

Aggressor and Aggrieved

Dr. Phil Keisman, Director of Teen Education, JTS



The Israelites find themselves in a new position in Parashat Beshallah. After generations of suffering as slaves to the pharaohs, and after decades of uncertainty about how and when their suffering might end, the Israelites are now staring backwards as their oppressors die violently.

וַיֵּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּשֶׁב הַיָּם לַפְּנֹת בְּקֶרֶךְ לְאֵיתָנוּ וּמִצְרַיִם
נָסִיִּים לְקִרְאָתוֹ וַיִּנְעַר יְהוָה אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם

וַיִּשְׁבּוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּכְסּוּ אֶת־הַרְכָּב וְאֶת־הַפָּרָשִׁים לְכָל־תֵּיִל פְּרָעוֹה הַבָּאִים
אֲחֵרֵיהֶם בַּיּוֹם לֹא־נִשְׁאָר בָּהֶם עַד־אֶחָד

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִלְכוּ בַיַּבְשָׁה בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם וְהַמַּיִם לְהֵם חָמָּה מִיַּמִּינָם
וּמִשְׂמָאלָם

Moshe held his arm out over the sea, and at the break of day the sea returned to its normal flow, and the Egyptians fled from it, but God propelled the Egyptians into the sea. The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the riders of all the troops of Pharaoh who had come with them to the sea. Not a single one of them remained. But the Israelites had gone through the sea on dry land, for them the waters were like walls to their right and to their left. (Exod. 14: 27-28)

What follows in the text of the Torah itself is unbridled jubilation. We read “Az Yashir,” a triumphant song of military might in which we are told [“God is a lord of War.”](#) That song, found in chapter 15 of Shemot, is part of the daily liturgy established by the rabbinic authorities.

Lest we miss the point, [Midrash Tanhuma](#) takes the death of the Egyptians by water as a chance to make a larger point:

¹ Note that in his translation on Sefaria.org, Samuel Berman explains “glorified themselves by water” as referencing Pharaoh’s claiming that he created the Nile in Ezekiel 29:3. This requires ignoring the use of the verb “שנתגאו” in its plural form in order to make Pharaoh the subject of the sentence.

Israel’s enemies die in ways fitting to their wickedness. “Egypt was lashed in water because they glorified themselves through water [by killing Jewish babies in the Nile].”¹ The Midrash then spends 12 pericopes detailing the deaths of the wicked men of the Bible from the generation of the flood to Nebuchadnezzar, Babylonian conqueror of Jerusalem. In classic midrashic fashion, this text utilizes other biblical verses to flesh out the imagery of the stories. The result is a series of violent vignettes, with the midrash dwelling on the “rightness” of the punishments of wicked people.

Tanhuma’s delight in the violent deaths of the wicked speaks to a satisfaction that can be derived from violence. Freud, in one of his earliest works, argued that violence, even abstracted violence through language, was a mechanism for working through trauma. “The reaction of an injured person to a trauma has really only then a perfect ‘cathartic’ effect if it is expressed in an adequate reaction like revenge.”² Freud lends his imprimatur here to the joy that humans can take in watching their foes suffer. In the absence of real violence, he believes humans can have similar catharsis from verbal or artistic depictions of suffering. The delight in this rabbinic text may be understandable, but it can trouble those of us committed to the universality of God’s creations.

Luckily for us, the rabbinic tradition never speaks with only one voice. This moment of violent catharsis comes with ambivalence for the Rabbis. In one of the most famous

² Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*. Translation A. A. Brill. (Nervous and Mental Health Disease Publishing, 1936).

midrashim, we get insight into God-the-universalist's reaction to the death of Israel's foes:

אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּר נַחֲמָן אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן: מֵאֵי דְכַתְּיב "וְלֹא קָרַב זֶה אֶל זֶה כָּל הַלַּיְלָה" ? בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה בִקְשׂוּ מִלְּאֲכֵי הַשָּׂרֵת לֹאמַר שִׁירָה לְפָנַי הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא. אָמַר לָהֶן הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: מֵעַשָׂה יְדֵי טוֹבָעִין בְּיָם וְאַתֶּם אוֹמְרִים שִׁירָה לְפָנַי ?

Rabbi Shmuel son of Nachman says in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, "Why does the Torah say [in Exodus 14:20] '[the Israelites and Egyptians] did not come near one to the other all night?' In that moment, the ministering angels requested to sing a song before the Holy one, blessed be he. The Holy one, blessed be he said to them, 'The works of my hands are drowning in the sea, and you would sing a song before me?!'" (Sanhedrin 39b)

By having God himself refer to the Egyptians as "the works of my hands," the midrash reminds us of the overriding commonality in the human condition. From the perspective of God, there is no joy in violent death and suffering.

This midrash is today beloved for its humanistic bent. It is often employed as a demonstration of the pathos of rabbinic Judaism. It is not, however, more or less authoritative than the pornographic violence of Tanhuma. Rabbinic Jews—like the Israelites in the Torah—had both the capacity to see the divine spark in all of God's creatures, and also had the drive towards aggression as a way to face their own trauma.

We are the same. There are moments in our lives as Jews when we face the trauma of the world around us—in America and in Israel, with our families and in public—and feel an inclination towards cathartic violence, whether rhetorical or real. That is human, and it is Jewish. But equally human and equally Jewish is to meet the drive with what [Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature,"](#) to look at our erstwhile targets and see the humanity within. We are the Israelites, but we are also the Egyptians.

This redemptive power of knowing that we are both aggressor and aggrieved underpins the *yirah* (awe/fear) at the core of our relationship with God. [In chapter 28 of Devarim](#), when God warns the Israelites of what will happen

to them if they fail to keep the covenant, medieval commentator [Rashi notes "when the Israelites saw the various afflictions that befell Egypt, they feared \(יִרְאוּ\) them, so that they would not befall them as well."](#) The Israelites leaving Egypt saw their foes suffering, and they did rejoice, but Rashi tells us that they also were able to see that this suffering was not something they would necessarily be spared. Even the chosen people are vulnerable to suffering, and though we may have base passions, we also have the capacity to rise above them when we see the humanity in the other.

Even at moments when we see our foes wracked with pain, perhaps pain that we feel they deserve, we have the opportunity, and the obligation, to see ourselves in them. Only this can stop the cycle of violent trauma that persisted in our parsha, where the victims glorified retributive violence and the sea became littered with the corpses of the work of God's hands.