

## פרק א:ח-יד - Lesson 2

### The Anatomy of Oppression

#### Goals:

The description of Pharaoh's propaganda and gradual enactments towards enslavements of the Israelites is eerily similar to more modern cases of totalitarian regimes and genocide, especially the Holocaust. The purpose of this lesson is to draw connections between this perek and modern parallels in order to unpack the precise and terse language of the Tanakh as well as appreciate how important it is to learn from history how to recognize and prevent evil.

#### Activity:

1. Recall together the status of the Israelites at the end of Beresheet. They lived in their own town of Goshen and enjoyed the privileged status as guests of Pharaoh. Raise the question of how the Israelites went from good relations to becoming slaves in only a generation? In general, how can people who are neighbors and friends one day become enemies within a short time?

2. Have students split into pairs, read through 8-22 carefully and write down a list of statements and actions of Pharaoh. It should look something like this:

- a) The new Pharaoh forgets the past.
- b) He identifies the Israelites as a nation that is separate from "his nation."
- c) He spreads propaganda that label Israelites as a threat – a fifth column.
- d) Conscripts them into forced labor.
- e) Made Israelites suffer and eventually the Egyptians came to be disgusted by the Israelites.
- f) Harsh labor.
- g) Directive to midwives to murder baby boys.
- h) Directive to all citizens to murder baby boys.

3. Review the list and notice that each step is only a gradual escalation from the one before. Ask: *If Pharaoh's goal was to rid himself of the Israelite threat then why didn't he immediately order all citizens to murder the Israelite boys, or simply order his soldiers to just kill them?* Read Ramban on pasuk 10 (printed in the sourcesheet) and unpack his psychological insights.

4. Discuss the psychological tactics used by totalitarians to convince their subjects to act brutally towards a subgroup of its members.

For homework, have students choose one example of totalitarian genocide in modern history and look for parallels to the steps taken by Pharaoh delineated in the list above. Have them bring in quotes or prepare powerpoint presentation on what they have found. Alternatively, have them read the selections in the accompanying collection of resources.

5. Analyze each step of the list using modern parallels to help illuminate the pesukim and vice versa.

a) Demonstrate with some examples how easy it is to forget even major historical events. Ask, for example, if anyone knows how many people died in the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 (20 to 40 million). It is even easier for a new king to “forget” (or expunge) historical alliances for his own political agenda. This is one reason why we are constantly commanded to remember the redemption from Egypt and why we say “Never forget.” Read Edwin Landau’s description of the boycott in West Prussia and how the boycotters “forgot” the former loyalty of the Jews to the country in *Facing History*, pp. 165-66.

b) Interestingly, it is Pharaoh who is the first to call the Israelites a nation – עם בני ישראל. Compare to the Nuremberg laws that defined who was a Jew, whether or not they identified themselves as Jews.

c) Read Julius Streicher’s speech in *Facing History*, p. 165, labeling the Jews as a threat to Germany. See also p. 166 where Goebbels refers to the Jews in Germany as “guests” who are “misusing our hospitality.”

Note: When Pharaoh fears that Bnei Israel will ועלה מן הארץ, this means that he worries that they will gain ascendancy and take over the country. See Rabbi Shamah’s commentary.

d) This could still be considered legal and a normal act for a king to impose on his subjects, see 1 Kings 5:27. In modern times also, labor camps and internment camps were used by many nations before the Nazi’s innovated death camps.

e) Notice that the order here seems counterintuitive. We’d expect that first the Egyptians would feel disgusted by the Israelites and then as a result of that disgust would torture them. However, the order is the opposite. In fact, once someone tortures and dehumanizes another, the victim then becomes disgusting in his eyes, which in turn makes it easy for the oppressor to continue. Read Alexander Donat’s explanation of the beatings he received while a prisoner at Majdanek in *Facing History*, p. 350.

f) The word פרך is related to the Akkadian word “*pirku*” and is a technical legal term meaning unjust and unreasonable demands that went beyond the right of the king to impose upon his free subjects. This term thus indicates that Pharaoh has now transformed the Israelites into slaves. See further in Rabbi Shamah’s commentary (<http://www.judaicseminar.org/bible/shemot1.pdf>).

h) Cite examples in modern history where civilians turned on their neighbors. Read about the experience of Ellen Switzer in *Facing History*, pp. 175-76, and sources 2 and 3 about the Bosnian war on the first page of the source sheets.

6. Conclude with a discussion of how the insights of this perek apply to current events.

**Further Resources:**

Moshe Halbertal: Yetziat Mizrayim (Leaving Egypt) – Lecture in Hebrew from 2008 at Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Israel – posted on their [website](#).

Nehama Leibowitz, *Shemot* 2, “Come Let Us Deal Shrewdly With Them.”

Margot Stern Strom, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior: Resource Book* (Brookline, 1994). Available at <http://www.facinghistory.org/>