PARSHAS SHEMOS - THE ORIGINS OF STATE ANTI-SEMITISM

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The Origins of State Anti-Semitism[1]

He said to his people, "The...children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we. Come, let us deal wisely with it, lest it become numerous and it may be that if a war will occur, it, too, may join our enemies, and wage war against us, and go up from the land. So the appointed taskmasters over it...

The storm clouds that form over the Jewish people at the beginning of Chumash Shemos have not dissipated in over three millennia. We find in Paroh's treatment of the Jews parallels to the methods and attitudes that would be applied to us during the centuries of our exile under the thumb of similar despots. Within the space of a few pesukim, we see treachery, cunning, avarice and ambivalence - items that would mark our bitter galus.

The first thing we notice is how contrived was the campaign against the Jews was! Paroh had no substantive complaint about Jewish conduct; if he had, he would not have to urge dealing covertly with the Jews. He could have encouraged or simply allowed the Egyptians to act on their hatred of the detested foreigners. In fact, they did not hate them, because the Jews gave them no reason to. Paroh had to incite hatred. Moreover, he had to find a pretext, and the best that he could find was that they were having too many children.

It is not hard to understand his thinking. The Parohs had subjugated the entire Egyptian populace into oppressive serfdom. It takes diabolical cleverness to keep a nation subjugated. Paroh hit upon a way to get downtrodden Egyptians to feel good about themselves. He created an under-class of people whom Egyptians could look upon with contempt, rather than look upon them themselves with self-loathing. When a population sees itself as having hit bottom, of having no options and nothing to lose, its monarch is in danger of looking at a popular insurrection or palace revolt. Giving them a scapegoat for their anger conveniently deflects their anger from royal heads.

What we see is anti-Semitism elevated to a tool of the power elite to maintain their own authority. The masses are deliberately incited from on high to find a whipping boy in a Jewish people whose real conduct was beyond reproach.

What was Paroh's plan? Did Paroh want to be rid of the Jews, or to keep them? Is the going up from the land the desired consequence of dealing wisely with the Jews? Or is departing from Egypt one of the calamitous effects of <u>not</u> dealing wisely with the Jews that Paroh is attempting to thwart? The difficulty we have in parsing the first pasuk may suggest that he meant a bit of both.

We would have had an easier time making up our minds, had the internal punctuation of the pasuk been different. If the esnachta, the pause that divides a pasuk into two distinct phrases, come after the word "numerous," we would have understood Paroh to have feared a Jewish demographic bomb. Worried about the explosive growth of this colony of foreigners in Egypt's midst, Paroh proposed severe, repressive measures. If the Jews could be made to feel uncomfortable enough, they would surely seize the first opportunity - such as provided by the all-too-common outbreaks of war - to ally themselves with Egypt's enemies, and flee her borders. Paroh would bid them a good riddance!

The Torah, however, does not make things so simple for us. The esnachta comes earlier in the verse, in a way that leaves room to see the going up from the land as something Paroh wanted to avoid, rather than encourage. He urged his subjects to deal craftily with the Jews. Failing to do that might mean that the Jews would emigrate - and that would be intolerable! The pasuk quite possibly indicates that his plan was to stave off emigration, rather than stimulate it.

We do not immediately understand why this concern loomed large on Paroh's mind. They had not yet become his chattel, his slaves? Why should their loss be of any consequence? We must conclude that the Jews had already established themselves as useful and beneficial to Egypt. If their numbers could be kept in check - manageable and reasonable - it paid for Egypt to use them for their own interests. They chafed at the idea of their becoming too numerous and visible. It is likely, then, that going up from the land did not mean leaving Egypt. Rather, it meant leaving the Jewish enclaves that contained them, and spilling out into proper Egyptian neighborhoods. The Egyptians wished to make use of the Jews from a distance - but not to have them as neighbors. Jews are good to have around - to a point.

(If this is what Paroh meant, however, the reference to war makes little sense. The Egyptians would protest the flooding of Egypt with Jewish undesirables no matter when or how that occurred! Probably, Paroh meant both. He projected upon the Jews the same loathing for the other that he encouraged the Egyptians to feel for the Jews. Since the Jews were clearly the enemy, they represented an unreliable fifth column in Egypt's midst, poised to join with any foe that would wage war against her. Should that not happen, they still needed to be dealt with, lest their growing numbers pose a "Jewish problem," a threat against the purity of Egyptian culture.)

Beyond the campaign to "educate" the Egyptians about the evils of the Jews, the first concrete step that Paroh took against them was predictable. By appointing taskmasters over them, he turned the Jews into cash cows, sources of revenue who could be made to pay for the very air they breathed. The Jews would be suffered the right to live - so long as they could be squeezed to enrich the coffers of the State.

How familiar all of this became in the course of our wandering from country to country! How little has changed since the time Hashem first introduced us to the harsh realities of Jewish history, and

gave us the tools with which to endure them.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 1:9-11