**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #21: Power, Hierarchy, and the Art of Enslavement**

Chapter 5 centers on hierarchical relationships, with issues of authority and power – introduced in the previous chapter – at its core. Told as a series of dialogues, the scenes move down the bureaucratic chain of command (king, taskmasters, officers, slaves) as responsibility is passed from overlord to underling. Pharaoh looms at the apex of the (human) hierarchy; his power appears unassailable.

**Who is in charge?**

Moses and Aaron have failed to convince Pharaoh that he is subordinate to God; in response to their demand that he release Israel to serve God (even temporarily), Pharaoh rises to the full height of his authoritative posture. Stubbornly uncompliant and determined to break their unruly spirit, Pharaoh increases the Israelites’ labor, ordering his taskmasters and officers to add to their tasks without diminishing their daily quota:

And Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the nation and its officers, saying: “Do not continue to give straw to the nation to make bricks as you previously did; let them go and gather straw for themselves. And you shall place upon them the same quota of bricks that they were previously required to fill; it shall not be diminished.” (*Shemot* 5:6-8)

In verse 6, Pharaoh calls upon both taskmasters and officers to convey his words to the Israelite nation, who flounder at the bottom rung of this hierarchical society.

Until this point, the taskmasters and the officers appear to operate at the same mid-level position, functioning as the bearers of Pharoah’s order to the nation. It turns out, however, that the taskmasters occupy a superior role; they beat Israel’s officers when the quota is not met (5:14). These officers – representatives of the slaves, but also their superiors – consequently seek an audience with the highest authority, pleading before Pharaoh for a reprieve.[[1]](#footnote-1) Pharaoh’s escalated cruelty spawns despair and bitterness, which the officers then fling before Moses and Aaron, who had confidently presented God’s intentions to alleviate Israel’s suffering:

And they said to [Moses and Aaron], "May the Lord look upon you and judge, for you have made us foul in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, placing a sword in their hands to kill us.” (*Shemot* 5:21)

The first attempt to assert God's supremacy over Pharaoh has fallen short; instead of improving the slaves’ situation, Moses and Aaron have only worsened it, diminishing both their status and God’s in the eyes of Israel. The episode concludes with Moses challenging God (the highest authority), demanding that God explain why He has not yet displaced Pharaoh from his position of power.

**Pharaoh: The Apex of Power**

We have already noted how Pharaohs wield their power: unjustly and ruthlessly. Withholding straw is not a pragmatic decision but a spiteful response to a petition, meant to torment rather than to increase production. This act aligns with a broader pattern of an Egyptian king’s disregard for Hebrew lives. Twice, a Pharaoh in our story has issued a command (*vayetzav* *Pharaoh*) from his lofty regal perch: first, the decree to murder all male Hebrew infants (1:22), and second, the order to intensify the slaves' labor (5:6-9) – a command that all but ensures their suffering and death.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In refusing the minor appeal to go serve God, Pharaoh expresses fear of distracting the slaves even slightly; any disturbance may release chaos upon a highly organized system. The unusual word that Pharaoh uses in verse 4 for disruption is “*taphri’u*,” a word that suggests wild behavior and may contain a wordplay with the king’s appellation, Pharaoh. The Egyptian king seems to feel his personal interests are at stake; in requesting that Pharaoh disturb his slaves from their routine, Moses and Aaron threaten to usurp the Pharaoh’s authority and weaken his control.

