

# *Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

*Parashat Bo*, Exodus, Chapters 10-13 | January 20, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## Abu Simbel and the Exodus

Ramesses the Second was, in a sense, the greatest builder in human history; but the buildings brought into being at his command existed not to further the wellbeing of his subjects, but rather to ensure his own immortality. The Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson informs us:

Today, more standing monuments bear the names of Ramesses II than of any other pharaoh. By a combination of construction and appropriation (taking pains to have his cartouche incised so deeply into the stone that it could never be removed), Ramesses ensured that his name would live forever. He seems to have been driven by a deep desire to surpass all his predecessors, and by a resolute sense of his own uniqueness.

During the period of Ramesses' reign, two of his projects would have stood out as the most wondrous of all. The first was the creation of a new capital, where his throne was located. Its name, of course, was linked to his own, inspiring our own interest as students of Scripture. Wilkinson further writes:

Not content with erecting temples and usurping monuments throughout the length and breadth of Egypt, Ramesses II created an architectural wonder on an even greater scale, one that is now entirely lost from sight. His father, Seti I, had built a small summer palace near the old Hyksos capital of Hutwaret, where the Ramesside royal family had its origins. The young Ramesses must have spent time there, preparing for battle, and as king he set about transforming it into something altogether grander. In two decades of nonstop construction, a vast series of mansions, halls, offices, and barracks grew up around the royal palace, until Ramesses had created an entirely new city, a dynastic capital equal in splendor to Memphis or Thebes. With customary chutzpah, he named it Per-Ramesses, "the house of Ramesses."

Per-Ramesses, or Pi-Ramesses, "The House of Ramesses," was once one of the most incredible cities on earth, and it is difficult to think of another example of a king creating a capital of similar significance for his own glorification alone. Babylon existed before Nebuchadnezzar, as much as that king arrogantly associated himself

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with it; Ptolemy I created Alexandria, but named it after the man he once served. Ramesses built a new city to celebrate himself, named for himself; and if many associate Rameses II with the Pharaoh of the oppression at the beginning of the Book of Exodus, it is because the Pharaoh who enslaves the Israelites seems to create a city with just this name. Wilkinson notes this as well:

Exodus 1:11 tells how “Pharaoh” put the enslaved Hebrews to work on two great store-cities, Pithom and Raamses. “Pithom,” or Per-Atum, has been identified as modern Tell el-Maskhuta, in the eastern delta, only a day’s journey from Per-Ramesses, while “Raamses” can be none other than the new dynastic capital itself.

This would mean that the Israelites would have built the city known as “the House of Ramesses,” and that Goshen, where they lived, would have been in its vicinity. Historians describe the new capital as a sort of Venice in the desert. In her acclaimed biography *Ramesses: Egypt’s Greatest Pharaoh*, Joyce Tyldesley describes its beauty, citing an ancient eyewitness:

The new city of Pi-Ramesses, like the primeval mound, was surrounded by water. To the west and north flowed the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, known as the “Waters of Re” while to the south and east was an artificial canal, the “Waters of Avaris,” which fed a lake, the “Waters of the Residence.” Further south a second lake allowed the development of a port within easy reach of both the eastern Mediterranean and southern Egypt. Thus the city was provided not only with a source of drinking water but also with a means of transport, sanitation, irrigation, and defense. Beyond the city there was abundant fertile land, with desert to the east. Everyone who came to Pi-Ramesses was impressed by its beauty and its abundance.

One such visitor wrote:

It is a beautiful place which, although resembling Thebes, has no equal. . . . Life in the residence is good; the fields are filled with all kinds of good produce so that each day is blessed with good food. Its canals teem with fish and its marshland is filled with birds; . . . from the fields come fruit flavored with honey. The granaries overflow with barley and wheat.

