

My first introduction to the story of the Exodus came via Cecil B. DeMille's, "The 10 Commandments." As a six year old, I remember being spellbound watching Moses' cane morph into a snake, seeing the rivers turn scarlet with blood, and swarms of locusts filling the movie screen. Of course, like so many, I marveled at the cinematic miracle that made the red sea part. I breathed a sigh of relief as I watched the waters come back together to drown the Egyptian soldiers, just in the nick of time. I rooted for the Jews, because of course they were the good guys---my people. Even into adulthood, I swallowed the story whole—That we, the Jews, were delivered from slavery by an all-powerful God, the one with the deep male voice I can still hear in my head.

The story was reinforced each year for me, not only by my annual viewing of the film, which always seems to make an appearance somewhere between Pesach and Easter, but by the telling of our miraculous journey from slavery to freedom at each Passover seder. I never questioned the assumptions that went along with the story:

1. That Pharaoh was evil.
2. That the Jews were chosen by the one true God.
3. That the Egyptians were evil idolaters and slave owners, all except for Pharaoh's daughter, who saved Moses and raised him as her own.

Today I find myself troubled as I read Vayera, this week's Parasha. For in the telling of the story, the assumption seems to be that the people of Egypt deserved the devastation that befell them. I recalled sitting at the seder table as a child, as I was instructed to taste the sweetness of my Manischewitz wine-soaked finger after we recited the 10 plagues. Revenge was sweet in those days. Today, the tradition has changed at my house. The lesson my now adult child has learned is that the wine isn't sweet, that the price of our freedom took a heavy toll on the people of Egypt. I emphasize the word, "people."

As Americans, we have been taught that war brings with it devastation to others. We euphemistically use the term, "collateral damage," to shield us from the devastating impact of wars and plagues on innocent civilians. It's easy to dehumanize the other. In our own country, racism (and Islamophobia) are, in author Beverly Tatum's words, "in the air we breathe." The Black Lives Matter movement has attempted to call our attention to the fact that historically African-American lives have been devalued in the U.S. The response of many to the murders of innocents in France and San Bernadino by radical Islamic terrorists was to demand that we close our borders to Syrian refugees, who have fled their country also to escape radical Islamic terrorism. Why do Black lives matter less? Why do we respond differently to the deaths of Syrians than we do to those in France?

*Eetta Prince-Gibson, the former editor in chief of The Jerusalem Report, and an award-winning journalist, who lives in Israel, speaks eloquently of how fear leads us to "sit on a seesaw of right and wrong," where "only one side-mine-can be up*

*and so the other side must be down.” “But the truth,” she reminds us, “is nuanced and difficult.” She speaks of, “the terrible loss it would be if we lose our capacity to mourn for a child, no matter what his nationality or what his actions have been,” and implores us to remember, “that it is never a crime or an act of betrayal to hear the cries of another child’s mother, no matter what her nationality and no matter how horrific her child’s crimes have been.”*

A Midrash in the Talmud speaks of the angels who sang praises to God when the Egyptian soldiers drowned in the Red Sea. According to the Midrash, God responded angrily to the angels, saying, “My handiwork (the Egyptians) are drowning in the sea and you say a song before me?” If all of us are created by God, than all human life is sacred; even, according to the Midrash, the lives of those who try to destroy us. I believe that in this Midrash God is challenging us not to harden our hearts to the suffering of human beings, Jews and non-Jews. The violence in our world is overwhelming and it’s understandable that sometimes we want to harden our hearts in the face of so much misery. We convince ourselves we are helpless to act; we buy into the propaganda we are fed about the other; and use such myths to justify inaction.

In the Parasha, God says, “I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage.” God says to Moses, “See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh.” Moses is God’s emissary, sent to demand that pharaoh release the Jews from slavery. Just as God worked through Moses, we can let God work through us by opening our hearts to really hear the voices of those who are enslaved.

A couple of weeks ago, while vacationing in Florida, I heard some interfaith leaders on NPR discussing how to respond to the increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric in the wake of recent terrorist attacks. A rabbi on the program, whose name I can’t recall, spoke of the deep spiritual work that is needed to overcome our internalized fears of Muslims. As a Jew who was raised to believe that all Muslims want to destroy the Jewish people, I have had to do my own spiritual work to overcome internalized prejudices. Rabbi Jill Jacob, director of T’ruah (Rabbis for Human Rights) instructs us to practice what she calls, radical empathy, described as, “...opening ourselves to the pain of the other exactly at the moment when we are terrified of this other, and exactly at the moment when fear for our lives and for our loved ones pushes us inward.” She calls on us to express “authentic grief” at the deaths of others and to call for the “protection of civilian populations,” as well as denouncing language that “dehumanizes Palestinians and Muslims.” Rabbi Jacobs is not naïve. She does not believe that radical empathy will bring instantaneous peace. When, like God, we really hear the “moaning” of others, we become more human. When that happens, we more easily feel our shared humanity and recognize our obligation to take bold actions to affirm and to save human life.

Let me be clear that I am not minimizing the dangers inherent in terrorist actions based on misguided interpretations of Islam or any other religion for that matter, including my own. Rabbi Shai Held reminds us, "that while religion can elicit empathy and love and deeds of great kindness, it can also call forth hatred and bigotry and unspeakable cruelty." We should not be naïve to evils that threaten our own lives, as well as the lives of others. At the same time, we must avoid, as Rabbi Held says, "...to paint all Muslims (or any other group) with the same brush." The plagues unleashed by modern day pharaohs challenge us to remember our own history and our obligation to actively respond to human suffering. Today we have an opportunity to do just that. After the Kiddush luncheon, at 1 P.M., the Tikkun Olam Committee together with The Valley Syrian Relief Committee are sponsoring an information session about refugee resettlement in Western Massachusetts. We know all too well from our own history the trauma of being a refugee---of having to flee one's home to escape imminent death; of losing loved ones, of being turned away by those who harden their hearts.

Representatives from local resettlement organizations will teach us about the experiences of those who are making their exodus from brutality in places like Syria, Iraq, Bhutan, and others. With knowledge, we can find ways to respond to their needs, as individuals and as a congregation.

Let our strength as a people not be defined only by the plagues unearthed against our oppressors. Instead, let us be known by our capacity to not be ruled by fear; to respond, as God did, to the moaning of others, and, like Moses, to empower ourselves through our faith to confront injustice.