JEWS IN EGYPT: From Prosperity to Slavery

PHASE 1: Forced labor

EXODUS 1:11 ***Then the Egyptians assigned over them taskmasters to weaken them with hard work. And the Jews built for Pharaoh the fortified cities of Pitom and Ramses.***

In the first phase of Pharaoh's "final solution", the people of Israel were not yet technically enslaved by Pharaoh. In fact, in Exodus Chapter 1:11-12, the word "slavery" or "enslavement" is not mentioned in the text. However, the text emphasizes the word "taxes". The Israelites indeed *worked* for Pharaoh, building Pitom and Ramses. But at this point, this form of forced labor was a legal and legitimate procedure. The Egyptian monarch– ironically since the time of Yosef– was the Lord and Master of all Egyptians, Jews included. Pharaoh, therefore, had the absolute right to demand from his subjects any kind of service: joining the army to defend his territories, or working on the construction projects that the sovereign deemed necessary. As we saw in Pharaoh's speech, Jews were foreigners, and were not trusted by the Egyptians; therefore they had to contribute with labor *in lieu* of, for example, serving in the Egyptian army. In this first phase, the work of the Jews consisted in building the cities of Pitom and Ramses, which according to the most accepted interpretation, were fortifications for military use- garrison cities. These fortifications were not built with common mud-bricks as houses or temples were, rather they were built with carved stones. We could asume that Jews worked in the quarries extracting the rocks, carving them, carrying the heavy stones, and mounting them on top of each-other.

We also need to keep in mind that, although taxing the Jews was seemingly a completely legal act, the true ultimate

purpose behind this forced labor was not the building of the garrison cities. When Pharaoh delivered his infamous speech (Exodus 1: 9-10) warning his people about the threat that Jews represented to Egypt due to their increasing growth and wealth, he proposed a strategic plan to outsmart (□□□ □□ □□□□□□) and weaken the Jews both physically and financially. Forcing them to work in construction and abandon their own jobs; as well as forcing them to sleep in the fields far from home, would do the job. In this sophisticated, non-violent way, the power and the birth-rate of the Jews would be significantly reduced.

However, as the Tora explicitly says in the following verse, Pharaoh's plan did not produce the expected results.

EXODUS 1:12. But the more they oppressed [the Jews] the more the Jews multiplied and grew. And the Egyptians felt threatened by the children of Israel.

Pharaoh's plan failed. The people of Israel did not become weaker, rather they grew stronger, and continued to reproduce. It is at this point that Pharaoh decides to start Phase 2 of his plan: **slavery.**

EXODUS 1:13 And then the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with chattel* (parekh)*.

PHASE 2: Chattel Slavery

Here for the first time our text mentions "enslavement", *vaya'abidu,* redefined with a crucial word: "parekh", meaning "chattel slavery". That is, unconditional and indefinite submission of the slave to the master.

To better understand this phase let us remember that in the first phase, "forced labor", Jews had to fulfill an assigned mission: building Pharaoh's projects. I believe that at this point Jews did not necessarily have to work directly for Pharaoh. Surely, they had to pay for the building material,

but perhaps they were allowed to hire workers to do these constructions for them. And more importantly, once the building project was finished, they could return to their lives and routine.

However, in the second stage, "parekh" the Israelites were not assigned a specific job. We see that the Egyptians were *intimidated by the* Jews, therefore it would not have been difficult for Pharaoh to declare them as "the enemies" of Egypt. Jews were probably captured and taken as war prisoners –probably chained– and forced to work endlessly for the Egyptians- 24 hours a day. They were now at the complete mercy of their masters, who controlled their lives.

Visualizing this scenario is very difficult to do in our comfortable lives nowadays. I was only able to think more realistically about this by remembering what I know from the Shoah. The first time I read a comparison between Egyptian slavery and the Holocaust was in Elie Wiesel's book, *"Job: Ou Dieu dans la tempête"* (French). Following Wiesels line of thought, I imagine that at this second phase; the houses, property and assets of the Jews were confiscated by the government, and handed over to Pharaoh or to the common Egyptian man. Jewish men, women and children, must have been forcibly captured and removed from their homes and taken into "ghettos" or fortifications. Similar to the European Jews in 1940. But instead of being taken into labor camps, many of them were probably given over to the Egyptian civilians as free laborers. This fact- not very well known- that the Jews were handed over to the Egyptians, was mentioned by Rabbi Wisser, the Malbim (Russia, 1809 – 1879). He explains the word "Egypt", Mitzrayim, mentioned in this verse: *"And the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel."* In other words, similar to how Daniel Goldhagen describers in his book "**Hitler's Willing Executioners"**, ordinary Egyptian civilians were accomplices of Pharaoh's regime. The Malbim writes: *" Jews were taken as chattel slaves, but they no longer worked*

for the monarch [the government], but for the population in general. The Israelites were now the slaves of the slaves [of Pharaoh] and were obligated to do any work that any Egyptian asked of them".

