

The Baby, the Bathwater and the Immigrant Myth

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When teaching about Parshat Bo, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks likes to ask his audience to perform a thought-experiment. He says “Imagine you are the leader of a people that has suffered exile for more than two centuries, and has been enslaved and oppressed. Now, after a series of miracles, it is about to go free. You assemble them and rise to address them. They are waiting expectantly for your words. This is a defining moment they will never forget. What will you speak about?”

Rabbi Sacks reports that most people answer by talking about freedom. “That was Abraham Lincoln’s decision in the Gettysburg Address when he invoked the memory of ‘a new nation, conceived in liberty,’ and looked forward to ‘a new birth of freedom.’ Some suggest that they would inspire the people by talking about the destination that lay ahead, the ‘land flowing with milk and honey.’ Yet others say they would warn the people of the dangers and challenges that they would encounter on what Nelson Mandela called ‘the long walk to freedom.’”

And yet at the moment the Israelites are about to go free, Moshe Rabbeinu does none of the above. Instead, he fast forwards to a time in the distant future when children will ask their parents about the Exodus and the meaning of Pesach.

וְהָיָה, כִּי-יֵאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם: מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת, לָכֶם
וְהָיָה כִּי-יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶדְךָ, מָחָר--לֵאמֹר מַה-זֹּאת

And the question is why. Why doesn’t Moshe talk about freedom or nationhood? Why doesn’t he talk about responsibility or civic duty? What’s going on?

When we think of Bo, we think of the great moment of redemption; the end of slavery; the birth of the Jewish people and our introduction to commanded-ness.

But I want to suggest that there’s another narrative lurking just beneath the surface of our parsha. It’s a story about the stark contrast between hope and despair. The people possessed of hope in our parsha become empowered in extraordinary ways while the man without hope is reduced to a caricature.

Allow me to explain:

Remember the first time Pharaoh begins to capitulate? It’s all the way back after the third plague. Pharaoh is ready to make a concession (8:21).

וַיִּקְרָא פְּרֹעֹה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְלֵאמֹר; לְכוּ וַעֲבֹדוּ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם--בְּאֶרֶץ.

Go ahead and worship your God, but do it here in the land of Egypt.

And Moshe rejects the idea out of hand. It’s impossible he says (8:22).

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, לֹא נִכּוֹן לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן, כִּי תוֹעֵבֶת מִצְרַיִם, נִזְבַּח לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ: הֵן נִזְבַּח אֶת-תּוֹעֵבֶת מִצְרַיִם, לְעֵינֵיהֶם--וְלֹא יִסְקָלְנוּ.

To slaughter an Egyptian god in full view of the Egyptian people would be suicidal.

So how is it possible just four chapters later that the Israelites are ready to offer the Korban Pesach while still in the land of Egypt?

And what the Ibn Ezra and others point out, is that the Korban Pesach was no private affair. Yes, it would be eaten indoors. But it would be slaughtered as a public spectacle: Not boiled in a pot on a stove – but roasted outside for all to see and smell.

On the doorstep to the exodus, the Jews had become a hopeful people. Trusting in their new-found faith, they were suddenly confident that they could defy their long-time oppressors without fear of recrimination. Hope had empowered them to take an action they never would have dreamed of taking just a few months earlier.

Contrast this orientation to Pharaoh after the ninth plague. Until חושך, he and Moshe seemed to have had a cordial relationship. They were political nemeses, but the text betrays no personal animus. And then quite unexpectedly, Pharaoh banishes Moshe from his palace and threatens him with death (10:28).

אָמַר-לוֹ פִּרְעֹה, יָד מֵעַלְי; הֲשָׁמַר לָהּ, אֶל-תִּסָּף רְאוּת פָּנַי--כִּי בַיּוֹם רְאִיתָהּ פָּנַי, תָּמוּת.

Why the sudden about-face?

I think the answer is all about hopelessness. Whatever the meaning of Pharaoh's hardened heart, through the trials of the מכות, he somehow managed to cling to a glimmer of hope that he could preserve his monarchy and his caste of slaves. He convinced himself that not all was lost.

