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The Accretion of Nuance

What gives rise to a page of Talmud? Why isn't the Mishna enough? Or the Gemara? Or Rashi? Or all of that plus Tosafot? Why do you need all of the stuff in the back, also?

It's because one simple answer is only briefly seen as sufficient. People quickly have questions, amendments, edits, asterisks, and more. Rabbinic nudniks want to explore the limits of a position and take an idea to its logical conclusion. A simple point soon becomes complicated as we start thinking about it.

This is the process of the accretion of nuance, of the simple becoming complex and dynamic.

I want to trace this process through texts that you may know fairly well, two of which we read today, and notice the process of accretion of nuance, and speculate as to the reasons for it.

Many scholars see the Song at the Sea (Ex. 15:2-18) as older than the surrounding material; it is poetry, with older Hebrew grammatical forms than the surrounding text. It feels somewhat plopped into the context of the Exodus.

My teacher at Machon Schechter, the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, the Conservative movement's seminary there, Dr. David Fraenkel, writes extensively about the earliest versions of biblical texts and stories. Some of this is based on an article of his.¹

Dr. Fraenkel points out that there's almost nothing in the Song itself that refers to anything related to what's happening around it contextually. It does not know of the Exodus, or slavery, or plagues, and the Exodus narrative doesn't "know" the Sea story. It seems like an unnecessary, secondary climax following the climax of the 10th plague.²

It was originally a song maybe sung in the Temple, remembering the Israelites' being saved by God from a people who were marauding, and how did God saved them? By drowning the marauders in the sea.

There's no handwringing about this whatsoever; the Song at the Sea contains simple gratitude and joy at God's having destroyed our enemies, and saved us. We exult in God's military power, in God's "consuming them like straw," of God making them "sink like lead." There is no moral ambivalence.

Aiding this clear conscience is that the marauders are basically unnamed; Pharaoh is mentioned once (Fraenkel thinks it might be a late interpolation), but it could also be a generic name for "their" leader, a non-Israelite leader. The Song does mention that other peoples (the Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, and Canaanites in Ex. 15:14-15), are afraid and trembling. But they are not the ones who are drowned—they are just those scared by Israel and its powerful God.

¹ <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-song-of-the-sea-and-the-history-of-ancient-israel-and-judah>

² See Ex. 11:1.

Marauders all being drowned, and we only look back to cheer. That's the simple version.

If the Song at the Sea is the earliest layer of this, the surrounding biblical narrative is a somewhat later second layer. Placing the Song at the Sea in its context, at the (second) climax of the Exodus gives it so much more flavor, and complexity.

We know these people, these Egyptians, and we know Pharaoh best. Pharaoh may have been guilty initially, but at a certain point, God hardened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh had no free will to let the Israelites go, and it's actually God's stiffening Pharaoh's heart that leads Pharaoh to pursue the Israelites out of Egypt (Ex. 14:4). We know that the plagues affected all Egyptians—the rich, the poor, the powerful, and the weak—they did not “plague” only the guilty. Same with the drowning in the sea—we know that soldiers in a nation's army are often those who have the fewest other choices in life, and yet they all drowned.

These details all add to the moral ambiguity.

And then, the moment after the Israelites are free and sing, they start complaining, about food, and water. Basic and important things, but complaining is complaining. You'd think they'd feel a little more gratitude and would demonstrate how deserving they are of all of these miracles, and of being saved at the cost of all this death. So the Israelites immediately become less sympathetic victims who seem less deserving of these miracles, and of the cost in human lives of their redemption.

And to make this even more morally ambiguous, God says God is hardening Pharaoh's heart and bringing these plagues so that the Egyptians will know that God is God—for God's own glory. This death and destruction being for God, and not even necessary for humans is deeply troubling!

The entire Exodus narrative, the second layer, raises moral challenge after moral challenge to the simplicity of the Song at the Sea, our first layer.

A third and later layer comes from one of the more famous Talmudic vignettes. When the Egyptians were drowning in the sea, the angels were laughing, but God chastised them: “My creatures are drowning in the sea, and you sing praises before me?” (Sanhedrin 39b).

The Egyptians are humans, created, like us, in God's image. They are holy, they are sacred, regardless of what they have done or not done to deserve or not deserve this fate. Their drowning is a tragedy, a desecration of the divine image.

Even God is uncomfortable with all this, it seems!

How are we to feel, then?

We are happy when our enemies fall, but we also experience the wider context, and we then also recognize their humanity, and perhaps feel the loss ourselves. And when it's not God doing it but us, people like us, people we might know—it becomes harder even.

We are in various places of this process ourselves—rejoicing at our enemies' downfall, feeling the ambiguity and feeling ambivalent, or feeling their humanity. We might be in more than one stage, or moving frequently between them. Some of us tend toward one spot. In which layer of this accretion of nuance do you find yourself now?

Is one of these layers the most “evolved,” the most “moral,” the most “Jewish?” They are all Jewish, and they are all moral, in a particular context.

We are not angels, but perhaps we strive to be them. But we are not and cannot be angels. We want to understand all the complexity and dynamics and context and history. But

we also must live, and survive. And yet we want to be more than people who cheer when humans drown.

To step back for a moment, Judaism is an accretive tradition. The reason services are so long, the Talmud is so thick, and our prayer books have so many pages in them is because we always add things, and we almost never subtract. Every addition adds nuance and context and perspective. And length.

Does it ever become too much?

We long for the day when the world feels simple.

We yearn for a world that can grasp complexity.

And we hover between and amidst naivete and nuance, trying, praying to get the balance right.

Shabbat shalom.