Slavery, Mud and Straws

"And [the Egyptians] embittered the life [of the children and Israel, forcing them to do] the hardest works, [such as the extraction of the] mud and [the making of] the bricks …"

Exodus 1:14

PAYBACK TIME

For several decades, from the time of Yosef until the new Egyptian dynasty (the 18th?) that ruled over Egypt, Jews had a privileged life. They lived in a safe and fertile area, Goshen, and enjoyed prosperity and good health. Food was abundant for the Jews. And this material wellbeing is reflected more than once by the Tora by mentioning the exceptional high birthrate of the children of Israel.
The new Pharaoh sought to curb the power of the Jews—and their demographic growth—by imposing excessive labor taxes to impoverish and weaken them. But he did not succeed.
Then, Pharaoh went on to the second stage of his plan. Declaring the Jews officially as the public enemy, and assigning them as "the slaves of the people". Visualizing this scenario is very difficult from our comfortable residences. It can only become more real —and scary — if we think about the Shoah. The first time I read a comparison between what happened in Egypt and what happened in Europe 1939-1945 was in Elie Wiesel's book, "Job: Ou Dieu dans la tempête" (French). Following Wiesel line of thought, I imagine that at this point the houses, property and assets of the Jews were confiscated by the government and handed over to Pharaoh or the Egyptian aristocracy. Jewish men, women and children, must have been forcibly removed from their homes and taken to "ghettos" or fortifications, where they were chained, and then given to the Egyptian citizens as free labor. This little-known point, that the Jews were handed over to the common people as slaves, is mentioned among others by Rabbi Wisser, the Malbim (Russia,

1809 – 1879) who writes *"the Jews were taken as chattel slaves, but they no longer worked for the monarch [the government], but for the population in general. The Jews were now the slaves of the slaves [of Pharaoh] and were obligated to do any work that any Egyptian asked of them. "*
Our verse describes the ways the Egyptians treated their Jewish slaves.
"And the Egyptians embittered their lives with hard work." There was something personal about this mistreatment of the Jews. Animosity. Resentment. How did this happen? The new Pharaoh, a revisionist, changed the narrative and demonized Yosef and his descendants like the Nazis demonized the Jews. The Hebrews were categorized as "Persona non grata", "The enemies of the people". He surely used his propaganda to misrepresent Yosef, not as the hero who saved Egypt from famine, but as the villain who took advantage of the Egyptian famine in favor of a foreign Pharaoh (an Hikso?) and of his own family.
And something else.The Jews were prosperous. Instead of looking at the efforts Jews had made to earn their prosperity, or the sacrifices they made to save their gains, the Egyptians accused the Jews of dishonesty and abuse. This resentment was now translated into the most terrible revenge: the "rich" Jews were now absolutely vulnerable, free labor in the hands of the resentful Egyptians, who enjoyed having them beneath their feet.

THE HARDEST WORK

The jobs assigned to the Jews were, of course, the worst taasks. The most unhealthy and risky jobs, that nobody else in Egypt was willing to do. The first example mentioned in the Torah is the "homer ulbenim", mud and bricks. Apparently, of all the hard work that there was to do in Egypt, the most humiliating, exhausting and lethal was that of producing the bricks.
The bricks of Egypt were made of two materials: mud, or silt,

and straw. This way of making bricks is universal. Mud and straw bricks are still produced to this day in poor areas almost everywhere in the planet .
The Jewish slaves had to extract the mud from the Nile, which was rich in minerals. Transport it, mix it with manure, and stir it with their feet and hands for 4 or 5 days, until the mud reaches the fermentation point. Then, straw was introduced into this mud to make it stronger, more solid and durable. All this work was done in the swamps of the Nile, a river infested with crocodiles, hippos, mosquitoes, and under a scorching desert sun that burned the skin.

HAROSET

Maimonides explains that the Sages introduced the Mitsva of Haroset to represent these terrible times. The brown paste recalls the color and texture of the mud. Vinegar, the taste of bitterness. And the *tebalín*, the edible herbs or spices (cut in thin and long pieces), which Maimonides indicates that should be introduced in the Haroset, remind us of the straw. The extraction of mud and the manufacturing of bricks with straw was the hardest, most humiliating and most lethal work that Jewish slaves had to carry out, for generations. In the Seder, when we see the Haroset, the image of the cruelest slavery awakens in our collective mind, as a national memory that we can not forget…