

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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21 TEVET

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS SHEMOS

Root Cause of Antisemitism

But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were disgusted because of the people of Israel (1:12).

On the face of it, this verse seems a little hard to understand. What exactly were the Egyptians disgusted with and for what reason? Rashi (ad loc) explains that "they were disgusted with their own lives." Though Rashi explains what they were disgusted with (their own lives) he doesn't provide the reason for their disgust and their harsh reaction.

In fact, this has been an existential question that has haunted the Jewish people for two millennia: Why do so many people hate us? What did we ever do to them to incite the need to exterminate or expel us from their lands?

The answer is actually given in the verse itself. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were on a mission to eradicate the nation through excessive taxation and hard labor. Yet "the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew." In

other words, the more they did to us the more successful we became, particularly in growing as a nation. Our incredible success under the harshest conditions highlighted their own

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inadequacies as a nation. It began to dawn on them that compared to the Jewish nation they were far inferior. That is why, Rashi explains, they were disgusted with their own lives. Frankly, seeing our ascension made them feel terrible about themselves.

Unfortunately, this has been repeated throughout history. The Germans, soundly defeated after World War I, were both embarrassed and



impoverished. This became a breeding ground for the most virulent anti-semitism because they needed to feel that they weren't at fault; rather it was the fault of the Jews who controlled everything and were a malevolent subhuman life form. Therefore, the Jews should be exterminated.

If one travels through Poland and Ukraine it will become readily apparent how miserable the populace is and why anti-semitism is "mother's milk" in these countries. The root cause of anti-semitism is a host country's deep dissatisfaction with their own lives; particularly as it is contrasted by the success of the Jews. Obviously their ready solution to feeling better about themselves is to eliminate those that highlight their inadequacies.

Did You Know...

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 32:5), quoting a verse in this week's *parsha*, credits the redemption from Egypt to (among other things) the fact that the Jews never changed their language. Interestingly, the way the Midrash proves it seems to be a matter of identity as much as actual spoken language. Perhaps this is an appropriate time to examine "Yiddish" (literally –

"Jewish"), albeit briefly, which seems to be the modern equivalent. Generally, wherever Jews settled they would learn the local language, which they would then adapt to daily Jewish life. They did this by incorporating the vocabulary needed for religious purposes and other cultural references. In the case of Yiddish, it emerged when Jewish communities were established in the Rhineland during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Speakers of Judeo-French and Judeo-Romance languages

began to acquire varieties of Middle High German. This would explain both the heavy influence of German vocabulary and the French syntax found in Yiddish. The earliest written example of Yiddish is from the Worms Machzor dated to 1272. At the time of the Holocaust, eleven million Jews spoke Yiddish and 85% of the Jews killed spoke Yiddish (HY'D). Today it is estimated that about three million speak Yiddish.

A Deafening Silence

The Talmud (*Sotah* 11a) tells us that Pharaoh had three advisers: Yisro, Iyov, and Bilaam. When Pharaoh was deciding how to approach his “Jewish Problem” he sought the opinion of each of his three advisers.

Bilaam, the grandson of Lavan (according to some opinions he actually was Lavan), was an evil man and relished the prospect of eradicating the Jewish people. It was he who advised Pharaoh to enslave the people, destroy their identity, and later to kill the male babies.

Iyov was a righteous man who was opposed to any plan to destroy the Jewish nation. Yet, rather than display his true feelings on the issue, he refrained from offering any opinion. Perhaps he knew that his objections would be met with resistance. He most likely rationalized that he could do more to help the plight of the Jewish people at a later date by remaining in his position as advisor. As a result, he decided not to oppose or accept Bilaam's proposal, but remained silent.

Yisro, on the other hand, objected to Pharaoh's characterization of the Jews as a “problem” and rejected the idea of exterminating the Jewish people. Yisro's

protests angered Pharaoh and Yisro had to flee Egypt in order to save his life.

The Talmud continues by telling us that each of the three advisers was rewarded or punished according to his deed. Bilaam, who encouraged the execution of thousands of innocent Jews, was killed by the very people he sought to exterminate. Iyov, who remained silent in the face of Jewish oppression, was afflicted with a life of tremendous emotional pain (first he slowly lost all his possessions and then his children died) and physical suffering (his body became covered in boils to the point he wouldn't leave his house). Yisro, who fled because of his opposition, sacrificing his position of leadership and life of comfort and wealth in Egypt, eventually became the father-in-law of Moshe and his descendants became prominent judicial leaders of the Children of Israel.

We know that a very basic tenet of Judaism is that God repays a person measure for measure. Therefore, we can clearly understand the reward and punishment of Yisro and Bilaam. However, why was Iyov's punishment so severe? Iyov did not support the decree of persecution against the Jewish people. Iyov's only sin was remaining silent. Why then did he have to suffer

such a harsh life, one where tragedy followed tragedy?

The reason that Iyov's suffering is clearly more severe than even Bilaam's punishment is because his reaction was the unwitting cause to the Jewish nation's suffering in Egypt. How? In every generation there are madmen who have no qualms about the murder of entire civilizations to achieve their warped goals. What keeps them in check? Mainstream society saying this is not okay, that the ends do not justify the means. Society saying that they will not tolerate such behavior is what causes these sociopaths to retreat to the shadows.

Much like the way Hitler (*yemach shemo*) came to absolute power when his many years of vitriolic propaganda was embraced by the German society, Pharaoh realized that if Iyov wouldn't even stand against the destruction of the Jews than it was an acceptable plan. The real responsibility for the creation of evil isn't by the madmen who conceive it, the responsibility lies with the society that accepts it as viable approach. Iyov's silence was the precursor to every society that is silent in the face of unspeakable evil. That was why he was punished so severely.

The twentieth of Teves is the 815th anniversary of the death of one of the greatest luminaries of the Jewish people – Maimonides – Hanasher Hagadol Moshe Ben Maimon ZTL. Rambam's profound effect on the scholarship of the Jewish people continues to grow with every succeeding generation. Yet much of his life was devoted to being a physician to Jews and non-Jews alike. He was a vocal proponent of healthy eating and lifestyle. In his memory we leave you with the following statistic: If we had the same mortality rate now as in 1900, more than half the people in the world today would not be alive.

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