

# **This Year We Are Slaves, Next Year We'll Be Free:**

## **Pharaoh's Racist Fantasy (session 1)**

### **1. Hannah Arendt, Jewish Writings, 150**

As long as the Passover story does not teach the difference between freedom and slavery, as long as the Moses legend does not call to mind the eternal rebellion of the heart and mind against slavery, the 'oldest document of human history' will remain dead and mute to no one more than the very people who wrote it... there is paradoxically a growing number of those who believe they must replace Moses and David with Washington or Napoleon. Ultimately this attempt to forget our past and to find youth again [i.e., re-naissance] at the expense of strangers will fail— simply because Washington's and Napoleon's heroes were named Moses and David.

### **2. Rabbi Aharon Tamarat, A Sermon of Liberty (1906)**

74

In actual practice, however, we discern certain differences in the means advocated by European nationalist parties for "gaining freedom" from those with which we gained our freedom. They seized their freedom at the time of the French Revolution, for example, by means of barricades and bombs aimed at one despot or another. We, on the other hand, strive to achieve our freedom through the enactment of the seder: by eating matzah, reciting hallel etc. each Jew participating in his own home, within his family circle. Which is to say that by recalling and re-enacting the liberation from Egypt we fan within our souls the divine flame of remembrance of His merciful deeds...

However, the strategy of these revolutions, the answering of evil with evil, is questionable. It may succeed, but on the other hand, it's just as likely to aggravate the original evil. And even when it does succeed, it is only a short lived palliative. This we have seen clearly in every land where freedom was seized forcibly by nationalist revolutions: In no time at all, the plague of despotism erupted in the flesh of the body politic—just as before. The only true cure for this despotism, the only remedy which removes the evil at its roots, is the revolutionary activity of the Jewish people, the enactment of the seder—rightly understood, of course, and not merely performed by rote...

76-77

Natural acts of violence, then result from a person's having failed to develop his powers of restraint...

Such is not the case, however, with that unnatural evil which is justified by the intellect and which is supported by the deception of the mind... In a word, this fraudulent evil, this evil justified by the mind—political evil—has become the greatest destroyer on the face of the earth.

79

The intellectually abetted evil, its slippery justification at its side, had its inception in Egypt... Not until Egypt, the most advanced of ancient civilizations, do we have a clear instance of intellectual cunning operating to justify wickedness. The priceless phrase, "Come let us deal wisely with them," is the clue.

### 3. ר שמשון רפאל הירש, פרק כ פסוק ב

"מבית עבדים". ארץ מצרים היתה לנו "בית עבדים", ובה היינו עבדים מלידה (עי' פי' לעיל יג, ג). שלילת חירותנו בכוח הזרוע כבר נשכחה מלב הבריות, והעבדות נחשבה כמעמדנו הטבעי.

### Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch, Shemot 20:2

"From the house of bondage"- The land of Egypt was for us a "house of bondage", and in it we were slaves from birth. The negation of our freedom as brought about by the might of the Egyptian hand caused it so that freedom was forgotten from the heart of all Jews. Slavery was considered to be our natural position.

### 4. Hannah Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism

Slavery's crime against humanity did not begin when one people defeated and enslaved its enemies (though of course this was bad enough), but when slavery became an institution in which some men were "born" free and others slave, when it was forgotten that it was man who had deprived his fellow-men of freedom, and when the sanction for the crime was attributed to nature.

### 5. שמות פרק א (פרשת שמות)

(ו) וַיִּמַת יוֹסֵף וְכָל אָחָיו וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא:

(ז) וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמֵאדָּ מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם: פ

(ח) וַיִּקָּם מֶלֶךְ חָדָשׁ עַל מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע אֶת יוֹסֵף:

(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל עַמּוֹ הֲנִי עִם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעֲצוּם מְמֹנִי:

(י) הֲבֵי נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פֶּן יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה כִּי תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם הוּא עַל שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם בְּנוּ וְעָלָה

מִן הָאָרֶץ:

(יא) וַיִּשְׂמֹעַ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוּ בְּסִבְלַתְם וַיִּבְּן עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת לְפָרְעֹה אֶת פִּתּוֹם וְאֶת רַעַמְסֵס:

(יב) וַכֹּאשֶׁר יָעֲנוּ אֹתוֹ כֵּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(יג) וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרָה:

(יד) וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה בְּחֹמֶר וּבִלְבָנִים וּבְכָל עֲבֹדָה בְּשָׂדֵה אֶת כָּל עֲבֹדְתָם אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרָה:

(6) Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation.

