

A Muse: Shemot 2009

It's interesting how at times Torah text is interpreted through the lens of history as experienced by the interpreter. Parshat Shemot is a good example of this because in it we have several instances where this applies. Concepts such as slavery, freedom, persecution of a people, prejudice, death of the Hebrew males all lend themselves to the interpreters imagination based upon his/her own historical perspective and understanding.

Throughout biblical text the words "peru urvu" or "periyah urvayah" to be fruitful and multiply carries a positive connotation. It is only here in our text of Shemot that these two words are broken with the word "vayishritzu", which, according to the sage Resh Lakish is intended to give the act of "peru urvu" a negative connotation. It was negative according to Resh Lakish because the offspring weren't being circumcised and they were wearing their hair in the custom of the prevailing Egyptian culture. Clearly Resh Lakish was reading the text through the lens of assimilation that he was witness to. The Book of the Macabees references Hellenized Jews who were participants in the Olympiad and had to reverse their circumcision so that they wouldn't be identified as Jews. Clearly Resh Lakish and other sages of their period were wrestling with assimilation issues and superimposed it on the Hebrews in Egypt as well.

Rabbi Yochanan too, in identifying with his culture superimposed it upon the Hebrew experience in Egypt. When interpreting the text "vatimaleh haaretz itam", Rabbi Yochanan claims that this was to be understood literally. There were theatres and amphitheatres built down into the ground, creating a depression in the earth and it was the Hebrews who were heavy attendance, filling these theatres, thus the expression of the text "and the earth was filled with them". Egyptian culture didn't however build this way, nor did they have theatre, which was the culture and method of the Greeks and Romans familiar to Rabbi Yochanan.

Fast forwarding to nineteenth century Volozhin, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (Hanetziv) asserts that the principal sin of the Hebrews was that they weren't true to the

ways of Jacob. Jacob coming into Egypt preferred Goshen so as to separate off from the Egyptians, however the subsequent generations sought to move into the mainstream Egyptian culture. For the Netziv the push to assimilate was the sin of the Hebrews and the subsequent generations. Assimilation as expressed by the enlightenment (haskalah) was one of the hot button issues for nineteenth century Jewish leadership, one that the Netziv had to struggle with.

The Baal Haturim, Rabbi Yaakov interpreted the enslavement of the Hebrews as a result of the fact that they flunked the test of loyalty to the Egyptian ruling family. According to Rabbi Yaakov, there was this constant tension between the Egyptians and the Canaanites, thus important to discern where the loyalties of the Hebrews laid. Rabbi Yaakov was writing at the same time that Napoleon had convened the Jewish Sanhedrin in 1807 and one of the questions put to the Jewish leadership of France was whether or not they defined themselves as Jews or Frenchmen. One of the questions put to the community was if war were to break would the Jews fight alongside the French?

A contemporary Israeli interpretation of the text references the fact that the Hebrews were actually a ticking demographic time bomb waiting to go off in the not too distant future. The Egyptian concern was therefore to get a better control; over this community. Naturally this sounds familiar to the current demographic issues facing Israel when dealing with the Arab population on the West Bank.