To keep the mechanism of slavery running smoothly, Pharaoh erects a tiered system of oversight over the slaves, as we saw above. The higher-level (presumably Egyptian) taskmasters answer directly to Pharaoh, while the Hebrew officers maintain a supervisory role over their own people. Pharaoh seems intent upon driving a wedge between the Hebrews. In a cunning tactic, the taskmasters punish the Hebrew *officers* when the slaves fall short of the brickmaking quotas. The officers, therefore, have vested interest in driving the slaves to work harder, possibly spawning brutal treatment on their part as well, and pitting one Hebrew against another.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this scenario, unscrupulous men rush to collaborate with the oppressive regime, hoping to protect themselves (and even advance their status) at the expense of their kin. Pharaoh’s system is designed to foster societal rifts, purposely sowing internal division to weaken the possibility of unity and prevent resistance.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Pharaoh and the Hebrews**

In an oppressive and tyrannical society, the oppressed do not simply lose their will and energy to resist the regime; they may even begin to trust and embrace the autocrat at the top. He is, after all, both their oppressor and their benefactor; their well-being relies upon his goodwill.

The sole episode in the entire Exodus narrative that records direct contact between the Hebrews and Pharaoh occurs in response to his unjust decree that they must obtain their own straw while still maintaining their quotas. A delegation of Hebrew officers (who have been beaten for not meeting the quotas) cry out to Pharaoh.[[5]](#footnote-5) Referring to themselves three times in short sequence as Pharaoh’s servants, their words have a peculiar syntax, emerging in a jumble and revealing their agitation and nervousness:

“Why do you do this to **your** **servants**? Straw is not given to **your** **servants** and bricks you tell us to make, and now **your** **servants** are beaten, *ve-chatat* *ammekha*!” (*Shemot* 5:15-16)

Loosely translated, the final words in this citation mean “and your nation sins,” an obscure phrase that is subject to interpretation. Many commentators assume that these words are an accusation hurled against the Egyptian populace, who has sinned against the Hebrews with their cruelty.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Greek translates the phrase as a (rather unlikely, I should think) bold accusation on the part of the officers, against Pharaoh himself: “And **you** (Pharaoh!) sin against your nation.” Abravanel suggests it should be read as a question – “And did your nation sin?”[[7]](#footnote-7) – expressing a rhetorical query regarding the treatment accorded the Hebrews, who are part of Pharaoh’s nation. If indeed the nation sinned, then punishment is justified, but since this hardly seems the case, perhaps Pharaoh will reconsider his harsh decree?

The officers’ efforts are to no avail. Pharaoh’s response indicates his fury; the raging repetitiveness of his words emerges as a shout: “Lazy you are! Lazy! That is why you say, ‘let us go and sacrifice to God!’” (5:17). In his volatile rage, Pharaoh refuses to budge from his cruel decree.

Mute and impotent, the Israelite officers retreat from Pharaoh’s presence. The Tanakh does not describe them leaving the palace, concentrating instead on their perception of the situation following the failed audience with Pharaoh: “And the Israelite officers saw *them*, in evil” (5:19). This description is syntactically complex, as it lacks an antecedent specifying whom they perceive to be mired in evil. Exegetes offer several possibilities. Perhaps the officers refer to themselves and their own unfortunate situation, which they have not been able to alleviate (Ibn Ezra). Possibly, they are referring to the terrible predicament of the Hebrew slaves, who remain sunk in the mire of a tyrant’s malicious rule (Rashi).[[8]](#footnote-8) One thing is certain, however: the evil that these officers tried to battle clings to them still.

**The Israelite Officers and God’s Emissaries (Moses and Aaron)**

Exiting Pharaoh’s palace, the officers encounter Moses and Aaron, who are standing to greet them. Perhaps it is a chance meeting, or – more likely – Moses and Aaron await the officers’ report from their audience with Pharaoh with concern. Cassuto suggests they are waiting there in the hope of obtaining another audience with Pharaoh.[[9]](#footnote-9) Unyielding redeemers, Moses and Aaron persist, pressing forward in their mission despite its initial disastrous results. The balance of power, however, remains disconcerting. Pharaoh retains his imperious posture of intransigence, while God’s representatives stand impotently in the royal antechamber.

