

Dvar Torah  
Parshat Shemot  
by Rabbi Evan Hoffman

### **Egypt: The First Jewish Diaspora**

During Joseph's tenure as Egyptian viceroy, the Israelites were a politically protected ethnic minority living in an enclave at Goshen. After Joseph's death, the Israelites' political fortunes markedly declined. The next Pharaoh, belonging to a new dynasty, was alarmed by the Israelites' rapid demographic growth and their geographical diffusion, beyond the ethnic ghetto, to all regions of Egypt. Pharaoh said to his royal counselors: "Come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there befall us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and get them up out of the land (Exodus 1:10)." Pharaoh's "wise dealing" with the Israelites meant an ever-intensifying measure of barbarism, beginning with forced labor for the construction of storage cities and culminating in the murder of newborn boys.

On its surface, Pharaoh's comment to his counselors about the fate of the Israelites is logically flawed. If Pharaoh harbored such a visceral dislike for the Israelites then why would he consider it a negative consequence of war if the Israelites were to leave? Moreover, why would the departure of the Israelites from Egypt be contingent upon invasion of the country by a foreign army? As free residents of Egypt, the Israelites presumably had the right to move about the country and cross international frontiers at any time of their own choosing (Maharsha).

In light of these difficulties, the Talmud cites a creative re-reading of the verse (Sotah 11b). While Pharaoh actually said "they [the Israelites] will go up from the land," he really meant "we [the Egyptians] will go up from the land." Rabbi Abba bar Kahana understood the verse as an example of a person who curses (i.e., predicts a negative future occurrence about) himself but states it in reference to other people. Such oratorical trickery is employed in order not to expose oneself to harm caused by the accusatory angel.

In this view, Pharaoh saw the Israelites as a potential fifth column. Ancient Egypt frequently experienced turnover in its ruling class when a new dynasty forcibly replaced its predecessor. On occasion, Asiatic marauders would threaten Egypt. Among them were the Hyksos, who successfully conquered the Nile Delta region and held power for several centuries. It was rational on Pharaoh's part to suspect and fear that an Asiatic clan of Hebrews, without blood ties to the indigenous Egyptian population, might side with foreign invaders in a moment of armed conflict. In the wake of a victorious invasion, the Hebrews stood to regain their former influence in Egyptian governance and the opportunity to expel their aboriginal political opponents.

While the above interpretation appears in the Talmud, is quoted by Rashi, and was preferred by some of the early Sephardic commentators, it is nevertheless explicitly rejected by Scriptural purists Ibn Ezra and Rashbam as an unnecessary mangling of the verse. Their simpler rendering of the verse, in which Pharaoh worriedly predicts the exodus of the Israelites, requires us to reconsider some of our earlier premises.

While it is true that Pharaoh despised the Israelites enough to attempt to curtail their demographic growth and economic rise, he was smart enough to appreciate the economic damage that would befall Egypt if a prosperous element of the population were to leave. Rashbam noted that Pharaoh did not want Egypt to lose its workforce and thenceforth be known, embarrassingly, as a diminished kingdom. From the earliest days of Israelite settlement in Egypt, it had been understood that the Israelites were merely temporary sojourners. They were shepherds who had fled a famine-ravaged Canaan denuded of pastureland (Genesis 47:4). The Israelites' long-term intention was to return to the land of their forefathers, as repeatedly emphasized by Jacob and Joseph before their respective deaths. For sound economic reasons, though, Pharaoh preferred to make the Israelites' presence in Egypt permanent.

Regarding Pharaoh's concern that the Israelite exodus might happen, specifically, during wartime, we note that, in fact, the Israelites did not have freedom of movement. Egyptian-imposed limits on the Israelites' geographic mobility can be inferred from the story of Jacob's death. Joseph was reluctant to approach Pharaoh directly for permission to travel to Canaan to bury his father. He knew that Pharaoh would suspect Joseph and the Hebrews of trying to permanently repatriate to Canaan. Though permission was granted for the Israelite men to leave Egypt for the funeral, they were chaperoned by a heavy contingent of Egyptian officers. Moreover, the Israelites' children and animals were held back in Egypt as hostages guaranteeing the funeral party's return (Genesis 50:8). The curtailment of Israelite mobility is also apparent in the negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh over who should be allowed to attend the three-day sacrificial holiday in the wilderness (Exodus 10:11).

A literal reading of Exodus 1:10, then, is to be preferred. Rashi himself, though he quoted the Talmudic re-interpretation as a secondary possibility, initially commented *הארץ מן ועלה כרחינו על* "the Israelites will ascend from the land against our wishes."

The Pentateuch sheds light on the condition of the Jewish people in every generation. The descriptions of our ancestors' triumphs and travails foreshadow our own experience *מעשה לבנים סימן אבות*. In this spirit, both the literal and Talmudic readings of Exodus 1:10 have merit; each portends a diaspora experience.

Over the centuries, many diaspora Jewish communities have been accused of sedition, disloyalty, and treason against their host nations. Judaism itself strongly advocates a combination of political quietism and loyalty to the host country regime. This tradition dates back to the sixth century BCE. "Seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray unto the LORD for it; for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace (Jeremiah 29:7)." Yet the majority population tends to be suspicious of the inner convictions of those who are different. French Jewry experienced this discomfort during the 1894 Dreyfus trial and its protracted aftermath. Although only one man physically stood in the docket, the entire Jewish community stood accused of insufficient patriotism. German Jewry suffered a similar fate at the end of World War I. The German people were under the impression that they were winning the war, or at least holding their own in a stalemate. Germany's unanticipated surrender in November 1918, and the oppressive conditions imposed on it by the Treaty of Versailles, led many Germans to look for scapegoats. It was the Jews, they concluded, who had stabbed Germany in the back. National Socialists loudly trumpeted that theory during the Weimar years. With the

Nazi rise to power came anti-Jewish legislation of a Pharaonic sort. Like the Talmudic reading of Exodus 1:10 -- that the Israelites threatened to oust the natives from the land – the Nazis and their ideological kinsmen feared that Jewry was undermining true European civilization and supplanting it with one contaminated by Jewish influence.

Other diaspora communities faced a different problem. They were trapped by their host nation, restricted in their freedom of movement, and barred from emigrating. Sometimes these conditions were imposed because of the economic significance of the Jewish community, which often possessed unique skills in finance and trade. In other instances, the ban on emigration served the ideological agenda of the host nation. And in more recent times this phenomenon has been merely a symptom of Jew-hatred and the desire to be cruel. The Soviet Union kept Jews trapped behind the Iron Curtain for nearly half a century as a result of the combination of all three reasons. Allowing Jews to flee to the West would have meant conceding that the USSR was neither a worker's paradise nor free from bigotry. It also would have resulted in a massive brain drain with the loss of Jewish talent. The refusal of certain Arab countries (notably Syria) to allow their Jewish citizens to emigrate also exemplifies this phenomenon. It is a policy adopted primarily to indulge in the guilty pleasure of causing pain to a hated "other." These examples are consistent with a literal reading of Exodus 1:10.

The ability to correlate the story of the Israelites in the house of Egyptian bondage with the contemporary Jewish experience assists generations of Jews in finding meaning in the Exodus narrative. The commonality of Jewish experience through the centuries is best expressed in the *שעמדה והיא* paragraph of the Passover Haggadah. We raise our glass on the Seder night and remember all our tormentors who, like Pharaoh, attempted to act "wisely" and destroy us. But history proves that we have survived them all, and have flourished.