



Overcoming the Great Conspiracy Theory of Antisemitism

Antisemitism has never been just about physical attacks on Jews. It is the great conspiracy theory, in which a narrative is generated about the Jewish people portraying us as all-powerful and utterly disloyal, a combination of factors that create a climate of hatred and resentment towards us. Demonization creates space for physical attack.

This is the original story of antisemitism described in our parsha. The Jewish people were originally welcomed to Egypt as heroes, the family of the viceroy who had saved the country from ruin, yet all the good and the benefit they had brought to Egypt and its rulers was quickly forgotten. A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef and who began to portray the Jewish people as all powerful and utterly disloyal (*Shemot* 1:8-10):

“Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we are. Let us deal shrewdly with them lest they increase and when a war befalls us, they will

join our enemies and wage war against us and depart from the land.”

This was a critical stage in the process of our Egyptian experience, the demonization of the Jews. Before a taskmaster had cracked his whip or thrown a Jewish baby in the Nile, a narrative had to be constructed to recast the Jews as the Egyptians' oppressors.

This is why the Pesach Haggadah cites the above verse to illustrate that which is written in the book of *Devarim* (26:6), *Vayarei'u otanu haMitzrim vayanunu vayitnu aleinu avoda kasha*, “the Egyptians made us bad and afflicted us, and they burdened us with hard work.” Notice that the first phrase does not say that they did bad to us, but *vayarei'u otanu*, they made us out to be bad. This recharacterization of the Jews is illustrated in the verse from our parsha cited above that does not describe the Egyptians doing bad to us but rather their creating a picture of how we were not friend but foe, scheming against them and awaiting the opportunity to actively turn on them (see commentaries of *Orchot Chaim* and *Rashbatz* on the Haggadah).

We can readily imagine how disorienting this must have been for our ancestors. One of their own had saved Egypt and transformed

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Howie Berg z"l
on his passing

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its economy to Pharaoh's favor, and now they were suddenly recast as the enemy. Their contributions to Egyptian society had been consigned to the dustbins of history and they were quickly transformed from savior to oppressor.

Their first reaction must have been to blame it on the particular Pharaoh, the person then sitting in the seat of leadership. "Once we are rid of him, things will certainly be better." As Ramban wrote (2:23), "The custom of all subjects of a wicked tyrant is to hope for and look forward to the day of his death." Heads will roll, we will sack the coach or the university president and all will be good again. But when they saw that the king had died and nothing improved, they realized that conspiracy theories stubbornly survive and do not disappear from society with a change of leadership.

What can possibly come next that can bode well for us? Is the only path forward one of doom, Heaven forbid? Is the painful history of Jewish exile necessarily repeating itself?

Our Torah history provides three better pathways forward. In Moshe's Egypt, relief for the Jews came only with the tragic collapse of Egypt. In Yosef's case, he benefited from Pharaoh's responsiveness to the fear of Egypt's potential imminent collapse. And in the story of Purim, Achashverosh simply awoke one night to reopen the history books and read the true story of the Jewish contribution to society, thus resetting the narrative about the Jews.

This Shabbat, like every Shabbat, all of us will appeal to God for the well-being of our country and its government. We sincerely pray that the American kingdom of kindness will survive its current challenges and that it will recognize and be responsive to the

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genuine threats to its future, awakening itself to reread the true story of America and of the Jewish people, fundamentally resetting the narrative to "place in the hearts of all Americans to deal kindly with us and all Israel. In their days and in ours may the Jews be saved and Israel dwell in safety, and may the Redeemer come to Zion. *Kein yehi ratzon.*"

"Now it came to pass in those many days that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed from the labor, and they cried out, and their cry ascended to God from the labor. God heard their cry, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." (Shemot 2:23) ■

**Condolences to Gidon Ariel
on the passing of his BROTHER z"l**
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