

The Rodef Shalom Seder

From the Pardes Beit Midrash to your seder table: a Pardes Passover Haggadah insert.
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Why Would One Nation Oppress Another Nation?

Interpreting Conflicting Narratives in the Haggadah and Society Today

Table Topics

Read

Read the section from the Haggadah that describes Pharaoh's decision to oppress the Israelites.

Discuss

Why, in your opinion, did the Egyptians oppress the Israelites?

How might an Israelite and Egyptian spokesperson tell over the reason differently? (Ask for volunteers to play each side's spokesperson).

1a Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews. Book II, Chapter 9:1 (100 CE)

Now it happened that the Egyptians grew delicate and lazy, as to painstaking, and gave themselves up to other pleasures, and in particular to the love of gain. They also became very ill-affected towards the Hebrews, as touched with envy at their prosperity; for when they saw how the nation of the Israelites flourished, and were become eminent already in plenty of wealth, which they had acquired by their virtue and natural love of labor, they thought their increase was to their own detriment. And having, in length of time, forgotten the benefits they had received from Joseph, particularly the crown being now come into another family, they became very abusive to the Israelites, and contrived many ways of afflicting them.

1b Jubilees, Chapter 46 (200 BCE)

Makamaron, the king of Canaan, was dwelling in the land of Asshur, he fought in the valley with the king of Egypt. And he killed him there. And he pursued after the Egyptians as far as the gates of Ermon. And he was unable to enter because another new king ruled Egypt and he was stronger than he. And he returned to the land of Canaan

and the gates of Egypt were shut up and there was none who could leave or enter

Egypt...And he [the King of Egypt] conceived an evil thought against the children of Israel so that he might cause them to suffer...Come let us act wisely concerning them before they increase. And let us cause them to suffer in slavery before war comes to us, or before they battle with us, or if not (that, then) they will mix with our enemy. And they will depart from our land because their hearts and their faces are upon the land of Canaan."

...And they (the Children of Israel) built all of the walls and all of the ramparts that had fallen in the cities of Egypt. And they made them slaves by force.

From the Haggadah

The Egyptians treated us badly Deuteronomy 26:6

As it is said "Let us outsmart them so that they may not increase. Otherwise, in the event of war, they will join our enemies, fight against us and go up from the land." Exodus 1:10

וירעו אותנו המצרים דברים כו:

כמה שנאמר "ויקם מלך חדש על מצרים אשר לא ידע את יוסף. ויאמר אל עמו הנה עם בני ישראל רב ועצום ממנו. הבה נתחכמה לו פן ירבה והיה כי תקראנה מלחמה ונוסף גם הוא על שנאינו ונלחם בנו ועלה מן הארץ." שמות א:ח-י

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Continued

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2a Rashbam, Exodus 1:10 (1080-1160, France)

And they will fight us and leave the land: To return to their native land. It is not good for us to lose our slaves and be called “a truncated kingdom.”

3a Anchor Bible, Exodus 1:10 (W. Propp, 1999. p. 132)

“New King”: (means he) has not been king for very long. His headstrong action would exemplify the folly of youth upon attaining power...

Pharaoh’s paranoia is ludicrous, yet sinister. Demagogues often credit weak minorities with vast powers. Elsewhere, the Bible depicts the Egyptian ruling class as obsessively xenophobic. Egyptian sources attest to their tight control on immigration and emigration... We might expect the Egyptians to fear that Israel would conquer the land. But I am not sure we can or should rationalize Pharaoh’s concerns.

3b Rav Shmuel David Luzzato, Exodus 1 (Italy 19th century)

“And a new king arose” ...Pharaoh that was in the time of the Exodus from Egypt, was of the family of Ramses, and the kings from the family of Ramses annihilated two hundred years beforehand the ‘shepherd kings,’ that came from the lands of Arabia and conquered the Egyptians and ruled over them for a hundred years.... Yosef and afterwards his entire father’s house that came down to Egypt during the time of the Kingdom of the Shepherds. And the ‘Shepherd Kings’ loved them since they were all of the children of Shem and from Asia and spoke a language very similar to Hebrew...And behold, Pharaoh, in the times of Yosef, who used to love the Hebrews, settled the children of Jacob in the best part of the land in the land of Ramses, and this land...was the homestead of one family in Egypt who were called the family of Ramses. And the children of Israel took all of their inheritance or most of it, and settled it. And two hundred years later, it happened that the people of Ramses rebelled against the foreign kings from the shepherd families, and annihilated them, and ruled in their place. And since this family hated the Israelites for taking their land, and also since they were the allies of the shepherds, Pharaoh decreed upon Israel what he decreed.

2b Rashi Exodus 1:10 (1040-1105, France)

And he will go up out of the land: against our will. Our Rabbis explained that they spoke like a person who is pronouncing a curse against himself but attaches the curse to others (because he does not wish to use an ominous expression of himself), so that it is as though Scripture wrote “and we shall have to go up out of the land” and they will take possession of it.” (Sotah 11a).

Table Topics

Discuss

How might a third party rodef shalom/mediator be able to understand and retell the story in a way that would ring true for both sides?

(Ask for volunteers to play the role of rodef shalom/mediator.)

How can we attempt to better understand conflicting interpretations of conflicts in the world today?

Further Reading/Listening

<http://bit.ly/Elmad-Roth-Shemot>