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ZEKHER LIYTSLAT MITSRAYIM: **A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION**

PROLOGUE

Rabbi Dr. David De Sola Pool was a giant within the American Orthodox Rabbinate. As the dynamic leader of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, he was personally immersed in the activities of the largest Jewish community in the world and felt an intimate bond with our historic synagogue in Newport. In his introduction to Rabbi Morris Gutstein's classic text, *The Story of the Jews of Newport*, he wrote the following:

The Jew walks through Touro Street in Newport quietly conscious of inheriting a tradition both of American political and religious liberty and of Jewish ideals and religious faith. The synagogue, which has stood for one and three quarter centuries and which has withstood the alarms of war and the fatalities of swiftly changing time, is a witness of Newport's liberality of spirit and reverence for the ancient Bible, and Israel's loyalty to the teachings which it has borne on its centuried pilgrimage to the four corners of the earth.¹

He also wrote an outstanding article, entitled "Some Notes on the Touro Synagogue," for the special commemorative journal published in conjunction with the designation of our synagogue as a National Historic Shrine, in 1946.

. . . Newport, the second oldest Jewish community in the United States, is proud to possess not only the loveliest but also the oldest synagogue building in the country. . . . their shrine remained and remains the spiritual center of Newport Jewry, and a beloved shrine of pilgrimage for Americans of every faith."²

In light of the historic relations between Shearith Israel in New York and Jeshuat Israel in Newport, I am pleased to contribute this article in Dr. De Sola Pool's memory.

Americans are familiar with patriotic mottos starting with the term "Remember": "Remember the Alamo," "Remember the Maine," and "Remember Pearl Harbor." In modern times, Jews have added the motto, "Remember the Holocaust." For Sephardic Jews, a rallying call for the past 500 years has been "Remember the Expulsion" from Spain and Portugal. Generally speaking, this motto has concentrated on the trauma of the expulsion, with its related questions. The medieval Sephardic Jewish community considered itself the most influential of Jewish communities, both in its wealth and sophistication, as well as its spiritual and intellectual heritage. Thus, the shock of expulsion (or the alternative of conversion to Catholicism) raised profound questions: "Why did this happen to us? How could God allow such a catastrophe? Why were we punished?"

A broader, perhaps more poignant question, however, relates to the Expulsion. How could a spiritual/religious institution that used love as its motto, the Catholic Church, gain such potent and extensive temporal power? How could the Church have achieved the political status to dictate national policy to government bodies, literally to determine "who shall live and who shall die," to become more powerful than kings and queens? Even though the actual church-dictated executions were left to the civil authorities, the autos-da-fe and all the judicial functions aimed at the *conversos* were directed and supervised by the Church functionaries. This was political power wrapped in the religious banner of the Church! Yet, this was not an isolated incident of the display of Church participation and leadership in political and military functions. The Crusades were organized, inspired and supervised by the Church. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Church embraced anti-Semitic violence, organizing and encouraging pogroms and blood-libels.³ Outstanding Church personalities openly conducted political programs and served in the most influential echelons of government. Probably the most obvious example of this was Cardinal Richelieu, the Prime Minister of France in the 1600's, probably the most powerful individual in Europe at that time.⁴

Let us investigate the roots and sources of this political power that was enjoyed by a hierarchy of clergy.

In early civilizations, small groups of intelligent and observant people discovered patterns in nature, especially astronomic information. Since the general population didn't understand these phenomena, the wise men presented explanations. When unable to provide rational answers, they used the explanation of "mysteries"—the unseen power of gods. As more sophisticated questions were posed, a large collection

of gods developed, to explain natural phenomena. Idols became visible symbols of these gods. Concepts of local gods, who fought to defend local populations, developed. Thus, wars between city-states were envisioned as wars between rival gods, the stronger ones bringing victory to their realms. This was the world of pagan polytheism.

To enhance their positions of leadership, which in turn involved their favored social-political status, political rulers paid homage to these gods. To gain broader acceptance, these rulers also embraced and afforded privileged status to those who enjoyed close relationships with these gods, the learned wise men. A small clique accepted this partnership with the royalty. To maintain their special status, rulers encouraged such principles as the Divine Right to Rule, using the stamp of approval of that clique of scholars to give credibility to their rule. In turn, these religious leaders gained and maintained an intellectual monopoly, an early example of the power of knowledge.

In early Biblical events, we see the emergence of the “three estates,” composed of royalty, the military, and the clergy, each supporting and bolstering the other two. Nimrod’s power is buttressed by the teachings of the contemporary idol worship. Rebellion against idol worship was viewed as treason against the state.⁵

Even Abraham, the staunch foe of these religious-political alliances, seems to acknowledge this connection presenting a tithe to Malki-tsedek, the contemporary “*Kohen*,” after his victory against the four kings.⁶

We also see the unique status of the priestly clique in Egypt during Joseph’s reign as viceroy, during the period of the famine. The priests are the only group not taxed, nor are they forced to succumb to Pharaoh’s economic stranglehold over the general populace. They remain independent and retain their estates—and their power.⁷ Why? Perhaps Pharaoh needs their support. He does not antagonize them with the taxations or other economic pressures in this period of the great growth of power of the royal circle in Egypt.

