exile” spent in exile and not Avraham and b) stresses that this exile took place in “Egypt.” Essentially then, the verse itself excludes a reckoning of years of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov before they entered Egypt.

The Talmud (Megila 9a) itself is aware of this issue and states that this was one of the matters that the Rabbis edited when they translated the Torah for King Ptolemy. In the Torah they wrote for him they wrote: “And the abode of the children of Israel which they stayed in Egypt and in other lands was four hundred years.” By explaining that the exile included “other lands” they essentially answer the discrepancy in the amount of time that Israel spent in Egypt.²

Jumping over mountains

Another explanation to this inconsistency is postulated in *Pesikta D'Rav Kahana* (HaChodesh 5:7):³

“The verse (Shir HaShirim 2:8) states: “The sound of my beloved! Behold, he is coming, skipping over the mountains, jumping over the hills.” ... Rabbi Yehudah said “the sound of my beloved! Behold, he is coming,” refers to Moshe. When Moshe came to Israel and told them in this month you will be redeemed, they told him: “How can it be that we will be redeemed; did not G-d tell Avraham (Bereishit 15:13) ‘your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years;’ we have only two hundred and ten years accounted for?” Moshe responded: “Since he desires your redemption he does not look at your reckoning, rather ‘He skips over the mountains and jumps over the hills....”

The answer given by the Medrash seems to be, that though G-d *initially* desired Israel to be in Egypt for 400 years, in *actuality* they were there for a mere 210 due to G-d’s *shortening* the exile.

However, while this explanation explains the discrepancy between G-d’s *promise* that “your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years,” and what happened in *actuality* that they were in Egypt two hundred in ten years, it seems to have a shortcoming greater than the initial explanation postulated by Rashi.

² Interestingly, in the Septuagint that is extant today, the verse (Shemot 12:40) reads “And the sojourning of the children of Israel, while they sojourned in the land of Egypt *and the land of Chanaan*, was *four hundred and thirty years*.” While there is a slight variation of four hundred and thirty instead of four hundred, the essential change is clearly there. What is expressed in this change is essentially the explanation of R. Saadia Gaon and Rashi for this discrepancy. It is important to point out that our version of the Septuagint has clearly gone through several edits and is not the original edition that the Rabbis spoke of.

³ Variations of this answer are suggested in *Mechilata* (Bo:14), *Pirkei D'Rebi Eliezer* (Ch. 47) and *Tanchuma* (Masai, 7). For the purpose of this essay we will focus on the explanation of *Pesikta D'Rav Kahana*.

For, the verse (Shemot, 12:40) states unequivocally: “And the habitation of the children of Israel, that they dwelled in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years.” This verse expresses how many years Israel was *actually* in exile.

So, while the above explanation elucidates how there can be one verse that states that Israel *will be* in exile and Moshe’s redeeming them after two hundred and ten years, it does not explain how the verse can state that the *actual* amount of years that Israel was in exile was four hundred and thirty years!

Rashi’s explanation at least provided a reinterpretation of the four hundred and thirty years of exile, but according to the Pesikta this verse does not seem to be understood at all.

On the nature of time

To explain the answer of the Pesikta it is important to explain a brief overview of the concept of time.

The question of time is one that bothered philosophers, both Jewish and otherwise, since time immemorial. The question of time has bothered Aristotle⁴ and Plato⁵, Maimonides⁶, Crescas⁷ and all philosophers in between.⁸

While there are various aspects of time that are discussed and debated, the aspect of time pertinent to our discussion is the nature of the connection between one moment of time and the next, and the relation between time and space.

In the Guide to the Perplexed (1:73) Maimonides expresses the belief of the Mutakallemim that “Time is composed of time-atoms, i.e., of many parts, which on account of their short duration cannot be divided,” and negates their premise in stating “The Mutakallemim did not at all understand the nature of time.”

In essence, according to Maimonides, there is an argument between the Mutkallemim and himself whether time is—to use modern jargon—a particle or a wave. While the Mutkallemim believed that time was a composite of separate “time-atoms,” Maimonides was of the opinion that time was a single entity. (The actual breakup in seconds, hours etc. are an artificial construct of our perception of time, but is not the essence of time itself.)

Time and Space in the Rogatzover

⁴ Physics IV, II, 219a, 1-220a. Intermediate Physics IV, III, 7.

⁵ Timeous, 37c - 39e

⁶ Guide to the Perplexed 1:73, 2:13, 2:30

⁷ Ohr HaShem Ch. 16

⁸ See Derech Mitzvosecha, Mitzvat Ha-amanat Elokut Ch. 11 (Pg. נד) and Sefer Chakira (pg. 222ff) of the Tzemach Tzedek. For a lengthy discussion of the workings of time according to Jewish thought see מנחם (799 עמ' ה:ג-ד) תלפיות. תלפיות *וראשונים*. בספרי חז"ל *וראשונים*. מ. כשר, מושג הזמן בתורה, תלפיות (ה:ג-ד עמ' 799) letter 283 where the Lubavitcher Rebbe discusses this manner of time at length. (See http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/letters/default_cdo/aid/74601/jewish/A-Letter-on-Time.htm for a translation of this letter with notes.

In the formulation of the Rogatzover Gaon, Rabbi Yosef Rosen, the disagreement is whether “time is made up of parts or its singular entity is divided.”

Indeed, the Rogatzover understands that this argument is not merely theoretical but it was based on this disagreement that many Talmudic debates are predicated upon.

