

As readers of the Bible know, the future doesn't unfold quite that smoothly for Abraham's clan. He heads for Canaan, but in the years after his arrival, his family must head south to Egypt several times because of famine in Canaan. As the book of Genesis closes, the Israelites (only seventy in number at that time) have settled in Egypt. As the curtain rises on the book of Exodus, their situation becomes dire. The Israelites have increased to a thriving population of about six hundred thousand men, which might well have meant a total Israelite population of several million people; the pharaoh feels threatened by them and enslaves them.¹⁵

Once the Israelites are trapped in Egypt, the Tower of Babel's message is suddenly urgent. The builders of the tower had sought to remain in one place, but God's plan was that each people should seek its own territory. That is what the Israelites now want. The issue is not only their enslavement, as horrific as that is; it is also that as long as they reside in a foreign land, they cannot chart the course of their own future.

Because we commonly think of the pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites as evil, it is easy to forget that he is also deeply insightful: he is the one who first refers to the Israelites as "the people, the children of Israel," *am benei yisrael*.¹⁶ He understands that they are more than a clan; they have become a nation, with the urge for independence that nationhood often entails. It is Pharaoh who introduces the notion of the Jewish people.

His instinct is to protect himself: "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 go up from this land."¹⁷ Note what Pharaoh fears. He is not concerned that the Israelites will topple his kingdom. He's too smart for that. He understands their basic human desire: it is the wish, as Israel's national anthem, "Hatikva," says to this day in its penultimate line, "to be a free people in our own land." Pharaoh knows that the Israelites will not try to conquer *his* land; because they are a nation, they are destined to seek a homeland of their own.

The story of the Exodus is therefore in some ways the fulfillment of the vision of the Tower of Babel. In the Tower of Babel

story, humanity is instructed that distinctiveness, heterogeneity, and uniqueness are what they should seek; in the Exodus narrative, the additional requirements of freedom and independence are added—the Israelites become the Bible's model of a people desperately seeking to make that dream a reality.

Indeed, the link between the stories of the Tower of Babel and of the Exodus is beautifully hinted at in the Bible with one simple literary detail: the Hebrew word *levainim*, or "bricks." The word *levainim* appears in only two stories in all of the Five Books of Moses. It appears first in the Tower of Babel story, when the people discover their ability to make bricks and therefore to build the tower ("Come, let us bake *levainim* and burn them hard.' [So the] *levainim* served them as stone."¹⁸) The second and only other time that the word is used is at the beginning of Exodus, in the recounting of the awful burdens of production placed upon the Israelite slaves: "Be off now to your work! No straw shall be issued to you, but you must produce your quota of bricks!"¹⁹

The appearance of the word *levainim* in only these two stories is the Bible's literary way of telling the reader that the stories are intimately connected. The linkage between the tales makes a clear point: there are multiple forms of slavery. One is the standard form of slavery, a physical enslavement, typically enforced with brutality. It is the slavery that the Israelites endured in Egypt and to which Africans were subjected in the antebellum South. The other enslavement is not physical but is rather is about erasing identity. It is enslavement not to taskmasters but to a vision of a unified humanity. No force is needed to create this kind of slavery. All that is necessary is for people to abandon their differences, to have no conception of why they matter.

The Bible associates the Tower of Babel with the story of the Exodus because it wishes to note that both of these slaveries are utterly at odds with what human beings are meant to be. The Bible has an *ideal* for humanity, a vision in which each nation lives on its own land, with its own language and its own culture. With the Exodus, the Israelites embark on a journey to transform that universal dream into a reality. With the Exodus, the proverbial train of human history has left the station. The Israelites make their way to the Promised Land through the remainder of the Torah. Throughout the rest of the