

# SHABBAT AND THE EXODUS

*by Shlomo Katz*

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Martin and Michelle Swartz

on the 100<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit (on 10 Shevat) of  
Martin's great-great-grandmother  
Charlotte Kohn (Yentel bas Hillel a"h)  
née Birnbaum, of Vienna

In this week's parashah, Bnei Yisrael leave Egypt. In the Aseret Ha'dibrot in Parashat Va'etchanan (Devarim 5:15) we read, "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Hashem, your Elokim, took you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; therefore Hashem, your Elokim, has commanded you to make the Shabbat day." In what way is Shabbat a reminder of the Exodus?

R' Ehud Rakovski-Avitzedek shlita (Yerushalayim) explains: Egyptians believed that the source of all blessings was the Nile, which was in their backyard. They therefore felt that they needed no connection with an external source of blessing, i.e., with the Creator. Thus, Egypt is the antithesis of Shabbat, which testifies to the existence of a Creator.

He continues: Egyptians were involved with black magic, astrology, and other forces that conceal the identity of the only true power--Hashem. In contrast, when Moshe spoke to Pharaoh, he always referred to G-d by His "proper Name," Y-K-V-K (which we pronounce "Hashem"), not by the Name "Elokim," which refers to G-d as He is concealed in nature. [But Pharaoh replied (Shmot 5:2), "Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice to send out Israel? I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Israel!"]

Our Sages refer to Egypt as the "home of slaves." This means, R' Rakovski explains, that the Egyptians themselves were slaves--specifically, slaves to materialism. In contrast, Shabbat is the day of rest from materialism, a day of holiness. (Da'at Shabbat p.306)

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***“Not so! Let the men go. Serve Hashem, for that is what you seek!’ And he drove them out from Pharaoh’s presence.” (10:11)***

R' Aharon Hakohen z"l (1580-1656; Dubrovnik, Croatia) explains Pharaoh's statement as follows: All along, Moshe had been telling Pharaoh that Bnei Yisrael wanted to go out to the desert to serve Hashem. Tired of the plagues, Pharaoh asked Moshe (in verse 8) who would go. Moshe answered (verse 9), "With our youngsters and with our elders we shall go; with our sons and with our daughters . . ." To this Pharaoh responded (incorrectly): No! I don't believe that Hashem desires the service of those who are too young to know Him. Serve Hashem, for that is what you seek, but true service of Hashem can only be by adults. Clearly, your interest is not in serving Hashem; rather, you are plotting an escape!" This explains why Pharaoh drove Moshe and Aharon out of his presence without waiting for their answer. (Zekan Aharon)

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***“But against all of Bnei Yisrael, no dog shall whet its tongue [i.e., bark] . . .” (11:7)***

Why was it significant that no dog would bark during Makkat Bechorot / the plague of the firstborn, and why tell Pharaoh about it in advance?

R' Shimshon Chaim Nachmani z"l (Italy; 1706-1779) answers: We read in Parashat Shmot (2:14), "Moshe was frightened and he said [to himself], 'Indeed, the matter is known!'" Midrash Rabbah (cited by Rashi z"l) explains that Moshe was wondering why Bnei Yisrael deserved to be enslaved. When he saw that there were informers among Bnei Yisrael, he understood that they were enslaved because of the sin of Lashon Ha'ra.

Midrash Rabbah also teaches that our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt only because they repented. The dogs' silence during Makkat Bechorot was evidence of that repentance, explains R' Nachmani, for the Gemara (Makkot 23a) teaches that one who speaks Lashon Ha'ra deserves to be thrown to dogs. Here, the dogs were silent because they had no role to play, so-to-speak.

