

## The Story of Exodus Can Help Us See the Possibilities for Change in the World

In his book, *A Rumor of Angels*, Peter Berger, the sociologist of religion, discusses a common experience that we have all lived through, scores of times, at one end or the other:

"A child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream, and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats...The child cries out for his mother. She will take the child and cradle him....She will speak or sing to the child, and the content of this communication will invariably be the same: Don't be afraid. Everything is in order. Everything is all right...."

"All this," Berger continues, "belongs to the most routine experiences of life and does not depend upon any religious preconceptions. Yet this common scene raises a far from ordinary question which immediately introduces a religious dimension: Is the mother lying to her child?"

Berger answers that the answer can be "no" only if there is some truth to the religious interpretation of human existence. We do not need to believe that everything is fine, but we do need to trust the world as whole. If we believed that the world was fundamentally unreliable or that people were fundamentally pernicious, how could we ever turn our back on them, close our eyes, and go to sleep?

Like Berger's paradigmatic story of the scared child, the drama of Moses, Pharaoh and the ten plagues is also about how one sees the world in the most basic way. If we look carefully at the text, we notice that the Torah is not explicitly concerned with Pharaoh's inner soul, with his moral self-examination. However, it is very interested in how Pharaoh sees the world, specifically, how he interprets a series of unusual phenomena which are wrought first by Moses and Aaron his presence, and later by G-d across Egypt in the ten plagues.

How does Pharaoh view all of this?

Don Isaac Abravanel, a fifteenth century Spanish commentator, pointed out that after several plagues, Pharaoh's eyes seem to open. Verbally, he yields to some of Moses's demands but as soon as the plague is removed, according to Abravanel, Pharaoh concludes that the plague was merely a natural, predictable occurrence. Once the threat recedes, and he is off the hook, he refuses to see things differently. He returns to his own ego, his own imperial privilege. These speak to him more familiarly than the plagues.

Pharaoh's position was elevated, but his conduct was typically human. He is caught in the illusion that he can control his own life, that he can do as he pleases without consideration for the misery or hopes of others, or for G-d's will.

The Exodus story then is not just about justice vs. oppression. It is fundamentally a story about religion, about the way we see the world. Abraham Joshua Heschel said famously, "One has to be responsive to be responsible." Before we can learn to love our neighbor, we have to see the world in a certain way, and it's not fundamentally a logical or scientific way.

I cannot prove to you that human life is special and of unique value any more than you can prove that it is not. To gain some values, to respect life and revere the Life-giver, you need faith. Because of my faith, I can understand that there are certain values that are inviolable even if they have little utilitarian value. I can understand, for example, that it makes sense to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and hundreds of man hours to rescue one person from a collapsed building, or that an elderly, home-bound widow who has survived all of her friends still has a right to enjoy her life and not be left alone, or that there is great value in visiting someone who is too sick to respond normally to our words. Logically, one could argue that these efforts are not wise or necessary. I can't finally prove to you the opposite. I can tell you, however, that when you have learned to see the world in a certain way, you will accept it without proof.

Does the world make sense? Can we comfort our children, telling them that "everything is all right"? Or are chaos and suffering the rule, and goodness and opportunity the exceptions?

Pharaoh and all in Egypt then faced these questions. It is easy, as we look back much later, to judge the despotic Pharaoh, the apathetic Egyptians, and the depressed and fatalistic Israelites. However, before we judge them too severely, let us imagine how we ourselves would have reacted, seeing daily the wretched and muddy slaves on one hand, and the security and splendor of the palace on the other?

Would we have seen and heard G-d in that nightmare? Could we have imagined change? Would we have listened to the impractical visions of an eighty year old man with a speech impediment, who came out of the palace himself, and whose agitation had so far only deepened the misery of his people?

And how do we look at the world today? How do we respond when we see, on our TV screens and home pages, in our own country, third world income inequality, the breakdown of public education, and the destruction of our physical environment? Do we really believe in the possibility of change and renewal? Or do we secure our own advantages, shore up our defenses, and prepare to accept more disappointment and disillusionment?

As we read this drama which brought us to Sinai and Torah, let us not only remember the redemption of the past, but remain open to change and heroism in the present.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Weintraub