

When talking about the Hebrews becoming numerous the midrash uses a quote from Ezekiel that speaks in terms of women. Why talk of the feminine? The obvious answer is that women are the ones to give birth so when talking of increasing the numbers, we would speak of the women. But if we dig a little more, we find that the talmud teaches us that the women are responsible for perpetuating the species. During the heat of the day the women would entice the men to join them under the apple trees and lie with them. If not for the women, the Hebrews would not have increased by such large numbers.

What does it mean that the Egyptians “dealt wisely” with the Hebrews? A midrash tells us that Pharaoh one day told the Hebrews that he would pay them by the brick if they would build a monument. Many went out and produced up to 600 bricks. The tribe of Levi on the other hand, made very few, warning that the people should not be too eager to acquire wealth. When the bricks were counted, Pharaoh ordered that since this in the number of bricks that can be produced in one day, then this will be the quota for the future without pay. Whoever failed to complete the quota were subjected to torture or his family were entombed alive in the structure.

These two statements, “treated harshly” and “afflicted” are basically synonyms. So the midrash will want to find different meanings for each statement. In this case we learn that afflicted is talking about the taskmasters that are set over the people to put upon the people burdens. Not the burdens of the slaves, although that is what it becomes, but the burdens of the Egyptians and the building of the cities. The ancient Egyptians were expert builders and the monuments that they built (in this case cities) would keep their memories alive forever. In many cases these monuments were constructed to house their remains when they died. These burdens were the Egyptians, not the Hebrews, but through the taskmasters these burdens were afflicted on the people.

Going even further, the midrash tells us that they made the people work with rigor, with very hard labor. These three statements set the stage for what is to come. The affliction became so bad that finally the people cried out to God.

“And numerous” as it is said, “I made you as numerous as the plants of the field. You grew up and wore choice adornments. Your breasts were firm and your hair grew long. Yet you were bare and naked.”

Ezekiel 16:7

וְרַב. כְּמַה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר : רַבְּבָה
כְּצֹמַח הַשָּׂדֶה נִתְתַּיֵּד, וְנִתְרַבִּי,
וְנִתְגַּדְלִי, וְנִתְבְּאִי בַעֲדֵי עֲדָיִים :
שְׁדָיִם נִכְנֹו, וְשַׁעֲרֶךָ צִמַּח, וְאַתָּה
עָרֶם וְעָרְיָה :

“And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us. And they imposed on us hard labor.” **“And the Egyptians treated us harshly”** as it is said, “Come, let us deal with them wisely. Otherwise they will multiply and if we go to war, they will join our enemies, and fight against us and leave the land.”

Exodus 1:10

וַיַּרְעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִים
וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ. וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ עֲבֹדָה
קָשָׁה : וַיַּרְעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִים.
כְּמַה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר : הִבֵּה נִתְחַכְּמָה
לוֹ. פֹּן יִרְבֶּה, וְהָיָה כִּי תִקְרָאנָה
מִלְחָמָה, וְנוֹסֵף גַּם הוּא עַל
שִׁנְאֵינוּ, וְנִלְחַם בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן
הָאָרֶץ :

“And afflicted us” as it is said, “they set taskmasters over them in order to oppress them with their burdens. They built storecities for Pharaoh, Pitom and Ramses.”

Exodus 1:11

וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ. כְּמַה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר : וַיִּשְׂיִמוּ
עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים, לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוֹ
בְּסַבְּלָתָם : וַיִּבְנוּ עָרֵי מִסְכָּנוֹת
לְפָרְעֹה, אֶת פִּתּוֹם וְאֶת רַעַמְסֵס :

“they imposed on us hard labor” as it is said, “the Egyptians made the children of Israel work with rigor.”

Exodus 1:13

וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ עֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה. כְּמַה
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר : וַיַּעֲבְדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֶךְ :