

Torah Table Talk

How We View Egypt

Parshat Va'era

Exodus 1:1 – 6:1 / Isaiah 27:6 – 28:13



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

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This passage is taken from Ezekiel's oracles against the nations (chapters 25-32). During the years just before the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE, the Land of Judah found itself trapped in a geo-political tug of war between Babylonia in the north and Egypt in the south. In 597 BCE, the Babylonian king, Nebuccadnezer, conquered Judah and carried off King Jehoiachin and eight thousand exiles. Ezekiel was among the people who were taken away. The people remaining in Judah believed that their nation had to exert its independence and rebel against the powerful Babylonians. They made a treaty with the Egyptians which ultimately proved disastrous. Ten years later the Temple would be destroyed and the land decimated. During the interim years Ezekiel counseled his people not to make treaties with the Egyptians. He predicted that the Egyptian would be destroyed and only then would the people come to recognize the power of God. The Jewish people continued to have an ambivalent and complex relationship with Egypt. As we look back on our history how should we judge that relationship today?

Ezekiel 29:2 -3

O mortal, turn your face against Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and prophecy against him and against all Egypt. Speak these words "Thus said the Lord, God: I am going to deal with you O Pharaoh king of Egypt, mighty monster, sprawling in your channels, who said, "My Nile is my own; I made it for myself..."

Radak 29:3

I made it myself (*asitini*): I made and fashioned the Nile to water my land; or the meaning of the word *asitini* could be 'I made and fashioned myself with wisdom and understanding so that I became the great king.' In contrast (we read in the book of 1 Samuel 12:6) we read about God "Who made Moses and Aaron." This means that 'he made them great.' The Aramaic translation of the Bible (Targum) translates this, "I will send my anger against you, Pharaoh, King of Egypt, who is like the great crocodile who swims up the river for he has said 'This land is mine; I have subdued it!'"

Leviticus 18:2-3

Speak to the Israelite People and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws.

Leviticus 19:34

When a stranger resides with you in your land you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens, you shall love him as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I the Lord am your God

Deuteronomy 23:7-8

You shall not hate an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land. The children of the third generation that are born unto them may enter into the assembly of the Lord.

Exodus Rabbah 3:12

And the Lord said unto Moses: Put forth your hand and take it by the tale, (Exodus 4). We have already explained what the serpent implied for Moses; but what did this sign signify for Israel? R. Eleazar opined that the rod was converted into a serpent is a symbol of Pharaoh who was called a serpent, as it says: Behold, I am against thee, Pharaoh King of Egypt, the great-dragon (Ezekiel 29:3). He is also referred to as the leviathan the slant serpent (Isaiah. 27:1), because he hit Israel. God said to him [Moses]: 'Dost you Pharaoh who is like a serpent? Well, you will smite him with the rod and in the end he will become like wood; and just as the rod cannot bite, so he will no longer bite.'

Midrash Tanhuma, Buber. Va-era 16

Go early in the morning: Pharaoh made himself a God as it says, "My Nile is my own; I made myself..." (Ezekiel, Chapter 29). He said "I have created myself." The Holy One said (to Moses,) Since he has made himself a God, We will let him know that he is only mortal. He goes out to take care of his 'daily needs' in the morning, so go and grab him and let him know he is only human. What did Moses do? The Holy One told him to go out (and meet Pharaoh) early in the morning (by the river,) Moses grabbed hold of Pharaoh. Pharaoh said "Let go of me and let me take care of 'my needs' and afterwards I'll talk to you!" Moses said (to him) "Does a god have to take care of his daily needs?" That is why God told him to go to Pharaoh early in the morning to remind him that he was only human.

Around the Table

1. Despite the fact that the people of Israel were vanquished and living in Babylonia, the prophet Ezekiel sides with his conqueror and not with the Egyptians? Why? Why do you think he is so critical of the Egypt? To what extent do you think his decision was based on practical considerations or historical memory?
2. What attitude do the various verses quoted from the Torah take toward the Egyptians? Do you think the Israelites had reason to show anger and hostility toward their Egyptian neighbors? What reason does the Torah give for being conciliatory toward the nation that oppressed the Israelites?
3. What reasons does Ezekiel give for criticizing the Egyptians? What is his complaint about Pharaoh? Why does Pharaoh use the image of the "mighty monster" to depict the Egyptians? In what ways is Moses' Pharaoh similar to Ezekiel's Pharaoh?
4. What attitude do you think Jews should have today toward Germans, Poles, Austrians and other ethnic and national groups that persecuted the Jewish people? What can we learn from the Torah's attitude toward the Egyptians for our personal and national relations as Jews?

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*