

DEBAR TORAH by RABBI ROHDE

A Uniformly-Cultured Empire's Subjugation

The saga of the beginnings of Israelite oppression and slavery in Egypt has a number of elements which seem puzzling, requiring elucidation. For example, we learned at the end of Genesis that the Egyptian populace was content to be enslaved or at least accepted heavy levies or tribute (considered a form of enslavement) placed upon them by Pharaoh, in exchange for governmental support for their needs during a time of famine. This heavy tax or tribute seems to have continued long past the years of famine: The narrator of Genesis states that Pharaoh was given a fifth of the produce as a regular levy "unto this day." Thus, in some sense we should say that all non-priestly Egyptians were enslaved, should we not? Did the Israelites pay this levy as well, or had their separate territory of Goshen been exempted from the levy as had been the land of the Egyptian priests? We certainly don't hear of the Egyptians complaining about their tribute-burden: Had that levy been lifted by the new regime? Also, any Israelite departure from the land of Goshen is also not made clear: Genesis seems to imply the Israelites lived in Goshen apart from the Egyptians, but at the beginning of Exodus we seem to find the Israelites living among other Egyptians. Did this happen afterwards, through Israel's enslavement, or had Israel dispersed themselves earlier? There are later contradictory statements: For example, we are told that Israel had to disperse itself throughout Egypt to cut straw for their brickmaking, and yet, when some plagues come (like hail), we are told that it was specifically the land of Goshen which was exempted. On the other hand, the Plague of the First Born seems to affect all of Egypt, and to have "passed over" Israelite homes intermixed among their Egyptian neighbors.

Egyptian apprehensions about the Israelites also require explanation: Why do the Egyptians fear Israel's departure from Egypt? Indeed, in the end it is Egyptian enslavement and persecution of Israel which brings about the very result which the new Pharaoh fears: It leads precisely to Israelite departure from Egypt and becoming a neighbor on Egypt's border, often at odds with Egypt! Pharaoh and the Egyptians fear Israel's population growth, but did they just fill the land of Goshen, or did they proliferate throughout Egypt, as well?

I've been pondering these questions in the context of our Jeremiah class, pondering Jeremiah's diatribes against returning to Egypt, which also seem to relate to the Torah's prohibition of returning to Egypt. Jeremiah favors asking for favor from Babylonia, the destroyer of Jerusalem and the Temple, over Egypt. He says that from Babylonia it is possible to return and revive, but from Egypt it is well-nigh impossible to return.

In Babylonia Jews were able to thrive as a separate people. Babylon and Mesopotamia were a mix of different peoples and differently-named empires with different languages. The Neo-Babylonian Empire was quite short-lived. It had succeeded an Assyrian Empire and was succeeded by and partially contemporaneous with a Median/Persian Empire. The Two Egypts, on the other hand, had succeeded in merging into a unified political and cultural entity for eons which saw itself as quite distinct from its neighbors. We already saw that Egyptians felt it "abominable" to break bread with Hebrews or other foreigners. The Egyptians seem to have been xenophobic towards the Israelites even though their suspicions of them don't seem to have made sense. Egyptians ultimately only really cared only about Egypt alone and their self-sufficient Nile-based realm. It seems that the Egyptians after the Famine insisted on regaining their freedoms, especially under this new Pharaoh, as part of their national superior dignity. But anyone non-Egyptian had to be subjugated to Egyptian superiority, even if that subjugation didn't make much sense. Egypt eventually Egyptianized whoever came to it from outside, either by conquest or assimilation. It is true that Egypt later became part of Greco-Roman culture and later Arabic culture, but only by those cultures permeating Egypt.

It is worth considering the pressures associated with large uniform cultures which have horizons narrowed and limited to their short-sighted purview. They can entice foreigners from outside that purview towards assimilation, on the one hand, and at other times, when that doesn't eliminate the foreign, they can force a subjugation, sometimes largely due to an insistence that they must be acknowledged as superior. Return and liberation from such an environment requires nothing short of the miraculous.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Shemoth

January 5-6, 2024 | 25 Tebet, 5784

SCHEDULE

Kaplan: p. 258 | Haftarah: p. 1212

Hertz: p. 205 | Haftarah: p. 229

Evening Services | 4:30 pm

Candle Lighting | 4:25 pm

Friday Night Lights | Following Services | Main Sanctuary | *5784 Season of Friday Night Lights is sponsored by the Julis-Rabinowitz family*