In the confrontations of Moses and Pharaoh, the “wise men and sorcerers” advise Pharaoh and duplicate the magical signs that Aaron and Moses present to the king.⁸ Likewise, when the early plagues are related to Pharaoh as warnings, these sorcerers are at Pharaoh’s side. It is only at the third plague, when the sorcerer/priests cannot duplicate the plague, that their power diminishes. We do not have any further mention of their role during the following plagues.⁹ Apparently, Moses has to convince Pharaoh and the Egyptians that he can deal with them in the language they will respect—the knowledge of magical signs or omens.

Egypt in that period became a great powerful empire. It was the leader in technology and economic power. For many of its inhabitants, however, it was a land of corruption, cruelty and terror, especially for the Israelites who resided there. Where in this arrangement were the clergy? At the top, with the royalty and the military elite!

What was the power of the clergy? For one thing, their authority was limited to theological or religious concerns. The clergy included a combination of the technological and scientific leaders of the time: the engineers, scientists, and philosophers. One of the issues for which they tried to provide explanations for their society was death—its meaning and treatment. Armies of slaves toiled to build pyramids under the direction of the priests. The priests tended to the preparations and the embalming of corpses. They encouraged and performed mysterious seances and feats of sorcery and black magic to contact dead souls. When the national focus is on death, the choreographers of this “artistic expression” assume a position of importance as Pharaoh’s advisors and partners in controlling the masses. In order to maintain this power, the group had to retain the monopoly on knowledge. Somewhat related was an influence on the general population aimed at fostering intolerance and prejudice toward foreigners. In that way even the lowest, most down-trodden citizen could have a feeling of superiority to the alien outsiders; making scapegoats of strangers for purposes of political stability was standard policy.

As Jews, we often recall the events of our liberation from Egypt with the expression, “*Zekher Liytsiat Mitsrayim*.” This is, of course, the main theme of the Passover festival. It is also one of the two major themes of Shabbat observance, the other being recognition of God’s creation of the universe. This phrase, “*Zekher Liytsiat Mitsrayim*,” is generally associated with our appreciation of the miraculous manner in which God liberated us from Egyptian slavery and established us as a nation. However, I believe there is a broader, but perhaps more subtle meaning in this phrase. This theme may be perceived as a reaction to the practices of Egypt, an attempt to reverse the corrupting influences of the harsh Egyptian society, the world fashioned after the pyramid. The emphasis is on the word “*Liytsiat*,”—leaving—in the sense of turning away and ridding our people of the evil influences of the social structure of Egypt.

Some of this repugnance to Egyptian society is seen in the Ten Commandments, with the stress on one God, the prohibition of idols, and in the emphasis on the freedom of all people, as symbolized by the Sabbath. Moreover, the basic regulations of the *Kohanim* are in stark

contrast with the functions and status of the Egyptian clergy. The most obvious difference concerns death and dead bodies. Our *Kohanim* are not only forbidden to be involved with all phases of preparing corpses for burial, but are not to come in contact with bodies, or even be in the same room as a corpse. Even indirect contact results in temporary disqualification from the main functions and privileges of the *Kohanim*. Our *Kohanim* are to distance themselves from death.¹¹ Death is not glorified, nor magnified. We are expected to bury our dead quickly, in a simple manner, without the distasteful fanfare of the ancient Egyptians. Tearing of garments rather than the tearing of flesh as a sign of mourning may also be a reaction to Egyptian practices.¹²

Egypt's priestly cult sought to maintain an intellectual monopoly. This is quite alien to our tradition. The "Shema" urges all Jews to provide their children with an extensive education. Our constant efforts to make knowledge available to the entire population of our people is in direct and stark contrast with Egyptian practices. We are proud of being the first to establish a system of universal education for our youth, many centuries before the modern nations of Western civilizations adopted these educational requirements.¹³

The roles and functions of our Biblical clergy, the *Kohanim*, are not secretive or hidden, but are described openly to all Bible readers. Even certain priestly prerogatives that require certain scientific knowledge, such as decisions concerning animal blemishes and *tsara'at*, (leprosy-like skin diseases), are described openly in the Torah.

In several consecutive verses in *Vayikra*,¹⁴ the Torah reveals its rejection of many ancient Egyptian practices, especially those related to the role and power of the Egyptian clergy. The prohibition against eating the fruit of trees for the first three-years is associated with special magical efforts of Egyptian priests to make trees produce premature harvests. This is followed by two verses aimed against practices of sorcery, another strategic weapon in the arsenal of Egyptian clergy. These practices were often related to bringing back or communicating with dead souls, via seances or other forms of ventriloquistic sorcery.¹⁵ This cluster of verses includes bans against the shaving of heads in a fashion reminiscent of ancient Egyptian priests (and also medieval Catholic monks)¹⁶ as well as flesh cuttings for mourning. This set of laws culminates with the prohibition to mistreat a stranger, in direct opposition to Egyptian practices. It concludes, "You shall love him (the stranger) as yourself, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" A direct relationship is shown here between our opposition to the practices we faced in Egypt; we are admonished to act differently.

