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THE IRONY OF PASSOVER

The Exodus is replete with irony. The pride of Egypt was its fine steeds and its mighty chariots. Yet it was those very sources of Pharaoh's boastfulness that were cast into the surging sea. Thus was the Lord "exalted", *Ki ga'oh ga'a* (see *Or haHayim* to *Shemot* 15:1).

Similarly, as the Midrash puts it, "the Egyptians sinned with water and they were punished with water." It was the sea in which Pharaoh drowned Jewish boys, and into which he had cast even the infant Moshe. It was the sea about which Pharaoh boasted that "my river is my own, and I have made it for myself" (*Yehezkel* 29:3). And it was that very Nile that turned into blood, a sea that split in order to save the Israelites, and that very body of water which came together again in order to drown the Egyptian hordes and bring Pharaoh himself to a watery grave.

Indeed, the symbol of irony may be found in the paradoxical *halakha* that only those five species of grain which can technically become *hametz*—are qualified to serve as *matza*.

Irony may well be one of the most intriguing and least appreciated themes of Passover.

It is difficult to define "irony" with any precision. Basically, it is the feeling that arises from a sense of contrast or weakness or paradoxical rightness. Irony issues from surprise, from the failure to anticipate the opposite results—results which, upon reflection, indicate a measure of unexpected justice in the world. It is a sudden awareness of the kind of justice that turns on those who fraudulently posture as its greatest advocates, and that undercuts the smug, the certain, and the confident—as, for instance, when we notice a tow-truck in distress at the road-side, a traffic judge caught speeding, or a preacher caught sinning.

Irony is related to humor. Both share the element of surprise at the unexpected turn of events. But the comical is a revelation of the inappropriate, the disjunctive, and the disparate, such as a man in full, formal outfit slipping on the sidewalk and sprawling over it awkwardly. The grotesqueness or disproportion is what causes us to laugh. The ironical too is unexpected, but it is a sudden intuition of proper proportion, of surprising justice, that which turns back and afflicts the one who, despite the greatest pretenses to righteousness, is himself most vulnerable. There are some situations which are on the borderline between the humorous and the ironical; an example would be the remark by a celebrated wit during a mail strike in New York City who advocated giving immediate pay raises to the mailmen, provided they would be sent to them—by mail!

The ironical points to the moral that man must not overreach. Irony results when man's pretenses are punctured, when his arrogance is deflated, when his much-vaunted security turns out to be dust and ashes, when his virtues look seamy, when his achievements prove baseless.

Life itself, irony teaches, rebukes man: It exposes the emptiness of his strength, his virtues, his wisdom. A noted American thinker once wrote, "...Irony involves comic absurdities which cease to be altogether absurd when fully understood. Our age is involved in irony because so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history."

So, when astronaut John Glenn successfully returns to earth after a voyage through outer space, only to suffer a serious injury in a household fall—that is ironical and it teaches us something about the tenuousness of the power that we

ascribe to ourselves. When the USSR, with its pretense of being “peace-loving”, invades a “fraternal” country like Hungary or Czechoslovakia — that is the kind of irony that reveals the underlying hypocrisy of so much of our “ideology.” Or, when Yiddishists who used to berate traditional Judaism, now turn to the old-line Yeshivot as the only source for the survival of Yiddish — that is the irony which shows up the emptiness and invalidity of even our benevolent ideologies.

All of Jewish history reveals a divine irony that is active in the affairs of man. Avraham and Sara, our forebears, had everything people could want — except a child, and they gave up hope of ever having one. Could a man of 100 and a woman of 90 bear a child? “And Sara laughed” (*Shemot 18:12*), or smiled. In defense of Sara, one might well argue that it was not a sardonic or skeptical or sarcastic smile, but an ironical one. She saw that her despair itself was a sham, that man does not even have the right to despair in the confidence that his hopelessness is valid!

The eschatological vision of Judaism, that of the Messiah, also abounds in irony: The man who will redeem Israel and raise it to its ancient preeminence is not a man of great wealth and aristocracy, who will come riding in a Rolls Royce or Cadillac, but “a poor man riding on a mule.”

Seen in this light, irony possesses enormous moral significance. To open up oneself to the awareness of irony in history is to acknowledge the limitation of man in the face of God, the ultimate victory of divine justice, and the inscrutable but ubiquitous presence of God in the affairs of mankind. It therefore contains a double teaching: That we must not have too much confidence, and also not too much despair; that we must never be certain — nor must we ever give up. If we forget the ironical, we either abandon hope or turn insufferably arrogant; either way, we lose touch with God’s reality.

The Biblical reference to irony is in the expression “the finger of God” — the willful finger of divine irony, puncturing pretenses, and leaving man utterly bewildered. “Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, ‘This was the finger of God’” (*Shemot 8:15*) — a finger which not only directs events and points the way to *geula*, but a finger which also wags under man’s nose, which points mockingly at his vain presumptions, which tickles his swollen ego till it explodes in gales of laughter — at his own ridiculous pomposities. “He who dwells in the Heavens will smile, the Lord will laugh at them” (*Tehillim 2:4*).

In the Haggada we read that when the Torah says, “in great terror” (*Devarim 26:8*), this refers to “the revelation of the *Shekhina*.” God is revealed in the moment that man confronts the terror of his own limitations, his own finitude and inadequacy, his own mortality and inevitable death; when he is suddenly startled by his own lack of ultimacy or certitude or security. This is irony — at the very moment he realizes how terribly weak and frighteningly unworthy he is — *be’mora gadol* — at that moment he discovers his greatest blessing and strength and hope and security in God Almighty: the revelation of the *Shekhina*.

