**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

**Dr. Yael Ziegler**

**Shiur #03:**

**Leaving Egypt’s Religious Conceptions (2);**

**Divine and Human Kingship**

The biblical narrative focuses a great deal of attention upon the Egyptian king, in particular, his intransigence and absolute power, as he repeatedly refuses to bow to God’s demands. The story opens with the rise of a new king, who has forgotten Egypt’s debt to the wise Joseph, and who will soon demonstrate that he feels no obligations to the all-powerful God.[[1]](#footnote-1) To illustrate Pharaoh’s centrality, it is worth noting that the word “king” (in reference to Pharaoh) appears fourteen times throughout the story (*Shemot*, chapters 1-15) and the moniker “Pharaoh” appears one hundred and twelve times. Both numbers are multiples of seven, fulfilling Cassuto’s requirement for identifying a key word within a narrative.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Pharaoh and God**

The biblical story is presented as a showdown between regal and divine power, sometimes involving a direct clash between God and Pharaoh. Consider for example, the king’s opening words to his people (in *Shemot* 1:9), in which he describes Israel as a nation (*am*) and devises a plan, “lest they multiply and rise up from the land” (*ve’ala min ha-aretz*).[[3]](#footnote-3) In God’s first speech to Moses (*Shemot* 3:9-10), He describes Israel as “My nation (*ammi*),” promising that He will save Israel from Egypt and raise them up from the land (*le-ha’alato min ha-aretz*).

A *midrash* likewise draws attention to the clash between God and Pharaoh, noting the assonance between Pharaoh’s language of fear and God’s (successful) strategy to thwart Pharaoh’s scheme:

God said, “You [Pharaoh] said, ‘lest [they multiply] (***pen*** *yirbeh*),’ but I say, ‘surely they will multiply (***ken*** *yirbeh*).’” (*Tanchuma* Buber, *Shemot* 1:8)

When Moses confronts Pharaoh for the first time, the Egyptian king challenges God’s hegemony, defiantly responding to Moses: “Who is God, that I should listen to His voice and release Israel? I do not know God, nor will I release Israel!” (*Shemot* 5:3). The powerful Pharaoh cannot accept the authority of this omnipotent God.

The *Shemot* story directs our attention to the dangers of human kingship, and how easily human power can displace awareness of God. Positioned at the helm of Egypt’s military, economic, and political infrastructure, the king appears divine, an exalted figure responsible for the country’s success. Martin Buber describes the Pharaoh at the pinnacle of Egyptian society; if the Egyptian social structure is shaped like a pyramid, then the Pharaoh stands at its apex, with all residents of Egypt beneath him, there to serve him.[[4]](#footnote-4) Egyptians were in fact compelled to perform a fixed amount of forced labor for Pharaoh’s projects, both public and personal.[[5]](#footnote-5) This form of taxation, known as corvee labor, transforms Egypt into one massive house of slaves (*beit* *avadim*).

Pharaoh’s material and military triumphs, coupled with his presumed immortality, contribute to his elevated stature among Egyptians, who venerate him as a god. This attitude leaves little room for a monotheistic culture in which an unequalled figure – the one God – rises above the stature of a deified human king.

**Pharaoh’s Military**

Human regal power is firmly bolstered by military victories and their material rewards. During the New Kingdom,[[6]](#footnote-6) the Egyptian kings built a triumphant military, investing heavily in its infantry, weapons, horses, and chariots.[[7]](#footnote-7) Pharaoh stood at the head of Egypt’s army, leading its soldiers into battle, and returning with abundant booty. The Egyptian objective was not to achieve peace; perpetual war suited them, bringing a steady stream of luxury items that were unavailable locally (such as cedars from Lebanon and gold from Nubia).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Pharaoh’s military plays little role in the *Shemot* story prior to Israel’s departure from Egypt.[[9]](#footnote-9) At that point, however, Pharaoh rallies his impressive chariotry and sets out in pursuit of the fugitive Israelites. His failed campaign has disastrous results: Pharaoh’s military apparatus ends up drowned in the depths of the sea – horses, chariots, infantry, horsemen, and officers. In a stunning conclusion, the narrative declares that it is God who is the “man of war” (*Shemot* 15:3), the true source of military supremacy.

