Conspiracy Theories: Thoughts for Parashat Shemot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemot

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"And he [Pharaoh] said to his people: Behold the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us…" (*Shemot* 1:9).

Pharaoh was ruler of a vast empire. The Israelites were a tiny group mainly living among themselves in Goshen. They posed no threat to Egypt. Yet the mighty Pharaoh somehow imagined that the Israelites were incredibly numerous and powerful and that he had to crush them before things got out of hand. He mobilized the Egyptian masses against the Israelites, leading to centuries of enslavement and suffering.

Pharaoh was the author of the earliest "conspiracy theory" against Israel. He fantasized outlandish charges, he apparently believed them, he promoted them, he acted based on them.

Did Pharaoh actually know any Israelites? Did the Egyptians who oppressed the Israelites have any personal relations with them?

As strange as it may seem, Pharaoh and the Egyptians—like most anti-Semites—focus not on real flesh-and-blood people. Rather they hate stereotypes that they create. They turn Israelites/Jews into things: oppressors, manipulators, dangerous enemies. Although these claims are incredibly foolish and not grounded in reality, that does not stop people from embracing them.

Why do they engage in hatred and vilification of people they don't even know, people who pose no real threat to them? Perhaps it is a manifestation of paranoia

or jealousy. Perhaps it's a way to strengthen their own egos by diminishing others. In one of his essays, Umberto Eco suggests that human beings need enemies! It is through their enemies that they solidify their own identities.

Whatever the psychological reasons for fostering and believing conspiracy theories, humanity can only be redeemed by overcoming the corrosive evil of hatred. Although this seems like a far-fetched dream, it can happen.

Many years ago, a young lady came to my office to discuss the possibility of her conversion to Judaism. She was raised in Saudi Arabia to American parents in the American military. She grew up hating Israel and hating Jews although she had never met either an Israeli or a Jew.

When she reached college age, she came to the United States to study. She met Jewish students and found that they were nice people, not at all like the stereotypical Jews she had learned to hate as a child. She began to study Judaism. She learned about Jewish history and about modern Israel. She eventually met and fell in love with an Israeli man.

In due course, she converted to Judaism, married the Israeli, established a religiously traditional household, and had children who attended Jewish day schools when they came of age.

We discussed the remarkable transformation of her life from a hater of Jews and Israel, to an actively religious Jew married to an Israeli. In one of our conversations, she mused: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if all haters could suddenly find themselves in the shoes of the ones they hate? If only people really understood the hated victims by actually living as one of them!"

She came to this insight through her personal experiences. She overcame blind hatred by literally becoming one of those she had previously despised. She wished that all haters would at least try to see their victims as fellow human beings rather than as dehumanized stereotypes. If only people could replace their hatred with empathy!

While this is an important insight, it obviously eludes many people. Our societies are riddled with racism, anti-Semitism, anti-nationality x or anti-ethnicity y. It

seems that many people prefer to hate rather than to empathize. They somehow imagine that they are stronger if they tear others down. They don’t realize that by poisoning their lives with hatred, they undermine their own humanity.

Since the days of ancient Pharaoh, the people of Israel have been subjected to grotesque and hateful conspiracy theories. We continue to face such ugliness today. But we are a strong and resilient people, imbued with ultimate optimism for humanity. We value those human beings who choose love and understanding rather than hatred and vilification. We respect those who overcome hatred and who thereby contribute to the betterment of humanity.

The prophet Amos taught (8:11): “Behold the days are coming and I [God] will send a famine to the land, not a famine for bread and not a thirst for water…but to hear the words of God.”

We affirm this prophecy…and we wait for its fulfillment.