

Have you ever been watching a movie,
like a horror movie, for example,
and you know the killer is upstairs
and you see the main character heading upstairs,
and you shout at the screen “no, don’t go up there!!”?

What about a romantic movie,
when two characters obviously love each other,
but they’re too embarrassed to say anything
and the whole movie is them hinting at and dancing around the fact
that they actually like each other?
Ever shout, “Just tell him how you feel!!” ?

When it comes to these movies,
I tend to ask myself rhetorically,
but loud enough so others can hear:
“Why didn’t that person just leave the house and escape the killer?”
“Why didn’t those two people just profess their love for each other and avoid all the running
around?”

The best answer I’ve gotten to these questions is:
because then there wouldn’t be a movie!
It’s true, without drama, suspense and conflict,
movies wouldn’t be as interesting to watch.
Sometimes I end up leaving a movie saying,
“Thank God my life is not that complicated.”

The really good movies take you on a journey.
We are brought along with the characters,
experiencing what they experience from the safety of our own seats,
and in the end, we may even learn a lesson or two from their trials and adventures.

Story telling, which is what movies do, is nothing new.
Before there was dolby surround sound or moving pictures,
before film and radios were invented,
people used to sit around the campfire and tell stories.

Back then special effects were called “imagination”
and the stories were just as exciting,
filled with drama, suspense and conflict.
The stories could even teach important lessons or morals.
Not much has really changed in the world of story telling since then.

But can you imagine today being told,
“Go see the Wizard of Oz and you must imagine yourself as if you were Dorothy!”?
Certainly, the intention of a good story teller is to suck you in

so that you identify with the main character(s),
but we're never commanded to imagine
as if we ourselves went forth from Munchkin Land.

This is not so with our tradition.
In one of the most exciting stories filled with ample special affects,
murder, conflict, and escape,
we are commanded to see ourselves as the main characters.
We are even commanded to teach our children the story, too.
This is the story of the Exodus, our ancestors escape from Egyptian slavery.

This story has been at the top of the charts for thousands of years.
It's the number one best seller in hardcover, paperback and scroll.
It's even been made into a few movies like
"The 10 Commandments" and "The Prince of Egypt".
And in this story, God makes sure the action stays hot and exciting.
Let me tell you, God really knows how to spice up a plot.
Could you imagine if Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and say, "let my people go,"
and Pharaoh says, "okay"??
Then there wouldn't be a story.
The seder would certainly go a lot faster
"once we were slaves in Egypt, but we asked Pharaoh to let us go and he said yes. The end"
But, we would miss all of the excitement of being carried along with the characters,
and we'd miss the important lessons.

I always wondered, if the goal was to help the Israelites flee from slavery,
why did God harden Pharaoh's heart so many times?

After the second plague, which was frogs,
Pharaoh was ready to let the children of Israel go free.
But, as soon as the frogs had cleared up,
his heart was hardened and he changed his mind.
This happens a number of times with some of the other plagues, too.

It seems as though there is something else going on here.
Is God just trying to make a good story? Trying to capture our interest? To build up suspense?
Perhaps, in part, this is true.

God actually says to Moses,
"I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt."
(Exodus 7:3)
God wants to put on a show! God wants to make a good story.
God knows that Pharaoh could be convinced very easily to let the people go.
In fact, God could just force Pharaoh to let them go.
But what kind of story would *that* make?

No, God actually wants to teach a lesson and to build up the intensity of the escape. Also, in part, it's to punish the Egyptians for enslaving the Israelites. One might think that after a few plagues of insect infestation, dying livestock and boils, that the Egyptians would have learned their lesson. Certainly after the 10th plague, the Egyptians will never enslave the Jews again.

But it continues. Pharaoh finally lets them go in the wilderness, And then, God hardens his heart, forcing him to chase after them. Here's the suspense, the great chase scene in our movie of the Exodus. And what is the reason God says?
"I will stiffen Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am Adonai." (Ex. 14:4)
Not only does God want to punish the Egyptians, but God also wants to make sure that they know its coming from Adonai, not any other gods. Even more, God will gain glory from this event: Glory from the israelites, glory from the other nations at the time who heard what happened, and perhaps most importantly, glory from us. After all, we're still telling the story today of how great God was in rescuing our people.

Even after the sea parts and the children of Israel are safe on the other side, God is not yet finished. The sea could have easily closed before the Egyptians tried to cross, giving the Israelites a significant head start for their escape into the wilderness. But God wants a final climactic scene. God says, *"I will stiffen the hearts of the Egyptians so that they go in after them; and I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his warriors, his chariots and his horsemen. Let the Egyptians know that I am Adonai, when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen."* (Exodus 14:17-18)
God wants a finale in which the Egyptians know for sure (even as they drown) that God is more powerful than any of their gods. And God wants all the glory for saving the Israelites and for making a great story!

So, even if as you hear the Exodus story, you want to shout to Pharaoh and say, "Don't try to cross through the sea on the dry land!" Or "Just tell Moses how you feel about him!" if that happened, it wouldn't be as great of a story as we have today. And we can all get a taste of the action, while sitting safely in our chairs.

Shabbat Shalom