The Jews were not always slaves in Egypt. Between the immigration of Joseph and the birth of Moses, the people of Israel had enjoyed a period of privilege, a period of marginalization, and eventually their time in bondage. And it was not even the outset of this bondage that pushed the Israelites to challenge Pharaoh’s authority.

In a dark parallel of the Seder’s most memorable song, Dayenu—which celebrates how each of the miracles of the Exodus would have been enough for the Jewish people—it appears that none of the hardships induced by Pharaoh were actually enough to cause the Israelites to push against their tormentors. Joseph’s good deeds were forgotten, the people were increasingly viewed as a threat, they were forced into labor, they were whipped and beaten, and eventually the baby boys of the Israelites were thrown into the Nile. But none of these fomented insurrection, elicited rebellion, or encouraged the people to rise up.

Instead, the confrontation between Israel and Egypt began not because the people called out for a change, but because God observed their tears and decided himself to intervene. The rabbis explain this decision as evidence that the labor and hardship of bondage had broken the people of Israel — as Rabbi Pinchas Stolper described it, they had become “fermented.” They were simply too far gone to redeem themselves.

The plight of the Israelites echoes the apologue of the frog and the boiling water. If you put the frog into a pot of boiling water, it will jump right out, but if you slowly bring the water to boil with the frog inside, it will eventually succumb. The people Israel had waited too long, and they no longer had the agency to respond.

We tend to focus on the part of the Exodus narrative that traces the arc from slavery to freedom, but the path from freedom to slavery holds important lessons for us today. In Egypt, the Jews learned that waiting too long was simply not a tenable option. And the rebellions and political and civic activism that have long followed from the seder arguably have their roots more cleanly in avoiding a repeat of Jacob’s descendants’ mistakes than in retracing the deity-orchestrated redemption that followed.

Today, as we observe a spreading fascination with autocracy, a waning commitment to democracy, and a reemergence of antisemitism, we are faced again with the lessons of Israel’s descent. If we wait too long, we may lose our ability to challenge that forces that constrain us to narrow places. We must respond proactively and forcefully before that point. The question before us is when and how.

Despite these signs of dark forces on the horizon, there are rays of hope. In Israel itself, enormous protests against Netanyahu’s governmental restructuring showed that ordinary people have the capacity to push back these forces if they act in a concerted way. We are similarly bolstered by the power and will of the Ukrainian people, who not only used popular protests to oust a Russian puppet in 2014, but who have successfully pushed back against attempts to imperialize them by force.