

JANUARY 4, 2010

## Parashat Shemot

### Maintaining Jewish Identity

**V'eleh shemot benei Yisrael – “and these are names of the Children of Israel” (Exodus 1:1)**

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Commentators have long struggled to understand how the Jewish people survived in Egypt when most nations would have simply withered or assimilated in the face of such devastating persecution. What unique qualities did God see in the Jewish people that merited their redemption? The Ba'al Haturim answers this question in his commentary on the first verse of Exodus. Noting the unusual focus on names at the opening of the text, the Ba'al Haturim explains that “even though they were subjugated, ‘these were the names of the Children of Israel,’—that they did not change their names. This is one of the three reasons mentioned by our rabbis that they merited their redemption from Egypt.”

The Israelites' insistence on maintaining their Jewish names in ancient Egypt was indicative of their commitment to their Jewish identity and to honoring the customs of their ancestors. Nowadays, the state of Israel has officially recognized an Ethiopian Jewish holiday which underscores a contemporary commitment to these same values.

For thousands of years Ethiopian Jews have celebrated Sigd, a holiday symbolizing the Israelites' acceptance of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Each year on Sigd the Jews of Ethiopia climbed Mount Amburver (near Gonder) and prayed for God to bring them to Jerusalem. Even though most Ethiopian Jews have returned to their biblical home in Israel they continue to celebrate Sigd. This year all of Israel celebrated with them as the Israeli Association for Ethiopian Jews was successful in lobbying for Sigd to be adopted as an Israeli national holiday. According to *The Forward*, “The celebration began just before 10 a.m., when the community's 80 religious leaders ascended to a temporary stage on the Haas Promenade, a scenic walkway overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem. They wore white outfits with intricate designs, and carried colorful umbrellas which, in Ethiopia, gave shelter as they headed to the ceremony on a trek that could take up to five days.” This year, for the first time, Israeli President Shimon Peres hosted a special celebration at his house to mark the holiday and Israeli schools had mandatory educational programs about Sigd.

Even in ancient Egypt our allegiance to our identity and respect for our customs preserved the Jewish way of life. Now, with the state of Israel weaving the uniqueness of each community into the fabric of the Jewish homeland, our identity and customs will continue to be strengthened for the generations to come. ■

### Prejudiced Position

**Ki chayot heina – “For they are very lively” (Exodus 1:19)**

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Despite Shifra and Puah's refusal to murder newborn Jewish boys, the two midwives were not punished. How did they escape retribution for disobeying Pharaoh's order? The Talmud provides a possible explanation, stating that they told Pharaoh that the babies survived “Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women”—*ki chayot heina* (1:19). This phrase is usually interpreted as “for they are lively,” meaning that the Jewish women gave birth so quickly that a midwife could not arrive in time to assist in the birth (and therefore carry out Pharaoh's order to kill the male babies). However, the Talmud (Sotah 11b) also states that the word *chayot* can be translated as “animals.” Thus, the midwives told Pharaoh that the “Hebrew women are like animals that give birth without external assistance.” As

Pharaoh prejudged the Israelites to be lesser beings than the Egyptians, he accepted the midwives' claim without an investigation of the facts.

While a willingness to prejudge facts benefited the Jewish people in ancient Egypt, in modern times this approach is used to justify unfair condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza.

Recently, a group of international protestors arrived in Egypt hoping to travel to Gaza and participate in a march aimed at ending what they deem a humanitarian crisis in the coastal strip. While it is certainly true that Israel limits the materials which are allowed to enter Gaza, the prejudice of these protestors in declaring a humanitarian crisis simply ignores the facts. Since the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead in January 2009, Israel has facilitated the transfer of nearly 700,000 tons of aid and more than 100,000,000 liters of fuel to the Gaza Strip. Gas for domestic use (cooking and heating) is supplied according to Palestinian demand and is not subject to any limitation at all. In fact, humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip increased by nearly 900% in the past year. During this period the Israel Defense Forces have allowed over 4,000 Palestinians from Gaza to enter Israel for medical treatment and Israel has facilitated the successful transfer of six water desalination systems to the Gaza Strip. Even more aid will pour into Gaza as soon as the Hamas-controlled government accepts the International Quartet's conditions: recognize Israel's right to exist, renounce violence and abide by previous agreements. For more on Hamas, click [here](#).

Like Pharaoh, whose prejudice towards the Israelites blinded him to reality, many in the international community prejudge Israel's actions. When looking at the facts it becomes clear that despite the ongoing attacks from the Hamas-controlled area, Israel is determined to prevent a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. ■

## Crackdown of Conscience

**Vayar ish Mitzri makeh ish Ivri – “and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew” (Exodus 2:11)**

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Moses' reaction to the beating of a fellow Israelite drove him to kill an Egyptian taskmaster and flee to Goshen. What prompted the Egyptian to strike the Jewish man in the first place? Rashi (on verse 2:11) explains that the Egyptian had sent the man to the fields in order to take advantage of his unsuspecting wife under the cover of darkness. One evening, the Jewish husband returned home early and discovered the truth. “When the Egyptian master sensed [that the Israelite husband had uncovered] the matter, he oppressed and afflicted him throughout the day.” Once the Egyptian taskmaster's transgressions had been exposed he beat the Jewish slave in an effort to force the innocent husband into submission.

Today, Tehran is conducting itself in a manner similar to the Egyptian taskmaster. Like the slave-driver, the Iranian regime is violently lashing out against innocent people who call attention their misdeeds.

According to *The Washington Post*, Iranian opposition activists recently stated that Tehran's security forces have intensified a crackdown of the country's pro-reform movement. The report came one day after eight people (including the nephew of chief opposition leader Mir Hussein Moussavi) were killed in anti-government protests. According to *The New York Times*, “Mr. Moussavi issued a statement...that took a broad swipe at the government for its use of force against civilian protesters. It also criticized the government's handling of the economy and foreign policy and its failure to address institutional corruption.” The Iranian regime's actions are widely seen as an attempt to suppress criticism of the government's mismanagement of affairs of state and the fiasco of last summer's elections. The White House was quick to comment on the crackdown, stating: “We strongly condemn the violent and unjust suppression of civilians in Iran...Hope and history are on the side of those who peacefully seek their universal rights, and so is the United States.” For more on Iran, visit [www.aipac.org/Iran](http://www.aipac.org/Iran).

The Iranian regime has chosen the paths of oppression and violence to mask its misdeeds. But, as the Egyptian who beat the Israelite learned, truth ultimately prevails and eventually oppressors are called to task for their actions. ■

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