The Seder is replete with symbols of irony. The entire Seder is built around children: Various rituals are performed solely so that the children not fall asleep by arousing their curiosity; the four character types are referred to as four sons or children; it is the child who asks the *Ma Nishtana*. And — it is children specifically whom Pharaoh went out of his way to kill in order to destroy Israel.

Pharaoh is a man who had all the answers. When Moshe told him about God, he did not ask anything. Instead, he delivered himself of a tirade: “Who is the Lord that I should listen to His voice?” (*Shemot 5:2*) — and that was not a question, it was a rhetorical explosion proclaiming his own denial. And so, we who relive on the Seder night the triumph against Pharaoh — we are full of questions on this night...

Our ancestors did not want to leave Egypt. They wanted to stay there, the land of “the fleshpots of Egypt.” They told Moshe, whiningly, “We remember the fish...

the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic" (*Bamidbar 11:5*)—and, so very ironically, we their descendants celebrate our exodus from Egypt and our hard-won freedom not by eating all these vegetables of which they spoke, but with a broken piece of "poor man's bread" and a lump of bitter herbs—and we bless God for it! Throughout their pilgrimage in the desert, our ancestors complained that they did not have enough. And we celebrate our exodus by singing—*dayenu*, enough, enough!

Consider too the commandment of *heseva*, the leaning on the left side when we drink the Four Cups or eat the *matza*. We do so because it is a symbol of aristocracy and freedom. But it has always puzzled me: Why adopt for our Jewish religious purposes a form or posture that was unique to the Romans of 2,000 years ago? Why retain this fossilized Roman custom when we have so many beautiful Jewish customs? The answer, I suggest, is once again: irony. Why is our Seder lacking and incomplete today? Why do we not observe the Passover sacrifice, which was the center of our Seder in the days of our independence? Why *hashata hakha*, are we today in exile? Because the Romans of 2,000 years ago destroyed the Temple. But we shall not allow that destruction to undo us as a people. And so, today we practice that very Roman symbol of freedom, the inclining on the left side. We adopt the Roman posture of leisure—and we thereby celebrate *zekher leMikdash*, remembering everything that occurred in the Temple, while they, the Romans, are no longer in existence!

This indeed is the main intent of the plagues against the gods of Egypt. What the Egyptians trusted most became the source of their travail and woe. The Nile was a deity for Egypt—and it turned into blood. They worshipped the frog, sign of fertility—and God gave them so much fertility that the population explosion amongst the frogs threatened their very lives. The stricken gods of Egypt were an act of the irony of the One God.

We too, in our own lives, can detect—if we are perceptive enough—the workings of divine irony. What are our idols? Science, for one. And so we receive in return—the threat of mass destruction. We worship technology—and we now appreciate how it has interfered with the ecology of our planet. We love machines and prostrate ourselves before them—and they break down before the warranty is signed.

We Americans speak so much of love—and we are flooded with pornography. We have identified as "the good life" a life of hedonism—and there is no joy and no happiness to accompany our material pleasures. The State of Israel was founded and given its vision by socialists and "progressives," who adopted the principles of the Left—and now Israel is rejected by both the Old and the New Left.

There is a most remarkable way in which this double teaching of irony, as we have outlined it, is evident in the Talmud. The Talmud (*Berakhot 48b*) tells us that two of the blessings in the *Birkhat haMazon* were composed in different eras. One of them was written by King David and his son Solomon, the other by the Sages of Yavneh, in the period after the destruction of the Temple, specifically after the collapse of the Jewish revolt against Rome and the slaughter of the Jews in Betar. The two blessings are those which speak of God who "rebuilds Jerusalem in His compassion," and of God "Who is good and does good."

One would imagine that David and Solomon, who attained power and security, composed the blessing celebrating divine goodness. Further, they built Jerusalem, and did not have to plead for divine mercy for its upbuilding. Similarly, one would expect that the Sages who witnessed the massacre at Betar would plead with God for compassion and mercy and pity in rebuilding Jerusalem. Instead, the Talmud tells us the reverse: David and Solomon pleaded for divine mercy in building Jerusalem, and the Sages of Yavneh, when the victims of the massacre of Betar were

finally brought to burial, referred to God as one who is good and does good because He allowed them to give a decent burial to the victims.

What we are being told is that we must never overlook the religious principle of irony. At a time of national triumph we must not overreach, we must still acknowledge our need for *rahamim*, for divine compassion; otherwise, we risk being undone by divine irony. And at times of national disaster, we must never indulge ourselves in despair; thanks to irony, we may yet wrest victory out of defeat, triumph out of disaster, and therefore we must still look to God as *haTov vehaMetiv*.

Passover, then, reminds us never to forget the *etzba Elokim*, that same finger of God first revealed at Egypt and ever since active in the affairs of man — that symbol of divine irony, that which brings down the arrogant Pharaohs of life, and which gives new hope to the downtrodden in the houses of slavery.

It is when we have learned this Passover-teaching of irony and acknowledged this finger of God, that we shall be able to look forward in confidence to the words in the *Birkhat haMazon*, where we place our faith in the Almighty, "to Thy hand, so full and open, so holy and broad, that we may never be embarrassed or shamed."