

Why Hatred Follows the Jewish People—and What It Means



This piece first ran on our Substack, Reading Jewish History in the Parsha. We're pleased to share it here on our website.

A Transition to Tough Treatment

With the scourge of antisemitism raising its ugly head with particular prominence over the past year, the parsha of Shemot shows how this unwelcome phenomenon appears to have accompanied us from our very earliest days.

The Ramban notes how the transition from the book of Bereishit to Shemot marks a shift away from the Torah's previous focus on righteous individuals and their families as it turns its attention to the formation of the chosen nation. Our parsha begins the narrative of the Jewish nation with details of the 210 years of exile culminating in its brutal enslavement. What was the purpose of these centuries of oppression and suffering? Was this not an extraordinary way for God to treat the descendants of His beloved Avot?

Before getting to grips with this question, it is helpful to revisit the covenant between God and Avraham at the *Brit Bein Habetarim* (the ‘covenant between the pieces’). This covenant, at which the bitter enslavement was first predicted, provides crucial context for understanding this difficult period of Jewish history, linking it to the concept of a “chosen nation” and the role that God intended it to fulfill. In the conversation at the time of the covenant, Avraham asks God “*Bemah eida?*” How can I know that my descendants will be worthy of inheriting the land? That they will fulfill the daunting task of standing apart from the world’s other nations as a leading light? God responds that Avraham’s descendants will be enslaved in a strange land. The clear implication is that this suffering would hold the key to their ability to succeed as the chosen nation.

Shared Experience, Shared Identity

It is an observable historical phenomenon that collective experiences, particularly shared suffering, play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining a strong shared identity among persecuted minorities. During their years in Egypt, Yaakov’s family grew into a nation. Following this formative period, the nascent nation received the Torah and faced the formidable task of surviving and thriving as an island of monotheism amid a vast sea of paganism. It was therefore essential for them to develop a cast-iron collective identity—one independent of surrounding nations and cultures, resistant to compromise.

This may explain the *kur habarzel*—the iron crucible the Torah uses to describe the formative aspect of the Israelites’ suffering in Egypt. It also aligns with the midrashic emphasis on how the Jews preserved their names, language, food, and clothing—classic markers of cultural identity. For this reason, the Midrash teaches that these attributes were the merit by which the redemption from Egypt was earned.

This independent identity, forged by the common suffering of Egyptian bondage, was reinforced and infused with purpose by God’s miraculous rescue mission. There are two reasons provided by the Torah for the dramatic and lengthy process of the Ten Plagues: to show God’s mastery over the physical world (*Shemot 9:14*: “so that you shall know that there is none like Me in all the land”), and to demonstrate graphically the distinct status of the Jewish nation. Goshen, a predominantly or possibly exclusively Jewish locality, was immune to the plagues, and an array of Midrashim dwell upon the precision with which they distinguished between Jew and Egyptian. These Midrashim indicate both ideas that were to be integrated into the Jewish psyche at the nation’s inception—God’s absolute mastery and transcendence over nature, and the separate status and mission of the Jewish People.

Doorposts and Diplomatic Immunity

The plagues climaxed with the death of the firstborn and the command to the Jews to smear the blood of the *Korban Pesach* (the Pascal offering) on their doorposts to distinguish their houses from those of their Egyptian counterparts. By actively marking their houses as being different, the Jewish People were making a statement that they considered their houses and territory to be disconnected from Egypt. Just as an embassy can be physically located in one country but legally pertain to another, the blood on the doorposts of Jewish homes represented a clear separation from Egyptian sovereignty. It was this separation and rejection of Egyptian values which merited God 'skipping over' Jewish homes which had identified with God and become His "embassies." This concept of positively identifying as a nation of God is so central to the Exodus that it lent its name to the commemorative festival of Pesach.

As a result of this carefully orchestrated departure from Egypt, the strong collective identity forged through common suffering was combined with clear national knowledge of God's absolute mastery over the physical world and a positive national identification as God's nation. When the Red Sea waves came crashing down on their Egyptian pursuers, the Jewish nation continued unscathed towards the grand revelation at Sinai, suitably prepared to embark upon their journey as God's chosen nation.

Can Hatred Be an Act of Kindness?

The Beit Halevi draws upon some of these ideas as part of his analysis of antisemitism, a seemingly illogical phenomenon that has accompanied Jews around the world throughout the centuries. Initially, he is startled by a verse from Tehillim (105:25) which includes the Egyptian hatred and oppression among the acts of kindness that God performed for the Jewish People. He then notes Midrashim that connect the start of the oppression to the Jews' attempts to conceal their circumcision and Jewish identity. His great-grandson and namesake, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, appears to endorse this idea, that a history of persecution and martyrdom has the effect of hardening attitudes towards any form of assimilation which could challenge the distinct identity and values of the Jewish People. Writing in *Tradition Journal*, Rabbi Soloveitchik considered that:

We certainly have not been authorized by our history, sanctified by the martyrdom of millions, to even hint to another faith community that we are mentally ready to revise historical attitudes, to trade favors pertaining to fundamental matters of faith, and to reconcile “some” differences. Such a suggestion would be nothing but a betrayal of our great tradition and heritage and would, furthermore, produce no practical benefit.

The key to understanding both the suffering in Egypt and continued antisemitism through the ages is to view it not as a punishment, but rather as God’s tool to ensure that His promise to Avraham at the *Brit Bein Habetarim* would be observed. It is only as a result of unabated antisemitism, particularly severe at times of heightened assimilation, that the Jews have survived as the chosen nation, retaining the ability to carry out their holy and extremely challenging mission. This idea is given full expression in Radak’s commentary to a passage in Yechezkel (20:32), in which the prophet addresses God’s refusal to countenance Jewish attempts to assimilate among the nations:

But when they disobey My commands, I will strengthen the nations against them ... Israel, whom I took out from the house of slavery to be my treasured nation etc, and I to them a God, My eyes will be constantly on them for good and bad, as it states in the prophecy of Amos (3:2): “Only you have I known from all of the families of the world, therefore I will be attentive to all of your sins.” *And if you wish to depart from My worship, I will not grant permission for this. Even though you will be many years in exile, you will never cease to be a nation before Me ... and with force I will reign over you, and I will purify you ...*

Antisemitism as a Bar to Assimilation

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, in his *Meshech Chochmah*, makes a similar connection between the need to preserve Jewish national identity and the function of antisemitism in preventing assimilation. In his commentary on the *Tochecha* section of Parashat Bechukotai, he develops the theme by highlighting the importance and foresight of Yaakov and his sons in insisting that they be buried in Canaan rather than Egypt, thereby ensuring that their descendants would not lose sight of their distinct origin and destiny. Rav Meir Simcha maintains that these requests were the inspiration for the *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah*, Ezra, and later rabbis of the Mishna to issue rulings that had the effect of maintaining the separate status of the Jewish People. This may be why the decrees against the consumption of non-Jewish wine, bread, and milk were legislated with such gravity and force that they continue to be strictly observed even in situations where they pose no immediate danger to the regular rules of Kashrut.

Writing in the 1920s, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk concludes with an ominous warning: that the assimilation of European Jewry and attitudes such as “Berlin is the new Jerusalem” would lead to a ‘storm’ against the Jews in order to preserve Jewish national identity. This dark prediction was based upon his answer to the fundamental question of where God was during the brutal Egyptian servitude. The response, it would appear, is located within God’s covenant to Avraham at the *Brit Bein Habetarim*.