**The Divinity of the Pharaohs**

Ancient Egypt is a deeply polytheistic society, containing a large and shifting number of deities who control various spheres of nature (sun, wind, earth) and human experiences (agriculture, death).[[10]](#footnote-10) The gap between humans and divinities in polytheistic societies is small; gods are depicted as quasi-humans, and humans as quasi-gods. This notion expresses itself in varying ways. Gods were often represented in human form or in mixed animal and human form.[[11]](#footnote-11) More significantly, the deities tended to mirror human society – their foibles, weaknesses, political squabbling, and hierarchies. On the flip side, humans could attain divine qualities, cultivating for themselves an aura of immutability and invulnerability.

Pharaoh obtained divine status and qualities in ancient Egypt. As divine ruler, he stood at the head of Egyptian society. He was both the political and religious leader – the mediator between the gods and humans and the preserver of the god-given cosmic order, known as *ma’at*. Like many monarchical societies, Egypt was a veritable sanctuary of homage to regal power, filled with colossal temples and monuments that celebrate Pharaoh’s achievements alongside various other gods.[[12]](#footnote-12) In the world of Egyptian thought, Pharaoh is all-powerful and does not defer to any one omnipotent God; within a pantheon of multiple deities, Pharaoh is one among equals.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The *Shemot* narrative battles the erroneous conception of Pharaoh’s potency and divinity, repeatedly illustrating God’s power over the human king, especially in the plague narrative. In his pre-plague warnings, Moses confronts Pharaoh in the places where he feels most secure; either as he strolls along “his” cherished Nile (*Yechezkel* 29:3), or while he sits in his protected palace.[[14]](#footnote-14) Some of the plagues strike Pharaoh’s Nile directly,[[15]](#footnote-15) while others unleash havoc inside Pharaoh’s palace, encroaching upon the king in his inner private haven. The plague narrative culminates with a threat to the life of Pharaoh’s eldest son (*Shemot* 11:5). The plagues systematically expunge Pharaoh’s aura of invincibility, chipping away at his godlike image.[[16]](#footnote-16)

At the climax of the story, Pharaoh capitulates to God’s demands and releases Israel. And as God asserts His divine power, Pharaoh’s lofty regal stature shrivels. The story that opened with the rise of a new king (*Shemot* 1:8), and that focused on his intractable hubris, concludes with a fifteenth and final reference to the word “king” – but in its final verse, the text refers not to the human king, whose frailty has been revealed, but rather to the triumph of the eternal, divine King (*Shemot* 15:18): “God shall reign forever and ever.” Human regal power collapses before the divine King.[[17]](#footnote-17) References to Pharaoh immediately begin to ebb and then quickly, they vanish completely. The book of *Shemot* mentions the once-ubiquitous Pharaoh only three more times following the Song of the Sea. Pharaoh disappears alongside his arrogant belief that he – the deified and mighty ruler of Egypt – has no need of a peerless God.

**Power over Life and Death**

One of Pharaoh’s first acts in the story demonstrates his sovereign power over life and death. Wielding this power capriciously and cruelly, Pharaoh decrees death on all male babies, while allowing the females to live. The plague narrative combats Pharaoh’s regal conceit by illustrating God’s power over Pharaoh’s life. God threatens Pharaoh not simply with death (which any human force can cause) but with extinction, with the erasure of the Egyptian king:

Now, I could send out my hand and strike you and your nation with pestilence and you would be obliterated from the land. (*Shemot* 9:15)

