

January 5, 2013 Shemot, Why Did the Egyptians Hate the Jews?

"Over what we Jews like to call winter break, I was in Charleston, South Carolina, where there was the Renaissance Festival of Ideas. And there, in addition to participating in various panels on different issues, I got to hear a number of speakers all across the spectrum, religious, political, relational, on all sorts of topics. And one of the speakers that I had a chance to hear, whom I had read, but I had never heard her speak, was Deborah Tannen, who is a linguist and has written a number of books, the most famous one of which is called "You Just Don't Understand" about the different ways in which men and women communicate. Now, I'm not going to talk about that today, although it's a subject that fascinates me and I could talk about it a lot.

But instead, I want to talk about the fact that she said that differences in communication happen not only between men and women, between younger and older, and between different nationalities. And she gave some examples, but also even regionally, different cultures. And she gave the example of her discussion with a friend who came from Charleston, South Carolina. She said, "Now, I'm a New York Brooklyn Jew." So the first thing you need to know about this is that when you talk to someone else, there is a difference in conversational pauses. Some people wait longer after someone finishes before they speak. Brooklyn Jews don't wait.

As the person is placing the period at the end of their sentence, you speak. She said, and one of the misunderstandings that people have is that conversational pause. One person will walk away and say, "That guy never shuts up." And the other person will walk away and say, "My God, she has nothing to say." That has nothing to do with what I wanted to say. I just thought it was interesting. But she said she was having a conversation with a friend of hers from Charleston and she said to him, "What do you think of this guy whom they both knew?" And the other person said, "Well, I don't know him very well. What do you think?" And she said, "I think he's a jerk." And the other person said, "That's what I said." And she asked a friend of hers from Charleston, "If I say to you, when you ask me about someone, I don't know him very well, what does that mean?" And the other person said, "That means he's no darn good." She said, "I don't understand.

How could that mean?" He said, "Well, you understand if you know that I know the person at all, then if I found something good to say about them, I'm obligated to say that good thing. If I tell you I don't know them very well, that means I know nothing about them that's good that I could tell you. Therefore, you can assume that the person's no darn good." This lets you know that in order to know what someone is saying, you have to know a lot. It's not so simple. And one of her principles is that people actually ... When you say to somebody, "Why don't you say what you mean?" People always say what they mean, but you have to understand a lot to know what it is that they mean.

So armed with this experience recently, I reread the portion this morning where Pharaoh says about the Israelites, "We better take care of them because they're becoming numerous." And I thought to myself, "What does he mean? What could that possibly mean? I mean, there are lots of different groups in Egypt. Why is it that the Israelites are singled out for being numerous and the consequences of that are so dire? In other words, why did the Egyptians hate the Israelites?" And I think if we understand that, or at least if we speculate about it, we'll understand something about antisemitism in general, which is important to understand because remember that antisemitism is not about the behavior of the hated, it's about the psychology of the hater. In other words, antisemitism is not about Jews. It's about people who hate Jews. It affects us, but it's not something that we control.

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So what is it about the Israelites that ticked Pharaoh off, that caused him to initiate this program first of slavery and then of genocide? Well, first of all, and most centrally and important, one of the things that is built into the psychology of the human character is suspicion of the other. When someone is very unlike you, you wonder what they're like because you can't immediately identify with them. This goes back to the question of how we communicate. When you don't understand what someone means when they speak, you get a little anxious and worried, because if you can't internalize and identify with the other person, then you don't know what that person means, what they'll do, what they intend, what they think, and that makes us uncomfortable. So when someone comes into your orbit and is not like you, has different habits, different beliefs, different character, many people, not all, but many people's first reaction is suspicion, distrust, and even hatred.

This is something that you're aware of that we battle all the time in the United States. Because we're an amalgam of different groups all in one place, the principle of learning to understand and tolerate and live with people who are unlike you has become the cardinal principle of the country, but it has to be repeated every single day.

So one of the things that Pharaoh sees is that here is a group that lives among us that is not like us. They have different ideas and different strategies for dealing with life and different cultural patterns and different family life. And I don't like that because they're not like me. Throughout Jewish history, this has been a dilemma that Jews have dealt with because we've usually lived as the single minority among a much larger culture. So there were many countries in the world in which there were Jews and Muslims, or Jews and Christians, and we were identifiable as the group that wasn't like everybody else.

