



An Excerpt of a Project Zug course from R. Tali Adler

The *midrash* imagines the onset of slavery as transforming the Israelites from an accepted—even celebrated—minority to an oppressed and enslaved people. What do rabbinic texts about the Jewish experience in Egypt teach us about what it takes to survive in a world that wants to destroy you?

As you read each text, please ask yourselves:

- There is a midrashic tradition that the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt because they maintained some aspects of national identity during their time in slavery. While the *midrash* presents the cause and effect mechanism between the Israelite's loyalty to certain aspects of their identity and their eventual redemption as supernatural, involving God stepping in and taking them out of slavery as a reward for their loyalty to their identity, the link between the two may also be understood in a different way: it is the loyalty to these identity markers that gives the Israelites some way to understand their identity in a positive,

♦ **redeeming way**

For more on these midrashic traditions, see Yitzhak Bronstein's essay, "Redeeming Rufus and Reuven," available here: https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/Bronstein.pdf

♦ **Vayikra Rabbah 32:5**

Vayikra Rabbah is an ancient collection of *midrashim* on the book of Leviticus (early 5th century Galilee).

♦ **Justus**

The Hebrew says "Luliani" and "Lestes." The letter "j" would have been pronounced like our letter "y," and the changing of y-sounds to l-sounds is very common.

♦ **Hebrews**

In these verses, the word Hebrew (Ivri) is an ethnic designation, one which is normally used by non-Israelites; Israelites (Benei Yisrael) is the name they would use for themselves. Given that the normal word would be Israel, this *midrash* takes "Hebrew" instead as referring to their language. The *midrash* goes onto derive items (3) and (4), but we will skip this section here.

redeeming way. ♦ In a world that forcibly marks them as other and detestable, the Israelites choose to actively embrace their minority culture and use it as a source of pride.

As you read these texts, pay attention to which identity markers and values the texts single out. What is it about these particular markers and values which might help the Israelites take pride in their heritage? What is it about them that helps maintain the Israelites as a people?

SOURCE #1

ויקרא רבה ל"ב:ה	Vayikra Rabbah 32:5 ♦
ר חונה בש' בר קפרא בשביל ארבעה דברים ניגאלו ישראל ממצרים, על ידי שלא שינו את שמן ולא שינו את לשונם ועל ידי שלא אמרו לשון הרע ועל ידי שלא היה בהן פרוץ ערוה.	Rabbi Huna said in the name of Bar Kappara: Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of four things: (1) because they did not change their names, (2) they did not change their language, (3) they did not go tale-bearing, and (4) none among them lacked sexual restraint.
על ידי שלא שינו את שמן, ראובן ושמעון מי נחתין ראובן ושמעון מי סלקין. לא היו קורין לראובן רופס, ליהודה לוליאנא, ליוסף ליסטס, לבנימין אלכסנדרא.	They did not change their names—Reuven and Shimon went down [to Egypt]; Reuven and Shimon came up [to Eretz Yisrael]. They did not call Reuven "Rufus," nor Yehudah "Julian," nor Yosef "Justus," ♦ nor Binyamin "Alexander."
על ידי שלא שינו את לשונם, להלן כת' ויבא הפליט ויגד לאברם העברי (בראשית יד, יג) וכאן כתיב ויאמרו אל ה' העברים נקרא עלינו (שמות ה, ג).	They did not change their language—elsewhere it is written, "And there came one that had escaped, and told Avram the Hebrew" (Genesis 14:13), while here it is written, "The God of the Hebrews ♦ has met with us" (Exodus 5:3).

Explanation from R. Adler

This text offers two identity markers (names and language) and two values (not gossiping and not engaging in sexual immorality). While these might initially seem to be very different, in some ways, identity and values can both be ways of remembering who you are. Maintaining Jewish names without maintaining basic Jewish values, this text might be saying, is not worth very much—and, at the same time, values without the things that make up a people, like language and names, might not be enough.

» *What do you think are the factors that maintain Jewish identity and values?*

◆ **Eliyahu Rabbah, chapter 23**

This extract of the ancient work of *midrash*, normally called Tana de-vei Eliyahu (Reciter of the House of Elijah), comes from the version published by Meir Ish Shalom in 1900. It is split into two sections: Eliyahu Rabbah (Greater Elijah) and Eliyahu Zuta (Lesser Elijah).

SOURCE #2

**אליהו רבה (איש שלום)
פרק כג**

נתקבצו וישבו, שהיו כולם אגודה אחת, כרתו ברית שיעשו גמילות חסדים זה עם זה, וישמרו בלבבם ברית אברהם יצחק ויעקב, שלא יניחו לשון בית יעקב אביהם וילמדו לשון מצרים, מפני דרכי עבודה זרה.

כאיזה צד עבדו ישראל את אבינו שבשמים במצרים? שלא שינו את לשונם, והיו המצריים אומרים להם: למה אתם עובדים אותנו? אם תעבדו אלהי מצרים, יקל עבודתו מכם. משיבין ישראל ואומרים להם: שמא עוב אברהם יצחק ויעקב את אלהינו שבשמים שיעזבו בניהן אחריהן.

Eliyahu Rabbah, chapter 23 ◆

They gathered together as a single group and made a covenant that they would deal with each other kindly, and keep in their hearts the covenant of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov, that they would not abandon the language of the house of Ya'akov, their father, and learn the Egyptian language [instead], because it was tinged with idol worship.

How did the Israelites worship their Father in Heaven in Egypt? They did not change their language. The Egyptians would say to them, "Why do you worship Him? If you serve the gods of Egypt, we will lighten your slavery." Israel replied, "Did our fathers, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov abandon our God in Heaven such that their children after them should do so?"

Questions from R. Adler

1. When pressed by the Egyptians to give up their faith in God, the Israelites say that they will not because their ancestors did not give up on God. How might basing their faith on the faith of their ancestors help the Israelites maintain their resolve?
2. If you had to choose a value that could help the Jewish people maintain their identity in the face of adversity, what would you choose? What values have different Jewish groups chosen at different times in history?