ANTISEMITISM: Jews, a Separated and Powerful People

Yesterday we began to analyze the origins of anti-Semitism in this week's Parasha (see this). We mentioned that the people of Israel were prolific and enjoyed an economic well-being. The Jews had not committed any act of treason or anything to deserving Pharaoh's hatred. According to what the text of the Tora (peshat) tells us the causes of Pharaoh's antagonism had to do with a new political situation, an opposition to the previous government, which was friendly with the Jews.
We will now discuss the way in which this type of antagonism became a form of a verbal anti-Semitism, that is, the malicious and false accusations against the Jews .

Pharaoh, as explained yesterday, first ignored the contributions of Yosef to the welfare of Egypt.

Now, Pharaoh begins his speech (Shemot 1:9):
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In this pasuq the Tora subtly records the first two accusations of Pharaoh towards Israel.

FIRST ACCUSATION "A people within a people"
"Pharaoh said to 'his' people: Behold, a 'people', the children of Israel….". Almost four long generations had passed since the time the children of Israel came to Egypt (Levi, Qehat, 'amram). And Ya'aqob's family has not assimilated into the Egyptian culture and society. The Jews remained as a united people. What was the strategy to avoid assimilation into the powerful and attractive Egyptian society?

There are many elements mentioned on this matter, either by the Tora or by the Sages. We will mention just four illustrations.

1. □□□□ □□□□ In Parashat Vayggash we see how Yosef insists that his brothers should introduce themselves to Pharaoh as what they are: shepherds. Shepherding was a taboo profession for Egyptians. The children and grandchildren of Ya'aqob, with the consent and blessing of the previous Pharaoh, reside then in a separate land, Goshen, where they could graze their cattle without offending the sensibilities of the Egyptians. This also avoided social and religious assimilation with the general society.

2. □□□ □□□□□ □□□: The first thing this week's Parasha tells us is that the children and grandchildren of Ya'aqob did not come to Egypt as single bachelors. The Tora specifies that they came with their wives. In this way they avoided marrying Egyptian women, which would have been the first step into total assimilation.

3. □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□. Our Sages say that Ya'aqob sent one of his sons, Yehuda, before his family arrive to Egypt, to establish bate midrashot, Jewish educational institutions. Jewish education has always been seen by our Hakhamim as the number one element to avoid assimilation.

4. … □□□□□ □□ □□□□ □□ The Israelites kept their Jewish clothing, their language and their Hebrew names. These three elements were also critical for staying together and avoid assimilation into Egyptian society.

Now, in his effort to hurt the Jewish people, Pharaoh maliciously "denounced" Jewish unity as Jewish treachery. "They are a people apart > they will betray us". Said Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the first, but it was certainly not the last, to use the argument that the Jews "are a people within a people"

in order to generate antagonism against the Jews .

We can also see, from the point of view of Israel, for the first time, the double challenge of staying as Jews in a gentile society, doing our utmost for avoiding assimilation, while being exposed for that same reason to the possibility that the tyrant in power would use our Jewishness as an excuse to accuse and persecute us.

SECOND ACCUSATION: “They stole our money”.
□□□□ □□□□□ □□ “they are many, and very powerful, from us.”
The second charge, completely fabricated, is that Jews were rich and powerful “from us”, in other words, because they have taken “our” money. Pharaoh accused the Jews of having taken away the Egyptians’ money. The Jews were probably prosperous, but nothing indicates that it was because they stole Egyptian money. In fact, as we know, Yosef saved Egypt from ruin and starvation. Thanks to Yosef Egypt was a superpower.

At no time Pharaoh refers to the Jews prosperous situation or to Yosef extraordinary management abilities in a positive way, saying as the Chinese say today about the Jews: “Look at the Jews and learn from them how to succeed. The Jews give priority to studying. They are hard workers. They are never lazy. They don’t spend money unnecessarily. They believe in saving for the future. “. Everything Pharaoh said was: “The Jews are rich because they took our money”. Sounds familiar?

This accusation was repeated thousands of times in the history of the Jewish people while in exile. One example: Martin Luther (1483-1546): “The Jews … became rich by our sweat and blood, and we get poorer by this exploitation.”

Of course all these anti-Semitic arguments collapse when one notes that 41% of Nobel laureates in economics are Jewish (while Jews constitute less than 0.02% of the world population). Or when you see the commercial success of Israel,

“the Jew among the nations,” which does prosper by its own sweat and its entrepreneurial capacity (see Startup Nation).

In our Parasha we find the first signs of the anti-Semitic propaganda, which unfortunately will be repeated again and again throughout our exile among the nations.