

JANUARY 16, 2017

Parashat Shemot

Jerusalem: A Past and Present Jewish Capital

The names of the sons of Israel who came (Exodus 1:1)

שמות בני ישראל הבאים (שמות א:א)

In chapter nine of *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens utilizes an interesting literary device. See if you can spot it. He wrote: “If the funeral had been yesterday, I could not recollect it better. The very air of the best parlor, when I went in at the door, the bright condition of the fire, the shining of the wine in the decanters, the patterns of the glasses and plates, the faint sweet smell of cake, the odor of Miss Murdstone’s dress, and our black clothes. Mr. Chillip is in the room, and comes to speak to me.” (Chapter 9) Did you catch it? In the very last sentence, Dickens shifts from past tense—“when I *went* in at the door...” to the present—“Mr. Chillip *is* in the room.” This is called “[Historical Present](#),” when an author switches during a narrative from past to present tense, all in the context of the past.

The Bible text uses this literary device in the first verse of the book of Exodus: “Now these are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob...” (1:1) This translation, while contextually accurate, ignores a subtlety in the text. In Hebrew we read that these are “the names of the sons of Israel *haba'im*—which literally means “who are coming”—to Egypt.” In his work *Tosefet Brachah*, the early twentieth century Lithuanian scholar Rabbi Baruch Epstein wonders why the biblical text uses the present tense when describing an event that occurred in the past. Why doesn’t the Torah say that these are the sons of Israel *haba'u*—who came—to Egypt? He answers that the Bible wrote the text in the manner that people speak. He writes, “This is the manner of people, when they relate an engaging experience from their lives, they express it in the present tense and say, ‘I go,’ ‘I sit,’ ‘I stand,’ ‘I say,’ instead of ‘I went,’ ‘I sat,’ ‘I stood,’ and ‘I said’...And the Torah writes in the manner of human speech.” In other words, the Torah writes using historical present. In order to make the story that much more vivid, instead of telling a dry story about the past, we read about it in the present tense. Historical present has a psychological component as well. When we speak in the present, we make events more real because in our mind, they’re happening now, and not at some distant point in the past. Judaism believes strongly in this device. The celebration of the Seder on Passover asks us not to reenact an event that happened in the past, but instead, “Each person is obligated to see himself as if he himself went out of Egypt.” (Passover Hagadah) The Exodus isn’t simply a story that happened to other people many centuries ago, rather it is the story of the Jewish people.

Jews from around the world also relate in historical present to the holy city of Jerusalem, which has represented the Jewish hopes, yearning, prayer and focus for the past 3,000 years. With more than 850 references to Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible and innumerable references to the city throughout more than 2,000 years of post-biblical literature, Jerusalem has served as the spiritual capital of the Jewish people throughout the exile. After the birth of the state of Israel, that historical present relationship with Jerusalem became reality, for today Jerusalem is the physical capital of the Jewish state, and we connect with our past and present as one. It is precisely due to our strong, innate connection to Jerusalem that we find Palestinian attempts like last October’s United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) [approval of a resolution](#) that ignored Jewish ties to the Temple Mount, so disturbing and dismaying. At the same time, we appreciate America’s broad support for our historical connection to Jerusalem, which included a [strong bipartisan Congressional letter criticizing the UNESCO stunt](#), as well as strong support from the leading presidential candidates at the time. Hillary Clinton [called the resolution](#) “disappointing and wrong,” while Donald Trump [called it](#), “a one-sided attempt to ignore Israel’s 3,000-year bond to its capital city.” Issuing resolutions in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that deny our historic connection

to our holiest sites in Jerusalem cannot change the truth of history, nor will they alter the present reality that Jerusalem is and will always be Israel's capital city. Instead, they represent an affront to the truth and a crude attempt to delegitimize the Jewish state. ■

A Campaign of Demonization

Come, let us deal wisely with them, (Exodus 1:10)

הבה נתחכמה לו (שמות א:י)

Last week, after several months of relative calm, a Palestinian driver intentionally rammed his truck into a group of Israeli soldiers killing four and wounding a dozen on a promenade overlooking Jerusalem's Old City and a park called the Peace Forest, the [Washington Post reported](#). The victims of the terrorist attack, 20-year-old Lt. Yael Yekutiel of Givatayim, 22-year-old cadet Shir Hajaj of Ma'aleh Adumim, 20-year-old cadet Shira Tzur of Haifa and 20-year-old cadet Erez Orbach of Alon Shvut, were part of a large group of officer cadets on an educational tour of Jerusalem. This, and many similar terrorist attacks that Israel has suffered, are the tragic and direct results of an ongoing campaign of demonization of Israelis prevalent throughout Palestinian society, which continues to support the families of terrorists, lauds and extolls their murderous acts and incites attacks against Israeli citizens. It should not surprise us that this isn't a new tactic. In fact, demonizing a group in order to coerce people to commit terrible atrocities was an integral aspect of Pharaoh's campaign to subjugate the Israelites in Egypt.

How does an advanced, sophisticated Egyptian society suddenly subjugate an entire people? How did Pharaoh convince his people to become willing accomplices in the enslavement of the Israelites to the point that they acceded to and aided in the murder of babies? He did all of this through a campaign of demonization. After a careful reading of the text, Rabbi Galia Sadan adopts the position of Nechama Leibovitz, S.R. Hirsch and Martin Buber, who suggest that the Israelites never presented a true demographic threat to the Egyptians. What then was he so afraid of? When he told his people that they must enslave the Israelites he states, "lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that when there befalls us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us..." (1:10) Rabbi Sadan [writes](#), "Pharaoh's fear is not a rational fear. He creates the demonization of the stranger—of the Children of Israel, [suggesting that] demons or ghosts would free the Israelites from Egypt...Even the description of the reproduction of the Israelites is animalistic—they 'swarm' (*vayishretzu*) the land..."

Just as Pharaoh encouraged the enslavement and murder of the Israelites by first demonizing them in the eyes of his people, Palestinian society encourages its citizens, young and old, to commit acts of murder and terror by similarly demonizing Israelis and Jews in the media. [Palestinian Media Watch reports](#) that in the last month alone Palestinian media published a cartoon depicting an IDF soldier who had killed Santa Claus and, a cartoon depicting an Israeli soldier planting a knife on Santa Claus (both in the official PA daily, *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*), and another cartoon on the website of Fatah's Information and Culture Commission depicting a demoralized Santa Claus hiding his eyes as an Israeli soldier throws grenades and fires his gun down a chimney. After the truck ramming in Jerusalem, Israeli politicians [directly linked](#) Palestinian incitement to the terror attack. MK Moti Yogeve (Jewish Home) said, "The roots of the problem are in the incitement in the Palestinian education system, calling to kill Jews." Culture and Sport Minister Miri Regev (Likud) said that, "There is no difference between a gun or a truck or a kitchen knife... We are dealing with the roots of terrorism that starts with incitement in the [PA] education system and in the Palestinian media. We are currently in an uncompromising battle to defeat the nests of Islamic terrorism."

Last year, the Senate Appropriations Committee, on June 29, and House Appropriations Committee, on July 12, marked up and approved the State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2017. Both bills included key provisions addressing Palestinian incitement and payments to terrorists and their families. The continued campaign of demonization and glorification of terror that has fueled the wave of terror against Israel must stop. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.