

Renaming the Enemy

RABBI NAOMI KALISH, Harold and Carole Wolfe Director of the Center for Pastoral Education; Assistant Professor of Pastoral Education, JTS



One year, I invited a few people from an interfaith dialogue group to join my family for our Passover seder. An extended family from Egypt came; some of them lived in the United States and some were visiting from Alexandria.

Before we began the seder, I told my guests that it would be good for us to discuss terminology. I did not want to offend my guests by referring to the villains of the Passover story as “the Egyptians.” Even though I know that the phrase refers to ancient Egyptians, the sound of it and the conflation of time and texts might feel personal and uncomfortable to my guests. I said, “I know you have the story of the Exodus in the Quran. What do you call, for lack of a better word, the ‘bad guys?’”

My guests were quick to respond that they refer to the people who oppressed the Hebrews as “Pharaoh’s people.” They expressed the assumption that not all of the Egyptians were bad and that they, too, were living under tyrannical rule. By renaming or re-referring to the villains as “Pharaoh’s people,” they resisted vilifying and dehumanizing an entire group of people.

My friends’ understanding of the conflict in the Exodus story reminded me of an interpretation about the oppressors in the Exodus story. In the story of Egyptian slavery as told in the Book of Deuteronomy, we read the verse *וירעו אותנו המצרים ויענונו ויתנו עלינו עבודה קשה*, typically translated as “The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us” (Deut. 26:6, *Revised JPS Translation*, 2023).

By renaming or re-referring to the villains as “Pharaoh’s people,” they resisted vilifying and dehumanizing an entire group of people.

In his commentary on this verse, the Netziv of Volozhin (*Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin*, 1816–1893) reinterpreted the first of these words—*vayareiu*. Instead of understanding it as simply meaning “The Egyptians mistreated us,” he apparently understood it grammatically as a *hif’il*, a causative verb meaning “The Egyptians made us into the wicked ones, who lacked gratitude” (*HaEmek Davar* on Deut. 26:6). They propagandized the Hebrews, vilifying them as an entire people, an essential step in the process of oppressing a minority group.

A close reading of the text indicates that the biblical narrative also perpetuates a generalization about the Egyptians, suggesting that they all participated in the oppression of the Israelites. However, we know that Pharaoh’s daughter saved Moses as a baby, and there is no reason in the text to assume that all Egyptians participated in the oppression of the Hebrews.

A more accurate statement would be that Pharaoh and his people, his leadership team, perpetuated vilifying propaganda against the Hebrews. In conflict, all too often, vilifying and generalizing takes place in both directions regardless of power and privilege.

From these two stories—the Egyptians who attended my seder and from the Natziv’s telling of the story of the oppression of the Hebrews—I gained three specific insights about communicating in the presence of conflict. First, I try to avoid using the definite article “the” (such as, “the Egyptians”) so as not to generalize and label entire groups of people. Second, I try to identify and name the specific people or institutions that took specific actions. This clarity calls for a sense of accountability. Finally, I practice *hakarat hatov*, recognizing the good actions taken by people. I hope that these insights offer a helpful model for disrupting generalization and transforming conflict at our Passover seders and beyond.



On a narrow column of a 14th-century Spanish siddur, gratitude climbs the page.

MS 4366 (the Schloss–London Siddur), a 14th-century Sephardic manuscript from Spain, sets *Dayenu* in a narrow vertical column. Each clause *Dayenu* . . . ולא . . . אילו stands on its own line. The eye climbs the page as the voice moves through the litany. The design is not incidental. Iberian manuscripts often list refrains in this stepped form so that repetition becomes visible, as well as audible. The layout belongs to a Spanish graphic tradition that treats liturgical sequence as structure to be seen not only heard.