



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת שמות תש"ע ~ Parshas Shemos 5770

PHARAOH THE PERNICIOUS

At first glance, something very peculiar occurs towards the beginning of the Pesach Seder.

ON A LOW NOTE

Referring to the operative mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* (relating the story of the Exodus), the Mishnah in Pesachim (10:4) states:

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, ודורש מארמי אויב אבי, עד שיגמור כל הפרשה כלה.

“One begins by relating degrading matters and concludes with praise; and the “*Arami oveid avi*” section is expounded in its entirety.” (This particular section is found at the beginning of parshas Ki Savo and summarizes the events of Mitzrayim. It begins with the words, “An Aramean sought to destroy my forefather,” a reference to the designs of the wicked Lavan against Ya’akov Avinu.)

The Mishnah speaks of the need to begin the narrative on a negative tone, eventually building up and leading to the crescendo of the wondrous events that took place. What, exactly, are these “degrading matters” to which the Mishnah refers, which are supposed to form the introduction to the Exodus story? R’ Amram Gaon understands that the second half of the Mishnah is explaining the first. In other words, the section of Lavan (“*Arami oveid avi*”) is the very fulfillment of the dictum to begin the narrative with “degrading matters” (*Siddur R’ Amram Ga’on 212*).

And so, as the Seder gets underway, the *sippur* (retelling) begins, and we make mention of Lavan’s sinister plots.

Yet here is where things seem to get peculiar. In introducing Lavan, the Haggadah makes the following remark:

צא ולמד מה בקש לבן הארמי לעשות ליעקב אבינו. שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים, ולבן בקש לעקור את הכל.

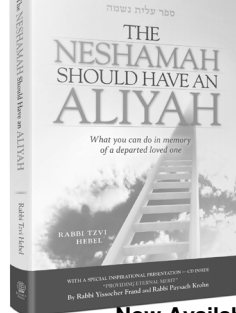
“Go and learn what Lavan the Aramean sought to do to Ya’akov Avinu. For Pharaoh’s death decree applied only to the Jewish males, whereas Lavan sought to uproot *everyone*.”

At first glance, this statement appears to be almost a type of “defense” for Pharaoh, as if we are trying to demonstrate that he’s really not *such* a bad guy. After all, his decree against the Jews was limited to the men, as recorded in this week’s *parshah* (*Shemos 1:22*). In comparison, Lavan formulated a policy of complete genocide. As we embark on the retelling of the events of Mitzrayim, highlighting our suffering at the hands of the Egyptians and the subsequent miraculous redemption by Hashem, why do we seemingly attempt to rehabilitate Pharaoh’s image by downplaying the heinousness of his crime?

SINISTER DESIGNS

In reality, explains R’ Chaim Soloveitchik (*Hame’or Shebahaggadah 180*), the exact opposite is true. In no way are we serving as Pharaoh’s PR advisors as we commence the Haggadah recitation. Pharaoh’s

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Parshas Shemos 5770 פרשת שמות תש"ע

designs on the Jewish people were no more benign than Lavan's, as he, too, sought to wipe them totally out of existence. In this respect, however, Pharaoh was more crafty than his predecessor; he sought to learn from Lavan's mistakes and succeed where the Aramean failed.

Lavan's problem was that he simply bit off more than he could chew. By overtly and directly seeking the destruction of the entire Jewish people, his plans were doomed to fail. Hashem had already promised that no enemy could wipe out the offspring of Avraham; and so Lavan, of course, could not accomplish the impossible, as Hashem's guarantee stood in the way.

Pharaoh, however, was much smarter. He knew he couldn't overturn Hashem's promise to protect the Jewish people from extermination. Instead, he attempted to "circumvent" it. And it was specifically for this reason that he limited his decree.

Here was Pharaoh's plan: Knowing that a "frontal attack" – a full-blown attempt against the entirety of the Jewish people – was impossible, he decreed instead against the males only. In this way, he would remove the Jewish males from the scene, but – by allowing the females to remain – he was not undertaking the impossible. After all, even from a *halachic* standpoint, the Jewish people would not disappear: in the absence of Jewish men, these ladies would have to marry Egyptian males, but the children would still be Jewish, following the principle of matrilineal descent.

This was the "genius" of the plan: since it didn't mandate the wholesale destruction of the Jewish people, Pharaoh could "get away with it," unlike the ill-fated attempts of Lavan. With Pharaoh's plan, the nation would retain its Jewish nature, as explained above. Yet, what type of "Jewish" nation would this be, where the only male role-models around were nice, pagan Egyptians? How long would it take before the

Jewish people completely abandoned and lost their Jewish identity through their own upbringing?

The Haggadah's intent is not to minimize Pharaoh's guilt by contrasting him with Lavan. On the contrary, it highlights his deviousness and his attempts to succeed in exterminating the Jews by "outsmarting" Hashem.

Of course, that's also impossible – and Pharaoh got his comeuppance. The Mitzrim were ignominiously defeated, and the Jews were saved and redeemed. For good measure, Hashem defeated Pharaoh at his own game. Pharaoh tried to destroy the Jews by keeping the women alive. And, as we shall see in the coming weeks, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, it was specifically through the merit of the righteous women that the Jewish people were delivered (*Sotah 11b*).

A glorious and climactic end to a "degrading" beginning.

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