Community Dinner with Magevet | Following Friday Night Lights | *for registered guests* | Levy Auditorium

Zemirot | 8:15 am / **Shahrit** | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Morning Talk | At Morning Services | Rabbi Soloveichik

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Youth Groups | 10:00 am | Elias Room

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Kiddush | following services | *Sponsored by Dr. Manuel Vazquez-Senior, in memory of his father, Angel Vasquez*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 3:35 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik | Main Sanctuary

Teen Class | 3:35 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman | Elias Room

Evening Services | 4:20 pm

Habdala | 5:10 pm

Rosh Hodesh Shebat begins on Wednesday night.

Weekday Service Times

Sunday Morning: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday Mornings: 7:05 am

Sunday-Thursday Evenings (Arbit Only): 6:30 pm

THIS SHABBAT

Friday Night: **SOLD OUT!** *Community Shabbat Dinner for registered guests*

The Return of Magevet, Yale's premier Jewish acapella group
Friday Night, January 5 | after Friday Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

in partnership with BASE UWS for 20s & 30s

NEW: SPECIAL INVITATION FOR YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

After the dinner, Young Professionals are cordially invited for an *oneg* with drinks and dessert next door at BASE UWS.

Shabbat Afternoon: **Weekly Teen Class**

Shabbat Afternoons | 3:30 pm | With Baruch-Lev Kelman, Rabbinic Intern
Baruch-Lev gives a class for Teens in the Elias Room. Expect snacks and socializing — a perfect opportunity to connect with like-minded peers in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

THIS SUNDAY

Sunday Matinee with Sisterhood

FINAL FILM DISCUSSION: Sunday, January 7 | 4:00 pm | "Footnote"

All proceeds will be donated to Friends of the IDF

Individual films: \$18.00 each

Link to film is sent in advance for viewing at your leisure

Film discussion with host Emanuel Cohn will take place on Zoom

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Rochelle & Eugene Major**, upon the birth of a grandson, born to their children, Talia Berday Sacks & Sam Major.

Membership Pre-Payment Offer — *through January 15, 2024*

Members, remember that you can pre-pay your July 2024-June 2025 dues now at this membership year's rates. **Note: You must be logged into your Shulcloud account in order to pay your dues.** Refer to our emails for the link.

Volunteer for a Shearith Israel CSS (Community Security Service) team

Entry Point training | Virtual one-hour training session

Tuesday evening, February 6 | 8:30 pm

Refer to our emails for the link and signup details.

COMING UP

For details & registration, go to shearithisrael.org

Grandparents, parents, and kids are invited to bond at

Parent-Child Learning

Next session with Baruch-Lev Kelman: **Sat. night, January 13 | 6:00 pm**

Please register so we'll be sure to have enough snacks!

The Shearith Israel League is a proud co-sponsor of

Bendichas Manos: The 7th Annual New York Ladino Day

Sunday, January 21 | 2:00-4:30 pm

15 W 16th St | Hosted by the American Sephardi Federation

*Featuring: Rabbi Marc Angel, Rachel Amado Bortnick, teacher and founder of the renowned online group, Ladinokomunita, Elizabeth Graver, author of the 2023 Sephardic novel *Kantika*, Sarah Aroeste, singer/songwriter, and Susan Barocas, foodwriter*

Register at tinyurl.com/nycladino.

COMMUNITY SHABBAT DINNER

featuring **Rabbi Soloveichik**

in Conversation with Author Liel Leibovitz

Friday Evening, February 2 | after Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

Join Rabbi Soloveichik and Liel Leibovitz for a spirited discussion of Leibovitz's inspiring book, *How the Talmud Can Change Your Life: Surprisingly Modern Advice from a Very Old Book*.

SAVE THE DATE - Registration coming soon!

Tu B'Shebat Seder

Wednesday, January 24 | 7:00 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman, Rabbinic Intern

COMMUNITY SHABBAT DINNER

featuring **Rabbi Soloveichik**

in Conversation with Yosel Tiefenbrun

Friday Evening, March 8 | after Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

As our rabbi and resident Anglophile, Rabbi Soloveichik will engage a unique guest, Yosel Tiefenbrun — a Hasidic high-end tailor who has dressed royalty and movie stars — in what will surely be an informative and entertaining conversation.