

Unordering the World: Exodus 7-10 and the Plagues

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1: God declares war

Exodus 7:1-5

(1) יהוה replied to Moses, “See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet. (2) You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land. (3) But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt. (4) When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements. (5) And the Egyptians shall know that I am יהוה, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst.”

שמות ז' א'-ה'

(א) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאֵה נִתְּתִיךָ אֱלֹהִים
לְפָרְעֹה וְאַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ יִהְיֶה נְבִיאֲךָ: (ב) אַתָּה
תְּדַבֵּר אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶךָ וְאַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ יְדַבֵּר
אֶל־פָּרְעֹה וְשַׁלַּח אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ: (ג)
וְאֲנִי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת־לֵב פָּרְעֹה וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת־אֹתוֹתַי
וְאֶת־מוֹפְתַי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: (ד) וְלֹא־יִשְׁמַע
אֲלֵכֶם פָּרְעֹה וְנִתַּתִּי אֶת־יָדִי בְּמִצְרָיִם וְהוֹצֵאתִי
אֶת־צְבָאתִי אֶת־עַמִּי בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם
בְּשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים: (ה) וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרָיִם כִּי־אֲנִי
יְהוָה בְּנֹטַתִּי אֶת־יָדִי עַל־מִצְרָיִם וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת־
בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתּוֹכָם:

2: The order of the world

Yoram Hazoni, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, 129:

Thus in the ethics of the ancient Near East, all action was ultimately directed toward the maintenance of the state since all goodness was seen as flowing from it. Indeed, whatever served to maintain the closed circle of farmer, tax collector, king, soldier and priest was on its face for the good, since it kept the clockwork of the state in motion for another day and another generation, maintaining the mass of people alive and protected.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

..it is worth reflecting more fully on who Ramses was and what he represented... No one in history constructed more monuments to his glory than Rmeses II... It is clear that when Pharaoh responds angrily to Moses’ request in God’s name to let the Israelites go, saying, “Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let the Israelites go? I do not know the Lord,” what he means is, “Here, I am God.”... The wealth of the royal court was astonishing...At the same time the population as a whole lived a wretched experience. (*Ceremony and Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays*,179-182)

The feather represented Ma’at, the central Egyptian value that included the concepts of truth, balance, order, harmony, justice, morality, and law. Not only was this fundamental to Egyptian culture. It was the task of the Pharaoh to ensure that it prevailed. This had been a key Egyptian principle for a thousand years. Ma’at meant cosmic order. Its absence invited chaos. A Pharaoh whose heart had become heavier than the Ma’at feather was not only endangering his own afterlife, but also threatening his entire people with turmoil and disarray. (From: “The Weighing of the Heart”)

3. The great lie

James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States:*

What the state has often done, once established... **is to maintain, amplify, and expand the agroecological setting that is the basis of its power by what we might call state landscaping. This has included repairing silted channels, digging new seeder canals, settling war captives on arable land, penalizing subjects who are not cultivating, clearing new fields, forbidding nontaxable subsistence activities such as swiddening and foraging, and trying to prevent the flight of its subjects. ...**

The early state strives to create a **legible, measured, and fairly uniform landscape of taxable grain crops and to hold on this land a large population available for corvée labor, conscription, and, of course, grain production.** For dozens of reasons, ecological, epidemiological, and political, the state often fails to achieve this aim, but this is, as it were, the steady glint in its eye. (22-23)

...a peasantry – assuming that it has enough to meet its basic needs – will not automatically produce a surplus that elites might appropriate, but **must be compelled to produce it.** Under the demographic conditions of early state formation, when the means of traditional production were still plentiful and not monopolized, **only through one form or another of unfree, coerced labor** – corvée labor, forced delivery of grain or other products, debt bondage, serfdom, communal bondage and tribute, and various forms of slavery – **was a surplus brought into being.** Each of the earliest states deployed its own unique mix of coerced labor, as we shall see, but it required a delicate balance between maximizing the state surplus on the one hand and the risk of provoking the mass flight of subjects on the other, especially where there was an open frontier. In the case of the earliest states, making the lower classes reliably unfree meant holding them in the grain core and **preventing them from fleeing** to avoid drudgery and/or bondage itself. Do what it might to discourage and punish flight – and the earliest legal codes are filled with such injunctions – the archaic state lacked the means to prevent a certain degree of leakage... Short of stemming the flow, most archaic states sought to replace their losses by various means, including wars to capture slaves, purchases of slaves from slave takers, and forced resettlement of whole communities near the grain core. (152-153)

Exodus 1:8-10

(8) A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. (9) And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. (10) Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”

שמות א':ח-י

(ח) וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-
יָדָע אֶת-יֹסֵף. (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עַם-
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ. (י) הִבֵּה
נִתְחַכְמָה לָּו פֹּר-יִרְבֶּה וְהָלָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה
מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסַף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחָם-
בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִדְּהָרָאֵץ.

