

## **OUTSMARTING GOD: EGYPTIAN SLAVERY AND THE TOWER OF BABEL**

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The Book of Exodus begins the story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt. A new pharaoh rises to power, one who did not know Joseph (Ex. 1:8). This new pharaoh ushers in a new regime and new policies. He embarks on a national program of enslavement and subjugation. Yet these policies are not as original as one might think, for they are reminiscent of the social-political experiment of another great building society, the people who built the Tower of Babel. The Torah deliberately links these two societies and passes judgment on both.

The new pharaoh begins by bringing his cause to the Egyptian people, making the following pitch: *'Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise, in the event of war, they may join our enemies in fighting against us and go up from the land'* (Ex. 1:9-10).

As presented in the text, the pharaoh's logic is hard to discern. His solution to the problem of Israel's burgeoning population is persecution and enslavement, rather than expulsion or genocide (Ex. 1:11). If they are too many, why not just kill them? Pharaoh does eventually order the killing of all the male babies born to the Hebrews, but only after his first policy prescription results in an Israelite population boom (Ex. 1:12, 16). Furthermore, if the Israelites represent a potential fifth column, why is Pharaoh afraid that they will leave the land? He should welcome their departure.

Slavery, in and of itself, is not a reliable form of birth control. Nor does it engender the loyalties of the subjected population. Perhaps population control and national security were not Pharaoh's true aims. He was able to justify his subjugation of the Israelites with this pretext, but the lack of logic in his reasoning suggests that his true goals lay elsewhere.

The language used by Pharaoh harks back to another, earlier narrative, that of the Tower of Babel. Pharaoh invites his people, *'Come, let us deal shrewdly ...'* (Ex. 1:10). This formulation, "Come, let us" (*havah n . . .* in Hebrew),<sup>1</sup>

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appears nowhere else in the Torah except in the Tower of Babel story, where it occurs three times.

There, the people who have settled in Shinar say to one another, '*Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard*' (Gen. 11:3). They go on to say, '*Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world*' (Gen. 11:4). Finally, God responds to their efforts by stating, '*Come, let us then go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech*' (Gen. 11:7). In all three instances, the Torah uses the same formula, "Come, let us..." (*havah n ...*), that Pharaoh uses in proposing the enslavement of the Israelites.

The literary connection between Pharaoh's policy of enslavement and the Tower of Babel is strengthened by the prominent role of bricks and mortar. The people who build the tower are able to do so only because they develop the technology to burn bricks as hard as stones and to mass-produce mortar (Gen. 11:3). The text in Exodus specifies the production of bricks and mortar as a method Pharaoh uses to embitter the lives of the Israelites (Ex. 1:14). In another parallel, the people of Shinar use their newfound technology to build a city (Gen. 11:4), while Pharaoh uses his slave labor to build great store cities (Ex. 1:11).<sup>2</sup>

The linguistic and thematic similarities between the two narratives suggest that Pharaoh's aims and those of the tower builders were one and the same, and they are viewed this way in the midrashic literature. What were the people who built the Tower of Babel trying to achieve? In their own words, the people who settled Shinar sought to make a name for themselves and to avoid dispersion (Gen. 11:4).

Focusing on the proposed height of the tower, "with its top in the sky," a midrash identifies one of the purposes of the Tower of Babel as being to challenge God's sovereignty. TB *Sanhedrin* 109a states that the builders of the tower fell into three groups: one wishing to ascend and settle there, one wishing to ascend and commit idolatry there, and one wishing to ascend and make war. Those who sought to settle were dispersed by God, those who sought to make war were transformed into apes, spirits, demons, and winged demons, and those who sought to worship idols had their language confounded.

The commentators presume that each of these punishments is specifically tailored to the nature of the offense. Rashi notes that spirits have neither body nor form, and while demons have some human characteristics (TB *Sanhedrin* 109a), both are clearly not human. Maharal explains that this brazen attack on God showed that the people who were building the Tower of Babel were no longer worthy of the divine image (the *tzelem Elokim*) in which they were created and which is meant to demonstrate the attachment and connection of human beings to their Creator. Therefore, they were transformed into apes, spirits and demons, all bereft of that divine image unique to humans.<sup>3</sup>

A direct assault on God may seem theologically so primitive that it is easily dismissed. However, the tower builders deemed themselves unworthy of their divine spirit, their *tzelem Elokim*, in another way. The tower builders undermined individual human dignity in the interests of the collective. They sought a collective name and feared dispersion of the collective, even at the expense of the individual. Another midrash captures their skewed values: the project of building the Tower of Babel became of such paramount importance that bricks became more valuable than human beings. If a man fell to his death during the construction, no one paid notice. But if a brick dropped, the people wept (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 24). By negating the value of the individual, the builders of the tower denied man's divine source and its attendant holiness. In so doing, they challenged God's authority as Creator.

