

Tales of the Ancient Jewish Diaspora

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Punishment, Opportunity,
or Universal Mission?



1. Lev. 26:27-33

And if ye will not for all this hearken unto me, but walk contrary to me...I will scatter you among the nations....

2. Deut. 28:64-5

And the Lord shall scatter thee among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other... and among these nations shalt thou have no repose, and there will be no rest for the sole of your foot (ולא יהיה מנוח לכף רגלך)

3. Letter of Aristeas 249

Keep in mind that it is good to live and die in one's country. Residence abroad brings contempt upon poor men, and upon rich - disgrace, as though they were in exile for some wickedness.

4. Philo, On Abraham 64

The legislators have appointed banishment as the penalty second only to death for those who have been convicted of the greatest crimes, though indeed in my opinion it is not second to death...but rather a far heavier punishment, since death ends our troubles, but banishment is not the end but the beginning of other new misfortunes and entails, in place of one death which puts an end to pains, a thousand deaths in which we do not lose sensation...

5. Philo, Life of Moses 2:232 (on 'Pesach Sheni')

The same permission also must be given to those who were prevented from joining the whole nation in worship not by mourning, but by absence in a distant country (*cf. Num. 9:6-14*). For settlers abroad and inhabitants of other regions are not wrongdoers who deserve to be deprived of equal privileges, particularly if the nation has grown so populous that a single country cannot contain it and it has sent out colonies in all directions.

6. Josephus, Antiquities 4:115-116

That land to which He himself has sent you ye shall surely occupy...and ye shall suffice for the world, to furnish every land with inhabitants from your race...(for) the whole habitable world, be sure, lies before you as an eternal habitation, and your multitudes shall find abode on islands and continent, more numerous than even the stars in heaven (*paraphrase of Num. 23:9!*).

7. Lamentations Rabbah 1:28

“Judah has gone into exile” (*Lam. 1:3*) - Do not other nations go into exile? [The fact is, however, that] though they go into exile, their exile is not really exile. The heathen nations who eat their bread (i.e. local bread) and drink their (i.e. local) wine - their exile is not real exile; but Israel - who do not eat their bread or drink their wine - they experience true exile.

8. Midrash Psalms 71:4 (ed. Buber p. 323)

“Cast me not off in the time of old age” (*Ps. 71:9*) - for I have become old in galut...; “Thou shalt bring me up again” (*Ps. 71:20*) - some explain this to mean from the exile which is the equal of death and the abyss.

9. Gen. Rabbah 33:6

“And he (Noah) sent forth a dove...but the dove found no rest for the sole of its foot, and so it returned to him, to the ark” (*Gen. 8:8-9*). R. Judah bar Nahman in the name of Resh Laqish said: Had it found a place of rest - it would not have returned.

10. Pesikta deRav Kahana, Lamentation 1, ed. Mandelbaum p. 249

R. Abbahu in the name of R. Yosse bar Hanina said: “But they like men have transgressed the covenant” (והטפה כאדם עברו ברית) (*Hosea 6:7*) - This is Adam. God said: Adam, I brought him into the Garden of Eden and commanded him, and he transgressed my commandments, and I sentenced him to banishment...and his sons too, I brought them into the Land of Israel and commanded them, and they transgressed my commandments and I sentenced them to banishment.

11. Gen. Rabbah 41:9

“And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth” (*Gen. 13:16*) - Just as the dust of the earth is found from one end of the world to the other, so shall thy children be found from one end of the earth to the other...and as the dust of the earth wears out even metal utensils yet it itself endures forever, so will Israel exist forever while the nations of the world will cease to be; and as the dust of the earth is downtrodden upon, so will thy children be downtrodden under the heel of foreign powers...nevertheless it is for thy benefit, for they purify thee of guilt (lit. they beat you of your guilt)...What did they (the powers) do to them? They made them lie down in the streets and drew ploughs over them. R. Azariah said in R. Aha's name: That is a good augury; as the street outlives those who travel on it, yet itself remains forever, so shall thy sons outlive the nations of the world, and they will remain forever.