The chastened officers turn on the divinely appointed liberators in anger, accusing them of being the source of their misfortune, of giving Pharaoh a reason to kill them (5:21). In a sense, they are correct; their slavery was tolerable until these agitators went to Pharaoh. It appears that Pharaoh’s scheme worked nicely. Instead of joining forces to fight a tyrannical regime, the Israelites begin to fight amongst themselves, twisting the blame from their oppressors to those who seek their freedom from oppression.

The attitude and behavior of the Israelite officers recalls Moses’ earlier encounter with morally bankrupt Hebrews.[[10]](#footnote-10) When Moses witnessed two brawling Hebrews, he confronted the wrongdoer, remonstrating with him for striking his fellow (2:13). The response of the Hebrew man is belligerent, and expresses disdain for Moses’ quest for justice: “Who appointed you the man to be officer and judge (*shofet*) over us?” That Hebrew mocked Moses’ bid for justice, brandishing Moses’ murder of the Egyptian in a bid to defame his character: “Have you spoken to kill me (*ha-lehorgeini*) as you killed the Egyptian?” This accusation is hurled in derision more than fear; it is a rhetorical question, designed to insult Moses. That event spawned Moses’ despair; he abandoned his corrupt brethren and absconded to Midian, where he remained until God instructed him to return.

Moses experiences a similar exchange in chapter 5 when he encounters the Israelite officers, who emerge from their meeting with Pharaoh chagrined and hopeless. They angrily proclaim a curse upon God’s appointed leader, implying that Moses’ and Aaron’s quest for justice is dubious: "May the Lord look upon you and judge (*veyishpot*)!” (5:20). The officers then accuse Moses and Aaron of advancing the death of the Israelite slaves: “You have made us foul in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, placing a sword in their hands to kill us (*le-horgeinu*)!” A specious accusation, which shifts responsibility from the tyrannical king to the men who challenged him, it contains just enough truth to rattle Moses, who will now shift the blame further up the hierarchical ladder to the highest authority, God.

**Moses and God**

And Moses returned to God and he said: “My Master, why have You made it worse for this nation? Why have You sent me? For since I have come to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has made it worse for this nation. And surely You have not rescued Your nation!” (*Shemot* 5:22-23)

Moses declines to respond to the recrimination of the officers. Instead, his immediate response is to “return” to God. Where does Moses go? Possibly, in a response reminiscent of his flight from his brethren in chapter 2, Moses returns to Midian.[[11]](#footnote-11) Moses is dejected, having lost his credibility in the eyes of the people, and perhaps he has also lost his own recently acquired belief in his mission. Some exegetes suggest that Moses returns full circle, back to the burning bush, in search of a revelation from God and perhaps a confirmation of His promise of redemption.[[12]](#footnote-12) God’s words to Moses in 6:1-8 may precipitate his subsequent return to Egypt, just as God’s urging at the burning bush eventually succeeded in persuading Moses to return. However, it is also possible that Moses simply goes to a designated place, “outside the city,” where he communes with God.[[13]](#footnote-13) This understanding offers a new portrait of Moses, different from the earlier one. This Moses no longer flees from conflict with his brethren; instead, he confronts God boldly in a determined quest to liberate his people.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, the words Moses directs toward God do not convey feelings of fellowship. Instead, he appears alienated from the Israelites, twice referring to them as “this nation” instead of using the possessive form (“my nation”). Moses concludes his speech by flinging responsibility for Israel upon God, calling them, “Your nation.” This alienation may be why some commentators posit that Moses had returned to Midian, with the intent to abandon Israel in Egypt as he did in chapter 2. As in the previous episode (2:13-14), it is the words of the contentious Israelites that spur Moses to forsake his nation.

The question posed here by Moses (“Why have You sent me?”) recalls his earlier hesitation at the burning bush (3:11). And, despite God’s promise at the burning bush to rescue (*le-hatzilo*) Israel from the hands of Egypt (3:8), Moses observes that this has not come to fruition (5:23): “And surely You have not rescued (*ve-hatzel* *lo* *hitzalta*) Your nation!”