(7) **But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.**

(8) A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.

(9) And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us.

(10) **Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground."**

(11) So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses.

(12) **But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.**

(13) The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites

(14) Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

## **6. Todd McGowan, The bedlam of the lynch mob: racism and enjoying through the other**

The primary manifestation of racism is the racist fantasy. The racist fantasy serves as the foundation for the legal and social apparatus of discrimination that arises around it... Although there are purely individual fantasies, there are also collective ones that enable societies to cohere around them. The racist fantasy is the primary example of a collective fantasy. It establishes a bond between members of the society by separating those who belong from those who don't belong... The racist fantasy creates an avenue for members of the society to find enjoyment in a direction that doesn't threaten the structure of the society but instead affirms it...

Fantasy provides a structure through which subjects can envision a path to obtaining the fantasy object, whatever that object is. The fantasy object might be a particular commodity, a lifestyle, or even a type of social status. But whatever it is, it promises unrestrained enjoyment for the subject. For the fantasizing subject, the object appears to have the utmost importance. It seems as if it is the nodal point of the fantasy. But despite this belief, the actual fantasy object can be anything at all. The specific object is insignificant. What is important is the position that this object has in the fantasy, not what the object is.

In order to be a fantasy object, the object need only be unattainable. The unattainability of the object is the source of its value. Because it is unattainable, the fantasy object appears to hold within it the secret of a perfect enjoyment. If one could attain it, one would quickly recognize that it is an object like any other and cannot provide the enjoyment that it promises insofar as it remains unattainable. It is with the object that the fantasy performs its magic for the subject's prospects of enjoyment... Fantasy allows one to imagine an enjoyment without lack, but it does so only by creating an obstacle who bears responsibility for the failure to attain this enjoyment...

But what characterizes the racist fantasy and differentiates it from other forms of fantasy is that the obstacle to the object—what bars the subject's access to unrestrained enjoyment—is the racial other. The fantasy's key player is the racial other because this figure makes the object unattainable. As the obstacle to complete enjoyment, the racial other is responsible for all the subject's—and the society's—failures. This figure gives the racist fantasy its racist hue. The fantasy defines the subject through the racial other that threatens it, which gives the subject a wholly secondary and insignificant status within the structure. The racial other bars the subject from enjoying the object by monopolizing the object for itself. The illegitimate enjoyment of the racial other occurs at the expense of the fantasy's subject.

This other enjoys in the subject's stead, triggering resentment for the racial other... The fantasy always depicts the racial other's enjoyment as illegitimate, as a violation of the law, of morality, or of social mores. The racial other becomes enshrined as racial as a result of the position of obstacle that this figure has in the racist fantasy... The racial other always has an enjoyment advantage deriving from its fantasized racial inheritance. It is a genetic gift, like athletic ability or intelligence.

**7. רש"י שמות א:ז**  
ויסרצו. שְׁהִיוּ יוֹלְדוֹת שֶׁשָׁה בְּכִרְס אֶחָד (שם):

**8. רש"י שמות פרק א (פרשת שמות)**  
ויקצו - קצור בחייהם. ורבותינו דרשו כקוצים היו בעיניהם:

## **9. Leon R. Kass - The Beginning of Wisdom\_ Reading Genesis, 557**

As we will see more clearly as we proceed, Egypt, at least in its public and official teachings, is the place that seeks to abolish change and to make time stand still. To be sure, Egyptians have accurate measures of time and a precise calendar, but they use them to manage or to stay ahead of natural change—in the first instance, to predict and manage the flooding of the Nile. What the Egyptians seek is changelessness, agelessness, permanent presence, or eternal return and renewal. Whether one looks to the hieroglyph in which the mobile world is represented in static ideograms; or to the worship of the eternally circling but never-changing heavenly bodies or of the cyclically rising and ebbing river, with its life-giving overflows; or to the practices of denying aging through bodily adornment and defying death through mummification and preparation for reincarnation—everywhere one looks, one sees in Egypt the rejection of change and the denial of death.<sup>9</sup>