4: Targeting the Nile

Exodus 7:14-24

(14) And יהוה said to Moses, “Pharaoh is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. (15) Go to Pharaoh in the **morning**, as he is coming out to the **water**, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile, taking with you the rod that turned into a snake. (16) And say to him, ‘יהוה, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, “Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness.” But you have paid no heed until now. (17) Thus says יהוה, “By this you shall know that I am יהוה.” See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood; (18) and the fish in the Nile will die. The Nile will stink so that the Egyptians will find it impossible to drink the water of the Nile...

(20) Moses and Aaron did just as יהוה commanded: he lifted up the rod and struck the water in the Nile in the sight of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and all the water in the Nile was turned into blood (21) and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt. (22) But when the Egyptian magician-priests did the same with their spells, Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he did not heed them—as יהוה had spoken. (23) Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this. (24) And all the Egyptians had to dig round about the Nile for drinking water, because **they could not drink the water of the Nile.**

Exodus 8:4-6

(4) Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Plead with יהוה to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to יהוה.” (5) And Moses said to Pharaoh, “You may have this triumph over me: for what time shall I plead in behalf of you and your courtiers and your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses, to remain only in the Nile?” (6) “For tomorrow,” he replied. And [Moses] said, “As you say—that you may know that there is none like our God “

שמות ז':י"ד-כ"ד

(יד) ויאמר יהוה אל־מֹשֶׁה כְּבֹד לֵב פַּרְעֹה מֵאֵן לְשַׁלַּח הָעָם. (טו) לֵךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה בְּבֹקֶר הַיּוֹם יֵצֵא הַמִּלְכָּה וְנֹצְבֶתָ לְקִרְאתוֹ עַל־שַׁפְתַּת הַיַּאֲר וְהַמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר־נִהַפְּתָ לְנֹחַשׁ תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ. (טז) וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים שְׁלַח־נִי אֶלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר שְׁלַח אֶת־עַמִּי וְעַבְדֶּנִי בַמִּדְבָּר וְהִנֵּה לֹא־שָׁמַעְתָּ עִד־כֹּה. (יז) כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בְּזֹאת תִּדְעֶנּוּ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה הַיּוֹם אֲנֹכִי מִכָּה וּבַמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדִי עַל־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר־בַּיַּאֲר וְנִהְפְּכוּ לְדָם. (יח) וְהַדְּגָה אֲשֶׁר־בַּיַּאֲר תָּמוּת וּבָאֵשׁ הַיַּאֲר וְנִלְאוּ מִצְרַיִם לְשִׁתּוֹת מַיִם מִזֶּה־הַיַּאֲר...

(כ) וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן כַּאֲשֶׁר ו צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיִּרָם בַּמַּטֵּה וַיַּךְ אֶת־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר־בַּיַּאֲר לְעֵינֵי פַרְעֹה וּלְעֵינֵי עַבְדָּיו וַיִּהְיֶה כָּל־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר־בַּיַּאֲר לְדָם. (כא) וְהַדְּגָה אֲשֶׁר־בַּיַּאֲר מָתָה וַיָּבֹאֵשׁ הַיַּאֲר וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ מִצְרַיִם לְשִׁתּוֹת מַיִם מִזֶּה־הַיַּאֲר וַיִּהְיֶה הַדָּם בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. (כב) וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן חֲרֻטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּלִטְיֵיהֶם וַיַּחֲזִק לִב־פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֶלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה. (כג) וַיִּפֹּן פַּרְעֹה וַיָּבֹא אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וְלֹא־שָׁעַת לְבֹ גַם־לְזֹאת. (כד) וַיַּחְפְּרוּ כָּל־מִצְרַיִם סְבִיבַת הַיַּאֲר מַיִם לְשִׁתּוֹת כִּי לֹא יָכְלוּ לְשִׁתּוֹת מִמֵּי הַיַּאֲר.

