

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter XIII: Shemot (Ex. 1:1–6:1)

### Essay 13. The Levites were exempt from servitude in Egypt

**פסוק** "לכו לסבלתיכם", פירש רש"י לכו למלאכתכם שיש לכם לעשות בבתיכם אבל מלאכת שעבוד מצרים לא היתה על שבתו של לוי עכ"ל. ופירשו ז"ל שיהיתה סבה מאת ה' לפי שצתידין לשאת המשכן ולעבוד במקדש.

There is a verse: “But the king of Egypt said to them, ‘Moses and Aaron, why do you distract the people from their tasks? **Get to your labors!**’ ” (Ex. 5:4). **Rashi interpreted, “Get to your labors that you have to do in your homes, but the work of servitude of Egypt was not [imposed] upon the tribe of Levi.”** [The rabbis,] of blessed memory, explained that this was a decision of G-d, because their future was to carry the tabernacle and to work in the Temple.

ומקשים והלא סתמא כתוב "כִּי־גַר יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֲךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וַעֲבָדוּם וַעֲנוּ אֹתָם", ואף שבת לוי בכלל זרעך. ואיך אפשר שלא נתקנים בהם גזירה זו? ויש לומר דהוי ליה למכתב פי יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם גר ועבדוים וענו אותם וכו', והנה משמע שכלם בכלל ועבדוים. אבל השתא דכתיב גר ברישא ואחרי כן הפסיק וכתב "וַעֲבָדוּם וַעֲנוּ אֹתָם", משמע שגזירת הגירות היתה פוללת לכל מי שהוא מזרעו של אברהם, ואף בשבת לוי נתקנים שהיו גם הם גרים במצרים. ועוד ועבדוים אותם לפי שהוא ראוי לעבוד, ואינו פוללת לכל זרעך.

[People] question: Isn't it plainly written, “**Know well that your offspring will be strangers—in a land not theirs—and they will be enslaved and oppressed**” (Gen. 15:13), and even the tribe of Levi is included in the category of “**your offspring.**” How is it possible that this entire decree, including enslavement and oppression, won't be realized for them? It can be said that [Scripture] could have written: “**Your offspring will be in a land not theirs—strangers—and they will be enslaved and oppressed.**” If Scripture had used that sentence construction, the word “strangers” would not have been redundant, but would have been additional information: that the descendants would have been outside the Land of Canaan, and would not have had the same rights as the other inhabitants of that land, but rather would have been regarded by the natives as strangers. With such a hypothetical sentence construction, **that would mean that [“your offspring”] are all included in the category of “and they will be enslaved.”** But now that it is written, “strangers” at the beginning, and afterward [Scripture] interrupts to say, “in a land not theirs,” we understand that as a redundancy, for to say that someone is a stranger necessarily means in a land not theirs. Then after the redundant interruption, **it is written, “and**

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they will be enslaved and oppressed.” This sentence construction means that the decree of being strangers included everyone from the offspring of Abraham, but the ending, “and they will be enslaved and oppressed,” does not necessarily include everyone from Abraham’s offspring. **Even the Tribe of Levi fulfilled this aspect of being strangers, for they were also strangers in Egypt. Yet “they will be enslaved” was only appropriate for some of Abraham’s offspring, in accordance with his fitness to serve, and this does not include all “your offspring,”** and so we can understand that the Tribe of Levi was exempt from being enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians.

**ועוד יש לומר** דאיתא במדרש על פסוק "ויקם מלך חדש", בשמות יוסף הפרו ברית מילה, אמרו נהיה כמצריים וכו'. וכיון שעשו כן הפך הקב"ה האהבה שהיו המצריים אוהבים אותם לשנאה שגאמר "הפך לבם לשנא עמו" וכו'. ואף כאן קשה וכי אם היו מקיימים מצות המילה, לא היו המצריים משעבדים אותם, והלא כבר נגזרה הגזירה של "ועבדום וענו אתם"?

**It can be said that it’s brought in Ex. Midrash Rabbah (1:8) on the verse: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” (Ex. 1:8), that when Joseph died, many of the [Jews] broke the covenant of circumcision, saying, “We will be like the Egyptians, etc.” Because they did so, G-d turned the love with which the Egyptians had loved them to hatred, as it is said, “He changed their heart to hate His people” (Ps. 25:25). Even here it is difficult to understand, because if they were fulfilling the commandment of circumcision, the Egyptians would not have enslaved them in the first place, and wasn’t the decree already decreed upon them of “they will be enslaved and oppressed” in the time of Abraham, long before the Israelites violated the commandment of circumcision?**

אלא ודאי צריך לומר שהגזירה לא היתה אלא על הגירות בלבד, ומשום הכי הקדים "כִּי־גַר יִהְיֶה זְרָעְךָ" כנ"ל, ואחרי כן אם לא יזכו יתוסף עליהם השעבוד, וזהו "ועבדום וענו אתם". והואיל ששקט לוי לא הפרו ברית מילה במצרים כדכתיב "כי שִׁמְרוּ אִמְרֹתַי וּבְרִיתִי יִנְצְרוּ", מן הדין הנה שלא יהיו נמי בכלל השעבוד אלא בכלל הגירות.

