

We who are active in organized Jewish life, value our Jewish identity and seek to transmit it to our children and to the preservation of our institutions (see Life and Legacy). We tend to respect other groups who similarly strive to preserve their culture, religion, and institutions, as long as they are not perverted for evil.

On the other hand, adherence to a group often stimulates bigotry towards or from outsiders. Our ideal is, or should be, respect and dignity for all people. We Jews know well that our species has fallen far short of that ideal for thousands of years. For guidance on how Jews should behave, we can read from our weekday *siddur*¹

One supports the poor of the gentiles as one does the poor of Israel; one visits the sick among the gentiles as one does the sick in Israel; one mourns and buries the dead of the gentiles as one does the dead of Israel; one comforts the mourners among the gentiles as one does those in Israel – for the sake of *shalom*.

The word *shalom*, usually translated “peace”, implies more than absence of violence and hostility – it implies a harmonious world of perfection. Thus, it is not enough to refrain from hatred and violence; each of us is obligated to be a *mensch*, not only within our own groups but also towards the “others” we encounter.

Elements of hatred of a group have appeared earlier in the Torah, and become more prominent in this week’s reading. Recall when Joseph had not yet revealed himself to his brothers, he had them over for lunch, where we read (p. 267, verse 32 of *Etz Hayim*) “They served him by himself, and them by themselves, for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians.” Does this not indicate the Egyptians regarded themselves as a superior race, or that they viewed the B’nai Israel as inferiors?

Today’s opening verse begins:

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם

- literally, “These are the names of the sons of Israel who **are coming** to Egypt.” Why is the verb in the present tense? Rabbi Yissocher Frand, in the name of Rabbi Mordechai Ilan, teaches the following. The Children of Israel were “coming” as guests or as travelers, not as permanent residents.

When Yosef, his brothers and their entire generation died, what happened? They multiplied, they became many, they became strong. The pasuk says “*Va’ya-tzmu b’meod, meod*” [They became very very mighty]. [See Ex. 1:7, *Etz Hayim*, p. 318]

The pasuk should actually read “*Va’ya-tzmu meod meod*.” The word ‘meod’ means very. What does B’meod mean? What is the letter ‘Beis’ [or ‘bet’] doing at the beginning of the word?

The Kli Yakar says that ‘meod’ also means money, as in, “*And you should love your G-d with all your heart and all your soul and ... u’vchol meodecha (with all your money)*” [Devarim 6:5]. Chaza”l [our sages of blessed memory] tell us that the word ‘meod’ can mean physical goods and material property.

The Kli Yakar says that “*Va’ya-tzmu b’meod*” is telling us that the second generation in Egypt became very mighty because they became very wealthy and affluent. The second generation felt that ‘they made it’ and they became part of Egyptian society. They no longer saw themselves as **baim** (now coming) to Egypt.²

So Pharaoh reacts (*Etz Hayim*, pp. 318-319, Ex. 1:9-10) “... the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies....” He spreads fear, as antiSemitic demagogues have for thousands of years, about what that rich foreign minority **may do**, not about anything they have done.

¹ *Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays*, p. 11, based on a passage from the Talmud, tractate *Gittin*

² <https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5757-shemos/> - consulted 1/4/2024

I also believe verse 7 is written from the imagined point of view of a racist Pharaoh. The Children of Israel are described as having “multiplied, and increased very greatly,”

פרו וישרצו וירבו

The first and third words of this expression echo the phrase “Paru u'r'vu” God used in blessing to “be fruitful and multiply,” first sea creatures and birds³, then Adam and Eve⁴, then Noah and his family⁵. But what about the middle word, *vayish'r'tzu*?

Vayish'r'tzu, or its root, *sheretz*, is typically associated with “swarming,” disgusting forms of life. Sforno, an important

commentator who lived in Italy in the 16th Century, tells us: “פרו וישרצו” - after the last of the original 70 migrants had died, their whole lifestyle became more like that of **creeping insects, creatures headed for destruction**.”⁶ And modern commentator Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg attributes to the word *sheretz* a “specifically reptilian quality”.⁷

Some other places at which we find *vayish'r'tzu*, or its root, *sheretz*:

Gen. 1:20 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 8): Let the waters bring forth swarms

It appears again in several *kashrut* prohibitions in Lev. 11 (*Etz Hayim*, pp. 638 – 642):

Lev. 11:10 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 638): ... all the swarming things of the water ... are an abomination to you

Lev. 11:20 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 639): All winged swarming things that walk on fours shall be an abomination to you

Lev. 11:29 – 30 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 640): The following shall be impure for you from among the things that swarm ... the mole, the mouse, and great lizards [*et al.*]

Lev. 11:41 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 642): All the things that swarm upon the earth are an abomination....

Lev. 11:43-44 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 642): You shall not draw abomination upon yourself through anything that swarms.... You shall not make yourselves impure through any swarming thing....

So by the use of *vayishritzu* in Ex. 1:7, I believe the Torah is using Pharaoh's viewpoint to imply that the B'nai Yisrael are, in his view, subhuman.

A few weeks ago was the 51st Yahrzeit of a great leader of our people, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel. In a few days, we observe the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. We should recall the great friendship of Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King and their joint work opposing racism. We should honor their memories by continuing their work.

³ Gen. 1:22 - *Etz Hayim*, p. 8

⁴ Gen. 1:28 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 10

⁵ Gen. 9:1 - *Etz Hayim*, p. 50

⁶ <https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.1.7?lang=bi&with=Sforno&lang2=en> - consulted 1/4/2024

⁷ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*, Doubleday, New York, 1996, p. 383