



## Ancient Egypt and Nazi Germany–Worksheet

### EGYPTIAN OPPRESSION

We will examine some Biblical texts and *parshanut* to better understand how *Bnei Yisrael* became enslaved in Egypt. Please note that there is no “one right answer”. The *parshanim* are all dealing with the same text and giving different options of how to understand it.

1. Read the following source and answer the questions. [Shemot 1:8-22](#)

a. The new king “did not know Yosef”. What was the position of *Bnei Yisrael* in Egyptian society before the new king rose to power and does this have to do with Yosef?

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b. What is significant about the fact that the new king did not know Yosef in terms of how Pharaoh views *Bnei Yisrael*?

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c. The enslavement and oppression of *Bnei Yisrael* was a process that involved several steps, culminating in the murder of the children. Identify the steps in this process. Cite from the text.

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d. In your opinion, why did the king go through this process instead of just killing the male children immediately?

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2. The king begins by sharing the problem as he sees it with his people: "Behold the Children of Israel have become numerous and more powerful than us. Come let us deal wisely with them lest they multiply and it will happen when there is a war, they will join with our enemies and fight us and go up from the land." (*Shemot* 1: 9-10)

a. What is the problem that the king perceives according to the simple meaning of the text?

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b. Do you think this is a real, legitimate possibility? Explain your answer.

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3. *Rashi* quotes from the *Midrash* to expand upon Pharaoh: "Let us deal wisely with the savior of Israel." The *Midrash* understands that the king's astrologers and advisors had warned him that a child would be born who would take *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt.

a. According to *Rashi*, what was the king's true motivation?

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b. Based on the *Midrash*, how can Pharaoh justify himself?

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4. According to *Ramban*, both the plan and its reasoning emerge from the text itself. Let us look at *Ramban's* explanation.

הבה נתחמכה לו: לא ראה פרעה וחכמי יועציו להכותם בחרב, כי תהיה בגידה גדולה להכות חינום העם אשר באו בארץ במצוות המלך הראשון וגם אם הארץ לא יתנו רשות לעשות חמס כזה, כי עמהם הוא מתייעץ, ואף כי בני ישראל עם רב ועצום ויעשו עמהם מלחמה גדולה. אבל אמר שיעשה דרך חכמה שלא ירגישו ישראל כי באיבה יעשו בהם. ולכן הטיל בהם מס כי דרך הגרים בארץ להעלות מס למלך. .... ואחרי כן צווה בסתר למילדות להרוג הזכרים. .... ואחרי כן צווה לכל עמו כל הבן הילוד היאורה תשליכיהו אתם.

Come let us deal wisely: The pharaoh and his advisors did not see fit to slaughter them because it would be a great treachery to kill for no reason the people who had come to the country by order of the first king because



the people would not allow the king to perpetrate such violence, for he took counsel with them, and because the Children of Israel were numerous and powerful and would battle against them. But he said that it should be done shrewdly so that the Jews would not perceive that they were being treated with enmity. Therefore he first levied a tax on them because it was normal for strangers in the land to pay a tax to the king... And after that, he ordered the midwives to kill the male children secretly...and after that, he ordered all of the people to cast every child born into the river.

a. According to *Ramban*, why did the king go through this process rather than killing the Jewish children immediately?

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b. Was the process planned out or did it evolve? Explain your answer.

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5. *Ibn Ezra* (*Shemot* 1:13) suggests an interpretation that differs than that of *Ramban*:

ויעבדו: רעות רבות חדש עליהם בראשונה לעשות מלאכתו. וכאשר ראה שלא חסר רבותם נתן רשות למצרים ולשריהם להעבידם יותר מחק העבדים וזהו בפרך... וכאשר ראה שלא יועיל זה אז קרא למיילדת שהן שרות על כל המיילדות וצוה להרוג כל הזכרים הילודים.

And they worked them: He initiated many evil decrees against them—at first to do his work. And then when he saw that their numbers did not decrease, he gave permission to the Egyptians and their ministers to work beyond the normal standards of slavery and that is the meaning of “בפרך”. ..And when he saw that this was not effective, he called the midwives who were the coordinators of all the midwives, and commanded them to kill the male children.

a. How does *Ibn Ezra*'s explanation of the process of oppressing the Jews differ from that of the *Ramban*?

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b. According to *Ibn Ezra*, what was Pharaoh's motivation in persecuting the Jews?

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6. In the final stage of the process (*Shemot* 1: 22), the king orders his people to throw the male children into the Nile river. Presumably, this refers to *Bnei Yisrael's* children. *Rashi*, however, explains that Pharaoh's order even applied to the Egyptian children who were born on that particular day:

לכל עמו: אף עליהם גזר, יום שנולד משה אמרו לו אצטגניניו: היום נולד מושיען של ישראל ואין אנו יודעים אם ממצרים או מישראל.