But the plague of darkness finally persuaded him. All this time Moshe had been asking for a three-day furlough to worship in the wilderness. For the six days of חושך the Egyptians were utterly paralyzed. Had Moshe really intended to take the people on a brief sojourn and then return, he could have done it right under the noses of the Egyptians during חושך and they would have been powerless to stop him. That the Israelites had gone nowhere indicated to Pharaoh that they were in fact leaving and they were never coming back. The jig was up.

Having been plunged into darkness, Pharaoh is suddenly plunged into despair just as the darkness has lifted. There is no more hope. And so he's reduced to an empty suit uttering empty threats. It's a character type we know all too well: the vain attempt of someone powerless and hopeless to appear less diminished.

It's with this in mind that we can return to our original question. When Moshe talks to the Jewish people as they are about to go free, the most urgent message is not about liberty or nationhood; it's not about even about survival. It's about hope. From that hope confidence will emerge. And the rest will come in due course.

There will be a time to celebrate freedom, Moshe says. But first know that we have a future to which to aspire. Children who have not yet come into this world will be waiting for us with questions. As long as you can imagine such a time – as long as you can envision the promise of that future – your freedom will be assured.

A couple of days ago, Bret Stephens wrote a provocative op-ed in the Times, the title of which was: *A Modest Immigration Proposal: Ban Jews*.

Recognizing that a handful of Jews who came to this country as immigrants turned out to be bad actors, maybe permitting Jewish immigration was a mistake.

“Would the United States have been better off if it had banned Jewish immigration sometime in the late 19th century, so that the immigrant parents of Rosenberg and Sobell had never set foot here?”

And of course his argument doesn't require further explication. We readily understand that of course there will be exceptions to every rule, but by and large immigrants make our nation stronger, not weaker.

But it's not just that we need to think long and hard before making our borders less porous. There's a bigger human issue here. There is perhaps no greater gift that we can give someone than the gift of hope. We need to let people dream. And there is no dream more powerful than the one people have about a future for their children.

I don't mean to suggest for a moment that there's only one side to the current political debate.

A nation without borders – a nation with no means of protecting those borders – is no nation at all. It would be naïve to dismiss those for whom circumspection is the watchword of the moment. But to fail to see the merit in the argument in favor of accommodation is a grave mistake.

As Americans we can never forget that we are not just a nation of immigrants; we're a neighborhood of immigrants. I learned just this week that Harlem is named after the Dutch town by the same name. We don't pay much attention to the history of our street names, but our shul sits between Amsterdam and Columbus Aves. And 86th St. is called Isaac Bashevis Singer Way. As if we needed more reminders. The moment we think of citizenship in terms of exclusivity is the moment we abandon our past and sell out our future.

But as Jews, we have to be especially mindful of what it means to be immigrants – and not just because the image of the passengers aboard the St. Louis in 1939 is seared into our consciousness. For 2000 years, the whole history of the Jewish people was the history of immigration. Excluding this great nation, I challenge you to think of a single country with a meaningful Jewish population from which we were not expelled.

- What are the standards we set for immigrants?
- What are our expectations?

- How do we handle illegal immigrants or their children?

These are important and difficult questions that defy ready answers. And there's often a tension between the best moral solution and the best political solution. They're not always coextensive.

But it behooves us every so often to put politics aside and consider what the Torah demands of us when thinking about these issues.

It's not enough to be convinced of our obligation to think compassionately. We need to give those thoughts a voice. Our elected officials have their roles to play and we have ours.

Whatever our positions on these important debates, let's be sure to remember the human sides of the story. The language we use matters. Literally or figuratively, our children are listening. They have to know that every human being should have the opportunity to hope and dream.

וְהָיָה כִּי-יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶדְךָ, מָחָר--לֵאמֹר מַה-זֶּאת:

When tomorrow they ask us: What is this – what's the value of constantly remembering the story of our exodus, we have to be prepared to answer them: To tell them the story of what Hashem did for us, and what we in turn do for anyone who suffers the same plight.