**Rather it’s certain that it must be said that the absolute decree was only on the condition of being strangers, and because of this, [Scripture] preceded with the text, “Because your offspring will be strangers.” Since the tribe of Levi did not break the commandment of circumcision in Egypt, as it is written, “Your precepts alone they observed, and Your covenant they kept” (Deut. 33:9), it was only right that the Levites would not be included in the category of servitude, but only in the category of the condition of being strangers.**

**וּבְדָרְךָ זֶה נָמִי יוֹבֵן הַפְּסוּק "כִּי־גַר יִהְיֶה וְרַעַד בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא לָהֶם", שְׁלֹכְאוֹרָה "בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא לָהֶם" הֵם דְּבָרִים מְיוֹתָרִים, שֶׁהָרִי דִּי לִזְמַר "כִּי־גַר יִהְיֶה וְרַעַד", פְּשִׁטָּא שְׁמִי שֶׁהוּא גַר אֵינִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּאַרְצוֹ. וְלִפִּי דְרָכְנֵי אֶתִּי שְׁפִיר, שְׂכַף הַיְתָה גְזֵרַת הַמְּקוֹם שֶׁפְּשִׁיִּהּוּ מִתְמַיִימִים בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא לָהֶם, שֶׁיִּהְיֶה נֶכֶר וְנוֹדַע שֶׁהֵם בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא לָהֶם, דֶּהֵיִינוּ שֶׁהֵם מְשׁוּנָיִם מֵהֶם, שֶׁיֵּשׁ לָהֶם הַמִּילָה. אֲזִי לֹא יִהְיֶה לָהֶם אֲלֵא הַגְּזֵרָה שֶׁל "כִּי־גַר יִהְיֶה וְרַעַד". הֵא אִם לֹא יִהְיֶה "בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא לָהֶם" כְּמוֹ שֶׁעָשׂוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם שֶׁאֲמָרוּ נִהְיֶה כְּמִצְרַיִים, שֶׁאֲזִי לֹא נִכְר שֶׁהֵם גָּרִים בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא לָהֶם, אֲזִי יִתְנַסֵּף עֲלֵיהֶם גְּזֵרַת הַשְּׁעָבוֹד "וְעַבְדוּם וְעַנּוּ אֹתָם" וְכוּ'.**

**In this way we will also understand the verse, “Know well that your offspring will be strangers in a land not theirs,” for apparently, the words “in a land not theirs” are extra words, for as explained above, it is enough to say, “Know well that your offspring will be strangers”—it is obvious that one who is a stranger is not dwelling in his land! According to this way of thinking, it is fine, for thus is the decree of the Omnipresent when they will settle a land that is not theirs: That it will be recognized and known to the Israelites that they are in a land not theirs, which is that they are different from [the natives], for [the Israelites] have the [commandment of] circumcision. Thus, for [the Levites], who did not break the commandment of circumcision, there was only the decree to Abraham of, “Know well that your offspring will be strangers.” Here, for those Israelites who were breaking the commandment of circumcision, if they were not “in a land not theirs,” as they created such a situation in Egypt when they said, “Let us be like the Egyptians,” then it was not apparent that they were living in a land not theirs, then the decree of servitude was to be added upon them, “and they will be enslaved and oppressed.” With this way of thinking, the Levites had circumcision to remind them they were different and that they were living in a land that was not theirs, so that they would be eager to leave to return to the Land of Canaan when the opportunity arose. In contrast, those other Israelites who wanted to become like Egyptians were prevented from becoming comfortable in such an identity, by being subjected to servitude, which would remind them that they were different and that they were living in a land that was not theirs, so that they, too, would be eager to leave.**

וּמְכַל מְקוֹם, הַטַּעַם הַזֶּה אֵינִי סוֹתֵר הַטַּעַם הַנִּלְשָׁל הַמְּפָרְשִׁים, דְּאִיכָא לְמִימַר שֶׁהִזְכּוֹת שְׁהִיָּה לָהֶם לְעַבּוֹד בְּמִקְדָּשׁ הִיא עֲמֻדָה לָהֶם שֶׁלֹּא הִפְרוּ הַמִּילָה בְּמִצְרַיִם. זֶה גַרְם שֶׁהַמִּצְוִיִּים לֹא הָיוּ שׁוֹנְאִים אוֹתָם וְלֹא הָיָה מְכַרְיָחִים אוֹתָם לְשַׁעְבּוֹד, כְּמוֹ שֶׁהֲאָרְכְנוּ לְעֵיל בְּתַחֲלַת הַפְּרָשָׁה שֶׁכָּל שְׁנֵאתָן הַיְתָה דְּנֹקָא לְפִי שִׁישְׁרָאֵל הִפְרוּ הַמִּילָה וְעֵי"שׁ.

**In any case, this sense does not contradict the above sense of the commentators, that [the Levites] had the right to work in the Temple because they did not break [the commandment] of circumcision in Egypt. This caused the Egyptians not to hate them and not to force them into servitude, as we explained at length above at the beginning of the *parsha*, in Essay 2, that all their hatred was precisely because Israel broke the [commandment of] circumcision, and see there.**

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