

Dvar - Parshat Masai
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There is an interesting phrase that appears more and more in public policy discussions; namely, the claim that a particular position is on the “right side of history,” or, conversely, on the “on the wrong side of history.”

This phrase is most often associated with progress towards gay rights and marriage equality, and was used in the title of Adrian Brooks’ 2015 book The Right Side of History: 100 Years of LGBTQ Activism.

But the phrase has also been invoked in relation to other issues. President Obama was particularly fond of this phrase. In commenting on Russia’s annexation of Crimea, for example, he said: “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, ...” He would similarly describe Andrea Merkel’s willingness to resettle refugees as being “on the right side of history.”

A recent article in Slate traced the origin of this phrase. The earliest use they could find was in an obscure 1903 novel titled “In Old Egypt” written by Rabbi Pereira Mendes, which recounts imaginative stories of life in Egypt leading up to Moses’ killing of the Egyptian overseer, which set in motion the events of Exodus.

Which brings me to this week’s parshah, Masai.

In this parshah, the Israelites are camped on the banks of the Jordan River preparing to enter the Promised Land, and the text recounts the journeys that brought them to that point.

The parshah begins: “These are the journeys of the children of Israel, GOING OUT of the land of Egypt with their hosts, under the hand of Moses and Aaron. ... these are their journeys according to their GOINGS OUT.”

And that is exactly what the parshah does. It recounts the 42 stages on the journey from Mitzrayim to the Promised Land one by one: “They journeyed FROM Rameses and they camped in Sukkot”; “They journeyed FROM Sukkot, and



camped in Eitam”; “They journeyed FROM Eitam, and camped in Migdol” --- and finally, skipping head 40 years---. “They journeyed FROM the Avarim Mountains, ... and campedby the Jordan River across from Jericho.” In every case, the text states where they journeyed FROM and where they CAMPED; never mentioning that they arrive, and only occasionally interjecting anything about the journey itself.

The text presents each step of their journey as a stage in an “arc of history.” The implication, of course, is that their arrival in the Promised Land is evidence that the Israelites are on the “right side” of this history, while the Egyptians, Canaanites, Moabites, and Amalkites who tried to interfere, were ultimately on the “wrong side.”

But we know, of course, that the story is going to get more complicated. As the parshah ends, Joshua is told to lead the Israelites across the Jordan into Canaan, “drive out all the inhabitants” “destroy all their molten images, devastate all their high places.” But this arc of history will also bring Assyrians, Babylonians, Romans, Islam, and Crusades, and Israel would be displaced from their Promised Land for two millennia.

It is hard to argue that Jews are on the “right side” of political history.

But the arc of Jewish history is really not about political history. There is scant evidence for the Hebrews having been slaves in Egypt or the events of Exodus, and no evidence of their journeys through the desert.

The essence of the exodus story, however, is not about the physical journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, nor is even about the journey from slavery to freedom; it is, of course, about the journey from idolatry to Torah.

This is what we teach our children at Passover. We respond to the child who does not know how to ask by saying “In the beginning, our ancestors worshiped idols.” We contrast the idol worship of Mitzrayim with the holiness of Israel. We rationalize the confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh, not as a test of strength or guile, but rather evidence for the impotence of Egyptian idols.

The theme is also evident in recounting the Israelites journey through the desert. The existential conflicts they faced were not against the elements or enemies encountered along the road, but rather the challenges of faith and idolatry. Numbers Rabbah summarizes, thus: “A highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the way of holiness.”

It is the conception of the Exodus as a journey towards holiness that differentiates the biblical narrative from the mythical journeys of other bronze age heroes such as the Greek Odysseus, the Roman Aeneas, the Babylonian Gilgamesh, and lesser-known heroes such as the Sumerian Inanna, or the Polynesian Mahu-ika. Joseph Campbell, in his classic book Hero with a Thousand Faces, demonstrated the formulaic nature of these myths, in which ancestral heroes undertake arduous journeys and trials, and emerge triumphant in a world populated by supernatural powers.

While there are many rhetorical similarities between the story of the Exodus and other myths of that age, none of the other traditions conflate the hero's physical or political triumph with the attainment of spiritual or moral milestones. It has been argued that this is the essential theological insight of the Abrahamic tradition. In this view, the genius of the Torah --and what makes it the "greatest story ever told" --- is that it coopted ancient legends of physical trials and triumph, and superadded the concept of a moral compass directing the hero towards holiness. This is the "arc of history" referred to by Martin Luther King in a quote that President Obama had woven into the rug in the Oval Office: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Martin Luther King's last speech, given in Memphis just hours before his murder, expands on this concept, and closely recapitulates the rhetorical formula of today's parshah. I can't do justice to the brilliance of Martin Luther King's oratory, so I will touch briefly on some key points. King begins:

"...if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the Promised Land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there.

I would move on by Greece....and I would watch them around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality. But I wouldn't STOP there.

I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire, ... But I wouldn't STOP there.

I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, ... But I wouldn't STOP there.

I would watch ... Martin Luther as he tacked his ninety-five theses on the door at the church of Wittenberg. But I wouldn't STOP there.

I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating President by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. But I wouldn't STOP there.”

And he goes on:

“Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy."

Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. ... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding.”

....and then, after discussing the specifics that brought him to Memphis, he comes to his now-famous, fateful conclusion:

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!”

Like our parshah today, the journey that Martin Luther King recounts is not about political history or power, nor even the journey from slavery to freedom, but rather a journey towards glory and holiness, towards emancipation and equality, towards peace and social justice, and towards fairness and forgiveness.

Martin Luther King was murdered hours after he gave this speech. Just as our parshah describes each journey as leaving FROM a point, but never mentions arriving at the next one, he never arrived. In his words, he never stopped.

Nor have we arrived. Like Moses, we have been given a glimpse of a world where our people and our principles seemed secure; where human rights, justice, charity, social and environmental responsibility, and compassion were not simply Jewish values, but also the law of the land and increasingly, our global civilization. Perhaps we thought we had arrived. Perhaps we thought we could stop.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs writes:

“The journeys of the Israelites from Egypt serve as a warning against the two kinds of error into which a Jew can fall.

One is to believe that one has arrived. He may think: Having reached so far in my Judaism, I can rest content. But the truth is that the Jew was not created to stand still. There is always a new journey before him.

The other is to despair. He may feel: I know so little, I am capable of so little, that my religious efforts are in vain.”

As Jews, we believe there is a “right side of history,” and that it is on arc that bends towards the moral and spiritual ideals of Torah.

Our parshah today reminds us at this is a journey. We have not arrived, and we can not stop.

Shabbat shalom.

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