Moses’ frustration at God would be understandable were it not for one fact: God told Moses *twice* that Israel’s liberation would not take place immediately, and that Pharaoh would resist greatly (3:19; 4:21). Moses knew well in advance that Pharaoh would not release Israel easily. Why then does he adopt an accusatory tone when he confronts God? And why does God not reprimand him for his tone?

In defense of Moses, Ibn Ezra explains that he thought the process of lightening Israel’s load would begin once he confronted Pharaoh. When the opposite happens and the process of liberation seems to move backward, Moses is shaken. Nachmanides similarly justifies Moses’ vehement response, positing that Moses thought God’s wonders would be implemented against Pharaoh immediately and the process of redemption would launch. Instead, the promised liberation seems even further from reality. This can explain why God neither takes offense at Moses’ insolence nor chastises him. Moreover, in this scenario, Moses no longer functions merely as God’s representative; he has become an advocate for his people.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is no wonder that God takes Moses’ accusations on their behalf in stride, offering not a rebuke, but a promise of imminent redemption: “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand he will send them and with a strong hand he will expel them from his land!” (6:1).

Yet not all exegetes are willing to let Moses off so easily. They discern rebuke in God’s opening response to Moses’ audacious indictment of God: “Now you will see!” The identical phrase appears in a later tension-filled dialogue between Moses and God, in *Bamidbar* 11. There, Moses expresses skepticism regarding God’s promise to provide plentiful meat for the nation journeying in the desert. God’s response clearly constitutes a reprimand of Moses: “Is the hand of God limited? Now you will see…” (*Bamidbar* 11:23). Given the linguistic similarity, it seems probable that God scolds Moses here as well.[[16]](#footnote-16) One *midrash* detects a punitive element in the opening word of God’s response to Moses, “Now”:

“And God said to Moses, ‘**Now** you will see what I will do to Pharaoh.’” The wars with Pharaoh you **will** see, but you **will not** see the wars with the thirty-one kings, when Joshua your student will take vengeance upon them. Here you learn that Moses received the judgement that he will not enter the land. (*Shemot* *Rabba* 5:23)

In this reading, it is Moses’ impudence toward God in *Shemot* 5:22-23 that disqualifies him from entering the land forty years later.[[17]](#footnote-17)

While duly protecting God’s honor, the above approach hardly coheres with the tenor and content of God’s response. God’s tone is reassuring, His message optimistic. God promises Moses that very soon, Moses will see what God will do (“*e’eseh*”) to Pharaoh. God’s promised action constitutes the seventh (and final) appearance of the word *aseh* in this section, rendering it a keyword. In its first six appearances, the word *aseh* referred to the slave-labor of the Hebrews (five times), and the unjust acts of Pharaoh against his slaves (once, in verse 15).[[18]](#footnote-18) This final appearance of the word indicates that God’s deeds will triumph over Pharaoh’s acts of oppression, punishing the tyrannical king and freeing the nation from their labor.

By using the word “now,” God may be indicating to Moses that His plan has already been activated, and the process of redemption has already begun. Moses may not yet be able to see it, but the troubling events of this chapter are part of God’s scheme. Pharaoh’s arrogant and public proclamations of power set him up for a public downfall at God’s hand. God will soon respond directly to Pharaoh’s blustering arrogance: his dismissal of God (by professing not to know Him, 5:2), his abject refusal to send Israel out of slavery (ibid.), and his imperious dispatch of the petitioners to their labors (5:18). Indeed, God knows that things are going according to plan; Moses needs only to be patient a little longer to see it himself.

