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Letter Vav

In this parashah, we learn about the initial 400-year decree placed upon the descendants of Avraham: "They will be aliens in a foreign land – and they will be slaves and oppressed (ועבדום וענו אותם) – for 400 years." (*Bereishis* 15:13). This decree eventually materialized as the Egyptian exile. However, it is immediately clear that the 400-year decree was not fulfilled in the simplest sense, since the Jewish people were in Egypt for only 210 years. When the nation was redeemed, there were many – even among the Jewish people – who felt that they had not completed the full 400 years and were therefore not yet permitted to leave.

Chazal and mefarshim offer several approaches to explain how they were able to leave Egypt before the 400 years had concluded. One answer suggests that because the Egyptians not only enslaved them but also oppressed them, this created a pathway for an early redemption. Yet this assumption requires elaboration – wasn't oppression part of the original decree as well?

Rav Yaakov Chai Zrihen (*Chelek Yaakov, Drush* 13) analyzes the words – and even the letters – of the *passuk* to explain how the Jewish people were permitted to leave when they did. His brilliant explanation unfolds through several interrelated steps.

AND OR OR

The *passuk* mentions two distinct punishments within the 400-year decree: slavery and oppression (ועבדום וענו אותם). In general, the letter *vav* (ו) can function in two ways – as "and" or as "or." Of course, how we interpret the letter *vav* in this decree makes a tremendous difference. Was the decree that they would be slaves ***and*** oppressed, or that they would be slaves ***or*** oppressed?

In reality, the Egyptians both enslaved and oppressed the Jewish people under their control. But whether they were justified in doing so – or whether they overstepped and were therefore punishable – depends on how we understand the *vav*.

If the decree meant "slaves ***and*** oppressed," then the Egyptians were justified in doing both, the oppression cannot be used as a pathway for an early redemption.

REDEMPTION AND/OR WEALTH

Rav Zrihen demonstrates that this question regarding the *vav* is connected to other elements of the Egyptian exile, forming a unified picture.

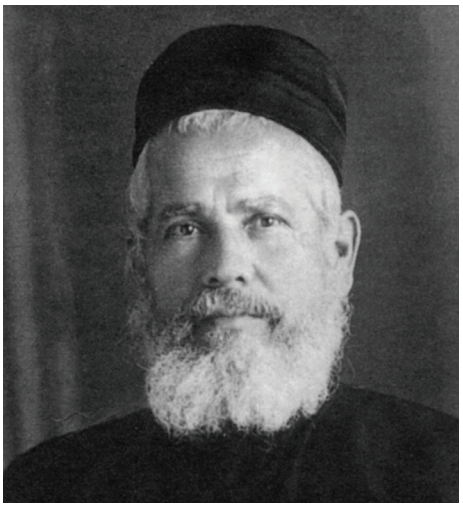
Another *vav* requiring analysis appears in the very same *passuk*!

After Hashem told Avraham about the decree, He added: "I [Hahsem] will execute judgment [against the perpetrators], ***and/or*** after that the Jewish nation will go out with great wealth דן אנכי ואחרי כן יצאו ברכוש גדול."

Here, too, the question arises: How should we interpret the *vav* linking Hashem's punishment of the oppressors with the promise that the Jews would leave with wealth?

If the *vav* means "and," then the Jewish people were promised wealth after the decree's completion and punishment of the oppressors.

If the *vav* means "or," (either He will punish the oppressors, or the Jewish nation will leave with wealth) then Hashem's punishment of the Egyptians alone would suffice to fulfill the *passuk*; there would be no further need for wealth.



ר' יעקב חי ב"ר ברוך זריהן

R'Yaakov Chai Zrihen (Sivan 1869 - 21 Av 1953) was born in Teveria. He grew up with R' Michlof Straus and R' Yaakov Viaknin. The three became the *dayanim* of Teveria. He married Leah, daughter of R. Binyamin Hamaoui (1860-1925 author of *Amtachas Binyamin*). He and R' Straus were fluent in Kabbalah too. In 1898, he was one of the founders of *yeshivas Keter Torah* in Teveria. From 1914 until his passing, he was a *dayan* of the *Beis Din* of Teveria, rising to the position of *Av Beis Din* in 1929. An ardent opponent of Zionism and secularism, R. Zrihan was zealous in his defense against any threats to religious life in Teveria. He had close relationships with many Gedolim, among them, the Sabba Kadisha, R' Herzog, R' Tuckitinsky, R' Kook and R' Sonnenfeld. Many of his published works have been reissued recently by *Machon Yad HaRav Zrihan* in Elad.

R' Shmuel Auerbach writes, "He knows in depth the revealed and hidden parts of the Torah. He cites ides that he heard from Maharil Diskin, and from R' Chaim Berlin who heard them from his father [the Netziv], as well as other Gedolim."

In his introduction to *Ohel Yaakov* (1930) he explains how publishing Torah creates the opportunity to have many students which can be better than biological children. He also hints how the Torah saved the Jews of Teveria during the 1929 riots, and he requests of Hashem to avenge the tragedies of those riots.

AVRAHAM

Rav Zrihen uses this question about the *vav* to clarify a Gemara.

