

From Joseph to Joseph Süß Oppenheimer: Court Jews and the New Anti-Semitism

Pesach II 2018

The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

In previous generations, the story of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer was common knowledge. Today, I suspect that his name is known only vaguely – if at all. He was one of the most important court Jews of his era. Born in Heidelberg in 1698, Oppenheimer showed an early aptitude for business and a precocious sense of ambition. He was introduced to Prince Karl Alexander in 1732 and soon became his banker and most trusted adviser. When Alexander became Duke of Wuerttemberg in 1733, Oppenheimer became his chief economist. He was responsible for financial and tax reform and went on to establish monopolies on salt, wine and tobacco.

His outsize power and influence, and his being a Jew, led to deep resentment among a number of interest groups and the duke's enemies. When they leveled accusations that he had minted substandard coins and profited in other illicit ways, he invited an investigation and offered to step down. But Karl Alexander stood by Oppenheimer and promoted him to his privy councilor of finance.

Every school child knows that we drink four cups wine at the Seder in connection with the four languages of redemption that we read at the beginning of **פרשת וארא**. But the Talmud Yerushalmi offers a very different explanation as to why we drink **ארבע כוסות**.

According to R. Yehoshua ben Levi, the four cups of wine correspond to the four times that the word **כוס** is mentioned by the **שר המשקים**, Yosef's prison-mate in Egypt.

On one level, this makes perfect sense. If we're thinking about where the story of the Exodus begins, tracing it back to Yosef is quite intuitive. If not for his reputation as a dream interpreter, he never would have risen to such political heights so quickly. The narrative of **יציאת מצרים** inevitably leads back to Yosef.

But maybe returning to Yosef can also help us crack the code of one of the great unsolved mysteries of ancient Jewish history. What happens in the gap between **בראשית** and **שמות**?

When the book of Genesis closes, the Jews are flying high. In the midst of famine and economic depression, the sons of Yaakov and their families sleep under the blanket of imperial protection and rise each morning in the knowledge that their safety is guaranteed.

And yet when Exodus begins, the Israelites have fallen to the lowest rung of society – debased and demoted to a slave class – suffering an interminable fate under a tyrannical autocracy.

ויקם מלך חדש אשר לא ידע את יוסף is inadequate as an explanation. Even powerful rulers are only as powerful as the people they govern. The seeds of the Israelites' oppression must have already been sown long before the Pharaoh of our story comes to power. How did it happen? And how did it happen so quickly?

The Torah doesn't say. But it furnishes us with two clues that allow us to at least hazard a guess.

First, when the brothers first meet Pharaoh, they say something very specific about their plan:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵל-פַּרְעֹה, לְגֹיֵר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, כִּי-אֵין מְרֻעָה לִצְאוֹן אֲשֶׁר לַעֲבֹדֶיךָ, כִּי-כִבֵּד הָרַעַב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן

They say: We've come לְגֹיֵר – to sojourn in the land. We're guests and we have no intention of settling here. Famines don't go on indefinitely. When the situation improves, they insinuate, they'll return to their homes.

Their trip to Egypt was intended to be something short term. Maybe Yaakov stays to live out his days in the company of his favored son. But when the famine ends a short time after their arrival in מִצְרַיִם, why don't the brothers go back to Canaan? Seventeen years later, what are they still doing in Egypt?

In fact, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us how quickly their original plan faded away.

וַיָּשָׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, בְּאֶרֶץ גִּשְׁוֹן; וַיֵּאָחֲזוּ בָהּ, וַיִּפְרוּ וַיִּרְבוּ מְאֹד.

Within the comfort of their new land, the travelers had become residents. Overly confident in their protector and overly complacent in their new home, they let their guard down and lost sight of the bigger picture.

The second clue comes from the very last chapter of סֵפֶר בְּרָאשִׁית. Remember Yosef's last words to his brothers.

וַיִּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף, אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר: פָּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם, וְהֵעֲלֶתֶם אֶת-עַצְמוֹתַי מִצְהָר.

He prevails on them to swear. Promise me, he says, that when the time comes you'll take my bones out of Egypt.

This is a formula we know.