If, then, the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus was ruling from this city, we can well understand Pharaoh’s growing shame as the plagues shattered the feeling of complacency and luxury within it: as the beautiful waters turned to blood, the abundant fish and animals died, and the grains were consumed by hail and pests. Pharaoh’s embarrassment would have been enhanced by the fact that the Israelites, in the nearby suburb of Goshen, seemed utterly immune from the plagues suffered by the Egyptians.

But perhaps even grander than the capital of Per-Ramesses was a creation that can still be seen today, in southern Egypt at Abu Simbel: a temple whose “Holy of Holies” contained images of Egyptian gods and of Ramesses himself, and whose outer walls featured astonishing statues of the Egyptian king:



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What is most incredible about Abu Simbel is not its grandeur but its union of architecture and astronomy. Somehow, as can be seen to this day, the building was architecturally aligned in such a way that twice a year—originally the 21st of October and February—the sunlight would enter the structure so that the rays would extend into the inner recesses of the building, and the statue of Ramesses along with the images of the gods associated with the sun, would glow.



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The suggestion has been made—and this will be important for our discussion—that these moments marked the periods of planting, in late fall, and harvesting in February; but it would seem the dates may have also been selected for a connection to Ramesses, perhaps marking his birthday or the anniversary of his coronation. The incredible illumination, as Wilkinson observes, was meant to reflect the very divinity of Pharaoh himself:

In his mind and in his monuments, the king was the equal of Egypt's most ancient and revered deities. . . . It must have been a stunning spectacle. Few autocrats in human history have conceived a more dramatic expression of their personality cult.

Thus the glorification of Ramesses through the sun of Abu Simbel was linked to the agricultural abundance of Egypt, supposedly a result of the sun god's benevolence toward Ramesses' dynasty.

Understanding that the city built by the Israelites may have been known in Egypt as the "House of Ramesses" can reveal new insights in our reading, and Abu Simbel allows us to appreciate a possible pun in our *parashah*—which in turn reveals the Exodus as a reversal of all that Egypt embodied.

Let us see how this is so. Soon after the miraculous hailstorm, discussed in last week's reading, Moses warns Pharaoh of another plague yet to come.

Behold, I bring tomorrow locust in your borders. And it will cover the face of the land, so that the land cannot be seen, and it will devour the additional remnant left over after the hail. . . . (Exodus 10:4–5)

If, as many assume, Moses spoke to a member of the Ramesside dynasty—perhaps Ramesses' son Merneptah—then our knowledge of Egyptian architecture and ritual lends a distinct drama to his declamation. The solar "miracle" of Abu Simbel would have announced the harvest in February, with the barley crop destroyed almost immediately afterward by the plague of hail. Now, Moses is warning, the most important sector of the Egyptian agrarian economy—its wheat—was at risk.

Pharaoh almost relents, and then his heart is hardened again, as he harshly proclaims:

See, there is *ra'ah* (רעה) opposite your faces. (Exodus 10:10)

Simply translated from the Hebrew, *ra'ah* means evil; for Pharaoh to say to Moses and Aaron that "evil is opposite your faces" is to threaten them. But as Umberto Cassuto comments, this may well be an allusion to Ra, or Re, the Egyptian sun god; Pharaoh, Cassuto writes, is telling them that Ra stands against the God of the Hebrews in Whose name Moses speaks:

The sense is: know that the power of my god will oppose you.

Cassuto's comment is striking; as he notes, it actually parallels a rabbinic midrash cited by Rashi. And there is much more to add to Cassuto's point. For if this is a pharaoh from the Ramesside dynasty, then the pun is even more profound; Moses is threatening what remains of the harvest, whereas in Abu Simbel, the sunlight on the



very face of Ramesses is what guarantees the abundance of the harvest itself. Saying that “Ra” is opposite “your face” may be a reference to this yearly cosmological phenomenon.

