



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Kristallnacht

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

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Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family

In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה זייל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Vaeira

Kristallnacht

When the infamous “Arbeit Macht Frei” sign was stolen from the main gate of Auschwitz, the news was read all over the world. In a few weeks, however, the sign was found and the gate was repaired.

But what is so special about this sign that turned it into a symbol of the Holocaust? Why was it international news when this sign was stolen?

The sign is unique, in its own dark way, because it symbolizes the Nazis’ devious justifications. The Nazis didn’t tell the Jews that they were going to kill them. When they got to the work camps, they told them that “work liberates”—so do your work, get your food and everything will be fine. That’s how it was with everything the Nazis did: They justified everything.

For example, everyone has heard of Kristallnacht. Just ask anyone what happened that one night in Germany, and they will tell you that they broke the “crystal” windows of the synagogues.

Just before Kristallnacht, a young Jewish man in France had assassinated a German diplomat because his parents had been exiled from Germany. The news reached Germany, and, as a result, mass mobs burst out in fury, taking out their rage on the windows of many synagogues.

But I only recently learned what really happened on that night: 1,500 synagogues were attacked across Germany in one night. And that's something that can only happen with planning and organization, not spontaneously.

On top of that, hundreds of Jewish-owned stores and businesses were plundered and looted. But not every Jewish store had a mezuzah on its door, or a yarmulke or visible Jewish symbol in its windows. So how did the rioters know exactly which stores belonged to Jews and which did not? For such a dark deed, someone had to have a list with addresses somewhere.

Additionally, 30,000 Jews were arrested that night and sent to labor camps. Now, you needed a lot of SS people to arrest 30,000 people on one night and know exactly where each one lived. And on top of it all, about 500 Jews were murdered on that night.

Such a broad undertaking needs many months of preparation and organization. It was all planned in advance. They only were waiting for the opportunity to carry it out—and then came the news that a Jew had killed a German diplomat, giving them a good excuse to get it under way.

But why did they call it "Kristallnacht?" Simple: Because it doesn't sound so bad – it sounds like they just broke some synagogue windows.

In this week's Torah portion, we continue reading about the Egyptian exile. And it's shocking to see how much the Pharaoh's philosophy was similar to Nazi philosophy.

Now, how did it all start?

The Midrash tells us that the Pharaoh first organized a convention for all the Jews. At this national conference, he told them, "I ask you to help me build up the country."

The Pharaoh himself then did what today we'd call a photo op—he personally took tools in his hands and appeared in public to do physical work. Now, which patriotic citizen of Egypt could see that and not feel motivated to do the same himself? Who wouldn't want to join the action—especially the Jews, who always want to prove their loyalty to the homeland? And so the entire Jewish People were drafted into helping the Pharaoh.

At the beginning, it was all voluntary. But later, it became obligatory, and they couldn't run away.

But the Pharaoh's problem all along was that there were "too many Jews," and that their birthrate had to be stopped. In other words, there is a demographic problem in the empire. The Jews will outnumber us! So the Pharaoh called the Jewish midwives and quietly told them, without publicizing it to anyone, that if the newborn is a boy, kill him during childbirth—so that even the mother won't know what happened. After all, it does sometimes happen that a child is stillborn.

But the midwives didn't join forces with the Pharaoh. So he tried another approach—and here we come to this week's Parshah, where we read about the Ten Plagues, of which the first, of course, was... blood.

Now, we can ask the question: Why did G-d hit the Egyptians specifically this way? Why turn all the water into blood? And why was that the first plague? Why not the second or third or tenth plague?

In a talk dated the 24th of Teves, 1981, the Rebbe points out an interesting Midrash which states that the Jewish women of Egypt used to regularly go to the mikvah—but since the Egyptians wanted to stop the Jewish birthrate, they “closed the water,” as the Rebbe puts it. They didn’t let Jewish women immerse in the rivers. As a result, they couldn’t continue to have children.

The Rebbe explains that the Egyptians had essentially found a way to make themselves look like civilized people. They weren’t mixing in. They weren’t telling anyone what to do. They weren’t killing babies, G-d forbid. All they were doing was “closing the water”—and you could find lots of excuses for not letting Jews immerse in the rivers. Maybe it was because they were a race of slaves and they would make the water dirty, so no one would want to bathe in the same places. Throughout our People’s long history, we were blamed for poisoning the wells. They never lack excuses. And so the Egyptians gained two things: They stopped Jewish childbirth and they also came out looking civilized.

Regarding this, the Midrash tells us: “Because they [meaning the Egyptians] didn’t let Jewish women immerse themselves free of their impurities so that they could be fruitful and multiply, they therefore were punished with blood.”

G-d punished them “*middah kneged middah*”—measure for measure. Because the Egyptians had closed the waters to the Jewish People, G-d came along and closed the waters to the Egyptians for a week, letting them feel what it’s like to not have water. And that’s what the plague of blood was all about.

But even that didn't work. So the Egyptians came up with a new decree: "Every newborn boy must be thrown into the river." Officially, this was a decree on everyone, as if there too many males in Egypt and they needed to balance the genders. But the Aramaic translator Unkelus adds one word to his translation of this verse: "Every newborn *Jewish* boy"—not any child but specifically Jewish children. The official notice was that every child had to be thrown into the river—but by word of mouth, they let it be known that it meant specifically the Jews. But officially? "Why, we have nothing against the Jews!"

Hundreds of years later, King David wrote, "I was made wise by my enemies"—meaning, if you really want to know what is truly important in Judaism, check what our enemies want to destroy. See what they concentrate on.

In Egypt, they tried to stop Jewish childbirth—the "Final Solution," G-d forbid—by prohibiting the use of the mikvah. And the Nazis, for their part, when they wanted to break the spirit of the Jewish Nation, they first attacked our synagogues—not our kosher restaurants, not our communal offices, but our synagogues.

From the ancient Egyptians, and the not-so-ancient Nazis, we can know what is most important to the Jewish Nation: mikvos and shuls.

And in these lie all the strength of the Jewish Nation. From these we draw the strength to carry on. And that's why there was never any Jewish community that didn't have a mikvah and a synagogue—because these were, and still are, the foundation stones of the Jewish community.

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