God’s promise is clear. His operation against Pharaoh will lead to Israel’s release and expulsion from Egypt: “For with a strong hand he will send them and with a strong hand he will expel them from his land!” But whose strong hand wields the force necessary to cause Pharaoh to release the enslaved nation?[[19]](#footnote-19) The ostensible subject is of course Pharaoh himself, whose strong hand rules Egypt. God’s assertion contains more than a hint of irony; that same potent hand that prevents Israel’s release will wield its power to do precisely the opposite. In this scenario, God is the puppet-master, directing Pharaoh’s hand to do as God desires. As support, some exegetes cite a concluding verse in the narrative: “And Egypt used *strength* (*va-techazak*) against the nation to quickly send them from the land” (12:33).[[20]](#footnote-20)

Other exegetes suggest that the verse refers to God’s strong hand, noting that the term “a strong hand,” often describes God’s power, particularly in relation to the liberation from Egypt.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In a delightful literary flourish, the subject of the “strong hand” (repeated twice in this verse), remains ambiguous.[[22]](#footnote-22) It appear that Pharaoh’s hand is indistinguishable from God’s hand. God retains utter control over Pharaoh’s hand. Egypt will certainly release Israel, but only because God’s hand manipulates Pharaoh’s hand, and God’s power triumphs over human regal power.