This threat is not simply an indication of God’s power over death. It also seems designed to strike at Pharaoh’s fundamental self-perception, undermining one of the central aims of his existence. After all, the Egyptians – and Pharaoh in particular – were obsessed with obtaining immortality. A characteristic feature of ancient Egypt was the notion that humans had some control over what happens to them after their death, that they had the means to obtain eternal life. This possibility was especially available to Pharaoh, whose vast resources enabled him to build pyramids and elaborate burial chambers, filled with everything he might need to ensure entrance to an ideal afterlife.[[18]](#footnote-18) Boats were buried alongside the Egyptian kings so they could obtain passage to the underworld. Pharaoh also had access to the elaborate spells and funerary texts that would facilitate entrance into the kingdom of Osiris, the afterlife.[[19]](#footnote-19) An expensive procedure, prohibitive for common Egyptians, the mummification of bodies preserves them for the afterlife so that the soul will not be lost.[[20]](#footnote-20) In threatening to obliterate Pharaoh, God hints to the human king’s limited control over his immortality.

**Names: Human and Divine Kings**

Upon accession to the throne, Pharaohs would take on five names, (two of which are relevant for our discussion), linking him to the populace and to the gods. These names reflected Pharaoh’s power, his identity, roles, and responsibilities. Two of Pharaoh’s names (his throne name and his birth name) were inscribed in an oval cartouche[[21]](#footnote-21) on a variety of manmade Egyptian structures, such as thrones, obelisks, temples, statues, and pyramids, as the king sought to immortalize his name. In the inscription, Pharaoh’s birth name would be preceded by the title, “son of Ra” (Ra being the sun god), offering further reminders of Pharaoh’s divine stature.

 Pharaohs often had theophoric names, embedding the name of a God alongside the word *mose*, meaning “born.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Thus, Ramose (often spelled Raamses) means, “born of the god Ra,” while Thutmose means, “born of the god Thoth.” Alternatively, it is possible that the name means “Ra\Thoth is born,” symbolizing the way the god manifests himself in the form of the king. In either case, this type of name declares the king’s divine origin, imputing him with godlike status and power.

In the *Shemot* story, the Pharaoh of the Exodus remains unnamed, his identity an enigma. Scholars corral vast evidence and expertise to identify the king, but these energetic efforts tend to obscure the startling point: the narrative has effectively erased Pharaoh’s name.[[23]](#footnote-23) This erasure seems to expunge Pharaoh’s power, undermining his bid to immortalize his name.[[24]](#footnote-24)

As the looming figure of Pharaoh hovers anonymously over the story, the Bible focuses a great deal of attention on God’s name. At the burning bush, Moses asks God His name, so he can identify God to the nation (*Shemot* 3:13-15). Later, God introduces Himself to Moses and the people by name (the Tetragrammaton, which will be represented by the word Lord) four times in rapid sequence:

**I am the Lord.** I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob with [the name] E-l Sha-ddai, but My name Lord I did not make known to them… Therefore, say to Israel, **I am the Lord**, and I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt… and you will know that **I am the Lord**… And I will bring you to the land that I promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inheritance; **I am the Lord.** (*Shemot* 6:2-8)

God, moreover, designs the plagues to ensure that people will “relate My name throughout the land” (*Shemot* 9:16). The story climaxes in the Song of the Sea, where the nation confidently proclaims (*Shemot* 15:3): “God is a man of war; God is His **name**!” In simultaneously obliterating Pharaoh’s name and introducing God’s name, the story once again sketches a contrast between the two. *Shemot* tells the tale of an eternal God whose enduring power and name triumphs over ephemeral humans – especially over the venerated king who inscribes his name upon the monuments of Egypt.

**Pharaoh and Kings of Israel**

The Exodus from Egypt paves the path towards a new society that will develop a new perception of kingship, built on the wreckage of Egypt’s misconceptions. The Bible’s well-known hesitancy regarding kingship (e.g., *Shoftim* 8:22; I *Shmuel* 8:7,11-18) is unsurprising, given the tendency of monarchs to displace God and wield power ruthlessly. To succeed, the Israelite monarchy must abolish the notion that a king operates independently of God’s will.