The locusts, of course, come, and the harvest that the sun of Abu Simbel would have announced is suddenly lost. And if the benevolence of the sun god seemed suddenly to have been challenged by Moses, the plague that comes next is especially freighted with symbolic import:

Then the Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt. (Exodus 10:21)

As Cassuto writes, this penultimate plague does not only refute Egyptian theology; it may also be linked to Pharaoh’s own reference to the sun god:

This plague will demonstrate how great is the Lord’s power against the gods of Egypt; when the God of Israel wills it, the sun, which is regarded by the Egyptians as the chief deity, will be hidden and unable to shine upon its worshippers; and if the conjecture

that the word *ra’ah* in verse 10 alludes to the Egyptian sun god be correct, the plague of darkness may be viewed as an immediate reaction to Pharaoh’s remarks.

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**Moses’ cutting comment is meant as an inversion, and rejection, of the entire cult of Pharaoh-worship that lay at the heart of Egyptian tyranny.**

This is fascinating, and when we bear Abu Simbel in mind, architecturally arranged so that the sun glows on Pharaoh’s face, then Pharaoh’s statement to Moses after the plague of darkness takes on a new meaning:

And Pharaoh said unto him, Get away from me, take heed for yourself, see my face no more; for in that day you see my face you shall die.

And Moses said, You have spoken well, I will see your face again no more. (Exodus 10:28–29)

Classical commentators struggle with this prediction, as Moses and Pharaoh would meet again before the Exodus. But the point, as many suggest, is that they would meet in the darkness of night, before sunrise, during the plague of the firstborn, so that Pharaoh’s face could not be clearly seen. And if we bear in mind how the sun in Abu Simbel would illumine the face of the statue of Pharaoh, then Moses’ cutting comment is meant as an inversion, and rejection, of the entire cult of Pharaoh-worship that lay at the heart of Egyptian tyranny.

If the plague of darkness was an assault on Egyptian theology, the Hebrews’ preparation for the final plague would emphasize the heart of the Israelite faith. We must note one word that appears again and again:

On the tenth day of the month, every man shall take a lamb for his father’s house, a lamb for every **home**. . . .



And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood, . . . and place it on the lintel and the two sideposts, . . . and none of you shall go out from the door of his **home** until the morning.

And the blood shall be for you a sign on your **homes**. (Exodus 12:3–13)

After spending centuries building palaces, temples, and cities for Pharaoh, the final moment before redemption would be spent by the slaves inside the humble Israelite home, emphasizing that it is not through construction but the household, the family, that Israelite identity is assured. Placing the blood on doorposts was not merely a sign of divine protection; rather, as others have noted, it highlighted that the Israelite home was turning into a Temple, into a center of cultic rite and ritual, a sacred site.

Indeed, at this point, rather than describe the future of the Israelite polity, Moses, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes, speaks about parents and children, instructing Israel that this moment would be recreated and retold in the ceremony that would become the seder:

And you shall tell your son in that day saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt. (Exodus 13:8)

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**Thus the seder, as Rabbi Sacks observes, is a fitting response to Ramesses' approach to immortality, highlighting how education and transmission, rather than construction, is the essence of endurance.**

In this verse, Moses, as Rabbi Sacks notes, fixed his vision not on the immediate but on the distant future, and not on adults but children. In so doing he was making a fundamental point. It may be hard to escape from tyranny but it is harder still to build and sustain a free society.

Thus the seder, as Rabbi Sacks observes, is a fitting response to Ramesses' approach to immortality, highlighting how education and transmission, rather than construction, is the essence of endurance. And if we imagine Moses speaking to slaves in the shadow of Pi-Ramesses, the most glorious city ever created by a king in his own name in the history of the world, then we can understand how the ritual of the paschal lamb might have been intended to express what Daniel Webster once said:

If we work marble, it will perish; if we work upon brass, time will efface it; if we rear temples, they will crumble into dust; but if we work upon immortal minds and instill into them just principles, we are then engraving upon tablets which no time will efface, but will brighten and brighten to all eternity.

