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Midrashic Tales of Jewish Survival in Egypt

Rabbi Tali Adler





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SESSION 1 Dehumanization

♦ Jewish people

Technically, the people the Torah talks about are Israelites (*Benei Yisrael*) or Hebrews (*Ivrim*). But because this is our story, one the Haggadah tells us we're supposed to relive, we can unapologetically retroject ourselves back on these texts; they are designed to teach us lessons for today. For this reason, we will not be careful to distinguish between "Jews" and "Israelites," despite the historical issues.

♦ midrash and aggadah

"Midrash" is from the Hebrew root .ש.ל.ח (to seek, explain) and refers to explanations of the Bible. "Aggadah" is from the Hebrew root .ג.א.ד (to tell) and refers to non-legal traditions in the Talmud or other works of Rabbinic literature.

♦ Shemot 1:8-14

This passage comes almost at the beginning of the book of Exodus. The last narrative in Genesis was about Joseph saving Egypt from years of famine and securing a safe place for his family to live in Egypt. Some generations have passed in this time.

COURSE INTRODUCTION

What did the Jewish people ♦ endure during their enslavement in Egypt?

While the Jewish people's enslavement is one of the most important parts of our religious experience as a people, the Torah gives us relatively few details about it. On the other hand, it does provide some clues and keywords that our Rabbis develop more thoroughly in *midrash* and *aggadah*. ♦ Take a few minutes with your *havruta* to discuss the following:

1. *What images come to mind when you think of the enslavement in Egypt? Where do those images come from?*
2. *Why does it matter what slavery in Egypt was like? Is all slavery essentially the same?*

I. TORAH TEXT

We will begin with the Torah's account. The text is incredibly terse. Our role as readers is to read carefully and slowly, trying to understand the function of each sentence in the whole, and how each stage in the narrative relates to what happens before and after. Bear this approach in mind as you read the text with your *havruta*, and then think about the questions below.

SOURCE #1 □

שמות א:ח-יד

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר
לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יֹסֵף: ⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-
עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעָצוּם
מִמֶּנּוּ: ¹⁰הִבָּה נִתְחַכְמָה לוֹ פְּנֵי-יִרְבָּה
וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסָף
גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנָאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ
וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ: ¹¹וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ עָלָיו
שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוֹ בְּסִבְלָתָם

Shemot 1:8-14 ♦

⁸A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. ⁹And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. ¹⁰Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise

◇ rise from the land

This phrase is a little unclear: why should he be upset if the Jewish people leave Egypt? Because of this, some commentaries assert that Pharaoh is actually suggesting that the Jewish people, allied with Egypt's enemies, may force the Egyptian people out of the land and occupy it in their stead.

◇ Raamses

The name of this garrison city has suggested to some that the name of this Pharaoh may have been Raamses. The Torah never gives him a name, probably in part because he is supposed to represent all Pharaohs and Egypt writ large. (The Tanakh elsewhere does name some Pharaohs). Also, there's a common misconception of the Israelites building the pyramids. The Torah never claims this because it's ridiculous—the pyramids were unimaginably ancient by the period in which this story is set. Instead, it says the Israelites built “garrison” or “store-cities.”

וַיִּבְנוּ עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת לְפָרְעֹה
אֶת־פֶּתֶם וְאֶת־רַעַמְסֵס:
וַיִּבְנֶה אֲשֶׁר יָעָנּוּ אֹתוֹ בֶּן
יִרְבֵּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּקְצוּ מִפָּנָיו
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ¹³וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ
מִצְרַיִם אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּפָרָךְ: ¹⁴וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת־
חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה
בַּחֲמֹר וּבַלֶּבֶן וּבְכָל־
עֲבֹדָה בַּשָּׂדֶה אֶת כָּל־
עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר־עָבְדוּ בָהֶם
בְּפָרָךְ:

from the land.”¹¹ So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses.¹² But the more they oppressed them, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.¹³ The Egyptians ruthlessly (*be-farekh*) imposed upon the Israelites the various labors that they made them perform.¹⁴ Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

Questions for Discussion

Verse 8:

1. *What was life for the Israelites before the new king?*
2. The story of the Jewish enslavement in Egypt begins with an odd detail: a new king arose who did not know Joseph. This verse invites us to imagine what Jewish life in Egypt was like before the enslavement, when the king did know Joseph: *were they equal citizens? How did they conceive of themselves in relation to the Egyptian population? How did Egypt remember Joseph, and how did they relate to the Jewish population as a result of that memory?*
3. *Why do you think it matters that the new king “did not know Joseph”?*
4. *How does this clue shape the way you think about Jewish life in Egypt before this new king?*

Verses 9-10: Pharaoh's speech

In these verses Pharaoh tells his people his fear about the Jewish people: they are too numerous, and because of that, they may ally themselves with the enemies of Egypt.

