

God Is a Show-Off

Parasha Beshalach

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God is a show-off.

It may sound sacrilegious, even blasphemous, and I certainly do not meant to take God's name in vain, especially not in the process of delivering a D'var Torah, but I have to be honest - if God had muscles, they would be flexing.

God has spent the last two Torah portions bombarding the Egyptians with plague after plague. In fact, God takes care to harden Pharaoh's heart against the Israelites numerous times, ensuring that multiple, increasingly devastating plaguing is made possible. After ten absolutely soul-crushing plagues, the Israelites are finally allowed to leave.

But God is not done flexing, there is more proving to be done - and so he hardens Pharaoh's heart yet again, and then a second time, drawing Pharaoh and his warriors out of Egypt and into pursuit of the fleeing Israelites. Reaching the Sea of Reeds, with Pharaoh + army close behind, the Israelites begin to despair, but God is just getting warmed up. Dramatically, even cinematically God drives back the sea with a strong east wind, clearing a dry path through the waves for the Israelites.

But wait, there's more!

God hardens Pharaoh's heart for a third time, for the express purpose of causing the Egyptians to follow the Israelites into the sea. At that point, their fate is sealed. With the Israelites looking on safely from the far side of the sea, the whole world watches as God causes the Egyptians first to panic and then to drown.

He stops just short of a "Tada!"

Now obviously, there are many ways to read this text.

One option would be looking at the story of God's actions through a Ancient Near Eastern lens - in other words, placing it in the historical and geographical culture from which it comes. Via this lens, this story is merely the tale of one people's God triumphing over another people - in order to show that one's God is the best god, there must be a story that proves this. In this way, the Exodus story fulfills all requirements: God is powerful and strong, more than capable of vanquishing enemies. Furthermore, this text allows the Ancient Near Eastern community to legitimize themselves. Telling this story is similar to walking around your neighborhood with a large angry-looking dog with a spiked collar and a heavy chain-link leash. The message is, "don't mess with us, we've got THIS on our side."

The other option is to couch the text within the Torah as a part of a sacred text, as having a holy message to convey. Through this lens, God's actions and the motivation behind those actions become a little troubling. God puts an entire people through the incredibly devastating events of the plagues and then lures its leaders into a watery death trap, and all to display glory and power. His actions are callous and his reasoning is entirely based on proving his own greatness.

Rabbis over the centuries have struggled with God's actions as well.

Tenth century Medieval commentator IbnEzra, in explaining why the Israelites didn't just take up arms and fight the Egyptians themselves, suggests that the Israelites, numerous as they were, could not shift their paradigm - they couldn't fight their way out of Egypt because they "had not yet learned to stand up to their masters."

God recognizes this when, in the very beginning of the portion, the Israelites are sent on a deliberately roundabout path so as to avoid the Philistines, a notoriously rowdy and violent bunch who would surely scare the Israelites right back to Egypt.

If we follow IbnEzra's logic, God's macho-man actions serve as a long involved ego boost not for

God, but for the Israelites. Surely watching an enemy being punished thoroughly is one way of building confidence!

Talmud also addresses God's seeming callousness. In Sanhedrin 39b, the rabbis explain: "God does not rejoice at the death of sinners. On seeing the destruction of the Egyptians the angels wanted to break forth in song. But God silenced them, saying: 'the work of my hands is drowning in the sea, and you desire to sing songs!?'"

We all know about this rabbinic view through the custom in the Passover seder of removing a drop of wine for each of the ten plagues. The idea is to literally lessen the joy of the triumph in recalling that our freedom from Egypt came at the expense of human lives.

In this way, the rabbis do not negate or criticise God's actions but rather suggest that sometimes nasty actions must be taken, actions that are unpleasant but necessary. The task at hand may be required, but that does not mean that it must also be enjoyed.

This is a little troublesome for me. It is frighteningly easy to move from the idea that "nasty actions must be taken" into discussion of appropriate "means to an end", which leads us down a very strange Stalin-esque path.

Violence throughout the Torah and indeed the entire TNK is often shocking and frequently off-putting. How can we condone genocide of any kind, especially when God is the perpetrator? Even more worrying, this is certainly not the first time we see God kill off a large number of people, nor will it be the last.

It is times like these that my Reform Jewish upbringing comes out. As a Reform Jew, I believe that the Torah is a book, written by humans, and that those humans, as I mentioned earlier, have an agenda: they want to prove that God is better than all of the other Gods, that God has big muscles.

I can ALSO say, as a Reform Jew, that the Torah is sacred and God-inspired, and that the lessons of the Torah are real and important for us to study and interpret - and reinterpret.

Just as the Talmudic sages decided that God mourned the loss of the Egyptians even as they drowned in the trap he had set for them,

just as Ibn Ezra decided that the Israelites needed to witness all of this destruction in order to truly move from slavery into freedom,

we also are given the honor of

reading the text,

sitting with the pieces that make us uncomfortable,

and finding a way to make sense of it in a way that speaks to us.

Shabbat Shalom.