

# THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The status of the Jewish people in Egypt changed rather abruptly. For well over a century after the death of Yosef and the original family of Yaakov, the Jewish people resided in Egypt under favorable if not even idyllic conditions. They multiplied in terms of population, wealth and influence. Their success, to a certain extent, also became their undoing for the Torah tells us that they eventually became abhorrent in the eyes of the native Egyptian population.

Even though, as certain midrashim teach us (there are naturally other midrashim that are of an opposite opinion) the Jewish people, in the main, attempted to assimilate into Egyptian life, the Egyptians themselves always saw the Jews as being an alien and foreign element in their midst. The Egyptians suspected that the Jews were disloyal in their hearts to the Egyptian Empire, no matter what their public proclamations were.

This abiding suspicion and unreasonable abhorrence of the Jews, even though the Jews were the vehicle for Egyptian survival and success from the time of Yosef onwards, provided the necessary background for the fact that the new Pharaoh could almost overnight enslave the Jews. Without the built-in resentment of Jews, that apparently was second nature to Egyptian society, Pharaoh alone would have been unable to place millions of people into slavery and oppression in his own country.

The Torah makes mention of the fact that Moshe was saved from the waters of the Nile by the daughter of the Pharaoh himself. In Jewish tradition this extraordinary act of kindness enabled her to achieve immortality. The inference is that there were not many like her who would somehow pluck Jewish infants from the jaws of the crocodiles in the waters of the Nile. The population of Egypt with its long-standing enmity towards Jews was what allowed the Pharaoh to implement slavery and genocide against the Jewish inhabitants of the then Egyptian Empire.

There are certainly parallels to this condition regarding the Holocaust and the current atmosphere of anti-Semitism that pervades democratic Europe. The general population of Egypt suffered greatly from the plagues that the Lord visited upon them because of the intransigence of Pharaoh and his refusal to free the Jews. The commentators to the Chumash all raise this question of collective punishment, which on the surface may appear to be unfair and extreme.

But the core of the matter and the answer to this question lies in the previous mindset of the Egyptian population which, long before this Pharaoh rose to power, already abhorred the Jewish people and resented its presence in their midst. There is an idiom in Jewish life that states: "There is

no king without a people."

The Holocaust, though planned and perpetrated by the Nazi hierarchy, could never have reached the proportions that it did without the active and passive participation of the native populations of Europe. Of course, the Jewish slavery in Egypt was predicted and preordained by God and revealed to Abraham centuries before it occurred. Nevertheless, as Jewish thought continually emphasizes to us, this in no way absolves the perpetrators of evil from receiving just punishment for their behavior. Only time will tell what the bill for the Holocaust will amount to. But I have no doubt that this bill, like all matters of history, eventually will be paid and redressed.

Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)