

Parshat Shemot 5781

Pharaoh's propaganda strategy: ויקם מלך חדש אשר לא ידע את יוסף - *"A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef"* (Shemot 1:8). The Be'er Yosef (Rav Yosef Salant, 1885-1981) asks two questions on this pasuk, based on Rashi and Onkelos. Rashi explains that the "new king" was either literally a new king, or the same king whose decrees were "renewed". Onkelos translates the pasuk as *"a new king arose over Egypt who did not uphold Yosef's decree"*. To what is Rashi referring when he describes the decrees as being "renewed"? The decrees were presumably new, not renewed. Regarding Onkelos, what was "Yosef's decree" that the new king did not uphold?

The Be'er Yosef explains that Pharaoh's objective was to subjugate, enslave and torture the Jewish people. However, the problem with his plan was the positive feelings of his nation towards Yosef's family and descendants. After all, Yosef had saved the Egyptians from starvation. Therefore, Pharaoh's first step was to uproot the laws which Yosef had established. During the years of famine, Yosef had sold food to the Egyptians. As they ran out of money and then all their possessions that they could use to purchase food, Yosef had compelled the Egyptians to sell themselves as slaves to Pharaoh. Additionally, he had forced them to uproot themselves and relocate to different parts of the land, to show that they did not own the land as all the land was owned by Pharaoh. The only people to whom this law did not apply were Bnei Yisrael who lived in Goshen. Thus, the native Egyptians had become strangers and the Jewish strangers had become natives. This was part of Yosef's plan to allow his family to settle in Goshen, undisturbed by the Egyptians.

Pharaoh now incited his nation against the children of Israel, telling the Egyptians that Yosef's intentions had been purely for his own benefit and that of his family. Pharaoh therefore "renewed" the law by making Bnei Yisrael the slaves instead of the Egyptians. The law was not new. It was renewed and reversed. The Egyptians became free and could own land, whilst Bnei Yisrael became slaves.

Based on this, the Be'er Yosef points out that we can understand the next pasuk in a more profound way. ויאמר אל עמו הנה עם בני ישראל רב ועצום ממנו - *"He (Pharaoh) said to his nation, 'look, the Israelite people are more numerous and mightier than us'".* As well as "numerous", the word רב can also mean "master". Pharaoh meant that Bnei Yisrael had been masters over the Egyptians for long enough and it was time to turn the tables.

We can now understand a curious passage in the Haggada. In the tzei u'leamad section, each word of the four pesukim recited when bringing bikkurim (Devarim 26: 5-8) is

expounded. The Haggada, based on the Sifrei, explains the phrase וירעו אתנו המצרים - *"the Egyptians were evil to us"* by quoting our pasuk regarding Pharaoh's strategy to outsmart the children of Israel. However, this pasuk does not explain how the Egyptians were evil to us, rather it describes their fears of the evil that we might do to them. The Beit HaLevi (Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, 1820-1892) says that the Haggada does not interpret וירעו אתנו המצרים to mean "the Egyptians were evil to us"; rather, he says that it means "the Egyptians made us out to be evil". They demonised us as part of their propaganda to turn Egyptian opinion against the Bnei Yisrael. This strategy has tragically been emulated by antisemitic leaders throughout history: first demonize and dehumanize the Jewish people, then strip them of property and rights, then enslave them and finally try to eradicate them. Along the same lines, the Beit HaLevi points out that one can translate Pharaoh's complaint ועצום ממנו as "their wealth and power is from us" – the Jewish people have taken away what rightfully belongs to us.

Work which has no purpose: ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרך - *"the Egyptians imposed upon the Israelites oppressive labour"* (Shemot 1:13). In order to keep the Bnei Yisrael occupied and prevent them from having time to think about Moshe's words heralding their freedom, Pharaoh decreed that the Jewish slaves would have to collect their own straw, whilst maintaining their previous quota of bricks. Why did Pharaoh not just double their quota?

The Torah describes the labour of the Jewish people as avodat perech, which can be defined as work which has no purpose and is designed just to keep the slave busy. Pharaoh understood that nothing so diminishes a person as seeing no purpose to his activity and no result in which he can take pride. He therefore had Jewish slaves build arei miskanot, which can be translated as "pitiful cities". These cities, says the Midrash, were built on the foundations of sand and toppled over after being built, only to be rebuilt again. Doubling the Israelites workload without increasing productivity fit perfectly into Pharaoh's plans.

The Gemara (Taanit 8a) relates the following parable: They asked the snake, "lions maul their victims and then eat their flesh; wolves attack their victims and then eat their flesh. But you – what benefit do you gain when you harm someone?". The snake symbolises the concept of harming others without personal gain. The Beit HaLevi explains that this is the reason Hashem chose the snake as the sign which He showed to Moshe Rabbeinu to depict the oppressive labour imposed on the Jewish people for no useful purpose.