12. BT Pesahim 87b

R. Oshaya said: The Holy One Blessed is He showed righteousness (or: mercy) unto Israel by scattering them among the nations...A min said to R. Judah Nesi'ah: We are held in greater esteem than you. For concerning you (=Israel) it is written: "For Yoav and all of Israel remained there six months until he had cut off every male in Edom"(I Kings 11:16); whereas you have been among us for many years, and yet we have not done anything to you...R. Oshaya answered: The reason you have not is because you do not know how to do it. If you would destroy us all - we are not all among you. If you were to destroy those among you - you would be called a murderous kingdom (or: a kingdom that is lacking; מלכותא קטיעתא). He (the min) replied: By the Goddess (or: love) of Rome - it is with this thought that we lie down and with this thought that we get up.

13. Seder Eliahu Rabbah 10, ed. Friedman p. 54

A governor (hegemon) told R. Judah the Patriarch: We have more pity than you. When you had the power over Edom you did not permit but one pregnant woman to survive...(a disciple then replied - enigmatically - to the hegemon): Don't you think the homeowner knows where he put his tools? (The hegemon, at first dumbfounded, finally understands the implication and admits): From one hundred places [plans against you] have been formulated. But we said: If we kill those in the Land of Israel who will kill for us those north and south? And if we kill those north and south, who will kill for us those in Babylonia and Elam and in other lands? And so everything is cancelled. Of course the owner knows where he put his tools. When he returns to his house he will restore the tools to his house.

14. Song of Songs Rabbah 8:10

The nations of the world scoff at Israel and proclaim: Why has God exiled you from your land and destroyed his Temple? And Israel replies by saying: We are like a king's daughter who has gone to carry our 'regel redufim' (regale repudium; רגל רדופים) at her father's house; in the end she will return home in peace.

15. BT Pesahim 87b

R. Eleazar said: The Holy One Blessed is He did not exile Israel among the nations save in order that proselytes might join them.

16. Tobit 13:3-4

Acknowledge Him before the nations, children of Israel, for He has scattered you among them; and there He has shown you His greatness. Therefore extol Him before all the living, because He is our Lord.

17. Song of Songs Rabbah 1:3

"Thy name is as ointment poured forth"(Song 1:3). R. Yohanan interpreted this scripture in connection with our Patriarch Abraham. When God told him "go forth from your land and place of birth" - what was he like? He may be compared to a flask of perfume that was

sitting in a corner and not emitting any scent; someone came and shook it from its place and its scent began to spread. So said God to Abraham: Abraham, you have many good deeds, you have many mitzvot - move around the world...

18. Lev. Rabbah 29:2

“And he dreamed and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached heaven, and behold the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (*Gen. 28:12*). R. Shmuel b. Nahman said: Do you really think these were the angels? Nay, they were the masters of the nations of the world. He showed him the master of Babylonia ascending seventy rungs, and of Media ascending seventy-two rungs, and of Greece one hundred and eighty rungs, and of Rome ascending and descending - and not knowing how many (rungs). He said: Master of the Universe: tell me, will he descend? God answered: Jacob, even if you see him reaching the heavens, I will lower him, as it is written: “If you ascend like an eagle and place your nest among the stars, from there I will lower you, said God” (*Ovadhiah 1:4*).

R. Berechiah...in the name of R. Meir: He showed him the master of Babylonia ascend and descend, and of Media ascend and descend, and of Greece ascend and descend, and of Edom ascend and descend. He said: Master of the Universe, just as these have descended I too will descend? And God told him: Fear not, go up, for you will ascend but not descend. Nevertheless he (Jacob) was afraid and did not ascend...and God told him: Jacob, had you believed and gone up you would never have descended, but because you had no faith and did not go up, your sons will be caught up and involved with the nations, from nation to nation, from Babylon to Media, from Media to Greece, from Greece to Edom. He said to Him: Lord of the Universe, forever?! And God told him: “Fear not my servant Jacob... neither be dismayed, O Israel, for I will save thee from afar” (*Jer. 30:10*), from Gallia and Aspamea, “and your seed from the land of their captivity” - from Babylonia...from Media, from Greece...from Edom.