Why was it important for Pharaoh to know this? R' Nachmani answers: Hashem had foretold to Avraham Avinu that He would harshly judge the nation that enslaved Avraham's descendants. He also told Avraham that Jewish History would include four periods of subjugation to other nations. But, writes R' Nachmani, if Pharaoh could be made to recognize the power of Teshuvah and to himself repent, the Attribute of Justice would be unable to demand further punishment of the Egyptians. In turn, the Attribute of Justice would be unable to demand the fulfillment of the rest of the prophecy received by Avraham--i.e., that Bnei Yisrael undergo additional periods of subjugation. (Zera Shimshon)

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***“This chodesh / month shall be for you the beginning of the months . . .” (12:2)***

R' Moshe Shapiro z"l (1935-2017; Rosh Yeshiva in several Israeli yeshivot; best known for his lectures on Jewish Thought) observes: The similarity between the Hebrew words "chodesh" / "month" and "chadash" / "new" is a reflection of the Torah's view of time. Time is not primarily something that passes, but rather an opportunity to build a future, to progress toward a goal. Not coincidentally, the letters of the word "zman" / "time" form the root of the word "hazmanah," whose meanings include "to invite," "to prepare," and "to set aside for a specific purpose." The Torah teaches this lesson in connection with the Exodus because the Exodus was not meant to be an end in itself but rather a preparation for a higher purpose, as Hashem told Moshe at the beginning of his mission (Shmot 3:12), "When you take the people out of Egypt, you (plural) will serve Elokim on this mountain," i.e., receive the Torah. (Shiurei Rabbeinu: Parashat Ha'chodesh p.412)

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***"The [period of] habitation of Bnei Yisrael during which they dwelled in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years." (12:40)***

Rashi (to Shmot 6:18) notes that this should not be taken literally. How then should it be understood?

R' Aryeh Leib Zunz z"l (Poland; 1765-1833) explains: The Torah describes the Egyptians' oppression of Bnei Yisrael using the Hebrew word "Innuy." This is the same term the Torah uses to describe our self-affliction on Yom Kippur. Indeed, all five of the afflictions we impose on ourselves on that day were imposed on Bnei Yisrael by the Egyptians:

- (1)Eating (they had to eat Matzah, which is difficult to digest);
- (2)Bathing and
- (3)Applying ointments to the skin (both of these activities are mentioned in Yechezkel 16:9, which speaks of the slavery in Egypt);
- (4)Wearing shoes (they had to trample straw with their bare feet to make bricks); and
- (5)Marital relations (as mentioned in the Pesach Haggadah).

Our Sages teach that the actual enslavement of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt lasted only 86 years (of the 210 years that Bnei Yisrael were in that land). In His kindness, Hashem counted the five forms of oppression as, so-to-speak, five 86-year sentences running concurrently, for a total of 430 years of enslavement. (Kometz Ha'minchah)

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## **A Traveler's Journal**

*This week, we continue excerpting from a letter that the noted Mishnah commentator, R' Ovadiah Yarei z"l of Bartenura, Italy (approx. 1455-1515), wrote to his father and brother about his journey to Eretz Yisrael. This passage continues R' Ovadiah's description of the Jewish community and Bet Ha'knesset in*

*Palermo, Sicily.*

There are many differences between their customs and ours. They read the entire Kri'at Shema out loud, and so they do in all of Egypt and Eretz Yisrael. On Yom Ha'kippurim, the Chazzan does not stop in the middle of the prayers to recite Selichot; rather, after he finishes his prayers, he begins Selichot. They prostrate themselves in every prayer on Yom Ha'kippurim. On Tisha B'Av, they recite "Va'ya'avor" [i.e, the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy] more times than we do on Yom Ha'kippurim. . .

I was in Palermo from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of Tammuz [5]247 [1487 C.E.] until Shabbat Bereishit [5]248. When I arrived there, the community leaders asked me to give a Derashah late on Shabbat afternoon, and so I did beginning on Shabbat Rosh Chodesh Av [5]247. Hashem caused me to find favor in their eyes, and I was forced to deliver a Derashah every single Shabbat. This caused me trouble, because I came to Palermo with the intention of going to Syracuse at the far end of Sicily, because I heard that boats from Venice would stop there on their way to Beirut, near Yerushalayim. . . I missed that opportunity, and I remained here delivering Derashot . . . every single Shabbat for three hours. I spoke against informing [on other Jews to the government] and about family purity, and so on. The elders told me that many people repented from sin. As long as I was there, the informing stopped. . . For the rest of my life, I cannot hope to live among people who will love me, honor me, and elevate me as the Jews in Palermo did, for they treated me as the gentiles treat their saints. The common people said that Hashem sent me, and many people asked for a piece of my cloak as a memento. . . They tried to keep me there for an entire year, but I would not listen, because my desire was to get to Eretz Yisrael. (Darchei Tziyon)