9. The evidence for this proposition could be multiplied many times. To take only one more example: the Egyptians revered the scarab or dung beetle, and treated it as the symbol of immortal life. The dung beetle forms manure into a large ball (as big as an apple), with which it then buries itself in the earth. There it feeds on the dung ball and (we now know) lays its eggs. Wonder of wonders, new scarab life emerges from the dung! The Egyptians also gave this activity of "resurrection" a cosmological meaning: the dung ball represented the earth and the beetle represented the sun, ever renewing life out of the lifeless earth.

#### **10. Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch on Exodus 1:9**

Note in general: a) this first anti-semitism was not brought about by anything bad the Jews had done. Pharaoh could not bring any accusation against them, otherwise he would not have been driven to act against them covertly. B) this first act of wickedness was engineered from above, did not spring from the people. They were incited from above, Jew hatred was a political measure which the new dynasty used to strengthen their own position of force and violence. There is little new under the sun and historical events at large are as old as history itself. Whenever a tyrant wished to oppress a people, he like to give them a lower class whom they could oppress, and thus be indemnified for his own oppression... He wanted to compensate the Egyptian people whom he held in oppressive subjection by creating for their benefit a caste of pariahs on which every other caste could look down with contempt and in comparison could imagine himself a free man.

#### **11. רשב"ץ הגדה**

וירעו אותנו ר"ל כי חשבוננו רעים מבלי הגעת רעה לגופותינו אלא שאמרנו שאנחנו בעצמנו רעים והחזיקונו רעים על כן אמר כמו שנאמר הבה נתחכמה לו פן ירבה והיה כי תקראנה מלחמה ונוסף גם הוא על שונאינו ונלחם בנו ועלה מן הארץ כלומר הם רעים וצריכים אנו להתחכם שלא יזיקונו ברעתם כשיבואו עלינו אויבינו ויהיו הם בעזרתם להלחם בנו וההתחכמות הזו היא להתחכם למושיען כי אנחנו יודעים שיש למושיען מידה לדון מידה כנגד

#### **12. W.E.B. Dubois, Black Reconstruction [1935], 700-701**

Most persons do not realize how far [the view that common oppression would create interracial solidarity] failed to work in the South, and it failed to work because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the

best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.

### 13. רש"י שמות פרק א (פרשת שמות)

ועלה מן הארץ - על כרחנו. ורבותינו דרשו כאדם שמקלל עצמו ותולה קללתו באחרים, והרי הוא כאלו כתב ועלינו מן הארץ והם יירשוהו:

AND HE WILL GO UP OUT OF THE LAND, against our will. Our Rabbis explained that they spoke like a person who is pronouncing a curse against himself but attaches the curse to others (because he does not wish to use an ominous expression of himself), so that it is as though Scripture wrote “and we shall have to go up out of the land” and they will take possession of it (Sotah 11a).

### 14. Todd McGowan, *The bedlam of the lynch mob: racism and enjoying through the other*

The practice of lynching is perhaps the most extreme response to this fantasy figure. Lynching was an extralegal practice, occurring primarily in the American South in the seventy years following the Civil War, that functioned as a compensation for the inadequacy of legal authorities in the face of the threat of black enjoyment. According to the logic of the racist fantasy, the black man, as a form of the racial other, had an ability to enjoy that official law and authorized policing cannot contain. Lynching most often targeted black men who engaged with white women in some measure of sexual relationship—from acts as innocent as a desiring glance to accusations of rape...