Pharaoh's capital was called "The House of Ramesses;" and if it is there that the Pharaoh of the Exodus dwells, then—as the plague of the firstborn descends—we can understand how this plague undermines the Egyptian ruler's purported power. As the verse puts it:



For there was no home in which there was no dead. (Exodus 12:30)

If it is in Per-Ramesses that all this occurs, then as all the power Per-Ramesses proclaims is undone—belied by the deaths of the Egyptian firstborn—the humble homes of the Israelite families are themselves turned into the true temples of Egypt, so that the simple structures in which parents and children live and learn are placed at the heart of Israelite culture and faith forever.

Pharaoh, in desperation, orders the Israelites to leave, and the Hebrews depart from the city of Ramesses, traveling eastward to Sukkot. And another incredibly interesting detail about the capital allows us to suggest something new. Wilkinson tells us the following about per-Ramesses:

The four cardinal points of the city were placed under the symbolic protection of other major deities. In the south was the temple of Seth, lord of Hutwaret, dating back to Hyksos times. In the north, a shrine was built to honor the ancient cobra goddess of the delta, Wadjet. In the west, a temple celebrated Amun of Thebes. Finally, in the east, pointing the way to Egypt's empire in the Near East, a sanctuary was dedicated to Astarte—not an Egyptian deity at all but the Syrian goddess of love and war, appropriated into the Egyptian pantheon and given the special role of protecting the horse team that drew the royal chariot.

Here, too, the symbolism of the city might allow us to understand how the plagues set the stage for the final inversion. A statue of a pagan goddess in Per-Rameses pointed east, toward Canaan, reflecting its purported protection of the Egyptian royal chariot. If this is where the Exodus is taking place, then as the Israelites departed Per-Ramesses and headed east, toward Canaan, they would have been pursued by chariots that relied on the assured protection of this goddess. And as we will read next week, this purported pagan power would also be disproved.

“If we work marble, it will perish.” So Daniel Webster said. The capital named for Ramesses the Great disappeared with his dynasty, and the faith and texts of the Hebrew slaves was the main way in which it has been remembered. Joyce Tyldesley tells us:

It seems almost inconceivable that such a splendid city could disappear without trace but this is exactly what happened to Pi-Ramesses. Although the city outlived its founder, continuing in use throughout the 20th Dynasty, its fate was sealed when the Pelusiac branch of the Nile started to silt up. Gradually the Nile changed its course to flow further north, rendering the port of Pi-Ramesses useless and effectively isolating the city from the main highway of Egypt. Eventually, during the 21st Dynasty, the decision was taken to abandon Pi-Ramesses and establish a royal city at nearby Tanis. Much of the old city was dismantled, its valuable masonry transported to Tanis for reuse. The mud-brick buildings were simply abandoned, and slowly subsided into mounds of fertile soil. With the passage of time more modern buildings, fields, and irrigation canals obscured the archaeological site until Pi-Ramesses was just a name preserved in the monuments of Ramesses and in the Bible.



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Abu Simbel, of course, remains. But the original Egyptian empire does not. It is therefore incredible to ponder an image of Menachem Begin, after the Camp David Accords, standing in front of Abu Simbel



To this day, the sun illumines the face of Ramesses twice a year. But as the poet Shelley famously put it, “nothing beside remains.” Meanwhile, a descendant of Hebrew slaves can stand in front of perhaps the most astonishing glorification of a tyrant ever created, doing so as the leader of a resurrected Jewish state, embodying the astonishing endurance of a people that left that land millennia ago. The humble home of the Israelites has defeated the “House of Ramesses” in a victory that resounds through the ages, and contains lessons for us all.

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## **Additional Resources**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Passover, “Passover Tells Us: Teach Your Children Well,” Originally Published in *The Huffington Post*, April 17, 2011. [Click here to read.](#)

Nati Gabbay on Menachem Begin’s Visit to Egypt, “Begin Discovers Egypt,” The National Library of Israel, March 26, 2019. [Click here to read.](#)

