

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

UNDERSTANDING THE WORK AND WORDS OF SHEMOT

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Shemot 1:13-14

ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל

בפרך:

וימררו את חייהם

בעבדה קשה

בחמר ובלבנים

ובכל עבדה בשדה

את כל עבדתם

אשר עבדו בהם בפרך:

Mitzrayim worked (ABD) the Children of Israel

with PRKH

They embittered their lives

with ABD

with mortar and with bricks

and with all ABD in the field

eat all their ABD

that they ABD with them

with PRKH

The details of our enslavement in *Mitzrayim* are told at great length but almost complete opacity in these verses. In addition to five iterations of the verb ABD, which in its transitive form likely means enslaved, we have

- two nouns – mortar and brick;
- one location – the field;
- two adjectives – *parekh* (beginning and end) and *kashev* – middle;
- and one verb phrase – “they embittered their lives.”

I suggest that both the length and opacity are deliberate, and their combined purpose is to stimulate and encourage our imaginations. What the *mitzrim* actually made us do will change meaning over time; the goal is for us to imagine their cruelty in terms appropriate for our time, in

the same way as I argue that it is appropriate to make the standard depictions of Mosheh Rabbeinu conform to our current religious images even if they are purely anachronistic.

Seeing Mosheh in Bedouin garb distances us; seeing him in a *kippah srugab* helps us understand who he was. And if children intuitively draw him wearing a black hat instead of a kippah, we should not criticize them for their ahistoricalism, but rather seek to understand why their image of spiritual greatness is *chareidi* rather than Modern Orthodox, and make whatever changes – pedagogic or substantive – are needed to change that. For example, we should ask why they fail to immediately connect Mosheh Rabbeinu with Zionism.

The imaginative freedom we are given here is serious business, but seriousness and playfulness are not antonyms, and my argument is that pedestrian interpretations miss the point here. Of course the “work in the fields” may refer to plowing, planting, harvesting, and the rest of the first 11 prohibited categories of *melakhah* on Shabbat, and the other four ABDs may collectively include the other 28. But this is meaningful only if one accepts the medieval R. Chaim Paltiel’s suggestion that this is why Shabbat too is a reminder of the Exodus. More directly in the spirit is the *Midrash Aggadah*, which has the Egyptians ordering the Jews to bring bears and lions and tigers to them.

Talmud Sotah 11b records Rabbi Elazar’s position that the first appearance of *parekh*, rather than meaning “that breaks into pieces” is a contraction of *peh rakeh*, “soft mouth,” which means that the Egyptian slavery began by persuasion/seduction rather than with force. Rashi talks

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about money as well as words; some *midrashim* describe Par'oh himself picking up tools himself for at least the first day (likely this reads *vayaavidu mitzrayim et benei Yisroel as vayaavdu*, and translate as “And the Egyptians worked together with the Children of Israel, with soft words”) and/or that the first project was a Jewish city.

Why the poetic “embittered their lives”? Rabbeinu BeChayay among others suggest that the plural is intended to suggest that G-d’s life as well was embittered. Kabbalists follow the Zohar in suggesting that true slavery can only take place in the heart, when one sins. (I suspect that there is an implicit pun – *vayimareru*/embittered turned into *vayamru*/rebelled).

Now there must be a connection between this passage and the three prohibitions against working a slave with *parekh* in *Vayikra* 25. Rabbinic tradition there as well defines *parekh* not as physically by as mentally “breaking” labor, specifically work that is assigned solely to express the dominance of the employer over the employee. The Egyptian enslavement of the Jews as well, as Pharaoh says explicitly, had a psycho-political rather than economic

purpose. “Let us outsmart them” – which is why it began with sweet words.

So much for the pure textual readings. But the Zohar begins with an assumption, picked up by Seforno, that slavery must be deserved to be effective. There are two ways it can be deserved – for Seforno, it is retribution for the Jews’ sin, but for the *midrashim*, it was a natural and just consequence of their weaknesses.

But why was it a culpable weakness to believe the initial soft words? I can think of many explanations, several of which make me uncomfortable. My mother *aleha baShalom* was always proud of being a bat Levi, following the midrashic tradition that the tribe of Levi did not succumb to the initial blandishments (and so Aharon could leave Egypt to meet Mosheh without opposition). But why would it have been wrong to work for money, or to build one’s own housing? And why was it so easy for the Egyptians to transition them to slavery?

I welcome your answers, and hope to develop satisfying ones of my own as we follow the narrative through to Sinai. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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