One of the reasons, maybe the reason why Jews have done better in America is because it's not Jews and another group. We're so many different groups that we're one among many, as opposed to a dominant nationality and then the Jews. So that would be enough, but it gets much more complicated and goes much deeper into human psychology because if you ask yourself, why do you hate people that you enslave? After all, you control them. Why must you hate them? Why does Pharaoh become genocidal about a people that after all are already enslaved? What does he have to worry about? And then the answer is that nobody likes the people to whom they have done wrong.

When you do something wrong to someone else, you would think you should like them better, but it doesn't work that way because they stand there as a constant reminder of what you have done and people don't like to be reminded of their wrongs. Moreover, the Jewish people have not only represented what the world has done wrong, but also remember as the people who gave the world the Torah, the 10 commandments, the idea of one God, we represent something even worse to human beings, which is we represent conscience. When you're the people that has brought a group of laws that tells people you should not do this, how fond of you are you of people who say what you're doing is wrong?

Nobody, as Maurice Samuel said so beautifully when asked why the people hate the Jewish people, he said, "Nobody likes their alarm clock." So even the Jewish people has in fact awoken the conscience of the world or at least tried to, of course we would be disliked, not only that, but even inside of our own community, Judaism makes Jews uncomfortable for the same reason. You want to hear one of the most common phrases that you hear in America in the 20th and 21st century? "Don't be judgmental." Which by the way, is a judgment. Judgmentalism is bad. That's a judgment, but human beings make judgments all the time. You can't not be judgmental. You can be less judgmental. You can be not petty. You cannot

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go around disapproving of the way someone talks and someone dresses and so on. I mean, there are ways to be open and accepting, but not to judge.

If I tell you antisemitism is bad, are you going to tell me, "don't be judgmental"?

And since Judaism tried to urge on the world the idea that certain things needed to be judged, eliminating them in some ways was eliminating the need to listen to your conscience. This goes very deep, but it makes sense even in the context of the Exodus story, because the Egyptians knew, as by the way, did the Americans when they enslaved Africans, they knew that the presence of that slave in front of me is a constant challenge to the integrity of my convictions and my conscience. And part of the hatred of the group that you have wrong is because they stand as a rebuke, as a reminder of what you have done. I don't think there's anyone who somewhere doesn't know that part of the hostility that Israel is subject to in Europe is because the existence of Israel is a constant reminder of what happened in Europe not very long ago.

And thus, Shakespeare is exactly right, "conscience does make cowards of us all". The fact that we know that we've done wrong instead of confronting us makes us more likely to hide behind ourselves by disliking the person who reminds us of our wrong. And that, I think, is really what's underneath Pharaoh's phrase, "They're becoming too numerous for us. They're overwhelming us. I can't stand it. I don't want to go to bed every night thinking about this people that I've enslaved." This people remember that not so long ago, saved Egypt because that's what Joseph did. He saved Egypt. So imagine a people that saved you and then you enslaved. What human conscience could bear that and Pharaoh can't. So better to eliminate them, that's the only way that you don't have to face them anymore.

Now, I don't want to suggest to you that this is a thorough analysis or a complete explanation of the phenomenon of hatred of the Jewish people. There is no single explanation or series of explanations that is comprehensive enough and complicated enough to explain this phenomenon that has happened now for thousands of years, over hundreds of cultures. But I want to remind you of this: the reason in part that Judaism has made humanity uncomfortable is because Judaism insists on making humanity better. Waking it up just like an alarm clock. That's what Rebi Nachman of Breslov said, who was the great storyteller of the Hasidic tradition. He said, "Other people tell stories to put people to sleep. I tell stories to wake people up." That's what our story is supposed to do. We tell stories to wake people up and all of us, Jews and non-Jews, feel more comfortable when our consciences are asleep.

So what do we learn from the beginning of the Exodus story? We learned that human beings have a hard time being challenged to be better, but that the only antidote to that is to challenge them over and over and over again. And sometimes that will bring on you the dislike of individuals, of communities, of people, but that is the fate of anybody who believes that it is better to go through the world awake than it is asleep.

That's our legacy to the world, to try to be a people that lives life with our eyes open, listening for what is said and what is not said, and bringing into a world where there is distrust of the other, embrace of the other, in a world in which there is no faith in human beings, faith in human beings, a world in which people and cultures seem random, the truth and the belief that we were placed here for a specific mission and a specific destiny. "What have you sent me here for?" Moses says to God in this morning's Parsha, and the answer is clear, to make my world better. It won't be easy and it won't be quick, but it is sacred and it is, we believe, what God wants. Shabbat Shalom.