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# Parshat B'shalach: Why did so many Israelites refuse to leave Egypt?

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In Exodus 13:18. It is written, “Now the Israelites went up ‘armed’ (חַמּוּשִׁים, *chamushim*) out of the land of Egypt.” Is it reasonable to assume that the Israelites—who up until this point had been slaves with all that that implies—would have been able to go out of Egypt armed with military equipment? They could not have possessed M-16 rifles nor Abrams tanks, but what about bows and arrows and elephants?

There had been a period of liminality in which they were no longer completely slaves and yet were not yet completely free. Could they have used this opportunity to acquire arms and begin military training? Or perhaps they had secretly began making their own arms while they were still slaves in preparation for a possible revolt?

We could argue that the answer is yes and in that case, the translation would work. But many commentators were troubled by this understanding and looked for alternative possibilities. If we reject this idea of the Israelites literally being armed, what does this word which we have tentatively translated as “armed” actually mean?

*The Jewish Study Bible* I refer to constantly, which uses the new translation of the Jewish Publication Society, is not much help here. They put in a footnote which states, “Meaning of Heb. hamushim uncertain.”

The midrash is more helpful, if not in uncovering the original meaning of the biblical Hebrew, then at least in offering one potential interpretation. The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael plays around with the letters of the word “armed” (רַמְשִׁים, *chamushim*) to suggest that if the vowels are altered slightly, it might actually mean that only one out of five (רַמְשִׁיחַ, *chamishah*) Israelites left Egypt.

Going even further in this homiletical direction, other midrashists suggest that only one out of 50 or even one out of 500 voluntarily left Egypt with Moses. The others apparently refused to go. Some state that they may have been put to death by God under cover of darkness so that the Egyptians would not see and erroneously come to believe that God had turned against his people.

On the other hand, some Egyptians came with the Israelites out of Egypt. They were part of what was called the “mixed multitude” in the Torah. Also, many scholars believe that only a small number of Israelites actually came out of Egypt and most of what became the Jewish people never left Canaan. But those are topics for another day.

If so many Israelites refused to leave Egypt, why? Of course I do not know for sure; I was not there. But I can speculate. In one word: Fear. They feared the unknown. They feared going into the desert with Moses only to die of thirst or face other catastrophic calamities. Who could blame them? What is amazing is that a minority dared to dream of the possible, no matter how improbable.

[Sources: Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael Beshallah 19:1:19; Rashi on Exodus 10:22; Rashi on Exodus 13:18.]

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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