שמות ח':ד'-ו'

(ד) וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה לְמֹשֶׁה וְלֵאהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַעֲתִירוּ אֵל־יְהוָה וַיְסַר־הַצְּפַרְדָּעִים מִמֵּנִי וּמֵעַמִּי וְאֲשַׁלַּח־אֶת־הָעָם וְיִזְבְּחוּ לַיהוָה. (ה) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְפַרְעֹה הַתְּפָאֵר עָלַי לְמַתִּי ו אַעֲתִיר לָךְ וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ וְלַעַמֶּךָ לְהַכְרִית הַצְּפַרְדָּעִים מִמֶּךָ וּמִבְּתֵיךָ רַק בַּיַּאֲר תִּשְׁאָרְנָה. (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר לְמַחֵר וַיֹּאמְרוּ כְּדַבְּרֶךָ לְמַעַן תִּדְעֶנּוּ כִּי־אֲנִי כִּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ.

5. Unpacking the Nile

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership*, 25:

From the river – the source of civilization, abundance and prosperity – emerge beautiful creatures and also the ugly cows... The blessings of the human civilizing experience may be completed by the demonic forces which man the genius sets free. Some philosophers have questioned whether the dream is worthwhile. Perhaps it would be more beneficial to man to inactivate rather than accelerate the process. Pharaoh was troubled in the morning, but his advisers didn't comprehend his dilemma. They did not grasp that the dream cast doubt upon the whole civilizing enterprise.

Midrash Tanchuma, Vaera 13:1

(1) Get thee unto Pharaoh in the morning; lo, he goeth out unto the water (Exod. 7:14).

Thus the Lord said: Through this (water) you shall cause him to know that I am the Lord. I will smite the water of the Nile with the staff that is in your hand, and it shall turn to blood. Why were the waters turned to blood first? Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile, and the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Smite his god first and then him, as in the popular aphorism, "Strike the gods and the priests will be frightened."

6. Timing

Ramban on Exodus 8:15

Now with regard to Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra's statement that Moses did not inform them of the coming of the plague of gnats, it appears to me that Aaron struck [the dust of the earth] with the rod *in the sight of Pharaoh*, just as he did in the case of the soot of the furnace. However, there was no forewarning here, since the Holy One, blessed be He, **warned Pharaoh only of those plagues which entailed the death of people..All this reflects His mercies towards man, just as it is said, *Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it, and he turn not from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but thou hast delivered thy soul.*** Therefore, He did not warn Pharaoh of the plagues of gnats, boils, and darkness, [as these did not entail the loss of human lives]. He warned him only of the pestilence of cattle because it involved death which should have taken effect also on man... In the case of certain plagues, [i.e., blood, swarms, and hail], G-d said to Moses, *Rise up early in the morning ... lo he cometh forth to the water.* In line with the plain meaning of Scripture, this was the time when the kings were wont to go forth in the morning to enjoy themselves in the waters, and the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded Moses to go there. The reason for it is that since the plague of blood was the first one [of the plagues], He wanted Moses to do it in the sight of the king and without fear of him... He wanted these two plagues to be wrought [at that particular time] because since swarms and hail brought death and punishment upon the people, the Holy One, blessed be He, **wanted the warning to be given in the sight of all people. When the king went forth to the water, a multitude of people followed him, and when Moses will then forewarn him in their sight, perhaps they might plead with their master to return from his evil way. In case they do not do so, they will deserve punishment.**

7: Selective disasters

Exodus 8:16-19

(16) And יהוה said to Moses, “Early in the morning present yourself to Pharaoh, as he is coming out to the water, and say to him, ‘Thus says יהוה: Let My people go that they may worship Me. (17) For if you do not let My people go, I will let loose swarms of insects against you and your courtiers and your people and your houses; the houses of the Egyptians, and the very ground they stand on, shall be filled with swarms of insects. (18) **But on that day I will set apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of insects shall be there, that you may know that I יהוה am in the midst of the land. (19) And I will make a distinction between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall come to pass.**”

Exodus 9:1-7

(1) יהוה said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says יהוה, the God of the Hebrews: Let My people go to worship Me. (2) For if you refuse to let them go, and continue to hold them, (3) then the hand of יהוה will strike your livestock in the fields—the horses, the asses, the camels, the cattle, and the sheep—with a very severe pestilence. (4) But יהוה will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of the Egyptians, so that nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites. (5) יהוה has fixed the time: tomorrow יהוה will do this thing in the land.”