- Avraham asks Eliezer to swear he won't find a bride for Yitzchak among the Canaanites; and Eliezer swears.
- Yaakov asks Yosef to swear that he'll bury him in Israel; and Yosef swears.

So when Yosef asks his brothers to swear that they'll re-inter him in the land of his fathers, we know exactly how they should respond. But instead of telling us they swore, the Torah betrays only their silence. Yosef never forgot himself and Yosef – for all his Egyptian trappings – never forgot his destiny.

וְאֵת שֵׁם הַשָּׁנִי, קָרָא אֶפְרַיִם: כִּי-הִפְרַנִּי אֱלֹהִים, בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנָנִי.

But whether his brothers shared that faith remains an open question. Why else would they have allowed themselves to become so ensconced in a land that was not their destination? Was it perhaps, because they had become too comfortable – and as a result – too vulnerable?

Jewish history – beginning with Yosef – has taught us time and again that comfort and vulnerability can be measured in proportion to one another: And a meteoric rise is almost always followed by an equally precipitous decline.

When Karl Alexander died suddenly, on March 11, 1737, the Jews of Stuttgart were placed under arrest. Oppenheimer attempted to flee, but was arrested forthwith. He was tried for fraud, embezzlement and high treason. But the decisive factor in his conviction was the fact that he was a Jew. Sentenced to death, Oppenheimer was offered numerous opportunities to convert to Christianity. Having lived a life of excess and extravagance, Oppenheimer lived his last days as a pious penitent. When he was led to the gallows, he was given one last chance to convert. He responded by reciting the *Shema*.

בכל דור ודור עומדין עלינו לכלותינו

In the living memory of the Holocaust, who could have dreamed that anti-Semitism would be alive and well in the Western world in the 21st century?

The price of liberty is eternal vigilance. The moment we become oblivious to the danger is the moment we risk becoming victims of it.

Imbedded within the four cups of wine is a sobering reminder: There is no time or place when we can declare that we've graduated from the world's oldest hatred.

From Jeremy Corbyn to the murder of an 85 year old Holocaust survivor this week in Paris to events in our own backyard.... We shouldn't need more reminders.

I'm not saying we should be alarmist. We've weathered these storms before והקב"ה מצילנו מידם.

But neither is faith a license to bury our heads in the sand.

So allow me to suggest three practical responses to the new anti-Semitism which is of course not new at all.

First, if the new anti-Semitism is cleverly disguised as anti-Zionism, then we need to double down on our pro-Zionism. Israel stands taller today than she ever did in the past. Her economy is booming. Religious life is flourishing. And Israel has become a world leader in high tech and innovation. But that doesn't mean she doesn't need our support. When opportunities arise to tell the story of Israel or to be champions of the Jewish land, we have to seize them.

Second, we have to remember where we are in the grand sweep of Jewish history.

A year ago, a Jewish teacher named Benjamin Amsellem was on his way to shul in Marseille when he was attacked by a Muslim teenager brandishing a knife. The only thing Amsellem was holding was a leather-bound Chumash. He used it to deflect the blade and save himself while his attacker was later arrested.

It's an actual story, but it's also a powerful metaphor.

For the Torah itself reminds us how easy it is to mistake the desert oasis for the Promised Land. Whenever anti-Semitism rears its ugly head, it has to serve as a reminder that we are travelers. And if we happen to be blessed with the safety and liberty and prosperity in this great land through which we travel, we should duly acknowledge those blessings and never take them for granted. But we also have to recognize that they are not everlasting.

The modern State of Israel is not yet a bastion of security. But it is our homeland. And we're always safer when we are home.

We Jews of the diaspora most assuredly have a role to play in the Haggadah's unfolding story of the Jewish people. But we can never forget the setting of the final scene. לשנה הבאה בירושלים

And finally, to combat anti-Semitism, we have to stand together as a people. Recognizing the threats that loom from without, we can't afford to spend our time bickering within. The Seder is the one occasion of the year when all Jews can be counted. There's no bar to entry. Anyone can just show up and be a participant. So it should serve as our model. With enough planning and forethought it really is possible to literally or figuratively bring Jews of different stripes together around a common table.

Our ultimate salvation will come from Hashem. The roadmap for how to arrive at the moment of that salvation comes from us.