In the Talmud (Nazir 7a) the Talmud records the following argument:

We have learnt: [If a man says,] ‘I wish to be a nazirite as from here to such and such a place,’ we estimate the number of days’ journey from here to the place mentioned, and if this is less than thirty days, he becomes a nazirite for thirty days; otherwise he becomes a nazirite for that number of days... Then let him [observe a naziriteship] for every stage [on the road]; for have we not learnt that [a man who says,] ‘I intend to be a nazirite as the dust of the earth,’ or ‘as the hair of my head,’ or ‘as the sands of the sea,’ becomes a life-nazirite, polling every thirty days? — This [principle] does not apply to [a nazirite vow in which] a definite term is mentioned, and this has indeed been taught [explicitly]: [A man, who says,] ‘I intend to be a nazirite all the days of my life,’ or ‘I intend to be a life-nazirite,’ becomes a life-nazirite, but even [if he says] ‘a hundred years,’ or ‘a thousand years,’ he does not become a life-nazirite, but a nazirite for life. Rabbah said: Hairs are different [from parasangs or stages], since each is separate from the others.

The Talmud asks what is the difference between when one states “I am a Nazir like the hair on my head,” where the person is considered a nazir his whole life, and in the instance of traveling where we measure the amount of time it takes to arrive?

The Talmud gives two answers: 1) That the language of this vow is different as it contains a definite term or 2) that hair and space cannot be compared, as each hair is a separate entity while space is essentially one.

It is clear—explains the Rogatzover—that the difference between these two answers is whether or not space is made up of separate particles or is one entity. In his formulation:⁹ “They are arguing whether the world is one entity or a composite entity...the same too is with time.” In describing this he uses the Talmudic language (Kiddushin 27b) “The earth is one block.”

According to the Rogatzover, time and space are intrinsically linked, and the rubric that applies to space can be said of time.¹⁰

A valley in time

In appreciating the link between time and space and their internal workings can be appreciated the statement of the Pesikta D’Rav Kahana in explaining the contradictory amounts of time of the exile.

⁹ Tzafnat Pa-aneich Gilyon. Yuma 54b, Michtivei Torah 126

¹⁰ See Sefer Yetzirah, Ch. 6 that the basic elements of the world are “time, space and ‘nefesh’” which is essentially the observer. See Mifanei-ach Tzfunot Pg. 90 that suggests that according to the Rogatzover time and space have the same definitions.

In explaining the amount of time of the exile the Pesikta applied the verse (Shir HaShirim 2:8): “The sound of my beloved! Behold, he is coming, skipping over the mountains, jumping over the hills.” It explained that when Israel asked how can it be that the time of the redemption had arrived when they had only been in Egypt for two hundred and ten years that “Moshe responded: “Since he desires your redemption he does not look at your reckoning, rather ‘He skips over the mountains and jumps over the hills....”

However, while this explains the reason why the verse (Bereishit 13:15) states: “your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years,” when they were only there for two hundred and ten, it does not explain the verse (Shemot 12:40) that states: “And the habitation of the children of Israel, that they dwelled in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years.” This clearly articulates that Israel was *actually* in exile for four hundred and thirty years and not two hundred and ten!

However, with the above explanation of the working of time and space coupled with the Pesikta’s description of G-d “skipping over the mountains,” we can appreciate how both verses are an actual expression of reality.

We are accustomed to think of time being absolute with one moment following the other and being unable to skip over moments, however with the conception of time being similar to the working of space, we can re-conceptualize the way time works.

Just as space can have mountains and valleys, the same can be said of time. Indeed, Einstein in his theory of general relativity and gravity explained that the time and space is essentially “curved” around a large body of mass which creates gravity.

In his theory of time-dilation and length contraction there were all sorts of implications as to how our perspective of time can change or how one can move at different speeds through time.

Using then the description of G-d “skipping over the mountains” of time we can explain how there can be two times working in tandem.

The “skipping over mountains” need not be poetic but a *literal* description of how G-d and Israel passed through four hundred and thirty years of time in a much more condensed period.

When one conceptualizes the space between to mountain peaks, there are two manners in which the space can be measured. One can either take a string and measure *only* the distance between the peaks, or one can measure the space that it takes to go down one peak to the valley in between and the space it takes to climb the second peak. The first measurement will express a drastically smaller result than the second although they are essentially measuring the same space.

The same can be said when one jumps from one peak to the second and measuring the distance that was traversed. From one vantage point they moved only the small distance of the jump, but from another vantage point they traversed the entire distance down one mountain and up the other.

Using this description as it relates to space, one can understand that can be said of time. Just as space contains hills and valleys, the same can be said of time. In a situation then where there are

two peaks of time and a valley in between one can jump from one peak to the other and skip over the valley below.

It is this description that the Pesikta is expressing in its statement: "Since he desires your redemption he does not look at your reckoning, rather 'He skips over the mountains and jumps over the hills...'"

G-d skipped from one moment of time to the other by only traversing the space between the peaks. It is understood though that for the traveler who is walking on "a bridge" between this proverbial valley of time, that he need no move through time quicker, but need only traverse the smaller space of time.

It is therefore understood how both reckonings of the amount of time that Israel spent in exile are true in *actuality*. It is not merely that G-d shortened the exile, or that the reckoning was from Avraham instead of their entering of Egypt, but rather, they are both true in *actuality*.

From the perspective of the "space" in time between the two peaks of time, Israel spent two hundred and ten years in exile, but when one reckons the "space" of the time that they traversed, in actuality they traversed four hundred and thirty years. While this is not the regular manner of traveling through time, "Since he desires your redemption he does not look at your reckoning, rather 'He skips over the mountains and jumps over the hills...!'"

May the same happen with the Jewish people in our exile. Even if G-d forbid, the Jewish people are destined to be in exile even for another moment, may G-d skip over that moment and bring the redemption immediately, Now!