

“Shelach lecha: Protests, media bias, false propaganda, and why the Israelites did not attempt to break out of Egypt.”

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Of the ten sidrot that comprise the current book of Bemidbar, seven of them contain accounts of dissatisfaction, complaint, or protest.

In the Sidra Naso, we have a situation where a man protests publicly – though possibly unjustly - about his wife’s infidelity. In Beha’alotcha, the Israelites protest at the lack of variety in their diet of heavenly manna, and lust after meat. In shelach lecha, they protest against God, preferring to believe the false report of the spies rather than the promise of God that He would bring them into the Promised Land. In the sidrah Korach, we have the latter’s rebellion against Moses and Aaron and his assertion of spiritual equality: ‘All the congregation is equally holy, and God accompanies them all’ (Nu. 16:3).

In the sidrah Chukkat, the Israelites complain about their lack of water and claim that God has brought them to die in the desert. In the sidrah Pinchas we have another protest – this time, justifiable – by the daughters of Tzelafchad against the unfairness of the laws of inheritance which would not allow them to inherit their father’s future inheritance in the land of Israel since, as the law then stood, land was only permitted to be passed on to male heirs.

In the Sidrah Mattot, we have the converse situation, wherein the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and one-half of Menasseh protest at having to take up their allotted inheritance in the Promised Land proper, which, they allege, would not be large enough or suited to sustain

their vast flocks, and accordingly request to be allotted an inheritance on the east side of the River Jordan.

We, Jews, have a very well-honed critical faculty, and are almost as critical of our own leaders as we are of our enemies. So perhaps we shouldn't complain or be surprised that Medinat Yisra'el and Diaspora Jewry, in turn, have so many critics!

On this subject, I recently pulled out one of my addresses from 2005 wherein I was fuming at John Humphreys, one of the BBC's most prominent interviewers.¹ It was the peak listening time of 5. 30 pm on Radio 4, when people were in their cars, many nose to tail in the rush hour, with nothing else to do but listen intently to the radio.

He was interviewing a woman who was comparing the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians in Gaza to the Nazi treatment of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. The following day another British woman was given air space to make the same complaint. She was so passionate about the Palestinian cause that she had gone to Gaza to join a human shield. This involved suicidally standing in the way of tanks to protect terrorists and enable them to snipe at the Israelis from behind that human shield. In other words, she was there to help the terrorist cause. She then had the gall, to denounce the Israeli army, in that unnatural and over-heated situation, for being heavy-handed with the poor defenceless Palestinians. With her warped logic, she claimed to 'understand' why suicide bombers were 'driven' to explode a bus of innocent people. Yet she was outraged when the Israeli army demolished a bomb-making factory which the terrorists had consciously situated amid a crowded district, with the inevitable, though regrettable, result that some uninvolved bystanders became casualties!

We live in a world wherein criticism of Israel is rife and the BBC and countless other news outlets around the globe display far greater sympathy for the plight of terrorists than for their peace-loving victims. Hence they allocate far more news time to the former's woes than to the latter's and favour the cause of those who had spent many years working underground in preparation for the destruction of a country and for unprecedented atrocities over those who had been building model communities and pursuing peaceful agricultural and other constructive endeavours.

One may wonder at the lasting effect such bias and false propaganda will engender. In the case of future generations of Hamas, it will certainly embolden them and intensify their determination to right the perceived wrongs inflicted on their people. In the case of young Israelis, it may render many dispirited and doubting the massive sacrifice involved in securing the reality of the Zionist dream.

It's a topsy-turvy world, wherein everyone is clear about their rights but not about their responsibilities; a world wherein prejudice rises like oil to the surface, particularly concerning Jews. Sadly, the barrage of criticism of Israel makes it difficult for some Jews, especially those of the ilk described by Menachem Begin as 'JWTK' ('Jews with trembling knees')² – to remain objective, let alone supportive.

But we must never underestimate the power of propaganda. Remember how easy it was for the Nazis to convince ordinary folk, reasonable neighbours, housewives, youth, doctors, nurses, artists and writers, to join the Nazi party and to absorb and justify its irrational hatred of the Jews. This enabled them to stand by without protest when synagogues were firebombed, Jews dismissed from their jobs, deprived of their rights,

dispossessed of their homes, herded into cattle trucks at gunpoint, and eventually liquidated. Reality can so easily be distorted, history rewritten, and perpetrators of evil vindicated.

PHARAOH'S PROPAGANDA MACHINE

However, the dissemination of false propaganda is not a modern phenomenon, and, according to the Torah, goes back to the Pharaoh of the exodus who employed it to his advantage. Hence,

“He said to His people: “See how more numerous and how much stronger than us are the Israelites. Come, let us outsmart them lest they become numerous, so that, if war breaks out, they may join our enemies and wage war against us, and leave the land” (Ex.1:9).

