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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חירות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## THE EGYPT OF OUR IMAGINATION

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Torah narratives are highly cinematic. For example, we rarely pay attention to anything “offscreen” when reading the text. So it seems valuable to take an occasion when we’re not reading the text, for example reading an interpretive essay, to consider how and why G-d manages His literary lenses and camera angles to focus our attention, and look at what is being excluded.

Let’s first consider Egypt after the Splitting of the Reed Sea. Did it recover economically? Was there a political backlash against the Pharaoh or his dynasty for the spectacular failure of his Jewish policy? The Torah tells us essentially nothing. The cameras and mics follow the Jews into the desert. It’s true that dissatisfied Jews occasionally imagine returning to an unchanged country. But that country is likely a phantasm of false nostalgia.

Egypt is offscreen because it is irrelevant to our religious narrative, and it is irrelevant because its moral choices showed that it learned nothing. That is a core tragedy of the Exodus story. If the signs and wonders were intended to teach Egypt to know that Hashem is G-d, as the Torah states explicitly - they failed.

At least some of Chazal were uncomfortable with this conclusion. Their solution was to place an exiled Pharaoh on the throne of Nineveh in the time of Yonah. Wow had he learned! The appearance of a bedraggled prophet of G-d foretelling imminent destruction leads to instant universal mandatory repentance.

That repentance was presumably as sincere as mandated repentance under threat of destruction gets, and as lasting. Had G-d removed a large, ethnically other, pool of far-below-minimum-wage laborers from Nineveh, I suspect that the king would have led his army in pursuit the very next day (unless his loyalists were celebrating that removal on the assumption that wages would rise). At least that’s what Yonah thought. Maybe G-d lowered his expectations after Egypt.

None of this is unique to non-Jews. Chapter 34 of Sefer Yirmiyah tells us that with Babylonian invaders looming, the

royal party of Judea and all its supporters entered into a covenant with G-d to free all their Jewish slaves, and implemented it (perhaps even extending it to Gentile slaves.) And then – although the Babylonians still loomed – they rethought and reenslaved. G-d tells them via Yirmiyah: “I gave you one command the day I took you out of Egypt ... !” Perhaps we didn’t learn much either; at the least we failed to internalize what we learned.

Let’s next consider the Jews in Egypt. What are they doing during the Plagues? Are they still subject to work levies with backbreaking brick quotas, or has all productive activity ceased? The Torah tells us essentially nothing. I suggest that the practical enslavement of the Jews ended before the Exodus.

It’s important to understand that the Jews were not chattel-slaves in Egypt. We did not belong to Egyptian individuals. Rather, we lived in our own houses; owned property; and so forth. However, a significant percentage of our able-bodied men - much greater than the percentage from other ethnic groups - was conscripted to labor on government construction projects under oppressive conditions at minimal pay. Disabling the Egyptian administrative state therefore made us individually free. There might have been a full-time yeshiva on every block in Goshen during the Plagues.

Or there might have been raucous block parties. The Torah doesn’t only tell us nothing about the Jewish experience during the Plagues; it tells us that it will tell us nothing. Here’s what I mean.

Before the Plagues, the Torah regularly reports the Jews’ verbal reactions to Mosheh’s efforts. This culminates when they accuse Mosheh in 5:21 of ‘handing Pharaoh a sword to kill us with’. That is the last time a Jew other than Moshe and Aharon speaks until they see Pharaoh pursuing near the Reed Sea and collectively cry out to G-d.

The Torah’s account of the pre-Plague period concludes with a peculiarly repetitive and redundant structure that

foreshadows the Jews' disappearance as agents in the narrative of their rescue. Here is Shemot 6:26-27:

הוא אהרן ומשה  
אשר אמר יקח להם  
"הוציאו את בני ישראל ממצרים על צבאתם":  
הם המדברים אל פרעה מלך מצרים  
להוציא את בני ישראל ממצרים  
הוא משה ואהרן:

The very same Aharon and Mosheh  
to whom Hashem had said:

"Remove the Children of Israel from Land of Egypt in  
orderly formation."

They were the ones speaking to Pharaoh King of Egypt  
to remove the Children of Israel from Egypt –  
the very same Aharon and Mosheh.

Only Mosheh and Aharon among the Jews will have speaking parts. In fact, the pre-Plague dialogues-of-complaint between Mosheh and the Jews are replaced during the Plagues by dialogues of complaint between Pharaoh and other Egyptians.

The only explanation I can give is that the plagues had no purpose so far as the Jews, and therefore the Jews had no purpose during the plagues. The plagues were intended to educate the Egyptians.

It is therefore not disappointing to G-d, rather expected, that the Jews react to the first sign of post-Plague adversity with despair rather than faith, and that they turn on Mosheh again and express a wish to turn the clock back to their time in Egypt before the Plagues. If we put our two offscreen scenes together, possibly they imagine returning to freedom in an Egypt frozen exactly as it was in the midst of the Plagues.

What would have happened, though, if the Egyptians had learned from the Plagues, and come to genuinely know G-d?

When Mosheh first comes to Pharaoh, he warns Pharaoh that his first-born son will die unless the Jews are released. In the end, all first-borns in Egypt die (see Davida Kollmar's alum dvar Torah "[Did Egyptian Daughters Die During the Plague of the Firstborn?](#)"). I argued in a past essay that the warning was deliberately ambiguous as to whether Pharaoh was being addressed personally or nationally. Had Egypt relented, only Pharaoh's firstborn would have died. I also wondered how Jewish self-perception would be different if our freedom was defined against a backdrop of genuine repentance rather than the retributive justice of the Reed Sea. These may also be ungrounded fantasies.

As religious readers of Torah, we are often confronted with the question of whether to emulate all of G-d's actions, or

rather to decide that some sorts of actions must be left to G-d alone.

So here: Should we learn from the educational failure of the Ten Plagues that some cultural evils are irretrievable? Or that power is a poor educational tool? Or that G-d will try absolutely everything to avoid total destruction, and only He can declare failure?

A different framing: At the Reed Sea, G-d orders the Jews not to participate in any way in the destruction of Egypt. Yet not long thereafter He demands that they confront Amalek. And then the Torah makes the eradication of Amalek a joint obligation, with the distribution of responsibility and mode of fulfillment an arena to further litigate the moral issue. A guiding principle must be that there would be no point in eradicating one Amalek only to become another. Rambam allows us to accept converts from Amalek; I suspect it follows that we must acknowledge the possibility of sincere conversion to Amalek.

All learning from stories yields similar problems unless the moral is drawn explicitly. Do we learn from the Akeidah that we ought to be willing to sacrifice our children for G-d, or that we have G-d wrong if we ever think He wants that? Although perhaps those lessons are not wholly incompatible.

The same sort of question faces us with regard to G-d's actions in our world. "Just as He is merciful, so too you ought to be merciful", but not cruel, even though some of His actions seem as cruel as others seem merciful. G-d "causes death and brings to life" in one-to-one correspondence, yet we are charged almost exclusively to sustain life. And so forth.

As seen from the examples in the preceding paragraph, Chazal understood and ruled that we must be selective in our imitatio Dei, and gave us guidelines for how to be selective without denying the totality of G-d. Guidelines are not a code of absolute and unambiguous rules. But the more power we have, the more important they become.

*Shabbat shalom!*