This is accomplished in several ways. First, regal authority in Israel is limited by the prophetic office. The king must obey the prophet, who operates as the mouthpiece of God, even scolding him harshly when necessary.[[25]](#footnote-25) *Devarim* 17:14-20 further limits the king’s power, ensuring that he does not accrue excessive military might,[[26]](#footnote-26) wealth, or wives, so that he does not lose sight of his reliance upon God.[[27]](#footnote-27) As a constant reminder of God’s authority over him, the passage also mandates that an Israelite king must write a Torah scroll and read from it daily. These guidelines are designed to construct a monarchy founded on a completely different ethos than its Egyptian counterpart. The king is not divine, nor does he retain a divine right to do as he pleases. He is limited by the power of the actual divine King, whose authority rises above that of all humans.

The essential outlook of Israelite monarchy may constitute a key to understanding why God rejects Saul’s kingship and establishes David as founder of the lasting monarchic dynasty. Consider the well-known story of Goliath, the Philistine hero who threatens Israel. King Saul is terrified of Goliath’s evident superior military prowess (I *Shmuel* 17:11). When a young David courageously expresses his inclination to fight Goliath, Saul strenuously objects, noting the Philistine’s might:

“You cannot go to this Philistine to fight him, for you are but a lad and he is a man of war from his youth!” (I *Shmuel* 17:33)

King Saul’s words suggest that he is overly reliant on the human trappings of military strength. More egregiously, Saul’s description of Goliath’s military prowess (“he is a man of war!”) clashes with Israel’s conclusion in the Song of the Sea that “*God* is a man of war!” (*Shemot* 15:3). Saul remains cowed by human might, disregarding the lessons of the Exodus narrative.

David, in contrast, understands how to conduct himself in light of the messages of the Exodus story. He is not intimidated by the prospect of facing the mighty Goliath in battle, but approaches him boldly, openly bolstered by his faith in God. David renounces reliance upon weapons, declaring (I *Shmuel* 17:45): “You come to me with the sword, the spear, and the javelin, but I come to you with the **name** of God!” Unlike Saul’s objection, David’s statement echoes Israel’s song at the sea: “God is a man of war; God is His **name**!” David champions the notion that God alone is the source of Israel’s success; the king’s military situation is not what determines the outcome of a battle.

The founder of the Israelite monarchy does not present himself as immortal or deified, nor does he build monuments that bear his own name. The greatest accomplishment of the Davidic dynasty is the building constructed by David’s son and heir, Solomon, whose Temple bears the name of God, rather than his own.[[28]](#footnote-28) In Israel’s monarchy, the kings recognize that their ultimate objective is not self-glorification, but the dissemination of God’s name.

**Conclusion**

Israel’s nationhood begins in Egypt. In Egypt, Israel encounters an advanced civilization, but one that is rife with polytheistic conceptions, blurring the lines between humans and God. This is especially the case when it comes to the powerful king, whose material success fosters hubris and a distorted perception of regal power. Egypt’s populace labors to serve a human king who has arbitrarily placed himself at the helm of society. The Israelite nation must set up a society that abandons Egypt and establishes a monarchy that rejects the notion that any human being can be deified. It must turn its attention instead to serving and representing a supreme God, whose unlimited, eternal existence will always triumph over the temporary power of a human king.