(6) And יהוה did so the next day: all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not a beast died. (7) When Pharaoh inquired, he found that not a head of the livestock of Israel had died; yet Pharaoh remained stubborn, and he would not let the people go.

שמות ח':טז-י"ט

(טז) ויאמר יהוה אל-מֹשֶׁה השכם בבקר והתיצב לפני פרעה הנה יוצא המיטה ואמרת אליו כה אמר יהוה שלח עמי ויעבדני. (יז) כי אם-אינך משלח את-עמי הנני משליח בך ובעבדיה ובעמה ובעמך את-הערב ומלאו בתי מצרים את-הערב וגם האדמה אשר-הם עליה. (יח) והפליתי ביום ההוא את-ארץ גושן אשר עמי עמך למען תדע כי אני יהוה בקרב הארץ. (יט) ושמתי פדת בין עמי ובין עמך למחר יהיה האת הנה.

שמות ט':א-ז

(א) ויאמר יהוה אל-מֹשֶׁה בא אל-פרעה ודברת אליו כה-אמר יהוה אלהי העברים שלח את-עמי ויעבדני. (ב) כי אם-מאן אתה לשלח ועודה מחזיק בם. (ג) הנה יד-יהוה הולך במקנה אשר בשדה בסוסים בחמרים בגמלים בבקר ובצאן דבר כבד מאד. (ד) והפלה יהוה בין מקנה ישראל ובין מקנה מצרים ולא ימות מכל-לבני ישראל דבר. (ה) וישם יהוה מועד לאמר מחור יעשה יהוה הדבר הזה בארץ.

(ו) ויעש יהוה את-הדבר הזה ממחרת וימת כל מקנה מצרים וממקנה בני-ישראל לא-מת אחד. (ז) וישלח פרעה והנה לא-מת ממקנה ישראל עד-אחד ויכבד לב פרעה ולא שלח את-העם. {פ}

8: Sowing doubts

Exodus 8:14-15

(14) The magician-priests did the like with their spells to produce lice, but they could not. The vermin remained upon human and beast; (15) and the magician-priests said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God!” But Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he would not heed them, as יהוה had spoken.

Exodus 9:13-21

(13) יהוה said to Moses, “Early in the morning present yourself to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says יהוה, the God of the Hebrews: Let My people go to worship Me. (14) For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world. (15) I could have stretched forth My hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been effaced from the earth. (16) Nevertheless I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, and in order that My fame may resound throughout the world. (17) Yet you continue to thwart My people, and do not let them go! (18) This time tomorrow I will rain down a very heavy hail, such as has not been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. (19) Therefore, order your livestock and everything you have in the open brought under shelter; every human and beast that is found outside, not having been brought indoors, shall perish when the hail comes down upon them!’” (20) Those among Pharaoh’s courtiers who feared יהוה’s word brought their slaves and livestock indoors to safety; (21) but those who paid no regard to the word of יהוה left their slaves and livestock in the open.

Exodus 10:7

(7) Pharaoh’s courtiers said to him, “How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let a delegation go to worship their God יהוה ! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?”

שמות ח':י"ד-ט"ו

(יד) ויעשו־כֵן החֲרָטְמִים בְּלִטְיָתָם לְהוֹצִיא אֶת־הַכִּנָּם וְלֹא יָכְלוּ וַתְּהִי הַכִּנָּם בְּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה: (טו) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַחֲרָטְמִים אֶל־פֶּרֶעַה אֲצַבֵּעַ אֱלֹהִים הוּא וַיִּחַזַק לִב־פֶּרֶעַה וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה: {ס}