The Gemara (*Berachos* 9a) relates that because of the promise that the Jewish people would leave with great wealth, right before the final plague Hashem told Moshe to "please" instruct the Jews to borrow items from the Egyptians (*Shemos* 11:2). Why? "So that the ***Avraham*** should not say: Hashem fulfilled His word regarding the promise of the initial decree of his descendants being enslaved and afflicted—but did not fulfill the promise, "that they would leave with great wealth." Therefore, Hashem requested that they borrow the Egyptians' treasures and thereby become wealthy.

Many ask: Why did Hashem ask the Jews to do this *"so that Avraham not say…"* if Hashem Himself promised Avraham that his descendants would leave with wealth, that promise alone should ensure its fulfillment—regardless of what Avraham might "say."

Rav Zrihen explains: Hashem's original promise—that the Egyptians would be punished and that the Jews would leave with wealth—was joined by the *vav*.

Therefore, one may conclude that since the Jewish people left ***before*** the full 400-year period ended, it must be that the Egyptians were not justified in both enslaving and oppressing them. The *vav* in "ועבדום וענו אותם" must therefore mean "or," meaning ***either***

enslaved and oppressed, not both. However, because the *vav* means "or," there is no guarantee for the Jews to be granted wealth, since Hashem's punishment of the oppressors alone would fulfill the decree.

Nevertheless, Hashem recognized that ***Avraham*** understood the *vav* as "and." Therefore, He asked the Jewish people to take the wealth of Egypt before leaving, in order to fulfill both aspects of the promise—according to ***Avraham's*** understanding.

LAND PURCHASE

Why would Avraham interpret the letter "*vav*" as "and"?

Rav Zrihen cites the *Midrash* stating that one of Avraham's greatest tests was having to purchase a burial plot for Sarah, even though Hashem had already promised him the land. Avraham did not question Hashem but accepted this with pure faith.

How had Hashem promised Avraham the land?

Hashem told Avraham that he should go and acquire the land of *Eretz Yisrael* (*Bereishis* 13:17) by walking its length and width – קום התהלך הארץ לארכה ולרחבה. There too, the letter "*vav*" is used, and it becomes a question whether Avraham was supposed to walk ***both*** its length and width, or if he may acquire *Eretz Yisrael* by only walking along one border.

Rav Zrihen cites *Mefarshim* who maintain that Avraham walked only the length of the land. Therefore, if the *vav* is understood as "and," then the land was not yet fully acquired.

Subsequently, when Avraham was forced to purchase a burial plot for his wife Sarah, he concluded that because he only had walked its length, and the command had said "length and width," it was not yet his.

Thus, Hashem—knowing that Avraham understood *vav* as "and"—arranged that the Jewish people would also take Egypt's wealth, to fulfill both aspects of the original promise, "so that ***Avraham*** not say…"

EGYPT TO ERETZ YISRAEL

Rav Zrihen uses this approach to explain what Hashem's words to Moshe at the burning bush. "I have seen the affliction of My people in Egypt and have heard their outcry because of their taskmasters; I have none of their sufferings. I shall rescue them and bring them to the land [Eretz Yisrael]. (*Shemos* 3:7, 8)

Is there a connection between the affliction in Egypt and bringing them to Eretz Yisrael?

According to everything we have been learning, yes.

Hashem was explaining why the Jewish people could leave before the end of the 400 years; because the letter "*vav*" is to be understood as "or." The Egyptians were punished for overstepping their fulfillment of the decree. And because the letter "*vav*" is to be understood as "or," the Jewish people could inherit the land acquired by Avraham, even though Avraham walked only the length of it. This was enough to fulfill one of two requirements.

LAND CONNECTION

Rav Zrihen uses this to explain another nuance in the story of the redemption.

Hashem mentions Avraham's faith when he purchased land for Sara's burial when He speaks to Moshe about taking the Jews out of Egypt (at the beginning of Va'eira). The question is asked: Why is this specifically mentioned to Moshe as a symbol of Avraham's faith as opposed to all the other ten tests he had passed? Doesn't the Akeida prove Avraham's faith?

Rav Zrihen explains because Hashem was teaching Moshe that the interpretation of the letter *vav* is "or," and that is why they merited leaving Egypt before the 400 years have been fulfilled. Hashem was noting that He was rewarding Avraham's faith when he purchased of the land because in reality when Avraham was instructed to go and acquire the land of *Eretz Yisrael* (*Bereishis* 13:17) by walking its length and width – קום התהלך הארץ לארכה ולרחבה, Hashem meant that he may acquire *Eretz Yisrael* by only walking along one border. When Avraham walked the length of the land, he fully acquired it and should not have had to purchase a burial plot for his wife Sarah.

HASHEM

Hashem thus applied the interpretation of the vav as "or": He punished the Egyptians for exceeding their role and redeemed the Jewish people early so they could inherit the land that was already theirs by right.

Although this interpretation provided no guarantee that they would also leave with wealth—since punishing the oppressors alone satisfied the decree—Hashem, out of deference to Avraham's understanding of vav as "and," instructed the Jews to take Egypt's wealth as well.

Avraham was also rewarded for his willingness to purchase land with pure faith.

	Original decree	Jewish nation leaving Egypt with great wealth	Abraham acquiring the land of *Eretz Yisrael*	Abraham having to acquire land after Sarah passes away
If "*vav*" is and	Slavery *and* oppression (no punishment for the Egyptians)	They must	Must walk length and width but he did not	He must purchase
If "*vav*" is or	Slavery *or* oppression (punishment for the Egyptians)	no	Must walk either the length or width and he did	No need to purchase