



Parashat Vayigash tells of the onset of the Egyptian exile, as Yaakov and his entire family relocate to Egypt to escape the deadly famine that ravaged the land of Canaan. We read that as Yaakov headed towards Egypt, he sent Yehuda ahead "to show the way towards Goshen" (46:28). According to the straightforward reading of the text, as Rashi comments, this means that Yehuda was sent ahead to prepare the practical arrangements for the family ahead of their arrival in Goshen. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 95:3), however, as Rashi cites, explains differently, claiming that Yaakov sent Yehuda ahead to establish a *beit talmud*, a place of study. The Torah employs here the term *le-horot* ("to show" or "to instruct"), in which the Midrash detects an allusion to *hora'a* – halakhic instruction.

What kind of "yeshiva" did Yaakov have his son establish in Egypt?

Maimonides answers this question in the first chapter of *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim*, where he presents a brief historical overview of the development of idolatry and *Am Yisrael's* opposition to it. He describes how pagan beliefs became widespread throughout the world until Avraham began preaching monotheism and attracted a considerable following. This process, as Maimonides writes, continued with Yitzchak and Yaakov:

Yitzchak sat and taught and admonished, and Yitzchak informed this to Yaakov and appointed him to teach, and he [Yaakov] sat and taught, maintaining all those who had joined his ranks. And our patriarch Yaakov taught all his sons and designated Levi, appointing him as leader and assigning him over an academy to teach the way of God and preserve the charge of Avraham...

(*Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 1:3)

According to Maimonides, the "yeshiva" that Yaakov established was intended to preserve and perpetuate the legacy of Avraham, who struggled to affirm the monotheistic belief in a pagan world. This academy was a place where students were taught the arguments that Avraham had used in persuading his contemporaries to embrace monotheism, and, presumably, where the texts that Avraham had composed – as Maimonides mentioned earlier – were carefully studied and analyzed.

Maimonides proceeds to describe how Yaakov's ambitious endeavor to perpetuate Avraham's legacy in Egypt did not succeed:

The matter continued to progress among Yaakov's children and those who joined their ranks such that there emerged in the world a people that recognized God, until Israel's stay in Egypt became extended and they resorted to learning their [the Egyptians'] ways and to serving constellations like them... The principle that Avraham implanted was on the brink of being uprooted, and Yaakov's

descendants almost returned to the [lowly] stature and folly of their [pagan] ancestors. Out of God's love for us and His fulfillment of the oath to our patriarch Avraham, He made our teacher Moshe the greatest of all the prophets and sent him. Once our teacher Moshe prophesied and God chose Israel as His lot, He crowned them with *mitzvot* and instructed them the way to serve Him...

*Benei Yisrael's* experiences in Egypt proved that even a stable social and academic nucleus could not withstand the pressures exerted by a foreign spiritual culture. In order for the belief in God to survive in a pagan world, the nation had to be "crowned with *mitzvot*," they had to commit themselves to a system of laws and obligations that set them fundamentally apart from their ideological adversaries. Avraham's descendants could maintain their distinctive beliefs only if they followed a distinctive lifestyle. God therefore appointed a prophet – Moshe – who would bring them the system of Torah and *mitzvot*, through which *Benei Yisrael* would remain separate and distinct even while living in a gentile world, thereby ensuring the survival and perpetuation of Avraham's legacy.