שמות ט':י"ג-כ"א

(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הִשָּׁכֵם בַּבֹּקֶר וְהִתְיַצַּב לִפְנֵי פֶרֶעַה וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים שְׁלַח אֶת־עַמִּי וַיַּעֲבֹדְנִי: (יד) כִּי יוֹ בַפֶּעַם הַזֹּאת אֲנִי שְׁלַח אֶת־כָּל־מִגְפָּתֵי אֶל־לִבָּהּ וּבַעֲבֹדָיָהּ וּבַעֲמָהּ בַעֲבוּר תִּדְעַ כִּי אֵין כָּמוֹנִי בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ: (טו) כִּי עַתָּה שְׁלַחְתִּי אֶת־יָדִי וְאָךְ אוֹתָהּ וְאֶת־עַמָּהּ בַּדְּבַר וַתִּכְחַד מִזֶּה־הָאָרֶץ: (טז) וְאוּלָּם בַּעֲבוּר זֹאת הָעֲמֻדָתִיָּהּ בַּעֲבוּר הַרְאֹתָהּ אֶת־כַּחַי וְלִמְעוֹן סִפְרִי שְׁמִי בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ: (יז) עוֹדָהּ מִסְתַּלְלֵל בְּעַמִּי לְבִלְתִּי שְׁלַחֶם: (יח) הַנְּגִי מִמִּטִּיר לְכַעַת מִחֹר בְּרֹד כְּבֹד מֵאֵד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־הָיָה כָמוֹהוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם לְמוֹתֵי־יָוִם הַיּוֹסֵדָה וְעַד־עַתָּה: (יט) וְעַתָּה שְׁלַח הָעוֹל אֶת־מִקְנֶה וְאֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לָהּ בַשָּׂדֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר־יִמְצָא בַשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא יֵאֱסַף הַבִּיָּתָה וְיָרַד עֲלֵהֶם הַבָּרָד וּמָתוּ: (כ) הִירָא אֶת־דְּבַר יְהוָה מֵעַבְדֵי פֶרֶעַה הַנִּגִּים אֶת־עַבְדָּיו וְאֶת־מִקְנֵהוּ אֶל־הַבֵּיתִים: (כא) וְאֲשֶׁר לֹא־שָׁעַם לְבוֹן אֶל־דְּבַר יְהוָה וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶת־עַבְדָּיו וְאֶת־מִקְנֵהוּ בַשָּׂדֶה: {פ}

שמות י':ז

(ז) וַיֹּאמְרוּ עַבְדֵי פֶרֶעַה אֵלָיו עַד־מָתִי יִהְיֶה זֶה לְנוֹ לְמוֹקֵשׁ שְׁלַח אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲבְדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַטֶּרֶם תִּדְעַ כִּי אֲבָדָה מִצְרַיִם:

9: The heart and the feather

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Weighing of the Heart: family Edition":

If the "heaviness" of Pharaoh's heart is an allusion to the Weighing of the Heart ceremony, it allows us to read the story in a completely new way. First, it suggests that it is directed to Egyptians as well as Israelites; to humanity as a whole. The Torah tells us three times that the purpose of the signs and wonders was "so that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord" (Shemot 7:5; 14:4; 14:18). This is the core belief of monotheism. It is not that the Israelites have their God, and the Egyptians their pantheon, but rather that there is one sovereign power in the universe.

Our religion is not intended to be the religion of all humanity... Religion is particular. Morality is universal. If the story of the "heaviness" of Pharaoh's heart does allude to the Book of the Dead, then **the story of the Exodus is not simply a partisan account from an Israelite point of view.** It is telling us that certain things are wrong, whoever does them and whoever they are done against. They are wrong by Egyptian standards too. That was true of Pharaoh's decision to kill all male Israelite children. That was an unforgivable sin against Ma'at.

Justice is universal. That is the point made plainly by the Torah's three stories of Moshe' early life...This is the simplest way of telling us that Moshe' sense of justice was impartial and universal.

The most generous interpretation of Pharaoh's treatment of the people is that he was trying to maintain order in the Empire. A successful minority like the Israelites could be seen as a threat to such order. If they stayed and thrived, they might take over the country as the Hyksos had done several centuries earlier. If they were allowed to leave, other enslaved groups might be tempted to do likewise. Emigration is a bad sign when the place people are trying to leave is a superpower. That is why, for many years, the Soviet Union forbade Jews to leave the country.

Pharaoh, in his repeated refusal to let the people go, must have justified his decision in each case on the grounds that he was securing Ma'at, order. Meanwhile however, with each plague the country was reduced to ever greater chaos. That is because oppressing people, which is what Pharaoh was doing, was a fundamental offence against Ma'at.

For the first five plagues, Pharaoh could tell himself that he was enduring minor inconvenience to protect a major principle. But as the plagues became more serious, reducing Egypt to chaos, Pharaoh's room for manoeuvre grew ever less. Having five times said "No" to the Israelites, he could not now back down without making himself look ridiculous, forfeiting his authority and damaging his standing. Pharaoh was a prisoner of **his own system, held captive by his own decisions. The Torah states that Pharaoh's heart was heavy, to hint at a self-contradiction at the heart of the Egyptian concept of Ma'at.**

Seeking to protect order, he created chaos. That is because the order he was seeking to protect was built on a foundation of injustice: the enslavement of the many for the benefit of the few. The more he tried to defend it, the heavier his heart grew.