But lynching did not just eliminate the threat of black enjoyment. At the same time that it destroyed the black man's capacity for sexual enjoyment (through castration and murder), lynching provided a means through which the perpetrators could themselves partake of this illicit enjoyment. Although we imagine lynching as a hidden activity done under cover of the night by masked men, it was first and foremost a quasi-public ritual whereby racist white society partook of the black enjoyment that threatened it. In the American racist fantasy, black enjoyment hindered any realization of white desire. The fantasy envisioned the black man doing what the white men refrained from doing—enjoying women without the constraints of marriage or propriety. The black man enjoyed in the stead of the white man and did so in a way that the white man himself could not.

But this black enjoyment was also the means through which the fantasy produced enjoyment for whites. While lynching is an act of barbaric violence, it reveals how the racial other's enjoyment served as the source of enjoyment for those invested in the racist fantasy. The perpetrators of lynching themselves fed on the enjoyment of the racial other that lynching attempts to destroy.

In terms of their ability to deliver enjoyment, lynching parties were genuine parties. They provided enjoyment through an identification with the enjoyment of the figure that they destroyed. The violence of lynching called to mind the actions of the black man being punished for those involved in it.

### 15. רמב"ן שמות פרשת שמות פרק א

(י) הבה נתחכמה לו - לא ראה פרעה וחכמי יועציו להכותם בחרב, כי תהיה בגידה גדולה להכות חנם העם אשר באו בארץ במצות המלך הראשון. וגם עם הארץ לא יתנו רשות למלך לעשות חמס כזה, כי עמהם הוא מתייעץ, ואף כי בני ישראל עם רב ועצום ויעשו עמהם מלחמה גדולה. אבל אמר שיעשו דרך חכמה שלא ירגישו ישראל כי באיבה יעשו בהם, ולכך הטיל בהם מס, כי דרך הגרים בארץ להעלות מס למלך כמו שבא בשלמה (מ"א ט כא). ואחרי כן צוה בסתר למילדות להרוג הזכרים על האבנים, ואפילו היולדות עצמן לא ידעו בהם: ואחרי כן צוה לכל עמו כל הבן הילוד היאורה תשליכוהו אתם. והענין שלא רצה לצוות לשרי הטבחים אשר לו להרגם בחרב המלך או שישליכו הם אותם ליאור, אבל אמר לעם כאשר ימצא כל אחד ילד יהודי ישליך אותו ביאור, ואם יצעק אבי הילד אל המלך או אל שר העיר יאמרו שיביא עדים ויעשה בו נקמה. וכאשר הותרה רצועת המלך היו המצרים מחפשים הבתים ונכנסים שם בלילות ומתנכרין ומוציאים הילדים משם, כי על כן נאמר ולא יכלה עוד הצפינו (להלן ב ג):

COME, LET US DEAL WISELY WITH HIM. Pharaoh and his wise counsellors did not see fit to slay them by the sword, for it would have been a gross treachery to smite without reason a people that had come into the land by command of a former king. The people of the country also would not give the king consent to commit such perfidy since he took counsel with them, and all the more so since the children of Israel were a numerous and mighty people and would wage a great war against them. Rather, Pharaoh said he would do it wisely so that the Israelites would not feel that it was done in enmity against them.

It is for this reason that he placed a levy upon them, as it was customary that strangers in a country contribute a levy to the king, as it is mentioned in the case of King Solomon. Afterwards he secretly commanded the midwives to kill the male children upon the birthstool so that even the mothers should not know it. Following that, *he charged all his people, Every son that is born, ye — yourselves — shall cast into the river*. Essentially, Pharaoh did not want to charge his executioners to slay them by the decree of the king or to cast them into the river. Rather, he said to the people that whoever would find a Jewish child should throw him into the river. Should the child's father complain to the king or to the master of the city, they would tell him to bring witnesses and then they will exact vengeance [for the crime]. Now once the king's restriction was removed, the Egyptians would search the houses, entering them at night, and indifferent [to the cries of the parents], would remove the children therefrom. It is therefore said, *And when she could no longer hide him*.