

Parashat Bo: Immoral Complicity

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Shemot 12:30	
וַיָּקָם פַּרְעֹה לַיְלָה הוּא וְכָל-עַבְדָּיו וְכָל-מִצְרַיִם וְתָהָי צַעֲקָה גְדֹלָה בְּמִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֵין בֵּית אִשָּׁר אֵין-שָׁם מֵת:	And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians—because there was a loud cry in Egypt; for there was no house where there was not someone dead.

1. No Innocent Bystanders

Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 7:6	
תני בשם ר' נתן ביום שהיה בכורו של אחד מהם מת היה צר איקונין שלו בתוך ביתו, ואותו היום היתה נידקת ונשחקת ומזרת והיה קשה עליו כאלו אותו היום קברו. אמר ר' יודן לפי שהיו המצרים קוברים בתוך בתיהם והיו הכלבים נכנסין דרך הכוכין ומשמטין את הבכורות מבין המתים ומתעתעים בהם, והיה קשה עליהם כאלו אותו היום קברו.	A Tanna said in the name of R. Nathan: On the day that the firstborn of one of [the Egyptians] would die, [the Egyptian] would carve an icon of him and place it in the house. On that day, [the icon] was crushed, pulverized, and scattered, and it was as hard on the [Egyptian] as if he was burying his son again. R. Yudan said: Since the Egyptians would entomb [their dead] in their own houses, [on that day] the dogs went into the catacombs, pulled out the [bodies of] the firstborn from their tombs, and tore into them. It was as hard on [each Egyptian] as if he was burying his son again.

Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, Tractate Pischa 13:8	
דָּבָר אַחֵר: לְלַמֶּדֶךָ שֶׁכָּל גִּזְרוֹת שֶׁהָיָה פֶּרַעַה גּוֹזֵר עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, הָיוּ הַשְּׁבוּיִין שֶׁמִּחִין בָּהֶם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: (משלי יז, ה) "שִׂמְחָה לְאִיד לֹא יִנְקָה"..."וְלֹא שְׁבוּיִים בְּלֶבֶד, אֲלֵא אֶפְלוּ עַבְדִּים וְשִׁפְחוֹת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: (שמות יא, ה) "עַד בְּכוֹר הַשְּׁפָחָה אֲשֶׁר אַחֲרֵי הָרָחִים".	And we are hereby apprised that the captives rejoiced in all the decrees inflicted by Pharaoh upon Israel, (for which they were punished) in keeping with (Proverbs 17:5) "He who rejoices in (another's) misfortune will not be absolved"...And not only captives alone (were thus smitten), but even men-servants and maid-servants, viz. (Exodus 17:5) "... until the first-born of the maid-servant."

2. Moral Decadence

Rashi on Shemot 12:30	
כי אין בית אשר אין שם מת. יש שם בכור, מת, אין שם בכור, גדול שבבית קרוי בכור, שנאמר "אף אני בכור אתנהו" (תהילים פ"ט). דבר אחר,	There was no house where there was not one dead- If there was a firstborn there, he died: if there was no firstborn there, then the chief person in the house died because the chief person in the house is called בכור, as it is said, (Psalms 89:28) "I also will appoint him to be a

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

<p>מִצְרִיּוֹת מִזְנוֹת תַּחַת בְּעֲלִיָּהֶן וַיִּלְדוּת מִרְוָקִים פְּנִיָּיִם, וְהָיוּ לָהֶם בְּכוֹרוֹת הַרְבֵּה, פְּעָמִים חֲמִשָּׁה לְאִשָּׁה אֶחָת, כָּל אֶחָד בְּכוֹר לְאָבִיו:</p>	<p>בכור." Another explanation is: the Egyptian women were unfaithful to their husbands and bore children from young men, unmarried, and thus they (the Egyptian men) had many firstborn sons; sometimes there were five to one woman, each being the firstborn to his own father.</p>
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Siftei Hakhamim on Shemot 12:30	
<p>ד"א מצריות מזנות תחת בעליהן כו'. וקשה והלא גם עתה יאמרו משה בדאי הוא, שהרי גם אחרים שאינן בכורים מתים. וי"ל שמשה יאמר להם שכולן בכורים היו, לפי שהיו נשותיהן מזנות וכו'. וכל זה כדי להראות שפלותם וטומאותם. [מהרש"ל]:</p>	<p>An [Rashi's] alternate explanation: The Egyptian women were unfaithful. . . . This raises a difficulty: Now too, the Egyptians will say that Moshe is a liar, for sons who are not first-born were dying. The answer is: Moshe will tell them that they are all first-born because the women were unfaithful. And all this was in order to show the Egyptians' lowliness and impurity. (<i>Maharshal</i>)</p>

Midrash Tehillim 78:11	
<p>ר' הונא בשם ר' איבון אומר כל מכה ומכה שהיתה באה על המצריים במדה במשקל היא באה עליהן. לא חשך ממות נפשם. (דבר אחר) אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי כל מכה שהיתה באה עליהן דבר שפע עליהן. וחיייתם לדבר הסגיר. ויך כל בכור במצרים. אמר רבי אבא בר אחא בכור לאיש בכור לאשה בכור לבהמה בכור לכל ואם לא היה לו בכור אפוטרוטפוס שבבית מת שנאמר (שמות יב ל) כי אין בית אשר אין שם מת:</p>	<p>Rabbi Huna in the name of Rabbi Ivon says that every blow that was inflicted on the Egyptians was measured and weighed, and it was inflicted upon them accordingly. Their souls were not spared from death. Another explanation: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said that every blow that was inflicted upon them was a specific punishment for a specific sin. And they survived only because of God's protection. And all the firstborn in Egypt were struck. Rabbi Abba bar Acha says that the firstborn refers to the firstborn son of a man, the firstborn daughter of a woman, the firstborn of an animal, and the firstborn of everything. And if someone did not have a firstborn, the death of someone else in their household served as atonement, as it is stated: "For there was no house where there was not someone dead" (Exodus 12:30).....</p>

3. Immoral Complicity

Hannah Arendt, <i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i>	
<p>The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.</p>	
Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, Parashat Bo, "And There Shall Be A Great Cry Throughout" (5781)	
<p>When a population is subject to oppression, everyone reveals his violent instincts and casts thorns and thistles in the eyes of the oppressed people. No ruler can enslave a population by himself...</p>	
<p>Big Question: How complicit do you think ordinary Egyptians were in the oppression of the Israelites by Pharaoh? Does it matter?</p>	