

Thoughts on Completing Study of Exodus

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Temple Shir Tikvah Torah Study Group

We have finished reading Exodus, the story of how the Israelite tribes became the Jewish people. The basics of this story are familiar but we found a lot to discuss as we try to understand what the Torah meant when it was written and what it could mean for us today. Here are some examples.

Although we tend to use the words "bondage" and "slavery" interchangeably they are not the same. What we experienced in Egypt was not the same as the slavery practiced here in America. We were forced to work for free under abysmal conditions but we were not property to be bought, sold and separated from our families on the whim of our owners. We were marginalized but we lived in our own homes with our own flocks and herds. We could trade goods and services with Egyptians. Close reading of the text makes these things clear.

As we've all read at Seder but without much elaboration, G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart repeatedly thus prolonging everyone's suffering before we could finally leave. Why would a just and merciful G-d do this? Exodus tells us that G-d did it to show everyone, Egyptians and Israelites alike, just how mighty he is. We've spent a fair amount of time on Saturday mornings discussing how our concept of G-d has changed since these words were written.

Exodus tells us that 600,000 men and their families fled Egypt. Conservatively, that means 2 million people with their possessions crossed the Red Sea and wandered in the desert for 40 years without leaving a trace for modern archeologists to find. We read more plausible explanations (see 'The Exodus', R.E. Friedman) and we discussed how our real origins might differ from the one we tell ourselves and whether we need a true origin story to give power to the lessons we take from it.

And then we behaved badly for 40 years in the desert. We whined about the food. We forgot how bad it was in Egypt and wanted to go back. And the minute G-d and Moses were busy with something else, we built a golden idol to worship. We laugh a lot in Torah study because our people and our leaders are consistently portrayed as flawed human beings. But in more serious moments we see the wisdom of presenting our ancestors as people like ourselves.

The Tabernacle, the Ark, all their ornaments and rituals are described twice in Exodus and take up almost one third of its chapters. At first, some of us wondered about the point of including so much detail, but as we discussed each sentence (and we did!!) these objects became less abstract and we joked about building them from the descriptions in Exodus. We found a book in the library with artists' imaginings of these words and we saw how some of the ornamentations of synagogues we've know originated. And by the end of Exodus, we could see the value of these words, especially for our ancestors who didn't have access to visual images and high speed travel as we do.

Exodus is also the story of a contract written and witnessed by all in the desert near Mt. Sinai. After the Israelites' miraculous escape across the Red Sea, G-d did not say "Now you owe me for this!". Instead, G-d presented us with a contract describing how we must live and in return, we would be protected forever. And as is common in contracts between sovereigns and their subjects, we were reminded of all the miracles G-d had performed for us as proof that he was capable of keeping his end of the contract. The Torah is clear that we did not have to accept this contract. But we did and since then we have been wrestling with how to fulfill our side of it. And that's what we are doing on Saturday mornings at Shir Tikvah, in addition to eating bagels and enjoying each other's company.