“You Shall Not Hate the Egyptian”

Parshat Shemot
Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein
Anshe Sholom B’nai israel Congregation

About a week ago, Julie and I did something crazy that we rarely do: we watched an entire movie! Of the many choices available to us, we settled on last year’s Oscars Best Picture, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. For those who haven’t seen it, I won’t spoil it, but there is a hero and a villain and as the movie unfolds we learn more and more about the complex relationship between them.

The archetype of the villain or enemy in movies is one that has been well-documented over the years. I recently surveyed a recent top twenty list of the most notorious movie villains of all time—of course, Hannibal Lecter and the Joker are on it, coming in at numbers 5 and 2 respectively, representing villains who are pure evil. But then there are enemies of a different sort, like Loki, Thor’s brother from the Marvel series (number three on the list),as well as the all-time most notorious movie villain: Darth Vader.

Darth Vader represents a very particular kind of enemy: while he starts off as pure evil, it turns out that there is a longer history and more complex relationship at play.

Enemies take center stage in the beginning of our parsha, and are the seed from which the entire slavery narrative unfolds (Shemot 1:8-10):

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ־חָדָשׁ עַל־מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע אֶת־יוֹסֵף: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: הָבָה נִתְחַכְּמָה לוֹ פֶּן־יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה כִּי־תִקְרֶאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסַף גַּם־הוּא עַל־שֹׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם־בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ.

A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise up from the land.”

Pharaoh sees a local, burgeoning population of resident aliens who are not Egyptian. He immediately assigns this group, Yakov’s descendents, a role in Egyptian society. “*In the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise up from the land.”* The spectre of war loomed so large that just the threat of war becomes the pretext for slavery, persecution and genocide.

The Italian commentator Sforno intuits a more fundamental cause of Pharaoh's thinking. Pharaoh's thinking about the Israelites in Egypt goes like this:

כי בהיותם נבדלים ממנו במילה ובלשון ובדעות העברים, באופן שלא יכלו המצרים לאכול את העברים לחם הם לנו לאויבים בלי ספק.

Since they remained separate because they practiced circumcision, spoke a different language, and maintained Hebrew ideas, and because the Egyptians could not break bread with them because they would only eat meat after the blood was removed, they will be for us enemies, without question.

According to this interpretation, the Jewish people remained distinct, and as the population grew, this cultural contrast became untenable to Pharaoh. In Egyptian society, there was not much room for difference.

There is an irony here: only a few weeks ago, we read of Egypt being a melting pot of sorts, welcoming all who were hungry to come and eat. Now, things have changed and not for the better. There are only two options for how to consider non-Egyptians: either they are potential enemies or they assimilate and become Egyptians.

Pharaoh's ethos has many names associated with it. Colloquially we might summarize it as "you're either with us or against us." Rabbi Sacks uses the term *dualism*, meaning a certain black-or-white thinking projected onto the world and other groups. A dualistic worldview adopts the approach that we are good and therefore others are bad. Any struggles of mine are someone else's fault. (And if you're thinking about the concept of a scapegoat, you're not far off; Sacks notes that pre-World War II Germany became increasingly dualist as the German economy failed to rebound in the depression.)

Sacks goes even further with the concept of dualism, giving it a theological framework :

"The most powerful antidote to dualism is monotheism, best defined in a verse in Isaiah (45:7): 'I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster [*ra*, \ 'evil']; I, the Lord, do all these things.'"

"By refusing to split light and dark, good and evil, into separate forces or entities," Sacks continues, "monotheism forces us to wrestle with the ambiguities of our own character, the necessity for moral choice and the inescapability of personal responsibility. Dualism relieves us of all these burdens. It is the supreme betrayal of monotheism."

While Pharaoh was a dualist who saw foes all around him, the Torah also offers us a second approach to the concept of enemies.

Later on in Shemot (23:5), we read:

כִּֽי־תִרְאֶ֞ה חֲמ֣וֹר שֹׂנַאֲךָ֗ רֹבֵץ֙ תַּ֣חַת מַשָּׂ֔אוֹ וְחָדַלְתָּ֥ מֵעֲזֹ֖ב לֽוֹ עָזֹ֣ב תַּעֲזֹ֑ב עִמּֽוֹ׃

When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and you would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless help raise it.

The Torah takes for granted that enemies exist—it doesn't even bother defining the term! Not only that, we might encounter this person in daily life and this is the kind of person that we might refrain from helping. *Whoops, I didn't see you there…gee, wish I could help, I really do, but I have to tidy my socks drawer.* No, instead: עָזֹב תַּעֲזֹב עִמּוֹ / We have to help that person, says the pasuk.

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 32b) goes even further:

ת"ש אוהב לפרוק ושונא לטעון, מצוה בשונא כדי לכוף את יצרו.

If [the animal of] a friend requires unloading, and an enemy requires loading, you should first help your enemy—in order to suppress the evil inclination.

What emerges from this mitzvah, which the gemara expands, is that in the Torah and in Judaism, your enemy is still a person and so we have a basic moral obligation to help them. In the Torah's conception, an enemy is not a far-off entity but a person with whom you have a relationship. In Breishit, the concept of enemies comes up in the context of relationships that should be loving but instead are poisoned. The same root for enemy—*soneh (ש.נ.א)*—is used to describe the relationship of Leah and Rachel, and then Yosef and his brothers.

If we look at Devarim, there is an additional layer to add to this conversation, specifically regarding the Egyptians themselves. By all accounts, the Egyptians should have become the enemies of the Jewish people for all time. However, the Torah conveys a moderate attitude. In a passage about who can join the Jewish people, the Torah says:

לֹֽא־תְתַעֵ֣ב אֲדֹמִ֔י כִּ֥י אָחִ֖יךָ ה֑וּא לֹא־תְתַעֵ֤ב מִצְרִי֙ כִּי־גֵ֣ר הָיִ֔יתָ בְּאַרְצֽוֹ׃ בָּנִ֛ים אֲשֶׁר־יִוָּלְד֥וּ לָהֶ֖ם דֹּ֣ור שְׁלִישִׁ֑י יָבֹ֥א לָהֶ֛ם בִּקְהַ֥ל ה׳׃

You shall not abhor an Edomite, for such is your kin. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in that land. Children born to them may be admitted into the congregation of God in the third generation.

We are commanded to not hate Egyptians. After four generations, the possibility even exists for the descendent of an Egyptian to join the Jewish people.

This stands in contrast to groups like the Ammonite and Moabite, who are forever barred from joining the Jewish people because "*they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.*"

This is an important distinction, putting the Ammonites and Moabites in a category similar to that of Amalek. Even in biblical times, there were wicked actions and evil actors, groups who preyed upon the Israelites when they were in need. There is no place for such cruelty within the community of Israel and we are commanded to eradicate this kind of Amalek-esque behavior that is merciless and cold-blooded.

The shocking thing is that the Egyptians are not included in this group. The Torah does not command us to wipe out their memory, or forbid them from entering the Jewish people. We can't even hate the Egyptians for what they did.

Why shouldn't we hate them? According to Rashi: "*Because they were your hosts in time of need [during Joseph's reign when the neighboring countries suffered from famine]; therefore although they sinned against you, do not utterly abhor him…."*

There was much history—a long relationship—with the Egyptians. And although it would turn catastrophic, the Torah still tells us not to hate these persecutors. The Torah says explicitly, you know what it was to be hated and so you cannot allow this mentality within you. The ethos of dualism is anathema to Judaism.

Of course, we learn something else from the experience of slavery in Egypt. וְגֵר לֹא־תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי־גֵרִים הֱיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: / *You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.* The major message of the Exodus for the Jewish was not to hate; it is to care, and care deeply, for those who differ from us.

We are living now in a time of real cruelty and there is a great temptation—a *yetzer*—to meet this challenge with equal harshness. But we ourselves experienced what it was to feel the hatred and hardheartedness of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Such hatred is corrosive, to our hearts and to our souls.

The Torah is clear that while we may not love the Egyptians, we can't hate our enemies either, and if we perchance encounter one of them in life, in an Uber or at a grocery store, we even need to help them with their bags. The possibility exists, while ever so

slight, that with much time, maybe a few generations from now, things will be different and we may welcome an Egyptian or someone like them into our ranks. Let us pray that our present moments bends in this direction. כן יהי רצון / *Please God, speedily in Your days.*