

## One Man's Abomination is Another Man's Way Of Life

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26 December 2020/ 11 Tevet 5781

Parshat Vayigash

### Genesis 46:31-47:6

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָחִיו וְאֶל-בֵּית אָבִיו אַעֲלֶה וְאֶגִּידָה לְפָרְעֹה וְאָמַרְהוּ אֵלָיו אֲחֵי וּבֵית-אָבִי אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ-כְּנָעַן בָּאוּ אֵלָי:  
וְהָאֲנָשִׁים רָעִי צֵאן כִּי-אֲנָשִׁי מִקְנֵה הַיָּדוּ וְצֹאֲנָם וּבָקָרָם וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם הֵבִיאוּ  
וְהָיָה כִּי-יִקְרָא לָכֶם פַּרְעֹה וְאָמַר מִה-מַּעֲשִׂיכֶם:  
וְאָמַרְתֶּם אֲנָשִׁי מִקְנֵה הַיָּדוּ עַבְדֵיךָ מִנְעוּרֵינוּ וְעַד-עֵתָה גַם-אֲנַחְנוּ גַם-אֲבֹתֵינוּ בְּעֵבֶר יָדוּ תִשְׁבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן כִּי-**תוֹעֵבָת**  
מִצְרַיִם כָּל-רְעֵה צֵאן:  
וַיֵּבֵא יוֹסֵף וַיַּגִּד לְפָרְעֹה וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וְאֲחֵי וְצֹאֲנָם וּבָקָרָם וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם בָּאוּ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְהִנֵּם בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן:  
וּמִקְצֵה אָחִיו לָקַח חֲמִשָּׁה אֲנָשִׁים וַיִּצְגָם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה:  
וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-אָחִיו מִה-מַּעֲשִׂיכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-פַּרְעֹה רְעֵה צֵאן עַבְדֵיךָ גַם-אֲנַחְנוּ גַם-אֲבֹתֵינוּ:  
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-פַּרְעֹה הַגֵּד בְּאֶרֶץ בְּאֵנוּ כִּי-אֵין מְרַעֵה לְצֵאן אֲשֶׁר לְעַבְדֵיךָ כִּי-כִבֵּד הָרַעֵב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְעַתָּה יִשְׁבוּ-נָא  
עַבְדֵיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן:  
וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יוֹסֵף לֹאמַר אָבִיךָ וְאָחִיךָ בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ:  
אָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לִפְנֵיךָ הוּא בְּמִיטֵב הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּשֵׁב אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אָחִיךָ יִשְׁבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן וְאִם-יָדַעְתָּ וְיִשְׁבּוּ אֲנָשִׁי-חֵיל  
וְשִׁמְתֶם שָׂרֵי מִקְנֵה עַל-אֲשֶׁר-לֵי:

Then Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and tell the news to Pharaoh, and say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me. **The men are shepherds; they have always been breeders of livestock**, and they have brought with them their flocks and herds and all that is theirs.' So when Pharaoh summons you and asks, 'What is your occupation?' you shall answer, '**Your servants have been breeders of livestock** from the start until now, both we and our fathers'—so that you may stay in the region of Goshen. For all shepherds are **abhorrent** to Egyptians."

Then Joseph came and reported to Pharaoh, saying, "**My father and my brothers, with their flocks and herds** and all that is theirs, have come from the land of Canaan and are now in the region of Goshen." And selecting a few of his brothers, he presented them to Pharaoh. Pharaoh said to his brothers, "What is your occupation?" They answered Pharaoh, "**We your servants are shepherds**, as were also our fathers. We have come," they told Pharaoh, "to sojourn in this land, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks, the famine being severe in the land of Canaan. Pray, then, let your servants stay in the region of Goshen."

### Ibn Ezra

The Egyptians of those times were vegetarians like modern Hindus.

### Shnei Luchot Habrit

The Torah's explanation in Genesis 46,34, that any shepherd was an abomination to the Egyptians is logical. The mere suggestion that sheep needed human guardians -when they were viewed as a supreme deity- is an insult to their religion. When... G-d commanded that the lamb be taken in order to slaughter it and to humiliate by this single act the entire system upon which the Egyptians had built their position in this world. G-d performed judgments on the sheep, on the Egyptian deities, to demonstrate that He is not only a deity (like others, i.e. אלוקים) but that He is י-ה-ו-ה.

**Abominations to Egyptians by Aron Pinker** [www.scielo.org.za/pdf/ote/v22n1/08.pdf](http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/ote/v22n1/08.pdf)

Genesis 43:32 tells that Joseph hosted his brothers as well as some Egyptian officials for dinner. The seating arrangements were, however, unusual: They served him by himself, and them by themselves and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves. The Biblical narrator finds it necessary to supply an explanation for this curious situation, saying: for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews since that would be an abomination to the Egyptians. This is not the only case in which something is identified by the Bible as being an abomination תועבה repugnant, or abhorrent to the Egyptians. Similarly, in Exodus 8:22 Moses explains to Pharaoh that sacrificing to God inside Egypt is not possible. Doing so would bring a strong and dangerous outburst from the Egyptian populace; the Egyptians would stone the Hebrews.

Ibn Ezra even makes the Egyptian vegans as he believes the Hindu in India were (see Ibn Ezra on Gen 46:34). Being vegans the Egyptians despised anyone who ate meat (see Ibn Ezra (long version) on Ex 8:22). These commentators cannot be correct. Being a sacred animal of a god did not preclude its consumption outside the domain of the god. It seems that in the Middle Kingdom (2000-1780 B.C.E.) vegetarianism was quite common at least among priests, and neither pork nor beef were widely eaten. Dental wear in mummies shows that the Egyptian diet was apparently largely vegetarian, as was the case generally in the Near East. Yet, the average Egyptian was not a vegetarian.

[One modern scholar] notes that “[m]ost stockmen were poor enough specimens, worn out by a life of toil, bald-headed, likely enough, with matted beard, some paunchy, some thin as rakes, but all of them weaklings.” They usually lived with their herds, their hygiene not up to Egyptian standards. Native Egyptians were farmers - not pastoralists, and disdained shepherds.

It is possible that what was essentially abominable in the Israelite sacrifice was the fact that it was a burnt offering. The Ancient Egyptian apparently did not burn his animal sacrifices or portions of them. Despite the extensive source material available on Ancient Egypt the evidence for burnt offerings seems extremely slight.

The Israelites apparently burnt most of the sacrificed animal or portions of it. The smell of the burned salted flesh was considered as pleasing to the God of the Israelites. This was an abominable act to the Egyptians since it seemed as wanton destruction of prime food. It was also a theological anathema to Egyptians. They might have considered the burning of the divinity’s food reprehensible and potential cause for a god’s anger upon the land of Egypt. It would not surprise then that they would become agitated and aggressive toward practitioners of rites that would rile the gods, whatever they might be

The enigmatic references in the Bible to “abomination to the Egyptians” have baffled classical Jewish commentators. Their attempts to find a single cause for all the cases of relevance must be considered a failure. Modern scholarship, despite the vast sources on Ancient Egypt, has not come up with specific enough identifications of the “abomination to Egypt.” **It seems that these abominations originated from various causes. Coming from a rather different culture the Hebrews dressed differently, engaged in different occupations, and sacrificed differently. These differences led to some distancing between the Hebrews and Egyptians, which the Bible attributed to “abomination to the Egyptians.”**