

Was there a coup in Egypt during the Exodus?

Deploying modern political experience, these events could lead to surprising possibilities

How many Pharaohs were there between the time of the Exodus and the time the Hebrews crossed the sea?

The popular read of the story told in the Book of Exodus is about one Pharaoh who changes his policy a number of times due to God's miracles.

But could there have been more than one?

The Pharaoh with whom Moses and Aharon engaged during the first nine plagues makes clear in their last reported bilateral meeting that this is the last time they will see each other. Moses agrees: "And Pharaoh said unto him: 'Get thee from me, take heed to thyself, see my face no more; for in the day thou see my face thou shalt die. And Moses said: 'Thou hast spoken well; I will see thy face again no more.'"

Then comes the tenth plague that kills the firstborn, and following it, a surprise: a meeting between Pharaoh and Moses. This inconsistency can be reconciled if this is a different Pharaoh.

Moreover, it is made clear that all firstborns die, including Pharaoh's firstborn. Indeed, Pharaoh was likely a firstborn himself. We learn from multiple sources about a firstborn-based ruling system, including in Laben's scolding of Jacob, and later in the Hebrews' transition of power from the firstborns to Levis.

Pharaoh dying in the firstborn plague would lead to the immediate crowning that night of a new Pharaoh. This is further supported by the word "rose": "And Pharaoh rose up in the night."

This terminology was used to describe a new Pharaoh taking power before: "A new king has risen over Egypt who did not know Joseph."

Indeed, the behavior of the "second Pharaoh" seems different. Unlike his past behavior, he does not try to negotiate the terms of the Exodus. Similarly, in the past, Pharaoh conceded only in order to stop a plague. Suddenly, this Pharaoh concedes without a threat and without getting anything in return. (The



MODERN-DAY 'coup': Egyptian pro-democracy supporters gather in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011, during the Arab Spring. (Mohamed Abd El-Ghany/File/Reuters)

firstborn are already dead.)

Moreover, in a startling departure from past behavior, this Pharaoh asks to be blessed! We know blessings have strong meaning; much of the Book of Exodus deals with the power of blessings, and Jacob blessed the Pharaoh of his time.

Does the "The Hebrew Question" dominate Egyptian politics?

We know there were political camps in Hebrew politics. There was the "remain" camp, led by the likes of Dotan and Aviram, who wanted to be in Egypt; and there was the "exit" camp led by Moses.

It is likely that there were camps in Egypt as well. "The Hebrew Question" was no doubt a significant issue for Egyptians. Should we disengage and let them go – a divorce, a clear break, ending decades of Hebrews living in Egypt? (The pro-Israel camp). Or should we keep them? After all, it seems the Egyptian economy is dependent on Hebrew slaves.

As the plagues progress, we can ascertain that the entirety of life in Egypt is affected by "The Hebrew Question": economic, social, health, security and eventually an issue of life and death.

In this column, we have discussed various lessons from Theodor Herzl that can be applied to today, and to understand the past. One is the limited power that even kings have relative to their people, as Herzl wrote to refute the view that monarchs can defend Jews from

over-enslavement of the Israelites was based on a fear that they will "rise from the land."

As Herzl reflected, there are built-in tensions between the interests of the government/monarch and that of the people. Israeli singer Meir Ariel, who sang about the Exodus, said that even in a democratic system, "There is no such thing as the rule of the people. The people are always ruled."

Did some in Egypt say, "Let's get someone in there who knows what he is doing. Someone who will rule his people and not be ruled by them?"

Indeed, when we next hear about the Pharaoh, he again behaves very differently than the one who was amicable to Moses.

The key words that support the possibility there was a coup are "was told": "And it was told to the king of Egypt that the people fled." If it was the same Pharaoh, he would have known, since he is the one who sent them out. But a new "third Pharaoh" needs to be briefed.

The nature of the briefing provides additional supporting evidence to the "coup theory": Unlike in the course of the nine plagues, when God hardened the Pharaoh's heart a few times, here, we are told that it is the Pharaoh who attempts to turn the pro-Israel Egyptians! "The heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned toward the people."

In what could be viewed as a "dramatic address to the nation," this Pharaoh does what some new leaders (even new CEOs) are advised to do: Chastise the previous regime to lower the expectation base. He scolds the decision to "let Israel go from serving us."

In addition, coups happen when the ruler is not perceived as legitimate. A non-firstborn is likely an unprecedented "brand new thing." Moreover, coups happen when there is turmoil and people are not happy, as certainly was the case with the Egyptians burning their dead.

The idea of a coup in the lead-up to the Egyptians chasing the Israelites is speculative and not supported by commentators nor Jewish tradition. However, it is plausible enough to be used as an exercise in applying our contemporary experience to better understand the Torah, and vice versa.

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The three Pharaohs theory

We know that coup d'etats were a viable risk in Egypt. After all, the initial

The siren of Jewish history



JUDAISM & MODERNITY
MOSHE TARAGIN

Standing silently in the Gush Etzion cemetery, listening to a wailing siren blaring its sad howl across the mountains of history on Remembrance Day, is one of the most spiritual two minutes of my life as a redeemed Jew. Cramped in a crowded graveyard, surrounded by soldiers and citizens, I feel at one with my people, the bereaved families, and the memories of so many fallen heroes who died sanctifying God's name.

From schools to office buildings, from highways to farmlands, from supermarkets to beaches, Israelis halt their routine, stand at attention, and quietly ponder Jewish history and the sorrow of our national struggle.

