

Parashat Shemot 5772, 2012:

The Origin of Anti-Semitism

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Sefer Shemot is preeminently the story of our ancestors' 210 years of suffering and servitude in Egypt, followed by the wonders and miracles of the Exodus. The ultimate purpose, the *tachlit*, of the departure from Egypt was the acceptance of Hashem's holy Torah on Mt. Sinai. When we surrendered our hearts and minds to *HaKodesh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) through the immortal words of "*naaseh v'nishmah* ("we will do and we will understand"), the purpose of Creation was finally realized. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 1903-1993) Unfortunately, however, a very different and dark theme is introduced in our *sefer* and *parasha* as well, one that has been continuously "perfected" by our enemies until our own historical moment, namely, anti-Semitism.

Sefer Bereishit is primarily the story of the grand and glorious family of Avraham and his descendents Yitzhak, Yaakov, and Yosef. *Sefer Shemot*, in clear and straightforward contrast, is the story of Am Yisrael, the Jewish People. It is noteworthy to mention that we were not the first to recognize this transition. Instead, someone with the title Pharaoh, whose precise identity remains lost in the shifting sands of time, called us by this appellation. Thus we read in *Sefer Shemot* 1:9: "*Vayomer el amo, henah am bnai Yisrael rav v'atzum memenu*" ("And he [Pharaoh] said to his people: 'Behold the Jewish nation is greater [in number] and more powerful than we are"). This *ammimut* (quality of being

a singular people), under the Divine Providence of Hashem, has forged our collective consciousness and facilitated our survival until today. Ironically, it is this selfsame *ammimut* that has almost always been part of the calumny foisted upon us by our enemies. Two examples will suffice: Bilam's description of our people in Parashat Balak: "...*hen am l'vadad yishkon u'b'goim lo yitchashave*" ("...for they are a nation that dwells apart and they are not to be counted amongst the other peoples," (*Sefer Bamidbar* 23:9) finds its counterpart in Haman's defamation of the Jewish people in *Sefer Megilat Esther* 3:8: "*Vayomer Haman l'melech Ahashverous yeshno am echad m'fuzar u'mefurod bain haamim bchol medinot malchutecha...*" ("And Haman said to King Ahashverous: 'There is one [indivisible] nation that is spread about and distributed throughout the other nations in all of the lands of your kingdom...") Our singularity, uniqueness, and continued existence against all the normative laws of history have caused us to be perceived as "the other," "the stranger," and "the alien." This marginalization has been a dangerous tool in our enemies' relentless attempts to annihilate us.

It is arguably the case that Pharaoh's words in *Sefer Shemot* 1:8-10, contain the major themes of anti-Semitism for all time to come:

And a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef. And he [Pharaoh] said to his people: "Behold the Jewish nation is greater [in number] and more powerful than we are. Let us deal wisely with him, lest he will become greater; and it will [perhaps] come to pass that if there is a war that he will join with our enemy and go to war against us and we will be driven out of the land."

Verse eight may be best described as Pharaoh's "denial of Jewish contribution to society." Whether we follow Rav's opinion that he was, in fact, a new king, or Shmuel's view that he *acted* like a new king (*Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 11a), one thing is very clear: It is close to impossible to imagine that there could have been anyone on any level of

authority who was unaware that Yosef had saved Egypt, and the entire world, from starvation. At the very least, one would have expected some modicum of gratitude from the Egyptian hierarchy. Yet, this Pharaoh denied Yosef's life-saving role and legacy in preventing worldwide starvation. History demonstrates that one of the first things that anti-Semites do when attempting to create their power-base is to follow Pharaoh's heinous example. Thus, anti-Semites consistently repudiate the multifaceted and nearly innumerable contributions that we have given to the world.

Verse nine may be described as "the big lie." Even given the Midrash's statement on verse seven that "it was common practice for the Jewish women to give birth to sextuplets" (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 1:8), it simply is unlikely that our population had exceeded the native population of Egypt in such a relatively short time. Then, too, how could we have become "more powerful" than the ruling authorities in this slave-based society? This, too, regardless of whatever questionable influence we may have had, seems more than highly unlikely. Anti-Semitism, however, is not based upon facts. As a result, we are all too familiar with both past and present anti-Semitic canards that we "control the media" and that we, through a secret cabal, are "the hidden power behind the world's governments." Not too surprisingly, the famous anti-Semitic forgery that popularized these hackneyed themes, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, continues to be a worldwide best seller in the lands of our adversaries.

Verse ten may best be described as "the preemptive strike against the stranger among us." Pharaoh had meticulously set the stage for this by denying Yosef's and our ancestors' contributions to Egyptian society, and by fomenting irrational fear against us. He

continued this theme of fear and loathing by suggesting that we were a “fifth column” and incapable of being trusted. We were, in Pharaoh’s twisted and devious mind, simply waiting for the opportunity to act treasonously against our unsuspecting Egyptian hosts. Clearly, his was a meticulously planned anti-Jewish campaign. With the Egyptian people aligned with him in his nefarious purpose, he was prepared to punish us for our purported disloyalty. His calumnious message was simple, direct, and potentially devastating: “It is time to set the record straight and break the yoke of Jewish world domination.” Unfortunately, Pharaoh was far too good a teacher, and we suffer from his baseless teachings until today.

With Hashem’s help, may we witness *biat haMashiach* (the coming of Mashiach) soon and in our days. Then, and only then, will anti-Semitism cease and the entire world join us in proclaiming the prophet Zechariah’s words (14:9): “*V’hayah Hashem l’melech al kol haaretz, bayom hahu yiheyeh Hashem echad u’shmo ehad*” (“And it will be that Hashem will be recognized as the King over the entire world, on that day Hashem will be one and His name one.”) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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