

CLEVERNESS BACKFIRED

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Bnei Yisrael were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong...He said to his nation, "Behold, the nation, the Bnei Yisrael, are greater and stronger than us."^[2]

Before world leaders had Twitter accounts, they spoke to their court advisors, not to the general public. Why, then, does Paroh take his case to the Egyptian people as a whole? Why does he refer to the Jews as "the nation, the Bnei Yisrael?" Either one of those would have worked; using both together seems excessive. Setting the stage for Paroh's declaration, we learn that the Jews "were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong," yet Paroh refers only to the last two items – that they had become greater in number, and stronger than the Egyptians. If the first two – that they were fruitful and teemed – were also important, why did Paroh not speak about those issues as well? Chazal teach us to understand the *be-farech*^[3] with which we were lured into slavery as soft, clever, solicitous speech, rather than draconian decree. If so, how are we to understand the very next verse. "They embittered their lives with mortar and bricks...all the labors that they performed with them were *be-farech*." While a glib tongue successfully laid a trap for them, it was back-breaking work, not a soft-spoken appeal that made their lives bitter.

The key to these *pesukim* is the realization that the last two of the four descriptions of the explosive growth of the Jewish community do not refer to numbers of people, but to wisdom and understanding. Only the first two descriptions refer to population growth. Additionally, *am*/"the nation" means the common people, while "Bnei Yisrael" is reserved for the accomplished elite.

Paroh had two concerns. The common folk – *am*/the nation - were becoming more numerous than the Egyptians, while the most gifted cohort of the community swamped the Egyptians in wisdom. Moreover, even the ordinary people in the *am* produced an inordinate number of people possessed of superior intellect who were outperforming their Egyptian analogues. (Had this not been the case, Paroh would not have been so concerned with the growth rate alone.) Therefore, Paroh referred to both *am* and Bnei Yisrael, i.e. a nation expanding beyond projections, that was raising children so intellectually gifted that they put the Egyptians to shame. His consternation came from this toxic (to him) combination of the two factors.

Paroh decided to deal with the two groups of Jews separately, first focusing on the demographic issue. He turned not to his advisors, but to the ordinary Egyptians, thinking that a group of commoners more likely to understand the vulnerabilities of a group of their peers. They came up

with an ingenious solution to the Jewish problem, that could have worked, c"v, were it not for one fatal error.

The Egyptian street proposed giving the Jews a limited amount of self-rule. The key element of the proposal was that some Jews – particularly from the common folk – would rule over others. This, the Egyptians claimed, would destroy their cohesiveness, would pit one Jew against another, and would generate all sorts of foolishness from “leaders” rather than wisdom.

When we examine similar arrangements in the course of history, we understand that this proposal could indeed have destroyed the Jewish community. The Egyptians, however, fell prey to their own zeal and greed. Because they subjected everyone to horrific conditions, the plan backfired. The appointees were too busy nursing their own wounds to think of lording it over their brethren.

Had the Egyptians continued to deal with the Jews with soft cunning rather than with oppression and pain, they might have succeeded. The Torah indicates this directly: “As much as they would afflict it [the Jewish people], so it would increase, and so it would teem.”^[4] Notice the inclusion of one verb from each of the categories – raw numbers, and accomplishment. By afflicting and oppressing the Jews, however, they guaranteed that the plan would fail. The Jews continued to grow, both in accomplishment and in numbers.

So far, we've considered how the Egyptians wanted to deal with the masses of Jews. They had something else in mind for the high-achievers. Offering them a chance to rule over others was not going to work. They already were the de facto leaders of the community. The only route open to the Egyptians was to lure the accomplished class into servitude with glib talk of civic responsibility. They did just that, and then kept changing the rules, until this group – the “Bnei Yisrael” of our *pesukim* – were fully enslaved.

The upshot was the complete subjugation of the Jewish people, great and common alike. In the end, all suffered from the brutal slavery. It is in this sense that we must understand the Torah's summation: “They embittered their lives with mortar and bricks.” All groups were brought under the umbrella of harsh servitude. “All the labors that they performed with them” now were so oppressive, that they could no longer recall the time when they had initially been enticed “*be-farech*,” with soft-spoken words.

After a while, it was bitterness all around.

1. Based on Meleches Machsheves of R. Moshe Cheifetz, 1663-1711.
2. Shemos 1:7,9.
3. Shemos 1:13.
4. Shemos 1:12.