Another manifestation of this reversal of social structure from what we faced in Egypt is reflected in our governmental structure. In *Pirkei Avot*,¹⁷ the elements of Jewish leadership are represented with three crowns—the crowns of *Kehuna* (Priesthood), *Melukha* (Monarchy), and Torah (Scholarship). Our system is unlike the three estates of power found in ancient Egypt, which worked together to keep the masses down. The *Kohen* was to anoint the king, who was named by the prophet/Torah scholar. The king had to turn to the *Kohen* and the “*Urim veTumim*” breastplate to obtain sanction for military campaigns. The king was subject to Torah restrictions, subject to Rabbinical interpretation and possible legislation by the Sanhedrin. The King was also expected to teach Torah to the people in the Temple at the *Hakhel* ceremonies. To be sure, kings and priests often tried to expand their functions into other areas, and were criticized by the prophets during the first commonwealth period and by the Rabbis in the Second Temple period.¹⁸

A final indication that “*Zekher Liytsiat Mitsrayim*” involved an abhorrence to Egyptian persecution can be seen in the “*Tokhaha*” series of dire warnings found in *Devarim*.¹⁹ The Torah provides an extensive list of divine punishments that face the Jewish people if they fail to observe the Torah’s regulations. The final and seemingly worst punishment that faces the sinners is a threat to be returned to Egypt in slave ships. “God will return you to Egypt in ships, . . . and there you will sell yourselves as slaves.” The idea of remembering the Exodus from Egypt should serve as an effective deterrent to us. We certainly do not want to relive the cruel horrors and persecution of Egyptian slavery.

Contrary to the Jewish reaction to the experience in Egypt, the Church adopted, and to a certain extent perfected the status of the clergy along the lines of the Egyptian model. The key to their power could be traced to their monopoly of educational facilities and sources of knowledge.

We have seen that the development and growth of the stature and power of a small nucleus of religious leaders resulted in an influential clerical caste in ancient Egypt. The exclusive circle of intellectuals, aiming to maintain and extend their favored status, helped shape their contemporary society. Using sorcery, an excessive concern with death, and their monopoly over education and communication, they succeeded in gaining a crucial level of power in the Egyptian state. When the Israelites finally gained their freedom, many of the principles of their new society were reactions to their past persecution. The repeated exhortation to “Remember the Exodus from Egypt” indicates an attempt to produce a humane life-style, deeply sensitive to human needs.

NOTES

1. Rabbi Morris Gustein, *The Jews of Newport*, NY 1936, page 13.
2. Published by the Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue, Newport, RI 1946.
3. The National Holocaust Museum in Washington has a short, effective video program on the Church's role in planting the anti-Semitic seeds that resulted in the Nazi Holocaust.
4. *World Book Encyclopedia*, article on Cardinal Richilieu who is described as having "ruled France from 1624 to 1642, in the interests of Louis 13th."
5. *Bereshit Rabba*, 38:19
6. *Bereshit* 14:20—Rashi, quoting from Talmud *Nedarim* (32:a), offers the tradition that Malki-Tsedek was actually Noah's son, Shem. Rambam claims that Malki-Tsedek differed from his contemporary priests, who served angels, as Malki-Tsedek served the true God, and therefore was deserving of Abraham's tithes.
7. *Bereshit* 47:22. Rashi gives a clue to this interpretation by discussing the seeming redundant terminology of being "taken out of the land of Egypt and the house of slavery." Also, *Bereshit* 47:26, "only the Priests' land did not become Pharaoh's."
8. *Shemot* 7:11,22; 8:3.
9. *Shemot* 8:14.
11. Of course, for deceased immediate relatives, this rule is relaxed. Also, the law of "*Met Mitsvah*," the suddenly discovered corpse, applies even to *Kohanim*.
12. *Vayikra* 19:28, Rashi considers "cutting into one's flesh, as a mourning custom," to be based on "Amorite customs," which were also probably observed in ancient Egypt.
13. *Baba Batra*, 21:a—Through the efforts of Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Gamla and Rabbi Shimon Ben Shetah, a system of local schools was established in each community, and all children were required to attend.
14. *Vayikra* 19:23-34.
15. Rashi on *Vayikra* 19:31 explains the various forms of sorcery that emphasized "communicating" with the dead.
16. Rambam—*Mishne Torah* chapter 12—Section 1. Also, Section 7—comparing shaving to the custom of priests of idol worship. Also, see *Torah Temima*—Leviticus 19:27.
17. *Pirkei Avot*, 4:17.
18. *Devarim* 26:88.