



Slaves or Warriors:

Who Were We When We Left Egypt?

R. Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

Parashat Bo 5786

Woven into the account of the Exodus are two distinct and seemingly contradictory images of the Children of Israel. On one hand, they are a nation of oppressed slaves, redeemed from a bondage of both body and soul. On the other, they appear as a vast, armed, and formidable group, driven out in haste by an Egypt terrified of their power. The opening chapters of the Book of Exodus present these two narratives in parallel, without attempting to reconcile them.

I. Redemption from bondage and suffering

The Book of Exodus opens by describing the Children of Israel descent into slavery: “So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses” (Exodus 1:11). These verses detail the affliction and suffering of the Israelites, as well as the grueling physical labor they performed. The description then intensifies: “The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in all kinds of service in the field; all the tasks that they ruthlessly imposed upon them” (1:13-14).



The affliction and hardship of slavery are also depicted through the eyes of Moses: “Some time after Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk” (2:11). This misery is further revealed during a rare moment of respite from labor: “A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under the bondage and cried out...” (2:23). Finally, the hardship is confirmed from the perspective of the Divine: “Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians have enslaved.... Say, therefore, to the Israelites: I am God. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage...” (6:5-7).

The way Israel is commanded to remember Egypt reinforces this narrative of an oppressed slave-nation liberated from backbreaking labor and suffering. For example, when Moses instructs the people on the nature of memory, he repeatedly characterizes Egypt as a stronghold of servitude: “And Moses said to the people: Remember this day on which you went out from Egypt, from the house of bondage...” (13:3, and again in verse 14). These verses paint a portrait of a community of slaves—wretched and suffering—who are redeemed from their servitude by God.

II. The expulsion of a threatening army

The Book of Exodus opens with a description of the Children of Israel increasing numbers, which is framed as an accumulation of strength: “But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them” (1:7). This is echoed later in the chapter: “...and the people multiplied and increased greatly” (1:20). Their strength is perceived as a danger, perhaps because they are a foreign group, and the Torah



explicitly describes the threat and fear the Egyptians feel toward Israel: “lest they increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us” (1:10).¹

The verses recounting the departure of the Israelites from Egypt describe a vast and powerful force being expelled from the land: “The Israelites journeyed from Raamses to Sukkot, about six hundred thousand men on foot.... Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds” (12:37-38). The summary verse reinforces this: “At the end of the four hundred and thirtieth year, to the very day, all the ranks² of the God departed from the land of Egypt” (12:41).³

The perceived strength of Israel in the eyes of the Egyptians is also evident in the description of them as an armed force: “Now the Israelites went up armed (*hamushim*) out of the land of Egypt” (13:18). The term *hamushim* means “equipped with weapons.”⁴ The ultimate result of this perception is that Israel does not flee from Egypt; rather, they are driven out—both by Pharaoh (“And he drove the people out,” 12:33, 39) and by his people.⁵

¹ Elsewhere I have explored the conceptual and psychological shifts within Pharaoh that led him to view the Children of Israel as a threat; see my essay on Parashat Shemot, “The Choice of Knowledge,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/choice-knowledge>. The dread of Israel was so profound that some commentators identify the very word used to describe them—“*am*” (people or nation)—with soldiers. As the Ha’amek Davar notes on Exodus 1:9: “The meaning of *am* here is: men of valor for war.” According to another *midrash*, the Israelites’ power was so great that Pharaoh had to employ cunning just to get them to work (see Bemidbar Rabbah 15:20). It suggests that while the Israelites’ strength forced Pharaoh to use cunning to conscript them, that same vitality is what ultimately transformed them into such “effective” slaves.

² The Hebrew word used here is צבאות (*tzeva’ot*), often translated as “hosts,” but literally also meaning “armies.”

³ The description of how God perceives Israel further continues and intensifies the view of them as a powerful entity—specifically as a formidable military force: “I will lay My hand upon Egypt and bring out My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt” (7:4). This perspective appears again later: “for on this very day I brought out your ranks from the land of Egypt” (12:17).

⁴ See, e.g., the Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Rabbeinu Behaye on this verse.

⁵ The fact that the Children of Israel engage in war with Amalek soon after leaving Egypt (in Exodus 17) might also be proof of their identity as an army.

III. Slaves or Soldiers?

We are thus presented with two narratives. The slave narrative emphasizes helplessness and divine rescue. The other, the narrative of the ranks highlights power and an expulsion because of the Egyptians' dread of a formidable force—perhaps even the army of God.⁶

In his famous treatise, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik offers a reading of the opening chapters of Genesis that presents two fundamentally different archetypes of humanity. R. Soloveitchik does not declare one narrative “more correct” than the other; rather, he identifies the human tension in the existence granted to us by God as a complex existence—one that contains an inherent duality. These descriptions reflect a tension that exists within human nature itself.

Perhaps this is how we should view the two different narratives of the Israelites dwelling in and departing from Egypt: an existence as redeemed slaves and, simultaneously, as possessors of great power.

As individuals and as a people, we live and experience both archetypes together. Within our personal and national realities, servitude and power are often intertwined. Furthermore, we may feel enslaved yet find the strength to act with valor; conversely, we are capable of feeling like an army yet acting like a nation of slaves. It may be that the “complete” person, or the “complete” nation, bear this tension. This multiplicity of narratives reflects a broad human phenomenon: the reality that within the enslaved there are dimensions of strength, within the victim there are elements of power, and within the armed person there remain aspects of the slave.

⁶ One possible approach that I do not explore here is to reconcile these two narratives. In this view, the contradiction is minimized. For instance, one might argue that the term “armed” is metaphorical, or find a way to read the verses as a description of a slave nation liberated while carrying weapons.



The Torah does not choose a single narrative. It places them side by side. We are both liberated slaves whom God redeemed and armed soldiers perceived by others as a threatening power. R. Soloveitchik suggests that the fluctuations between these different narratives and identities should not be seen as a movement between poles, but as a complementary motion. Our task is to hold both narratives at once. The verses are telling us: pay attention to the different dimensions within yourselves. Perhaps these are not a contradiction, but rather a “double lens” through which we must understand the Exodus—and perhaps through which we must understand ourselves and those around us. This recognition is what allows for compassion, responsibility, and caution.

