



Kristallnacht

How the Nazis resembled the story of Passover, and the lesson we can derive from it.

The Nazis' Methods

When the infamous “*Arbeit Macht Frei*” sign was stolen from the main gate of Auschwitz a number of years ago, it made headlines around the world. Just a few weeks later, the sign was found, and the gate was repaired.

But what is it about this sign that made its theft such big news?

This sign is powerful—in a dark way—because it represents the Nazis’ devious deception. They didn’t tell the Jews they were being sent to their deaths. Instead, they convinced them that “work liberates.” Do your work, get your food, and everything will be fine. This was how the Nazis operated; they justified everything they did.

Take Kristallnacht, for example. Most people have heard about it. Ask anyone, and they’ll tell you it was the night when the “crystal” windows of synagogues were smashed across Germany.

The story goes that it all started when a young Jewish man in France assassinated a German diplomat. In response, mobs in Germany erupted in rage, targeting Jewish synagogues.

But now we know the truth—what happened that night was no spontaneous riot. In just one night, 1,500 synagogues across Germany were attacked. Something on that scale doesn’t happen by chance; it takes careful planning and organization.

Hundreds of Jewish-owned stores were also ransacked and looted. But how did the rioters know exactly which stores belonged to Jews? Not every Jewish store had a mezuzah or a visible Jewish symbol. Clearly, someone had a list of addresses ready.

That night, 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to labor camps. Arresting that many people in a single night meant the Nazis already knew where they lived. And beyond the arrests, about 500 Jews were murdered.

A mass operation like this couldn't have been pulled off overnight. It must have been in the works for months. The Nazis were just waiting for the right excuse to carry it out, and the assassination of the German diplomat gave them the perfect opportunity.

So why call it *Kristallnacht*—"The Night of Broken Glass?" Because it makes it sound less terrible than it really was. It sounds like a few broken windows when, in reality, it was a massive, brutal attack on Jewish life in Germany.

The Egyptian Method

In this week's Torah portion, we continue reading about the Egyptian exile, and it's shocking to see how much Pharaoh's approach resembled that of the Nazis.

But how did it all begin?

The Midrash tells us that Pharaoh first organized a grand national gathering for the Jews. At this conference, he made a seemingly innocent request: "I ask you to help me build up the country." To inspire them, Pharaoh himself took up tools and publicly joined in the labor—what we'd call a photo op today.

Now, who could resist such a call to action? Who wouldn't want to follow the king's example—especially the Jews, eager to prove their loyalty to their homeland? And so, the entire Jewish nation eagerly joined the effort.

At first, the work was voluntary. But before they knew it, it became mandatory, and soon there was no way out.

Pharaoh's real concern, however, was that there were "too many Jews." He believed their growing numbers posed a threat to Egypt. In other words, he saw a demographic crisis—*the Jews will outnumber us!* To address this, Pharaoh summoned the Jewish midwives in secret and instructed them: if a newborn is a boy, kill him during childbirth, without the mother even knowing. After all, sometimes babies are stillborn, and no one would suspect a thing.

But the midwives refused to go along with Pharaoh's plan. So he tried

another tactic, which brings us to this week's Parshah—the Ten Plagues.

The first plague, of course, was blood.

But why did G-d choose this plague first? Why turn all the water into blood? Why not make it the second, third, or tenth plague?

Measure for Measure

In a talk on the 24th of Teves, 1981, the Rebbe highlights a fascinating Midrash. It describes how the Jewish women in Egypt would regularly go to the mikvah to purify themselves, but the Egyptians, determined to curb the Jewish birthrate, found a cunning way to interfere. As the Rebbe puts it, they *"closed the water."* They didn't openly forbid anything or resort to outright violence. Instead, they simply blocked access to the rivers, preventing Jewish women from immersing. Without the mikvah, they couldn't continue having children.

The Egyptians managed to appear civilized while achieving their goal. They weren't issuing blatant decrees or committing atrocities—at least not publicly. They could justify their actions with all sorts of rational explanations. Perhaps they claimed that allowing the Jewish slaves to use the rivers would contaminate the water, making it unsuitable for the rest of the population. It wouldn't be the first time in history that Jews were accused of poisoning water sources. The Egyptians always had an excuse ready.

By doing this, they achieved two things: they quietly halted Jewish population growth, and they maintained their image as a cultured and reasonable society.

But G-d saw through their deception. The Midrash explains that because the Egyptians denied Jewish women the ability to purify themselves and have children, they were punished with blood. G-d responded *measure for measure*—just as they had closed the waters to the Jews, G-d closed the waters to the Egyptians. For an entire week, they experienced what it felt like to be deprived of water. And that was the deeper meaning behind the first plague.

But even that didn't stop them. When the plague of blood failed to break them, Pharaoh introduced an even harsher decree: *"Every newborn boy must be thrown into the river."*

Officially, the decree applied to all newborns in Egypt, as if it were a general policy to control the male population. But as the Aramaic

translator Onkelos subtly adds in his interpretation, the real target was Jewish boys. While the official proclamation stated *every child*, the Egyptians quietly spread the word that it was really aimed at the Jews. Publicly, they could claim, *“We have nothing against the Jews; it’s a national policy.”*

Learn from our Enemies

Hundreds of years later, King David wrote, *“I was made wise by my enemies.”* In other words, if you want to understand what truly matters in Judaism, just look at what our enemies seek to destroy. Notice what they target most.

In Egypt, Pharaoh sought to halt Jewish growth—their own version of a *Final Solution*, G-d forbid—by preventing the use of the mikvah. And centuries later, when the Nazis set out to break the Jewish spirit, they didn’t target kosher restaurants or community offices first. Their primary focus was on our synagogues.

From the ancient Egyptians to the not-so-ancient Nazis, we learn a powerful lesson: mikvahs and synagogues are at the very heart of Jewish life. These institutions contain the secret to our survival and resilience. They are the foundation from which we draw our strength to carry on, no matter the challenges we face.

This is why, throughout history, every Jewish community—no matter how small or how remote—always built a mikvah and a synagogue before anything else. Because these are, and always will be, the pillars that uphold Jewish life.