

POLICING AND RACIAL INJUSTICE

## Text Study: A Plan Devised Against Them - Oppression and Justice, Then and Now

The “Black Friday 14” were a group of Black Lives Matter activists who chained themselves to a BART [Bay Area subway] train on Black Friday 2014 to protest police violence. They were brought up on criminal charges and asked to pay \$90,000 in restitution. As part of a clergy protest, I did a teach-in connecting Shemot to the fight against racial injustice, in part using this commentary. The good news is that the county agreed to drop the charges against the activists. The bad news is that state violence against people of color continues unabated in our nation. May our timeless wisdom spur us to challenge this injustice — not just on a case by case basis, but throughout all the systems that perpetuate and sustain it.

- Rabbi Michael Rothbaum, Congregation Beth El, Berkeley

### Exodus 1:22

And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every son who is born you shall throw into the river, and every daughter you shall let live.”

וַיִּצַו פַּרְעֹה לְכָל־עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל־בֶּן־הַיְלֹד  
הַיְאֲרָה תִשְׁלִיכוּהוּ וְכָל־בַּת־תְּחִיּוּ:



Members of the “Black Friday 14”, Creative Commons License

**Commentary of Rabbi Yaakov Culi, 18th c. Turkey/Spain, *Meam Loez***

(Translated from the original Ladino by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan)

“Throw into the river.” Pharaoh’s decrees became harsher and harsher. Soon he decided that throwing the infants into the Nile was not sufficient... If a man did not make his quota of bricks on a given day, he was given a ghastly choice: Either he or his child would have to be placed in the structure to make up for the missing bricks...

Many Israelites were mortared into the walls of the structures while still alive. They screamed and begged for mercy, but no one would take pity on them. Many infants were also thrown into the fire.

Throughout all this, the Israelites did not know that this was a plan devised against them by Pharaoh. They were led to believe that such ghastly acts were being done by individual Egyptians on their own initiative. Many Israelites even complained to the authorities, and were told that if proper witnesses would be brought, the perpetrators would be punished.

Eventually, of course, the Israelites discovered the truth.

**Deuteronomy 4:9**

But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children’s children.

רַק הַשְּׁמֹר לָךְ וְשָׁמֹר נִפְשְׁךָ מְאֹד פְּרִי־תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־  
הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ וּפְרִי־סוּרוּ מִלְּבָבְךָ כֹּל  
יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ וְהוֹדַעְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וּלְבְנֵי בָנֶיךָ:

A reform that begins with the officer on the beat is not reform at all. It’s avoidance. It’s a continuance of the American preference for considering the actions of bad individuals, as opposed to the function and intention of systems.

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Myth of Police Reform,” *The Atlantic*, April 2015.