1. A *midrash* connects these two lapses, both of which display Pharaoh’s ingratitude: “Today, he did not know Joseph; tomorrow, he will say (*Shemot* 5:2), ‘I do not know God’” (*Shemot Rabba* 1:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. M. Buber, *Darko shel Mikra* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1964), 284, defined the *leitwort* (or leading word) as follows: “A word or linguistic root, which recurs within a text, a series of texts, or a set of texts in an extremely meaningful manner, so that when one investigates these repetitions, the meaning of the texts is explained or becomes clear to the reader, or at least it is revealed to a much higher degree.” Umberto Cassuto stresses the significance of a sevenfold appearance of a root in identifying a *leitwort*. See, for example, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 74, 91 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The exact meaning of this phrase has generated a debate among exegetes. Rashbam thinks his concern was that the Israelites would leave the land, Rashi avers that the phrase is a euphemistic way of describing Pharaoh’s fear of the Egyptians themselves being forced out of their land, and Ramban maintains that the language denotes warfare. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. M. Buber, *Moses*(New York: Harper, 1946), p. 21: “As the pyramid culminates in its apex, so the Egyptian state culminates of almost mathematical necessity in the Crown, the ‘red flame’, which is addressed in the pyramid texts as living Godhead.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Great Pyramid serves as an apt example of the way Egyptian society revolved around service of Pharaoh. Commissioned by Pharaoh Khufu (or Cheops) as a burial chamber for himself, this pyramid was constructed by quarrying an estimated 2.3 million large blocks, weighing 6 million tons in total. Scientists estimate that it took some 20,000 men ten years to build it. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The New Kingdom (from the 16th-11th BCE) was ancient Egypt’s most prosperous and powerful period, and included the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth dynasties. Even if we cannot date the Exodus story with precision, it certainly correlates with the period of the New Kingdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ancient Egypt learned from the Hyksos (the Semitic rulers of the 15th dynasty of Egypt, 1650-1550 BCE) how to use horse-drawn chariots in battle. Most of Egypt’s cavalry was owned by the state, lending even more credence to the sense of Pharaoh’s omnipotence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ##  Bob Briar, History of Ancient Egypt, Great Courses Lecture Series, explains: “Egyptian pharaohs began their reign by war to expand the territory and gain booty. Warfare in ancient Egypt was not a tool to protect the country; it was a value that brought respect and support for the king.” The Song of the Sea offers us a citation of the Egyptians’ own words, comprised of a boast that suggests that the aim of war is to bring back spoils: “I will chase; I will overcome; I will divide the booty” (Shemot 15:9).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pharaoh’s first words in the book do reflect his concern about the possibility of warfare, precipitating his bid to suppress the Israelites and curtail their fertility: “Behold this nation, the children of Israel, is too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal wise with him, lest he multiply and when war comes upon us, he will join our enemies and fight against us” (*Shemot* 1:9-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. When we examine the plague narrative, we will consider the theory that the plagues systematically wreak havoc upon Egypt’s deities: Hapi, the God of the Nile, Heket, the frog-like God of fertility, and Ra, the sun God, all fall victim to the display of God’s superior power. In this approach, the plague narrative is designed to dismantle the Egyptian pantheon (as is indicated by *Shemot* 12:12 and *Bamidbar* 33:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. These representations are fluid; the same god may be represented in various, ever-shifting ways. For example, the goddess Hathor was usually depicted as a woman wearing a wig with a headdress of cow horns, but sometimes she appears in pure animal form, as a cow, a lioness, or a snake. In the Hathor shrines of Deir el-Bahri, she appears in mixed form, with a cow's head but a human face. Each of these forms likely represents an attempt to depict a different aspect of Hathor’s nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Pharaohs often built temples that paid homage to the gods and also celebrated their own achievements. Consider, for example, the great temple carved out of the mountainside in Abu Simbel. The temple was dedicated to the gods Amun, Ra, and Ptah. The entrance to the Temple, however, is flanked by four colossal statues (each of which is sixty-six feet high), each representing Raamses II seated on a throne. The temple also celebrates Raamses II’s military achievements, with carvings that depict his military prowess at the battle of Kadesh. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As supreme ruler of the people, Pharaoh was considered a god on earth, the intermediary between the gods and the people, and when he died, he was thought to become Osiris, the god of the dead. After death, Pharaoh passed on his sacred powers and position to the new Pharaoh, his son, who would, in turn, became Horus, the falcon-god. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Rabbeinu Bechaye (*Shemot* 10:1), who observes and expands upon this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The following *midrash* indicates that the strike at the Nile is a strike at Pharaoh’s presumed god-like power over it: God said [to Pharaoh], “You said, ‘It is *my* Nile!’ I will show you if it is yours or Mine, for I will send a plague from Me upon it; I will issue a decree and it will spew forth frogs. Just as I initially decreed upon the waters (*Bereishit* 1:20): ‘let the waters swarm,’ and it did My bidding, so will the Nile conform to My decree” (*Shemot Rabba* 10:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. While this point is not made explicitly in the *Shemot* narrative, *Yeshayahu* 31:3 castigates Egypt for its erroneous notions of divinity: “Egypt is human and not a god!” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is the first time in Tanakh that God is referred to as a King who reigns (the verb used for God’s reign is *yimlokh*), implying perhaps that the collapse of the powerful Pharaoh before God’s might went a long way toward convincing observers that God is the absolute King. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ancient Egyptians believed that after death, spirits were presented to the god Osiris, who would determine the virtue of the deceased's soul and grant a rebirth, or afterlife, to those deemed deserving. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Pyramid Texts are the oldest religious writings in the world and make up the principal funerary literature of ancient Egypt. The purpose of these texts (which were inscribed on the sarcophagi and walls of the pyramids at Saqqara during the fifth and sixth dynasties, from 2600-2200 BCE) was to help Pharaoh complete his journey through the afterlife successfully, by conveying knowledge to the deceased about the paths he should take and the dangers he might face along the way. During the Old Kingdom period, these texts were used exclusively by Pharaohs. However, Egyptian queens and high-ranking government officials soon began to use Pyramid Texts in their burial tombs as well. During the Middle Kingdom, the Pyramid Texts were replaced by the Coffin texts, which were inscribed on the coffins of both royal and common people. These texts similarly provided the deceased with the magic they would need along their journey to the afterlife. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. When someone died, Egyptians believed that part of his spirit (known as “ka”) remained with his body. To properly care for the spirit, the corpse was mummified, and everything one would need in the afterlife was buried with the mummified corpse, including gold, food, furniture, and many other items. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. A cartouche is an oval shape indicating that the text enclosed is a royal name. The oval surrounding the name was apparently meant to offer protection from evil spirits in life and after death. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. It is widely accepted that the name “Moses” emerges from this Egyptian word, *mose*. Absent of the theophoric element, Moses simply means “born.” It appears that the man chosen to confront the all-powerful Pharaoh, son of Ra, has no divine origin and no pretensions of divinity. Selected by the singular, omnipotent God, Moses triumphs in his clash with the venerated Egyptian king simply because God has chosen him. We will discuss Moses’ name at greater length in a later *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) p. 7, offers a historical explanation for this Pharaoh’s namelessness, observing that Pharaohs are identified by name in the Bible only beginning with Shishak, during Solomon’s reign. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A 19th-dynasty text from Egypt illustrates the significance for Egyptians of erasing Pharaoh’s name. There, the goddess Isis says to the god Ra: “Say to me your name, my divine father. For a man lives when one recites his name.” See “The Legend of Isis and the name of Re,” R. K. Ritner, tr., in W. H. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. *The Context of Scripture* 1.22 (Leiden: Brill, 1997). Similarly, see *Hoshea* 2:19, where the prophet pledges that the names of the Baal deities will no longer be remembered. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See, e.g., I *Shmuel* 15:13-28; II *Shmuel* 12:1-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The limitation of the military power of the Israelite king is explicitly linked to a prohibition to go to Egypt to obtain horses (*Devarim* 17:16). Yeshayahu (31:1) similarly recognizes that Israel must avoid reliance upon Egypt’s horses and military might. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. These limitations upon the king are also designed for moral purposes, ensuring that the king will not begin to perceive himself as more worthy than any other human, as all are created in the image of God (*Devarim* 17:20): “So that his heart does not rise above that of his brothers.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. E.g., *Devarim* 12:5,11,21. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)