1. *Do you believe that Pharaoh is genuinely concerned about a danger posed by the Jewish people, or is this a pretext to force them into slavery?*
2. *Why must the Egyptians be shrewd? In what way is forcing the Jews into labor shrewd? How is forced labor supposed to help reduce the Jewish population?*

♦ **Midrash Tanhuma Shemot 5**

A medieval collection of *midrashim* on the Torah, with pre-medieval roots in Eretz Yisrael.

Verses 11-12: Population reduction

Verses 11-12 describe the first stage of the enslavement of the Jewish people: forced labor in the form of construction work. The intended population reduction, however, fails.

1. Verse 12 states that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. *Is this feeling simply a continuation of the fears Pharaoh laid out in 9-10 or somehow different?*

Verses 13-14: All tasks of the field

With the failure of their first attempt at population control, a new stage of Israelite slavery seems to begin.

1. *What other sorts of labor are the Jewish people forced to do in this stage?*
2. *What words stand out to you about the nature of the enslavement in these verses?*
3. *Is the purpose of the enslavement still population control? Bring proof from the text.*

II. FROM CITIZENS TO SLAVES

Why does it matter that the new Pharaoh did not know Joseph? Was there a lingering gratitude to Joseph in Egypt that provided some sort of protection for the Jewish people until this new Pharaoh? How did the new Pharaoh not know about this important part of Egyptian history? The *midrashim* below grapple with these questions and provide different angles on what the process of transformation from an appreciated minority group to despised and enslaved people might have looked like.

SOURCE #2 ס

מדרש תנחומא שמות ה

”וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ חָדָשׁ שָׂאֲמָרוּ לוֹ
הַמִּצְרִיִּים: בּוֹא וְנַדְּבֹג לְאַמָּה זֶה.”

אָמַר לָהֶן: שׂוֹטִים, עַד עֲבָשׂוּ אָנוּ
חַיִּים מִשְׁלָהֶם, וְהֵיכֵן נִדְּבֹג לָהֶן
עֲבָשׂוּ. אֱלֹהֵי יוֹסֵף לֹא הָיָה לָנוּ חַיִּים.

בֵּינוֹן שְׁלֹא שָׁמַע לָהֶם, הוֹרִידוּהוּ

Midrash Tanhuma Shemot 5 ♦

“Now there arose a new king”... The Egyptians cried out: “Come, let us attack this nation.”

“You fools,” he said to them, “we have survived only because of them, how dare we attack them now? Were it not for Joseph, we would not be alive.”

When he refused to carry out their

♦ **Yalkut Shimoni #163**

Another medieval collection of *midrashim*, this time from Ashkenaz, attributed to R. Shimon of Frankfurt.

מִכְסָּאוֹ שֶׁלֶשָׁה חֳדָשִׁים, עַד שֶׁאָמַר
לָהֶם: כָּל מָה שֶׁאַתֶּם עוֹשִׂין הֲרִינִי
עִמָּכֶם, וְהָעֲמִידוּהוּ.

request, they removed him from his throne for three months until he promised them: “I am with you in all you do.” Then they restored him to his throne.

לְפִיכָךְ כָּתִיב וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ חָדָשׁ.

Therefore it says “and a new king arose.”

This *midrash* places the initiative of the Jewish people’s change in status in the hands of the Egyptian people, who don’t have enough gratitude for Joseph (suggesting that previously the Egyptians had indeed shown gratitude to the Israelites). Pharaoh, an elite, initially resists the pressure to persecute the Jewish people. Pharaoh is “new” in that he newly reascends his throne once he has aligned with the Egyptian people.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why might Pharaoh have maintained a sense of gratitude to Joseph longer than the Egyptian people? How might Pharaoh and other elites have perceived Joseph’s actions differently than common Egyptians?
2. Does Pharaoh’s initial resistance absolve him in any way? From a moral standpoint, does it matter whether Pharaoh initiated the decrees against the Jews or whether he was coerced?