Exodus 1:14: *"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 …*

This verse describes the special and brutal way which the Egyptians treated their Jewish slaves. The biblical text mentions here the word *vayimareru*, "*and they embittered their lives*". From this Hebrew word comes the word "maror" the bitter herbs that we eat the night of the Pesach Seder to remember the bitterness of Egyptian slavery. But what was the source of this animosity? A Master usually takes care of his or her slave. For the sake of comparison, think about the African slaves taken into America in the 18th and 19th centuries. These slaves were traded at a high price. The masters, indeed, exploited them in the cotton or tobacco plantations but they also took care of them. This was not done out of compassion for the slaves, rather out of the master's convenience. Taking care of the slaves was similar to taking care of one's assets . In some sense, the masters treated these slaves as well as they treated their animals.

But our text describes bitterness… there seem to be something *personal* about this mistreatment. One possible explanation is this: For several decades, from the time of Yosef until the new Egyptian dynasty that ruled over Egypt, Jews had a privileged life. They lived in a safe and fertile area, Goshen, where they enjoyed wealth and prosperity. And it is very possible that many wealthy Hebrews had Egyptian servants working for them! And remember that Pharaoh's speech included the accusation that Jews gained their wealth from exploiting ordinary Egyptians! Now, Pharaoh is gifting the common Egyptians with Jewish slaves, their wealthy former masters.

The resentment is now unleashed into the most terrible revenge: the “rich” Jews were now absolutely vulnerable, free laborers beneath their feet of resentful Egyptians.

THE HARDEST JOBS

The enslavement of the Jews in Egypt was not the classic type of slavery in which the master buys and sells slaves in the market. Jews were treated like enemies, and potential traitors who would be willing to join the enemy in the event of a war. The Egyptians must have felt therefore that their job was not only to take revenge. Jews, ultimately, had to be eliminated. How could they do that? Our text briefly mentions that the Egyptians assigned the Jews to the most unhealthy and risky jobs. Tasks that nobody else in Egypt was willing to do. The example mentioned in the Tora is “chomer ulbenim”, mud and bricks. Probably the most exhausting and lethal job in Egypt. These mud-bricks were made by mixing the mud with the Nile’s silt, and perhaps with manure, stirring it with their hands and feet for 4 or 5 days, until the it reaches the point of fermentation. Then, the straw is mixed into this mud to make the bricks 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.

Maimonides explains that the Sages introduced the Mitsva of Charoset to bring to memory these terrible times. The brown paste recalls the color and texture of the mud. The vinegar the bitterness or tears. And the *tebalin*, edible herbs or spices , cut in thin and long pieces, which were part of Maimonides’ Charoset recipe, remind us visually of the straw mixed in the mud, a national memory of a slavery that we can not forget.

GENOCIDE

Understanding the nature of what the Charoset represents (the

mud-bricks) is key to comprehend the ultimate goal of our slavery in Egypt. Same as in the Europe of the Shoah, in Egypt, we were treated as enemies. A Jewish life in Egypt, like in Europe, had no value. Not even labor value. Jewish slavery in Egypt can only be understood when thinking about concentration camps. Those who were not killed upon arrival had to work endlessly. In those camps there were no infirmaries to care of the sick or wounded laborers. If they got sick they were executed, or left to die. And were then replaced by the next prisoner. In Egypt and in Germany, there was an endless supply of Jewish workers. Jews were absolutely disposable.

The prisoners were “used” as free laborers until they died of hunger, disease or exhaustion. Jewish prisoners were deliberately subjected to the most dangerous and unhealthy jobs, such as the extraction of slit from the Nile or coal from the Mauthausen mines. Because for Germans as well as for Egyptians, the aim was not the product of the Jew’s labor. The ultimate goal was the final solution. This type of labor with purpose to kill has a unique name in Hebrew: “abodat parekh”, and it has a unique name in German: *Vernichtung durch Arbeit*, “extermination through work”, an expression that to the best of my knowledge, was used exclusively to describe the practice of the Nazi’s in concentration camps, killing the Jewish prisoners by means of forced labor.



In this image you can on the left side a picture of mud mixed with straw, used for mud-bricks, and on the right side a picture of the Charoset I made following Maimonides recipe to visually represent our slavery in Egypt (I used Rosemary’s leaves).