

Parashat Vayigash: Empty Promises for Infinite Happiness

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Dear Friends,

Let's talk a bit about abomination, the elephant in the room that has been taking up valuable space for thousands of years. Abomination – תועבה (toe'eva) is a harsh word, and it evokes unpleasant associations.

From the moment Bnei Yisrael arrive in Egypt (in the last parasha), this word suddenly appears. It has crept in unnoticed, and is destined to affect our entire spiritual world forever. Judaism, followed by Christianity, has an infatuation with the concept of abomination. Anything that is abhorred, from this Parsha on, will be referred to as abomination. But what is toe'eva, how is abomination connected to the Israelite sojourn in Egypt? What has caused it to enter into our consciousness and take such a tight hold in our tradition and in Western culture?

The word toe'eva first appears in the last parasha, Miketz. It arises in the context of the meal served to Yoseph and his brothers upon their second visit to Egypt, this time with their brother, Benjamin. "And they set [the tables] for him [Joseph] by himself, and for them [the brothers] by themselves, and for the Egyptians that [usually] eat with him, by themselves; because the Egyptians do not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination for the Egyptians." (Genesis 43, 32)

What is an abomination for the Egyptians? Are we, Bnei Yisrael, an abomination? Are we the toe'eva?

In this week's parasha, Vayigash, abomination appears again, this time in a slightly different context. Yoseph reveals his identity to his brothers, they return to Jacob in order to bring him, too, down to Egypt, while Yoseph prepares to go to Pharaoh to ask him to allow them to come and live in Egypt. He tells his family: "And it shall come to pass, when Pharaoh shall call you, and shall say: What is your occupation? that you will say: Your servants have been keepers of cattle from our youth until now, both we, and our fathers; that you may dwell in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians." (Genesis 46, 33-34)

The Israelites were shepherds, and it appears that their profession was an abomination in the eyes of the Egyptians. Almost all of our ancestors were shepherds: Hevel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moshe, many of the prophets, and of course, King David – they were all shepherds and therefore an abomination in the eyes of the Egyptians, because such was the culture of that time.

Later, in the book of Exodus, we read that the exodus itself took place under the guise of going into the desert, far from Egyptian habitation, to celebrate to the Lord of the Hebrews, and come back. Never did Moshe tell Pharaoh that they are leaving for good, going to the Land of Canaan. The excuse given to Pharaoh was that the Israelite sacrificial cult involved sacrificing sheep and cattle, which the Egyptians saw as an abomination, the punishment for which was stoning in Egypt. "And Moses said: '... for we shall sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians to the LORD our God; lo, if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?' " (Exodus 8, 22)

At that time, Egyptian society was primarily agrarian. The archetypal “other” was the shepherd. They fought over land for grazing versus land for farming; they quarreled over water and other resources. The first two brothers in the Torah were Cain and Abel. One was a farmer, the other a shepherd, leading to the very first human jealousy, followed by the very first murder. This rivalry will underlie the entire Biblical story.

The division, between landowners and nomadic shepherds seeped into the religious cults of each group and impacted the lives of the priests performing their religious rites. In our parasha Yoseph is warned that the Egyptian priests were entitled to prime agricultural land, and that he may not possess their land. Later in the Torah, the Israelite priestly cast will be established, and their first prohibition is against owning any land. They will, on the other hand, enjoy the choicest animal flesh and fat from the sacrifices they burn on the altar.

The word "toe'eva" is from ancient Egyptian, its root being either "ove", meaning pure, or "vot", meaning a religious transgression. Either way, the word and the concept enters the Israelite psyche, and continues to imply matters of purity and religious ritual to this very day.

The appearance of the word “toe’eva’ marks a new phase in the evolution of the People of Israel - the Egyptian phase. We may even call it the phase of abomination. Ironically, it begins with the Israelites themselves being an abomination, deeply insulting the religious sentiments of the Egyptians.

The Pharaoh of Yoseph's era is actually able to accept Bnei Yisrael in his midst, despite the fact that they are an abomination. He can see the blessing they bring to his country. He gives them land and invites them to stay. Only many years later does a new pharaoh come to power, one who does not remember the contribution of Yoseph and his brothers to the Egyptian economy and society, and wants to destroy them- because they are an abomination.

Later in its history, as the commandments of the Torah solidify, there will be a whole category of serious offenses in Jewish law which will be considered abominations. What they have in common is the connection to idolatry. Later on, sexual offenses will enter the list.

There are two explanations for the expansion of the abomination list to include sexual offenses: the first is that there was a devaluation of the word toe'eva, and it came to mean any offence which was problematic or disgraceful. The second is much more interesting and logical: The sexual offences that are detailed in Leviticus are mentioned in connection with sexual rites that were part of the orgiastic culture of idol worship in the ancient world.

"Toe'eva" will become synonymous with all idol worship performed by the people of the region, including sacrifice of that which is defective, the act of men and women cross-dressing, and sculpting idols.

What are we to learn from all of this? What bearing does it have on us today? What are we to do with this Egyptian concept?

First of all, we learn that it is very important to use this word with caution and in the right context. Its original context suggests that “to’eva” is **anything that is done in order to satisfy the hidden desire for idol worship and is therefore dangerous.**

Hence, we may suggest that, today, "abomination" describes acts that are committed in the service of false, hidden idols which run our lives, and dwell in the depth of our cultural subconscious. They are idols, precisely because they promise us perfection, and that we will live happily ever after if only we submit to them. In fact, the reverse always happens: they end up destroying and fracturing our lives, our families and our societies.

Here are some examples of present-day "abominations" – modern idols that promise us perfection and total happiness:

- Holy wars in the name of a **perfect** kingdom of heaven on earth. These are an abomination.
- Continuously adding religious restrictions, fences and limitations, all in the name of **perfect** religious virtue. This, too, is an abomination.
- Distain for anyone who is different from us in the name of **purity** of race. This is an abomination.
- Crash diets in the name of the ideal of skinniness and a **perfect body**. These are an abomination.
- Obsessive shopping sprees in the service of the **sparkling** god of merchandise. These are an abomination.
- Addictions to brand names in the service of being **cool**. These are an abomination.
- Cosmetic surgery in the service of the deception of **eternal** youth. This is an abomination.
- Even the obsessive pursuit of self-realization in the name of finding the most **holy** and unique self – yes, that too, is an abomination!

Egypt, it turns out, is not a country on the map. It is a state of consciousness we descend to: high walls (=magic formulas), boycotts, excommunications and bans (=excessive purity), and especially, empty promises of eternal happiness.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha