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Dr Maurice M. Mizrahi (mizrahim@cox.net)  
Congregation Adat Reyim  
D'var Torah on Terumah

## Egypt, Enslaved.

These days, every pundit and his uncle is a self-styled expert on Egypt, and will give you an in-depth opinion about what's going on there and what it means. Me, I am not a pundit. I am only an uncle. Many times over. But the rabbi asked me to do this and I figured, why not? After all, I was born and raised in Egypt, until I was forced out in 1967, after the Six-Day War, when I was eighteen. So I may be able to give you some insights.

To be sure, I have received many e-mails lately asking me to comment on the situation in Egypt. I have done so in English, in French and in Italian. I have not done so in Arabic: Those who might write to me in Arabic have found their Internet feed cut in recent days.

In this week's Torah portion, *Terumah*, the Israelites have just gotten out of Egypt amid signs and wonders and miracles, led by God "with a strong hand and an outstretched arm" [Deut. 26:8]. They have just witnessed the spectacular giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, and are finally settling down to more mundane tasks, such as building an ornate tabernacle to house the Tablets of the Law.

But the thundering words they heard at Sinai are still ringing in their ears, beginning with:

I am the Lord your God, who took you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage. [Ex. 20:2]

Our commentators wondered: Why does God describe Himself that way? Would you not expect God to identify Himself by saying:

I am the Lord your God, who created the heavens and the earth?

This would make it clear that He is the Beginning, the Boss, the *Adon Olam*, the Master of the Universe. After all, even lowly human beings can be great leaders and liberators, but only God can create a world, so

shouldn't God stress this unique aspect of His being, just as He is about to give us the Torah?

One reason that comes to mind is that people, then as now, are afflicted with the "What have you done for me lately?" syndrome. In other words, spare me the creation of the world -- that's ancient history -- and tell me what you have done for me lately. So God anticipates that and obliges by saying: "OK. I just freed you from slavery".

But our commentators saw beyond that. They argued that if God had said only that He was the creator of the world, it might imply that he has distanced Himself from the world since then, and abandoned it to its own devices. By saying "I just freed you from slavery", God tells us that He cares and watches over us as history unfolds. He did not just create the world and withdraw. He is here with us and His presence is all around us. Yehudah Halevi, the 12th century Spanish Jewish poet, argues in his greatest poem, *The Kuzari*, that God is a "God of History", not just an abstract "God of the philosophers". God is always present.

So God took the Jews out of Egypt and they are ready to begin a new chapter in their march through history, as a proud and free people. But what about the Egypt they left behind? Did *it* ever get free? No, never. To this day, it has always remained enslaved by masters foreign and domestic. Are the Egyptians condemned to perpetual retribution for enslaving the Jews? Or has their time finally arrived to "proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof" [Lev. 25:10], in the middle of the massive demonstrations in Cairo and Alexandria we have been watching on TV?

First, why should we care what happens to Egypt? We are happy to be out of it, we are happy to be rid of it. Our 601st commandment states,

"Thou shalt never again dwell permanently in the Land of Egypt."  
[Deut. 17:16; Deut. 28:68; Ex. 14:13],

a commandment that, sadly, I broke the moment I was born. Yet we are *commanded* to remember Egypt every single day. The Torah says:

Remember the day when you came out of the Land of Egypt all the days of your life. [Deut. 16:3].

The Talmud reinforced this message [Berachot 12b]. The Passover *Haggadah* adds that in every generation, every person must consider that he, himself, was personally rescued from Egypt. (That's easy for *me* to say.) The Exodus from Egypt is highlighted at the Kiddush for every Shabbat and holiday eve: *Zecher litziat Mitzrayim*. Egypt is where we truly became a people, where we received the Torah. We are not allowed to keep Egypt out of our collective consciousness. We are linked to it, by proximity if nothing else.

So what can we say about Egypt today? Egyptians have a history of being passive, fearful. They are afraid to speak their mind. They may tell you in private what you want to hear, but in public they will go with the flow, out of fear. You are never sure what they *really* think. They fear their leaders and the police state that keeps those leaders in power. What is happening now in the streets of Egypt is totally unprecedented in their 5000-year recorded history. The people are demanding the ouster of their totalitarian ruler and are publicly reviling him, to his face, with astonishing vehemence. This has never happened before.

Let us briefly review the history of Egypt before we proceed:

- First, the Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt were in charge, all absolute rulers with absolute power over the people. The people, then as now, were mostly dirt-poor peasants. The Pharaohs were backed by the priests, whose job was to scare the people into submission, by threatening the wrath of the many false gods that were worshipped.

- Recorded history can be said to begin with the Pharaoh Menes, who united Upper and Lower Egypt in 3000 BCE, 5,000 years ago.

- By the time Cleopatra ruled in the first century BCE, Ancient Egypt was already moribund. It was conquered by Alexander-the-so-called-Great in 331 BCE. He built the city of Alexandria in his name and image. The Greeks -- or Ptolemies, as they called themselves in Egypt -- were the masters for three centuries.

- Then the Romans took over from them for about four centuries.

-When the Roman Empire split, the Byzantines took over Egypt in 395 and kept it for another three centuries.

-Then Islam was born. The foreign Arabs conquered Egypt in 639 and ruled it for six centuries, up to about the middle of the 13th century. The Egyptians of today are mostly the descendants of these invaders. The Ancient Egyptians morphed into the Christian Copts, and declined in proportion to become only about 10% of the population today.

-The Mamluks then took over Egypt in 1250 and held it for some three centuries. They were former slaves from Russia and the Caucasus who converted to Islam.

-They were followed by the Turks, or Ottomans, for another three centuries.

-Even Napoleon tried his hand at conquering Egypt. He came in 1798, but gave up and withdrew, leaving a power vacuum.

-That vacuum was quickly filled in 1805 by an Albanian commander by the name of Muhammad Ali. He managed to gain some autonomy from the Ottoman Empire and ruled Egypt ruthlessly as viceroy, along with his descendants, for a century and a half. His descendants ruled under the colorful names of khedive, sultan, and finally king.

-In 1882, some thirteen years after the Suez Canal opened, the British invaded, ostensibly to protect the vital waterway and ensure the stability of the Egyptian dynasty. They became the de facto rulers for many decades.

All this time, the poor Egyptian people watched their foreign masters, helplessly, licking boots and trying to survive by being as servile as possible.

-Then the 1952 revolution came and brought Nasser to power. It was not a grass-roots event. It was a bloodless palace coup. The Army simply came and told the king, "Your time is up. Get out!" Nobody consulted the common people. As expected, they cheered Nasser with the same gusto as they cheered King Farouk a few years earlier.

It's true that for the first time since the Pharaohs, the Egyptians were now ruled by one of their own. But "ruled" is the right word. The new rulers proved to be every bit as totalitarian and oppressive as their foreign predecessors. Democracy was never part of their vocabulary. Maintaining themselves in power was their foremost concern. There were only three rulers in almost sixty years -- Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak -- and the first two were stopped only by death, one natural and untimely, and one unnatural. Nevertheless, human nature is such that, if you are going to be ruled with an iron hand, better that it be by one of your own than by a foreigner, so the Egyptian people felt better in that regard.

Most Egyptians are tolerant, good-natured, kind-hearted, and not fundamentally antisemitic. There are three centers of antisemitism in Egypt: The Islamic fundamentalists, the intellectuals, and the Coptic Christians:

- The Islamic fundamentalists have always opposed peace with Israel and have vowed to abrogate the 1979 peace treaty with Israel if they ever get the chance. They support terrorists and view Jews in the most outrageously negative of terms, which I will not repeat here.

- The intellectuals are whipping up antagonism towards Jews and Israel through the media. They know that if war comes, they can always get out of fighting on the battlefield by pulling the appropriate levers. They speak bravely of "honor", as long as others do the fighting and the suffering and the dying. The government has always given them free rein as a safety valve, as long as they do not criticize the totalitarian regime.

- And the Copts are stuck in a medieval interpretation of Christianity from which the rest of official Christianity has been moving away. I remember shivers going down my spine when I heard the Coptic pope on the radio in 1967, right before the Six-Day War, when war frenzy was whipping up the masses. He said, "The time has finally come when the Jews will pay, and they sons will pay, for the crucifixion of Christ". He spat out the word "pay" with great anger.

But the three of them together do not add up to a majority. The Copts are only 10% of the population and are always at odds with the Muslim majority. Clashes are becoming more frequent. The bombing of a church

in Alexandria last December, that left scores of dead and injured, is the last episode. Numerically, the intellectuals are but frosting on the cake. The Muslim fundamentalists are significant in numbers, some estimate 20%, but still a minority. So there is hope for less hatred in the air, *if* the majority decides not to be silent anymore.

Corruption and nepotism are rampant and a way of life. You may find that to get a driver's license, you have to slip the examiner a fifty-dollar bill. But that's not the worst part. The worst part is that bad drivers are driving around. If you want a good job, who you are and who you know are more important than what you can do. But that's not the worst part. The worst part is that incompetents are frequently in charge of things. All that is not likely to change soon.

So far the demonstrators have been careful to limit their demands to three things. First, President Mubarak must leave immediately. Second, a provisional government must quickly organize multi-party elections. And third, these elections must be free and fair. They were smart not to bring up Islam, or Israel, or the United States, or terrorists, or any other specific or divisive issue. That should gain them international support.

So how do I personally see the future of Egypt? First, to answer the earlier question I posed, no, Egypt is not under a perpetual curse. The prophet Isaiah tells us that after much punishment Egypt will eventually see the light and be blessed. [Isaiah 19:1-25] But Isaiah does not say when that will happen.

But back to the present. I believe Mubarak will go, leaving his newly appointed Vice-President in charge of a provisional government that will organize multi-party election within six months. A new government will be elected, more or less fairly, depending on how well the thugs and goon squads are kept out of the process, most likely by the Army. *Nobody* knows who will emerge the victor, for the simple reason that no one has ever heard the Egyptian people express themselves in total freedom, in public or in private or at the ballot box . I repeat, *nobody* knows who will emerge the victor, not even the Egyptians themselves.

-If the new government is Islamic, it's curtains for Egypt. They are in for a long night, with Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and maybe even Al Qaeda as its best friends. Israel will have to prepare for war again. And the Islamists will tolerate no second chance for democracy.

-If the new government is secular, it will start out well, but as its term of office comes close to its constitutional end, its top priority will be to keep itself in power by hook or by crook, and they will be sorely tempted to slyly derail all opposition, as in the past. As they say, the proof of democracy is in the second election, not the first. At any rate, it will probably distance itself from Israel and make the cold peace even colder, if that is possible, to avoid angering the Islamists.

-Corruption and nepotism will continue, as it is a cultural matter that cannot be eradicated overnight. Whether the people will press *continuously* for transparency and accountability, or limit themselves to this initial burst, is anybody's guess.

As the Egyptians collectively decide their own future, for the first time in their long recorded history, they would do well to remember the promise made to Abraham in his very first encounter with the Divine:

I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. [Gen. 12:3].

As history has shown repeatedly, that promise *will* be kept. Whether it's the United States of America in the blessing, or Nazi Germany in the curse, or Spain in the blessing followed by the curse depending on how they behaved, that promise *will* be kept. If the Egyptians choose to move in the direction of cursing the Jews, they may well find themselves right where they were before.

Or lower.

Shabbat shalom.