

## A Brief Note on Relevance

*Parsha Shemot* begins a new chapter in the saga of the male descendants of Rachel and Leah, the wives of Jacob and of his concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah. The narrative in the Torah opens at a time after the death of Joseph and his brothers. The newly-minted *Bene Yisrael*, the Children of Israel, are still living in Egypt where they are thriving in the ideal conditions then enjoyed in the Nile delta. The Torah explicitly describes the great boon that befell these former nomads: [they were] *fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.*"

The time spent by the Children of Israel in Egypt is colloquially referred to as the Egyptian Exile, an entirely inaccurate description. The Israelites may have initially sought refuge in Egypt, victims of a natural disaster that befell the entire region, a famine, but there were not victims of political force. The narrative memorialized in the Torah makes no suggestion that *Bene Yisrael* were prevented from returning to the lands of their inheritance, at least prior to the events described in *Parsha Shemot*. They had even returned there for Jacob's burial, but did not stay. In fact the text strongly suggests that they were content to enjoy the comforts that Egypt offered, with its abundant food and water.

The Torah describes the good fortune of the Children of Israel as coming to an abrupt end. The Pharaoh suddenly expressed a fear of this suddenly large community of foreigners that lay in his midst and he turned on them. Rather than expelling the Israelites, the Pharaoh decreed that their bodies be expropriated and pressed the men into service in his construction gangs. There they toiled year long to produce the mud bricks needed by the Pharaoh for various construction projects.

God had early on told Abraham that dire destiny awaited his descendants. Along with the promise that his descendants would be numerous and prosper, God had warned Abraham that at some time his descendants would suffer: "*know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years*". However, God promised that he would then redeem them from their slavery and lead them to the lands already promised to Abraham.

One of the earliest glosses on Israel's predicament is found in the book of the Prophet Ezekiel. There, the last of the Major Prophets testified to the first real exile suffered by the then surviving remnants of *Bene Yisrael* in 586 B.C.E., the Babylonian Exile. The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and occupied Judea. They deported a majority of the population to Babylonia where they settled between the Tigris and Euphrates. Ezekiel's lament suggests that Israel's travails were not the result of Egyptian political decisions, but came because they had strayed from the path, that had been laid for them, and began to worship foreign gods: "*But they rebelled against Me, and would not hearken unto Me; they did not every man cast away the detestable things of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt; then I said I would pour out My fury upon them, to spend My anger upon them in the midst of the land of Egypt.*"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel, 20:8.

Indeed, as an observer of the events that lead to the fall of Judea, Ezekiel may have likely preferred divine cause for Israel's fate, rather than a powerful human ruler, and would have surely reminded his audience that their destinies, like their forefathers, could too include redemption by the hand of God,

However subsequent commentators, while not eschewing the divine nature of Israel's fate, primarily adopted a far different perspective on the events that befell *Bene Yisrael* at the hands of the Pharaoh. In this framework Pharaoh becomes the archetype of the perfidious oppressor of Israel. In the *Weltanschauung* shaped by centuries of suffering and scholarship, the details of Pharaoh's turn on the Israelites was transformed into something more than a step necessary to build the narrative.

The editors of the Art Scroll Chumash have captured this viewpoint. In their opening gloss on the Parsha, they describe Pharaoh's turn on the Israelites as the beginning of "a familiar pattern of anti-Semitism", where Jews were at first welcomed with open arms and then turned on by their suddenly hostile host. While the application of the label "anti-Semitism" may be anachronistic, there is a certain dynamic exposed by the details of the Pharaoh's turn against the Israelites and, and quite hauntingly, by the language chosen to exemplify a growing hatred, including allusions to false allegiance and untrustworthiness.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of the oppression that befell the Children of Israel in Egypt was echoed in the experiences of the Jews who lingered in the Roman Exile. They too suffered expropriation and were forced to endure rigid restrictions and a host of other insults. Thus the founding story of a people remained alive and real for centuries.

### **Parsha Shemot, Shabbath December 29, 2007**

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<sup>2</sup> Parsha Shemot 1:9 "*Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us; come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there befalleth us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and get them up out of the land*"