

The Uses and Abuses of Biblical Stories
Parashat Bo
January 19, 2002
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By some strange coincidence, today's *parashah* is associated—in my mind, at least—with war.

In 1991, during my senior year in rabbinical school, I was given this week's *parashah* on which to deliver my senior sermon. It was a tense time. After building up our forces in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf for several weeks, America was poised to attack Iraq and commence the liberation of Kuwait. Indeed, the attack began just a few days after we read this *parashah*. It was a difficult time not only here in America, but in Israel as well. Israel—justifiably, as it turned out—feared becoming a target of Iraq. There was grave concern that Iraq would unleash chemical and biological weapons against Israel. Israelis were stocking up on gas masks and creating sealed rooms in their homes to which to retreat in the event of an attack. As we may recall, SCUD missile attacks did occur, though fortunately their warheads were not armed with chemical or biological agents.

At the time, I was struck by the parallels between the anxiety so many Israelis were feeling and the tense events described in our Torah portion. After all, after the 8th and 9th plagues, about which we read this morning, the Israelites were told to get ready, to eat their meal that night, hurriedly, with loins girded, and not to go out of their homes that entire evening. That seemed parallel, in my mind, to the way Israeli pilots were sitting strapped in their cockpits prepared to take off at any moment, and the way ordinary Israelis were staying close to home so that they could slip into their sealed rooms quickly in the event of an attack.

As we all know, that war ended, after many SCUD missiles had fallen on Israel, with Kuwait having been liberated, yet with the Iraqi regime still firmly in power in Baghdad. And so tensions continued, periodically, flaring up. One time that they did was in January of 1998, when America threatened air strikes against Iraq and possibly an invasion of the country, and so again I spoke about war on the day on which we read the *parashah* that winter, January 31, 1998.



On that occasion I was struck by the way in which the news about another possible war against Iraq was treated as a form of entertainment by the media. Flashy slogans and logos illustrated the screen as earnest young news anchors who had never known war enthusiastically described the weapons that the U.S. military might be using to “knock out” Baghdad’s air defenses. There was much talk about whether we should “take out” Saddam Hussein, as if he were a football player on an opposing team. It was treated—the story about another possible war—as if it were a game. In fact, it wasn’t even the center of attention here in America. As serious and ominous as the news was, it was only the second most important news of the day. The so-called “Crisis in the White House” was the lead story instead that winter.

And now, of course, we really are in the midst of another war. And, as I think all of us have come to realize, it isn’t fun. It isn’t a game. Of course, as in every human situation, there are absurdities. It sometimes seems as though the name of this conflict is “Where’s Osama?” or “Where’s Mullah Muhammed Omar?” And then the next day we’re reminded of the murderous intent of those who’ve targeted us. There’s a lot of pain, suffering and bloodshed in war. War is confusing. One doesn’t always know whether one is winning or losing. One doesn’t know how it will all turn out.

This week’s *parashah* appears to offer us some guidance. After all, it describes how, after a long, tense standoff, with failed attempt after failed attempt to negotiate a resolution of grievances between the Israelites and the Egyptians, the parties are on the eve of the breakdown of negotiations. As we read near the end of the portion we read today, Pharoah says to Moses, “Be gone from me! Take care not to see me again, for the moment you look upon my face you shall die!” And Moses replies, “You’ve spoken rightly. I shall not see your face again.”

Before leaving his presence Moses tells Pharoah what will happen—a terrible calamity: all the first born sons throughout all Egypt will die. And he predicts that after that happens, finally, the Egyptians will urge the Israelites to leave and they will then do so. And then Moses leaves Pharoah’s presence in anger. How better could one describe the threatening language and the breakdown in trust that leads groups, peoples, and nations to move from diplomacy to war?

The Exodus story resonates powerfully with us. It’s a story of the quest for freedom and the victory of the oppressed over their oppressors. It’s a story that has resonated with many oppressed people over the ages, and has inspired them.

The rhetoric of the Exodus story was particularly seized upon by the champions of the civil rights struggle in this country, such as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this coming week. “Let my People Go!” has been a rallying cry for those seeking to throw off the chains of bondage. Who can resist an appeal for support, for loyalty, for devotion and commitment based on a story as powerful, as compelling as the one we read this morning?

And yet... And yet one must be careful when we seek to apply insights from today’s story to events of the day that we are witnessing. We must be careful because it isn’t always clear how to apply them. The paradigms don’t always work.

For example, in our struggle with Al Qaeda, are we the defenseless, victimized enslaved Israelites? Well, that’s a stretch, however victimized we may feel, however violated we were on September 11th. But on the other hand, are we the cruel, arrogant, swaggering, powerful, empire-building Egyptians who enslaved an innocent people? Perhaps to the members of Al Qaeda we may seem to be, but not to most of our critics and certainly not to us.

Applying the paradigm of the Exodus story is tempting. It’s appealing, but it’s fraught with risk.

When we look at the conflict between Israel and her Arab neighbors—the Palestinians and the Arab states in the region—do we look upon the Israelis (as I did on the eve of the Iraqi SCUD missile attacks) as the living descendants of the Israelites—the Children of Israel whose enemies had condemned to death their male children and who had enslaved them? When we think about Israel’s military and industrial capacity, when we think about her skilled army, it’s hard to make that comparison. And yet, do we see the Israelis as the descendants of the Egyptians, persecuting the innocent peace-loving Palestinians?

The Palestinians certainly see themselves as victims, and they’re certainly willing to die in the service of their cause, and if, as I’m sure they’d be inclined to do, one were to make the comparison between the 10th plague, the slaying of the first-born, and the terrible loss of innocent Israeli life we’ve witnessed since the start of the so-called Al Aqsa Intifada, then one must see the Israelis as the villains, as absurd and offensive as that might seem.

Looking at the rise in tension between India and Pakistan, do we see one as Egypt and the other as the Israelites? If so, which one is which? In struggles between people, those who are inspired aren’t always just, right or moral. Those who are blamed, accused, attacked or condemned aren’t always deserving of it.

And so we have to be careful. We should read this story, as we do, each and every year. We should read it carefully, and we should learn its lessons well. But we should hesitate to be too quick to apply its lessons in one and only one way. We should never be self-satisfied or smug. We should never fail to be self-critical. The values of this story are clear: Faith in God is stronger than chariots. Freedom must triumph over tyranny. But the challenge is determining how, in the real world in which we live, we can avoid being confined by paradigms that do not quite fit. Let us seek to promote our values in a way that doesn't prevent us from listening to and remaining open to other points of view. If we can remain true to our values in this complex world, then we have nothing to fear.

Shabbat Shalom.