To all of his people: Even on them, he issued the decree, for on the day that Moshe was born his astrologers said to him: "Today the savior of Israel will be born and we don't know if he will come from the Egyptians or from the Children of Israel.

a. How would you characterize the king's behavior in having the Egyptians kill their own children?

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b. Does *Rashi's* opinion seem to agree with *Ramban* or *Ibn Ezra*? Explain your answer.

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## NAZI GERMANY OPPRESSION

Historical events are also open to interpretation. Let us look at a brief summary of the process that Hitler took leading up to the Final Solution in which the Jews were systematically murdered in death camps:

During the first part of the 20th century, the Jews were well integrated into German society. In 1933, Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany. During his campaign and following his election, Hitler warned the German people of the dangers of the Jewish people to Germany. Jews began to be excluded and in 1933, the government organized a boycott of Jewish merchants. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were passed, restricting the rights of the Jews in Germany. Many Jews tried to emigrate from Germany, but it was difficult for them to find countries to accept them. Even the United States was unprepared to accept Jewish immigrants and a ship

full of refugees who sat on the shores of the United States in the S.S. St. Louis was refused entry. In 1938, the first major overt acts of violence were perpetrated against the Jews in the Kristallnacht pogrom. In 1939, the war broke out and Germany captured Poland and other Eastern European countries, placing a much larger number of Jews under their control. The process of ghettoization and deportations to concentration camps began. In 1940, Hitler proposed a plan to resettle the Jews in Madagascar, but it fell through. The oppression of the Jews continued and little opposition was heard from other countries or even from the world Jewish community. In 1942, the Final Solution, the systematic murder of the Jewish people began.

Hitler's oppression of the Jews also involved a gradual process of implementation. Historians disagree as to why this approach was taken, what do you think?

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Let us examine two theories relating to this question:

1) **The Intentionalists** – The intentionalists believe that Hitler had decided on the Final Solution early on. They point to a speech that Hitler delivered before the war in 1939:

“One thing I should like to say on this day which may be memorable for others as well as for us Germans: In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet, and have usually been ridiculed for it. During the time of my struggle for power it was in the first instance the Jewish race that only received my prophecies with laughter when I said that I would one day take over the leadership of the state, and with it that of the whole nation, and that I would then, among other things, settle the Jewish problem. Their laughter was uproarious, but I think that for some time now they have been laughing on the other side of their faces. Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside of Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!”

a. According to this primary source, what was Hitler's motivation in oppressing the Jews?

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b. If so, why, in your opinion, would Hitler have adopted this gradual approach to its implementation?

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2) **The Functionalists** – The functionalists believe that Hitler did not always have in mind the final solution, but that the process evolved gradually. They point to the inconsistency of German policy including the proposal of the Madagascar plan in 1940 as proof of their position. The following report was submitted and approved by Hitler in 1940:

“I hope to erase completely the concept of Jews through the possibility of a great emigration of all Jews to a colony in Africa or elsewhere... However cruel and tragic each individual case may be, this method is still the mildest and best if one rejects the Bolshevik method of physical extermination of a people out of an inner conviction as un-German and impossible.”

a. According to this primary source, what was Hitler’s motivation in oppressing the Jews?

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b. If so, what factors might have influenced the process to evolve differently?

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These two approaches correspond with the way the *parshanim* explain Pharaoh’s thought process and decrease regarding *Bnei Yisrael*.

c. Which of the *parshanim* that we studied correspond to the functionalist approach? Explain your choice(s).

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d. Which of the *parshanim* corresponds to the intentionalist approach? Explain your answer.

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### Reflection Questions–Implications

1. How might the German Jews have reacted differently to Hitler's actions? Why didn't they? What difference might it have made?
2. How might the nations of the world have reacted differently to Hitler? What difference might it have made? Why do you think that they didn't react differently?
3. How might the world Jewish community have reacted differently to Hitler? Why do you think they didn't? What difference might it have made?
4. Would it have made a difference if there had been the State of Israel then? How so?
5. How secure is the position of Jews in emancipated countries in which they have received full rights and enjoy a high level of acceptance? Could it happen in America?
6. Would you have answered this question (5) differently before October 7, 2023, than you would now? Why or why not?
7. What are the potential effects of integration with the non-Jewish society on readiness to perceive and act against antisemitic activities? In your opinion, how *should* we react to antisemitism in the US?
8. How do American Jews react when there is a conflict between the United States and Israel? In your opinion, how *should* they react?