

In many communities of Europe, there were multiple rabbis, and the leading scholar/teacher of the community would address a congregation only twice per year – on Shabbat HaGadol and on Shabbat Shuvah, in the former case to speak about Passover observances, and in the latter to speak about T’shuvah for the coming Yom Kippur. On these occasions, his lecture was long, perhaps hours. I’m not going to do that today. Instead, I’ll speak about a Passover-related *midrash*.

The word *midrash* has the same root as *d’rash*, a term we often use for a *d’var Torah*. It can be understood as meaning to seek, or to seek understanding. Torah leaves many questions unanswered, and in our attempt to find answers, we often turn to *midrash*.

A century ago, Rabbi Louis Ginzberg was a young faculty member at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He was part of the European-born faculty; there were few American-trained rabbis then. Rabbi Ginzberg was a towering scholar who edited a multi-volume collection of *midrash* called *Legends of the Jews*. He impacted Jewish history with his scholarship and with his obliviousness. His research assistant was Henrietta Szold, the learned daughter of a Baltimore rabbi who developed romantic feelings for Rabbi Ginzberg. He was oblivious to these feelings, and eventually married another woman. In her disappointment, Henrietta Szold took a trip to Palestine, the journey that led to her founding of Hadassah.

We can ask – how did Pharaoh grow to hate the children of Israel? A few weeks ago, I spoke about Egyptian racism as one root. Today, I’ll discuss another root – Pharaoh’s advisors. *Midrash* tells us that Pharaoh was advised by three wise men of the *Tanach* who were not of the Children of Israel – Jethro, Balaam, and Job.

... Pharaoh dreamed that he was sitting upon his throne, and he lifted up his eyes, and he beheld an old man before him with a balance in his hand, and he saw him taking all the elders, nobles, and great men of Egypt, tying them together, and laying them in on scale of the balance, while he put a tender kid into the other. The kid bore down the pan in which it lay until it hung lower than the other with the bound Egyptians. Pharaoh arose early in the morning, and called together all his servants and his wise men to interpret his dream, and the men were greatly afraid on account of his vision. Balaam the son of Beor then spake, and said: “This means nothing but that a great evil will spring up against Egypt, for a son will be born unto Israel, who will destroy the whole of our land and all of its inhabitants, and he will bring forth the Israelites from Egypt with a mighty hand. Now, therefore, O king, take counsel as to this matter, that the hope of Israel be frustrated before this evil arise against Egypt.”¹

So Reuel/Jethro was consulted, and advised:

“If it seemeth good to the king, let him desist from the Hebrews, and let him not stretch forth his hand against them, for the Lord chose them in days of old, and took them as the lot of His inheritance from amongst all the nations of the earth, and who is there that hath dared stretch forth his hand against them with impunity, but that their God avenged the evil done unto them?” Reuel then proceeded to enumerate some of the mighty things God had performed for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he closed his

¹ Louis Ginzberg, ed., *Legends of the Jews* II, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1948, p. 254

admonition with the words: “Verily, thy grandfather, the Pharaoh of former days, raised Joseph the son of Jacob above all the princes of Egypt, because he discerned his wisdom, for through his wisdom he rescued all the inhabitants of the land from the famine, after which he invited Jacob and his sons to come down to Egypt, that the land of Egypt and the land of Goshen be delivered from the famine through their virtues. Now, therefore, if it seem good in thine eyes, leave off from destroying the children of Israel, and if it be not thy will that they dwell in Egypt, send them forth from here, that they may go to the land of Canaan, the land wherein their ancestors sojourned.”²

Pharaoh didn’t want to hear this advice, and angrily banished Jethro to Midian. Jethro, however, was rewarded with the honor of becoming the father-in-law of Moses.

At this point, I’m going to continue out of order. Balaam said:

“From all that the king may devise against the Hebrew, they will be delivered. If thou thinkest to diminish them by the flaming fire, thou wilt not prevail over them, for their God delivered Abraham their father from the furnace in which the Chaldeans cast him [referring to another *midrash*]. Perhaps thou thinkest to destroy them with a sword, but their father Isaac was delivered from being slaughtered by a sword. And if thou thinkest to reduce them through hard and rigorous labor, thou wilt also not prevail, for their father Jacob served Laban in all manner of hard work, and yet he prospered. If it please the king, let him order all the male children that shall be born in Israel from this day forward to be thrown into the water. Thereby canst thou wipe out their name, for neither any of them nor any of their fathers was tried in this way.”³

Torah tells us that Pharaoh decreed as this *midrash* tells us Balaam advised, helping us to understand the latter as *Balaam ha-rasha*, Balaam the Evil. But what did Job, who was consulted before Balaam, advise? “Behold, all the inhabitants of the land are in thy power. Let the king do as seemeth good in his eyes.”⁴

In Elie Wiesel’s retelling,⁵ this is why Job suffered so greatly. He had the opportunity to advocate for justice, but told Pharaoh to do whatever he was inclined to do. Elie Wiesel teaches us that neutrality in the face of injustice and oppression is not neutral – it favors the oppressor.

² *Ibid.*, p. 255

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 255

⁵ Sorry – I’ve read this somewhere, but can’t find the source at the moment. It is mentioned, however, with less emphasis than Elie Wiesel gives, in Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, p. 296, in a somewhat different *midrash* on the cruelty of Pharaoh.