SOURCE #2 ס**ילקוט שמעוני קסג**

בשעה שאמר “הבה נתחכמה
לו” קבץ פרעה את כל ישראל
ואמר להם בבקשה מכם עשו
עמי היום בטובה היינו דכתיב
בפרך בפה רך. נטל סל ומגרפה
וכל מי שהיה רואה פרעה נוטל
סל ומגרפה ועושה בלבנים
היה עושה. מיד הלכו ישראל
בזריזות ועשו אומנות עמו

Yalkut Shimoni #163 ♦

At the time that he said, “Get ready, let us be clever with it,” (Exodus 1:10), Pharaoh gathered all Israel and said to them, “Please, let some of you work with me today for wages,” which is as written, “*be-farekh*—i.e. *be-feh rakh*, with a soft mouth.” He took a sack and a rake, and whoever saw Pharaoh taking a sack and a rake and working with bricks, would do [likewise].

כל היום לפי כחן לפי שהיו בעלי
 כח וגבורים כיון שהחשיך העמיד
 עליהן נוגשים ואמרו להם חשבו את
 הלבנים. מיד עמדו ומנו אותם ואמר
 להם כזה אתם מעמידים לי בכל יום.

Right away Israel went with alacrity and worked at the craft all day according to their strength (for they were strong and mighty). When it got dark, overseers were set over them, and they said to them, “Count the bricks.” They right away stood and counted them, and he said to them, “Make me the same [amount] every day.”

Explanation from Rabbi Tali

What did day 1 of slavery look like? How does a population go, in one day, from free to enslaved? In this *midrash*, Pharaoh essentially tricks the Jewish people into slavery by pitching it as a paid public work project, which he volunteers for himself. When the Israelites see Pharaoh working they join the project with enthusiasm, presumably motivated, at least in part, by their patriotism. At the end of the day, Pharaoh uses force to make sure that they must continue working.

This *midrash* offers insight into the tragedy of the way that the Israelites may have been lured into slavery—or at least numb to the risk of persecution—because of their own feeling of belonging. It is their enthusiasm to join in a project that Pharaoh himself is working on that traps them. Ultimately, the *midrash* may be answering the question of how a people goes from being a tolerated and accepted minority to a persecuted people with the simple answer: all too easily, and faster than you would expect.

III. DEHUMANIZING LABOR

It is important to remember that the motivation for Jewish enslavement was not (explicitly) to provide Egypt with free labor: it was a tactic meant to help suppress Jewish population growth. The Torah itself emphasizes the ruthless nature of the slavery, especially after the initial failure in impacting the demographics.

Because of this, our Rabbis, in imagining what slavery in Egypt was like for the Jewish people, offer vivid pictures of work that is not primarily focused on productivity, but on dehumanization. The *midrashim* below emphasize the ways in which certain types of work can be designed to make people feel dehumanized, defeated, and alienated.

As you read the following texts, please discuss with your *havruta*:

1. What is it about the nature of the labor described that is particularly dehumanizing or cruel?
2. What would it be like to be subject to the sort of labor described?

SOURCE #3

ילקוט שמעוני קסג

“וימררו את חייהם בעבודה קשה” ... שהיו מחלפין מלאכת אנשים לנשים ומלאכת נשים לאנשים

Yalkut Shimoni #163

“So the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with back breaking labor (*be-farekh*)” ... for they exchanged the work of the men with that of women, and the work of the women with that of men

SOURCE #4

מדרש תנחומא ויצא ט

אמר רבי פנחס הכהן בר חמא, היו במצרים משבעים לשון, ולא היו משעבדין אלא בישראל, שנאמר: וימררו את חייהם בעבדה קשה. מהו ובכל עבדה בשדה, אלא לאחר שהיו עושין מלאכתן בטיט ובלבנים ובאין לנוח לערב לבתיהן, בא המצרי ואמר לו: צא לקט לי זרע מן הגנה, בקע לי את העץ הזה, מלא לי חבית זו מן המים. הוי, ובכל עבדה בשדה.

Midrash Tanhuma VaYitzi 9

R. Pinhas the priest, the son of Hama, said: More than seventy nations lived in Egypt, but only Israel was in servitude, as is said: “And they made their lives bitter with hard service ... in all manner of service in the field; in all their service.” What is meant by *in all manner of service in the field*? It means that after they had worked all day long with mortar and bricks, and returned home to rest in the evening, the Egyptians would come and say: “Go, gather some herbs from the field for me, chop down this tree for me, fill this barrel with water.” Hence, Scripture says: “in all manner of service in the field.”

Take a Step Back

While we know how the story of Egypt ends—with God stepping in to deliver the Jewish people from slavery—we often speak less about what the story of the Jewish people looked like during enslavement. What did it take to survive the Egyptian project of dehumanization? What inner resources and strategies did the Jewish people muster to remind themselves of their humanity and worth? What allowed them to keep going during the long gap between enslavement and freedom? In the coming sessions we will study different rabbinic responses to the mystery of Israelite survival in Egypt.