Pharaoh's goals were not wholly different. He, too, sought to challenge God's authority. The Egyptian pharaoh was treated as divine, a representative of the gods on earth, if not a god himself. The Hebrews, however, worshipped a greater God. Their strength and success would have represented the superior power of their God. This challenged Pharaoh's divine credibility. Therefore, Pharaoh's interest would have been to diminish their power through subjugation, thus proving his divine superiority to the Hebrew God. This was the real motivation behind Pharaoh's policy of enslaving the Israelites.

The language Pharaoh uses when he proposes his plan is consistent with this goal. Pharaoh invites his nation, '*Come, let us deal shrewdly . . .*' (Ex. 1:10). The object of this shrewdness is unclear. In Hebrew, Pharaoh proposes that they deal shrewdly with "*lo*." In this context, the Hebrew word *lo* must mean "with him" or "with it." The standard translation presumes that the "it"

to which Pharaoh is referring must be the nation of Israel. Therefore, the verse is usually translated in the plural, '*Come, let us deal shrewdly with them . . .*' He refers to them in the singular, as a collective. They are deprived of their liberty and are subjected to oppression and humiliation. Their enslavement and objectification pave the way for mass murder. As in the case of those building the Tower of Babel, Pharaoh's challenge to God's sovereignty relies on the dehumanization of individuals, in this case the people of Israel. However, the verse could just as easily be translated, '*Come, let us deal shrewdly with Him.*' This rendering suggests that Pharaoh's primary target is not Israel, but their God. Indeed, Rashi suggests that it is God, the Defender of Israel, Whom Pharaoh seeks to outsmart (Ex. 1:10).

The stories of the Tower of Babel and the enslavement of the Israelites share another feature. While both stories depict challenges to God perpetrated through mass dehumanization, both rely on the willingness of the people to further those goals. The people who build the Tower of Babel collectively agree to subsume their individual dignity for the greater goals of the collective, thus denying their own humanity. Pharaoh, despite his tremendous power, cannot embark on his campaign of dehumanization without the consent and cooperation of the Egyptian populace. Even today, the excesses and abuses of tyrants and madmen are made possible only by the willingness of a sufficient number of the population to carry out those policies.

In the end, both plans backfire. Despite Pharaoh's efforts, the Israelites become numerous, they do leave the land, and God, through signs and wonders, triumphs over Pharaoh and all the gods of Egypt. Ultimately, the people who built the tower have no name. They are identified merely as a group of people who settled in a valley in the land of Shinar (Gen. 11:2). The location of the tower is named Babel after the people's languages are confounded and they are dispersed (Gen. 11:9), but the people themselves remain anonymous, scattered among the nations.

In fact, namelessness pervades both narratives. The anonymity of the tower builders stands in stark contrast to the genealogies that immediately precede and follow the Tower of Babel story. The progenitors of each generation are listed by name, as individuals. The builders of the tower are the exception, relegated to namelessness.

Similarly, the Book of Exodus begins with a genealogy, naming each of the twelve brothers who came down to Egypt with their father Jacob. In Hebrew, the Book of Exodus is called *Shemot*, meaning "names." Yet with the ascendance of this new pharaoh, the names disappear. The Israelites are dehumanized and lose their identities as individual human beings. (The Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, are an exception and they are specifically named by virtue of their human decency in the face of unspeakable cruelty.) Thus, an unnamed man from the tribe of Levi marries an unnamed woman of the same tribe, and they have an unnamed baby boy (Ex. 2:1-2). Only when Pharaoh's daughter saves the baby and names him Moses, transforming him from an anonymous, dehumanized victim into a human being, is the mechanism for redemption set in motion.

Significantly, the Egyptians are equally nameless. The Midrash has to supply Pharaoh's daughter with a name because the Torah omits one. Even the pharaoh himself is nameless. "Pharaoh" is the designation of his office, a political position, not a name. Historically, the Egyptian pharaohs all had names, yet the Torah pointedly omits them. They become anonymous persecutors of God's nation. And this is the ultimate lesson of namelessness. One cannot deny the divine spirit in others without denying the divine spirit in all men. One cannot dehumanize others without dehumanizing one's self.

#### NOTES

1. *Havah* is an invitational word, usually translated as "come." In all four of the cited instances, the *n...* prefix refers to a Hebrew verb beginning with a *nun* indicative of the first person plural in the future tense: "we will . . ." When paired together, the *havah* and the *nun*-prefixed verb are translated as "Come, let us . . ."
2. Incidentally, there is one extant source that conflates the story of the Exodus from Egypt with the Tower of Babel. In the Koran, when Moses comes before Pharaoh to demand that he free the slaves, Pharaoh's response is to command Haman – yes, that Haman – to make bricks of clay and build a tower so that Pharaoh can climb up to Moses' God to see if He exists (Koran, Sura 28:38).
3. Maharal of Prague, *Hiddushei Aggadot*, Part 3, second ed. (London: Honig, 1960) p. 261a.