Feeling this national and historical unity, and sharing our collective pain, feels spiritually uplifting and religiously meaningful. In some ways, this catharsis and spiritual heightening feel oddly similar to my post-Yom Kippur spirituality. It is odd because a siren does not possess any religious source and isn't anchored to any classical Jewish traditions. The siren belongs to a set of national symbols that our modern state has adopted.

Other Remembrance Day symbols include military columns, honor guards of soldiers, and laying wreaths of flowers, along with Independence Day symbols, which include military flyovers, lighting torches, and outdoor hikes and barbecues.

In addition, our people have generated a magnificent playlist of "national" Israeli songs, both melodies of sorrow and tunes of renewal. Though these songs are almost completely devoid of biblical references, they feel deeply soulful and even spiritual, as they voice our hopes, dreams, longings, sadness and pride. They may not contain Torah words, but they effuse Jewish *neshama* (soul).

Understandably, many religious Jews are uncomfortable with national symbols devoid of any traditional or religious resonance. Reciting *Hallel* or chanting psalms is one thing, but singing secular lyrics or standing silently during a siren has no religious reference points. If religion lies at the core of our identity, shouldn't all symbols be based solely on religious rituals or biblical references?

In part, this is why some Orthodox Jews commemorate the Holocaust on the Tenth of Tevet through fasting and *selichot* (penitential prayers) rather than on Holocaust Remembrance Day, through torch lighting and sirens. For them, religion is the only repository from which symbolism may be drawn.

National symbols have no place in the imagination of a religious Jew. We stand silently during *Shmoneh Eser* prayers but not during loud sirens. We say *Kaddish* but do not lay wreaths of flowers. We light Shabbat and *havdalah* candles but do not light public torches at national ceremonies. If it doesn't stem from religious roots, it can't be spiritually valid.

The larger issue

Validating and internalizing national symbolism forces us to confront a larger issue: For some reason, our final redemption was streamed through secular nationalism. Given the secular nature of our state, it adopted secular imagery common to many nations and unrelated to Judaism. Sirens, flowers and songs are all cross-cultural and international symbols. People around the world stand silently at attention to mark



FLOWERS, SIRENS and songs are all cross-cultural, international symbols. (Kobi Gideon/Flash90)

Why did God decide to redeem us with a secular nationalist movement?

their losses, and they sing wistful songs to express their national longings. There is nothing uniquely Jewish about either.

Ultimately, the question of nationalistic imagery and symbolism raises the larger specter of a redemption process that evolved from an awakening of secular Jewish nationalism. Why did God decide to redeem us with a secular nationalist movement rather than through a religious revival? Of course, we will only know the answer to that question when redemption concludes, but here are some preliminary thoughts.

The fall of religion

The 19th century witnessed the gradual collapse of organized religion. As humanity advanced into the modern era – achieving cultural enlightenment, political democracy and personal freedom – organized religion was cast as the great culprit of human history, responsible for wars, death and the suppression of the human spirit. By popularizing free thought, the 19th century inaugurated the secular city. Darwin, Freud and others accelerated this religious free fall, ushering in the modern world of secularism and atheism.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and so do humans. As religious identity frayed, something else had to replace it within the human imagination. Traditionally, human identity was forged upon religious belief; but as religious affiliation declined, numerous ideologies were conceived to replace it as the basis of identity.

Marxism, capitalism, and socialism were just a few of the newly emergent ideologies; however, it was nationalism that became the dominant system of thought and identity. For the first time in history, people more deeply identified with their common national heritage than they did with religious traditions and belonging.

During the 19th century, for the first time "Gustav" in Paris defined himself first as a Frenchman, who just happened to be Catholic. Likewise, "John" in London viewed himself primarily as an Englishman, who happened to be Protestant. National identity replaced religious identity and, as the fever of nationalism surged, it stressed the old world order.

During the second half of the century, nationalism sparked numerous local wars, and ultimately it erupted into World War I – the great war of nationalism. Over the course of a century, humanity underwent a cultural lobotomy. Religion was no longer popular or

authoritative.

The Jewish world was no different. The 19th century witnessed the first mass defection of Jews from classic Orthodox Judaism. In the past, individual Jews had opted out of Jewish religion and destiny, but never before had entire communities willingly abandoned classic Orthodox lifestyles.

The century of religious collapse caused severe spasms within the Jewish world. New religious denominations emerged, such as Conservative and Reform Judaism, each in its own way breaking with tradition. Additionally, millions of other Jews became assimilated both within the cosmopolitan European culture and within the dusty prairies of the New World.

Millions of Jews were slated for historical oblivion. They had embarked on paths that led them far astray from Judaism and, sadly, for many, far astray from Jewish identity. Facing historical extinction, they could no longer be captivated by classic religious inspiration. Religion was not the spirit of the age. Nationalism had replaced it.

A divine impulse

At this stage, God evoked an ancient spirit. From the dawn of Jewish history, He had programmed within the Jewish heart the ability to identify with Jewish history, peoplehood and land, even in the absence of religious commitment. This primal spirit lay dormant for thousands of years but was awakened by God in the 19th century, just when history depended upon it.

There are millions of Jews whose sole affiliation with Judaism is their love and commitment to the State of Israel. Their nationalistic loyalty is merely the hidden hand of God working through the tapestry of history and human culture, preserving millions of lost Jews for whom religion is no longer compelling.

One day, God will step out from behind the screen of history. One day, His unmistakable presence will revive toughened hearts and awaken deadened religious impulses. One day, national identity will provide a platform for religious renewal.

Until that day, we continue to participate in national expressions of Jewish pride, and we continue to fuse them with our religious identity.

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