

# 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*

*eit all their ABD*

*that they ABD with them*

*with PRKH*

These verses tell of our enslavement in *Mitzrayim* at great and repetitive length, but with almost complete opacity. There are five iterations of the verb ABD, or work, which in its transitive form likely means “enslaved”. We also have

1. two objects – “mortar” and “brick”;
2. one location – “the field”;
3. two adjectives – *perekh* (twice, at the beginning and end) and *kashev* – (in the middle);
4. and one verb phrase – “they embittered their lives.”

All this gives us essential no concrete detail whatsoever.

I suggest that both the length and opacity are deliberate, and their combined purpose is to stimulate and encourage our imaginations. The historical facts of what the *mitzrim* made us do would inevitably generate different reactions indifferent times and cultures. By using evaluative language

rather than specific descriptions, the Torah simulates us to imagine their cruelty in terms appropriate for our time.

Allowing each generation to fill in different details enables the meaning to remain constant.

Many schools of interpretation argue that the authors of the Eighth Amendment to Constitution used the same technique in a legal context when they banned “cruel and unusual punishment.” I have argued along the same lines that it is appropriate to have standard depictions of Mosheh Rabbeinu conform to our current religious images even when this is purely anachronistic.

Seeing Mosheh in Bedouin garb distances us; seeing him in a *kippah srugah* 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 pedestrian interpretations would miss the point. For example: The “ABD=work in the fields” may refer to plowing, planting, harvesting, and the rest of the first 11 prohibited categories of *melakhab* on Shabbat, and the other four ABDs may collectively include the other 28 categories of *melakhab*. We could produce beautiful picture books showing *mitzri* overseers forcing downtrodden Israelites to write or erase two letters. But they would not advance our understanding without an explanation of why the Shabbat categories are relevant.

Here the medieval commentator R. Chaim Paltiel reminds us that Shabbat is a reminder of the Exodus, and is (partially) intended to ensure that work does not become totalitarian. R. Paltiel's approach locates the cruelty of the Mitzriyim not in the nature of the work they imposed, but in its comprehensiveness. There was no category of ordinary labor that was not imposed on the Jews.

*Midrash Aggadab* gets more in what seems to me the spirit of this passage. The Egyptians ordered the Jews to bring bears and lions and tigers to them. The "fields" were for hunting rather than agriculture. Again, the details of the tigers and bears are arbitrary; the point is that the tasks were dangerous, and perhaps also that they have no constructive purpose. A bonus of this interpretation is that it may explain why the Plague of Arov was poetic justice.

Why the poetic assertion that "they 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).

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 sin, but for the midrashim, it was a natural and just consequence of their weaknesses.

*Talmud Sotah* 11b records Rabbi Elazar's position that the first appearance of *parekh*, rather than meaning "that breaks into pieces" as it ordinarily does, is a contraction of *peh rakeh*, "soft mouth." The Egyptian slavery began via persuasion/seduction rather than via force. Rashi suggests that the Jews were initially offered high salaries. Some *midrashim* describe Par'oh himself picking up tools for at least the first day (likely this reads *vayaavidu mitzrayim et benei Yisroel* as *vayaavdu*, and translates as "And the Egyptians worked together with the Children of Israel, with soft words") and/or that the first project was a Jewish city. All these readings seem aimed at assigning the Jews some degree of responsibility for their own victimization.

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 haShalom was always proud of being a bat Levi, following

the midrashic tradition 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 us to slavery?

I contend that 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 but 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 psychopolitical rather than economic purpose. "Let us outsmart them" – which is why it began with sweet words.

On this reading, the message of Sefer Shemot is that G-d's primary reason for hating the *mitzri* enslavement of the Jews was not His outrage at the physical outrages that were imposed on them. Maybe there weren't very many such. Rather, G-d objects to human beings seeking or having the kind of power over others that would enable them to abuse others with impunity – whether or not they ever use it to abuse.

This temptation to power, like all temptations to power, often stems from justifiable and even altruistic motives. You make bad decisions, so it would be better if I made them for you instead. It exists in religious leadership as in secular.

In all our programs, the Center for Modern Torah Leadership seeks to advance halakhic leadership that understands the dangers of this temptation. We try to develop talmidei and talmidot chakhamim who understand the importance of autonomy even or especially in a system that intended seems so centered on heteronomy. We emphasize that acceptance of G-d's right to command us is intended to prevent us from being subservient to any other human being. "Because the Children of Israel are My *avadim*' – and never *avadim* to other *avadim*". And yet we recognize that the development of a community bound by religious law requires everyone to sacrifice some measure of autonomy, both for the sake of creating community and for the sake of enabling Torah to function as law.

*A previous version of this Dvar Torah was written in 2016.*