

“They embittered their lives with hard work...all their labors that they performed with them were with crushing harshness.” (1:14)

In the *Talmud Sotah* 11b, *Chazal* give us an insight into the *avodas perach*, crushing/harsh labor, to which the Egyptians subjected *Klal Yisrael*. They inverted their tasks, giving the men work that was usually performed by women and vice versa. This seems enigmatic. If a man is forced to perform a woman’s work, is that to be considered crushing and harsh? It may not be his style, but it certainly is not heartless. The *Ozrover Rebbe, z.l.*, derives from here that any form of labor that is not habitual for an individual is, in effect, considered *avodas perach*. The difficulty arises from the fact that it is unusual and not his natural form of labor. Whenever one is directed to go against his grain, he is being brutally subjugated. He cites the *Rambam* in *Hilchos Avadim*, 1:6, who says that one who imposes labor upon his slave only for the purpose of demonstrating to the slave that he belongs to him and must serve his master, is subjecting the slave to *avodas perach*. His intention is to humiliate and demean the slave, not to seek benefit from his labor.

We now understand why the Egyptian *galus*, exile, is considered to have begun with the birth of Yitzchak *Avinu*. The Patriarch had what one might call an “easy life.” With the exception of the incident regarding the wells, the *Torah* does not record anything in Yitzchak’s life experience that would be considered *galus*-like in nature. Why, then, is the exile counted from his birth? Yitzchak was subjected to living in proximity of the *Pelishtim*, a pagan, immoral nation. It was counter to his nature for Yitzchak, the *Olah Temimah*, perfect sacrifice, the individual who achieved the zenith of spirituality and holiness, to be relegated to living near such a base nation. For him, this constituted exile! Therefore, the four hundred years of exile that was decreed against the Jewish People could be counted from the birth of Yitzchak.

The Jewish People were in Egypt for two hundred and ten years. Hashem counted these years as the exile years, thus, He redeemed them after this term was completed. When we think about it, were all of these years a time of travail for the Jews? In *Seder Olam Rabbah*, it is stated that the Jews suffered for eighty six years, beginning with the birth of Miriam. Why, then, do we begin counting the exile from the moment Yaakov entered Egypt? According to the above thesis, when one is compelled to perform an endeavor that goes against his very nature, or to live in a place that is contrary to his nature and religious conviction, it is crushing and demeaning; he is essentially in exile. Yaakov came with his family to a land known for its immoral and iniquitous lifestyle. For people of such spiritual nobility and holiness to be exposed to such an experience is demoralizing. *Shevet Levi* might not have been forced to labor as his brothers, but he was certainly subject to the demeaning experience of living in Egypt. That alone, for someone of *Shevet Levi*’s spiritual plateau, is devastating.

This remains an important lesson for us all. Any endeavor that goes against the nature and will of an individual is a crushing experience. Therefore, when one is dealing with people, he must be

sensitive to their habits and natural proclivities so as not to impose upon them in such a manner that would be destructive and ultimately self-defeating.