The first thing to notice is his contradictory statements. In his first sentence, he asserts that the Israelites were definitely ‘more numerous and much stronger’ than the Egyptians. However, in the next breath, he warns his people of their need to outsmart them, ‘*lest they become numerous!*’

To assess whether there was any basis for Pharaoh’s claim regarding the superior numbers and strength of the Hebrew slaves, we require to look at the situation of Egypt under the celebrated Rameses II (circa 1303-1213 BCE), widely regarded as the Pharaoh of the exodus.³

Acclaimed by historians as a military genius, he repulsed the attempted invasions by the Hittites and the Nubians, securing Egypt’s borders and restoring lands previously overrun. His record betokens a highly-trained, vast and well-armed, Egyptian army that would have

had little to fear from the enslaved Hebrews, confined to Goshen, regulated by taskmasters, with no military training or access to arms!

It might be argued, however, that the Torah's description of the phenomenal Israelite population growth fully justified Pharaoh's fears, especially through its employment of the phrase *vatimalei ha'aretz otam* : '**the land** was filled with them' (Ex. 1:7). However, although this is generally understood as referring to the entire land of Egypt, we take the view that this may not necessarily be the case. This is because, when Joseph first tells his brothers that he has reserved the area of Goshen for them to live, he describes it as *Eretz Goshen*, '**The land** of Goshen' (Gen. 45:10). Furthermore, this term is consistently used whenever Goshen is referred to, both in the Pentateuch (see Gen. 46:28, 34; 47:1, 4, 6, 27; 50:8,) and in the Book of Joshua (see 10:41; 11:16; 15:51) – the only other biblical book to refer to that area.

So, while we cannot ignore the Israelites' prolific increase, the reference to their having filled 'the land' may well point exclusively to the far more confined area of Egypt that went by the name of '*the land* of Goshen.' That consideration, added to Pharaoh's self-contradictory warning to his people, as referred to above, clearly indicates that his announcement of the threat posed by the Hebrews was no more than a propaganda ruse calculated to instil fear into the gullible Egyptians, most of whom would never have encountered any Goshen Israelites.

But maybe Pharaoh had a point after all, especially if we throw one further consideration into the mix of the comparative population data of Egypt and Goshen. During the Egyptian New Kingdom (circa 1550-1069 BCE) historians report a corresponding increase in the

population of Egypt to a total of around 2.5 – 3 million people.³ Now, the Torah gives the total number of Israelites leaving Egypt and capable of bearing arms as ‘around six hundred thousand’ (Ex. 12:37). Modern scholars concur with the traditional Jewish view that if we factor in the women, children, and elderly, we arrive at approximately two million Israelites.⁴ Thus, although, numerically, the Egyptian and Israelite populations might have been similar, we must not overlook the fact that the latter had the advantage of the additional absorption of a similarly large foreign ally, described by the Torah as ‘a mixed multitude’ (12:35), which *Targum Yonatan* estimates as ‘two hundred and forty myriads.’⁵

Even if this number represents an exaggeration,⁶ this alliance begs the question of why the two groups did not attempt to break out of Egypt long before. We may speculate that this was because Moses would assuredly have warned them against doing so, given that it would have constituted a flagrant disregard of God’s disclosure to Abram that his offspring would be strangers and in servitude in a foreign land, and would be afflicted by them for four hundred years before coming out with great substance (see Gen. 15:13 – 14).

We suggest, therefore, that it was the submissiveness of the Goshen Hebrews and their allies that triggered Pharaoh’s decision to introduce his repressive measures and not to be deterred by their combined numerical strength. His false propaganda may have turned the minds of the Egyptian citizens against the Israelites at the outset. However, as the plagues began to take their toll, both they,⁷ as well as Pharaoh’s royal servants,⁸ counsellors and sorcerers,⁹ expressed their fear and serious doubt regarding the wisdom of his campaign.

NOTES

1. From 1981 to 1987 John Humphreys was the main presenter of the Nine O' Clock News, the flagship BBC News television programme, and from 1987 until 2019 presenter of the BBC Radio 4 'Today' breakfast programme.

2. See my *Torah for Teens: Growing up spiritually with the weekly sidrah* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008), pp. 127-130.

3. It should be noted that scholars have difficulty identifying the precise historical period wherein the Moses saga is to be placed (with many denying his very existence!), and, consequently, the identity of the Pharaoh and the date of the exodus. Our attribution to the reign of Rameses II is followed by *The Encyclopedia Judaica*. However, working backwards from the reference in I Kings 6:1 to Solomon's Temple having been built in the fourth year of his reign (968 BCE) would lead to a date for the exodus of 1448 BCE which most scholars regard as too early.

4. See F.A. Hassan, "The Dynamics of a Riverine Civilization: A Geoarchaeological Perspective on the Nile Valley, Egypt," *World Archaeology* 29.1 (1997): 51-74; Werner Keller, *The Bible as History*, 2nd revised edition (New York: William Morrow, 1981), pp. 98-99.

5. See *Targum Yonatan* on Ex. 12:39; Elias Auerbach, *Moses* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), p.68.

6. The term 'myriad' derives from the Greek *myrias*, meaning ten thousand. Given that the Torah did not supply any number for the 'mixed multitude and that Targum had no independent historical sources upon which to rely, we must assume that the latter's reference to 'two hundred and forty myriads' was intended merely as a denotation of a vast number. Added to the number of Israelites, however, this would still have constituted a sufficiently vast potential force to justify Pharaoh's concern.

7. See Ex. 9:20.

8. See 10:7.

9. Ex. 8:14-15

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey