

Can We Serve Two Different Masters?

Text and Discussion from Project Zug

The following study guide is taken from Hadar's online learning platform, Project Zug. You can use this guide to spark conversation at your Seder, or study it with a havruta partner at any time before or during the holiday.

This is from a course by Dr. Meir Buzaglo, "The Wisdom of Shabbat: A Modern Israeli Perspective," making the case for the deeper meaning that Shabbat entails—even without the legal aspects—and how it serves as an antidote to many of modern society's ills. Check out the full course at www.projectzug.org.

◆ Introduction

Throughout the story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt and departure to freedom, the Torah presents a struggle, both implicit and explicit, between Pharaoh and God. The Torah suggests that a person cannot be subject to two different masters. Read the following two texts from the Exodus story and identify the explicit and implicit signs in them of the tension between Pharaoh and God.

◆ Source Text #1

שמות א:ז-י, יד-יז	Exodus 1:7-10, 14-17
(7) ובני ישראל פרו וישרצו וירבו ויעצמו במאד מאד ותמלא הארץ אתם.	(7) But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.
(8) ויקם מלך חדש על-מצרים אשר לא-ידע את-יוסף.	(8) A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.
(9) ויאמר אל-עמו הנה עם בני ישראל רב ועצום ממנו.	(9) And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us.

(10) הָבָה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פֶּן-יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחֶם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ.... (14) וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת-חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה בַחֲמֹר וּבִלְבָנִים וּבְכָל-עֲבֹדָה בַשָּׂדֶה אֶת כָּל-עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר-עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בַּפֶּדֶר. (15) וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמִּיֻּלֹּת הָעִבְרִיֹּת אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה. (16) וַיֹּאמֶר בִּיֻלְדֹכֶן אֶת-הָעִבְרִיֹּת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל-הָאֲבָנִים אִם-בֶּן הוּא וְהָמַתְן אוֹתוֹ וְאִם-בַּת הוּא וְחִיָּה. (17) וַתִּירָאנָּה הַמִּיֻּלֹּת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתְּחַיֶּינָה אֶת-הַיָּלִידִים	(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..." (14) ...the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field. (15) The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, (16) saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." (17) The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.
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◆ Source Text #2

שמות ה:א-ט	Exodus 5:1-9
(1) וְאַחֲרַיִם בָּאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-פַּרְעֹה כֹּה-אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי וַיְחַגּוּ לִי בַמִּדְבָּר. (2) וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה מִי ה' אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמַּע בְּקוֹלִי לְשַׁלַּח אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת-ה' וְגַם אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח. (3) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִיִּים וַקְרָא עָלֵינוּ נִלְכָּה נָא דָרֹךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְנִזְבַּחָה לָהּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ פֶּן-יִפְגְּעֵנוּ בַדָּבָר אוֹ בַחֲרֹב. (4) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לָמָּה מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן תִּפְרִיעוּ אֶת-הָעָם מִמַּעֲשֵׂיו לָכוּ לַסִּבְלִיתִיכֶם.	(1) Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness." (2) But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go." (3) They answered, "The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us. Let us go, we pray, a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He strike us with pestilence or sword." (4) But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you distract the people from their tasks? Get to your labors!"

(5) וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה הֵן-רַבִּים עַמָּה עִם הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁבַּתְתֶּם אֹתָם מִסִּבְלֹתָם.	(5) And Pharaoh continued, “The people of the land are already so numerous, and you would have them cease from their labors!”
(6) וַיִּצַּו פַּרְעֹה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת-הַנְּגִישִׁים בָּעָם וְאֶת-שֹׁטְרֵי הָאָדָם.	(6) That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying,
(7) לֹא תִסְכּוּן לָתֵת תְּבֹן לָעָם לִלְבָּן הַלְבָּנִים כְּתִמּוֹל שְׁלֹשָׁם הֵם יִלְכוּ וְקִשְׁשׁוּ לָהֶם תְּבֹן.	(7) “You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves.
(8) וְאֶת-מִתְכַּנֹּת הַלְבָּנִים אֲשֶׁר הֵם עֹשִׂים תִּמּוֹל שְׁלֹשָׁם תִּשְׁימוּ עָלֵיהֶם לֹא תִגְרַעוּ מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי-נִרְפִּים הֵם עַל-כֵּן הֵם צֹעְקִים לֵאמֹר גְּלֹכָה נִזְבַּחָה לֹאלֹהֵינוּ.	(8) But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God!’
(9) תִּכְבֹּד הָעֶבֶדָה עַל-הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-בָהּ וְאֵל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדִבְרֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל.	(9) Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises.”

◆ Questions

1. How do these verses contrast God and Pharaoh?
2. What do you think the verse means when it describes the midwives as “fearing God”? What makes them fear God and not Pharaoh?
3. How does Pharaoh relate to God? What do you think about the way he characterizes the relationship between the Israelites and God?
4. What do you think about the contrast: is it possible to serve God while one is subject to human authority? How?
5. If indeed serving God is in contrast to serving Pharaoh, what do we learn from that about the nature of servitude, and in contrast to it, about the nature of freedom?

◆ Source Text #3

R. Yehudah Ha-Levi, the great 12th century Spanish poet, grappled with the question of servitude and freedom and its relationship to the service of God, and expressed his impressions in poetry (you can listen to Etti Ankari's version here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npLcDIItUnyM&feature=youtu.be>):

עבדי הזמן, רבי יהודה הלוי (ריה"ל)	R. Yehudah Ha-Levi, Slaves of Time
עבדי זמן עבדי עבדים הם – עבד אדני הוא לבד חפשי: על כן בבקש כל-אנוש חלקו "חלקי אדני!" אמרה נפשי.	Slaves of time are slaves of slaves – Only the slave of God is free: Therefore when each one seeks his portion "My portion is God," my soul declares.

1. This poem connects the concept of time and the concept of servitude. What does Ha-Levi assert in the poem's first line? What do you think about that claim?
2. What does Ha-Levi assert in the second line? Do you agree with this claim? Why or why not?
3. This poem opposes the prevailing claim in our day that freedom and religion, or freedom and God, are hostile to one another. Ha-Levi claims that, on the contrary, only the servant of God, the human being whose master is God, can truly be free.

◆ Source Text #4

A similar feeling is well expressed in the words of the great liberator, Abraham Lincoln:

Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address (1863)
It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

1. Lincoln, like Ha-Levi, sees a connection between awareness of God and a life of freedom. What do you think the connection is between awareness of God and freedom?
2. In what way does this awareness help establish a society based on the value of freedom?