1. Identifying the various authority figures in this chapter proves to be complex. Verses 15 and 19 describe these officers as Israelites (“*shotrei benei Yisrael*”), while in verses 6 and 10, they are simply called “his officers” (“*shotrav*”). Netziv (on *Shemot* 5:6) proposes that the text differentiates between two distinct groups: those appointed directly by Pharaoh – referred to as *his* officers, likely Egyptians – and those designated by the taskmasters to supervise the Israelites, who are presumably Israelites themselves (as suggested in verses 14-15). The term "*shotrei benei Yisrael*" is somewhat ambiguous; it could refer to officers *from* the Israelites or officers *overseeing* the Israelites. (A similar ambiguity arises when identifying the ethnicity of the "*midwives of the Hebrews*" [*meyaldot ha-Ivriyot*] discussed in shiur #6.) Traditional commentators generally identify these officers as Israelites and the taskmasters as Egyptians (see, for example, *Shemot Rabba* 1:18 and Rashi on 5:6). This distinction may explain why it is the officers – rather than the taskmasters – who approach Pharaoh with complaints. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Israel’s officers seem to regard Pharaoh’s decree – issued in response to the petition of Moses and Aaron – as a death sentence (see 5:21). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I do not intend to suggest that all the Hebrew foremen were brutal or selfish. Presumably, there were some among them who did their best to ease the burden of their brethren. According to *Shemot Rabba* 5:20 (paraphrased by Rashi on verse 14), the Israelite officers were altogether righteous, willing to suffer blows on their brethren’s behalf. For this reason, the *midrash* explains, these officers will later receive the spirit of prophecy (*Bamidbar* 11:16). See also R’ Samson Refael Hirsch’s comment (on 5:21), where he expresses appreciation for people who have assumed this sort of role on behalf of the Jewish community over the centuries. I am simply pointing out that the system as it is constructed is *designed* to encourage divisiveness and fraternal enmity. One cannot help but compare this to the contemporary controversy over the role of the *Judenrat* (Jewish councils set up by the Nazis) during the Holocaust and the debate over whether their role was collaborationist or not. This open-ended (and deeply sensitive) question presumably does not have one clear answer: councils operated differently in their forced cooperation with the Nazis, and Jewish individuals in leadership roles behaved with different degrees of morality. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As Martin Luther King, Jr. famously noted in his comment on this biblical episode: “The Pharaohs had a favorite and effective strategy to keep their slaves in bondage: keep them fighting among themselves. The divide-and-conquer technique has been a potent weapon in the arsenal of oppression. But when slaves unite, the Red Seas of history open and the Egypts of slavery crumble” (*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*, p. 124). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The idea of citizens crying out to a king (as occurs in 5:15) may be a legal mechanism for citizens to obtain an audience from the monarch by issuing a complaint in a public forum. While I am not aware of this sort of administrative apparatus in ancient Egypt, there are several biblical contexts in which this is presented as an effective way to approach the king of Israel, especially in a desperate judicial matter. See, e.g., I *Melakhim* 20:39; II *Melakhim* 6:26. Nachmanides (5:22) portrays the present scenario in a similar manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Caspi, Radak, and Shadal. Seforno adds that this is a specific reference to the Egyptian taskmasters who beat the officers for not fulfilling the quota. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a similar reading, see Benno Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cassuto (*Exodus*, p. 72) suggests that the word *ra* (meaning evil) refers to the chief deity of the Egyptian pantheon named Ra, or perhaps to Pharaoh, who was considered a human incarnation of the god Ra. In either case, this statement would suggest that the officers are expressing chagrin at having been overpowered by worshippers of Ra. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A *midrash* identifies the officers who accost Moses and Aaron on their exit from Pharaoh’s presence as Datan and Aviram (*Shemot* *Rabba* 5:20, cited by Rashi 5:10). *Midrash Aggada* (Buber) *Shemot* 5:13 identifies the brawling men in 2:13-14 as Datan and Aviram. These *midrashim* appear to highlight the similarity between these episodes. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to *Shemot* *Rabba* 5:19, Moses indeed returns here to Midian. He will stay there for six months, returning only when God tells him. In the view of this *midrash*, it is at this point that Moses separates from his wife and sons, who remain in Midian. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Benno Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 138; Amos Hakham, *Shemot*, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The existence of such a place is indicated in *Shemot* 9:29. See *Mekhilta* *Bo* 1 and *Lekach Tov* *Shemot* 5:22, which propound this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Cassuto’s reading, *Exodus*, pp. 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Shemot* *Rabba* 5:22 maintains that Moses deserved punishment, but because God saw that Moses was speaking on Israel’s behalf, God suspended Moses’ punishment. See also *Shemot* *Rabba* 6:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rashi adopts this reading, contrasting Moses’ unwillingness to trust God here with Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son at God’s behest. See also *Sanhedrin* 111a. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is one of many reasons that *midrashim* provide to explain why Moses will not enter the land. Apparently, they do not see the two separate reasons offered by the biblical text (in *Bamidbar* 20:12 and *Devarim* 3:25-26) as sufficiently severe to warrant such a harsh sentence. Moreover, the fact that the Torah provides two separate reasons that do not reference the other suggests that there are multiple reasons that Moses dies before he enters the land. For an analysis of the midrashic approach to this subject, see Gerald R. Blidstein, *The Death of Moshe: Readings in Midrash* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2008), especially pp. 23-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The word appears twice (in verses 4 and 13) as a noun (*ma’asav*), referring to their slave-labor, and three times as a verb (verses 8, 9, and 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Exegetes raise a similar question regarding this phrase in *Shemot* 3:19. Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, for example, regard the phrase there as referring to Pharaoh’s strong hand, while Rashi and Nachmanides opine that it references God’s hand. (Rashi brings the alternative possibility as well.) The ambiguity itself seems to be the primary meaning of the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See, for example, Ibn Caspi and Bekhor Shor. Rashi also cites from this verse, noting that the end result of God’s strong hand is Egypt’s release of the slaves. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Shemot* 13:9; 32:11; *Devarim* 4:34; 5:15; 6:21; 7:8; 9:26; 26:8; *Yirmiyahu* 32:21; *Tehillim* 136:12; *Daniel* 9:15. See also R’ Samson Refael Hirsch and Shadal, who explain that the verse refers to God’s strong hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Commentaries on Rashi debate whether Rashi posits that both phrases refer to God’s strong hand (Siftei Hakhamim), or perhaps they diverge: the first phrase refers to *God’s* strong hand and the second to *Pharaoh’s* (R. Eliyahu Mizrahi). It seems that Chizkuni reads the verse like the latter reading (see also Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 74), while Shadal reads the verse with the former. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)