

## Dire Straits

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7th day Pesach 5781

Like many of you I'm sure, I watched the events unfolding in the Suez Canal last week with a combination of amazement and amusement. Billions of dollars were at stake, with vulnerabilities exposed in a world whose entire supply chain is dependent on the functionality of a narrow waterway. Backhoes were called in to dredge out a ship stuck in sand, and the great hope for the reversal of this debacle lay in the spring tide. Adding to the fascination was that it was not just any ship that was stuck- it was the world's largest ship. How large? According to Texas Monthly<sup>1</sup>,

*The ship can't match [AT&T] stadium in terms of girth, but Cowboys fans could tailgate at the bow of the boat, while Eagles fans could do whatever Eagles fans do on the stern, and the two groups would remain on entirely opposite sides of the stadium's parking lot.*

But while these were all reasons enough to follow the saga, the cherry on top was the obvious evocation of the connection to the Exodus from Egypt. A ship being set free on Pesach, crossing through the Red Sea to the other

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<https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/how-big-the-ship-that-got-stuck-in-the-suez-is-in-texas-terms/>

side, is positively biblical; furthermore, the metaphors between blocked shipping lines and the post-matzah digestive system evoke the Abarbanel's comment that Matzah is pauper's bread because it keeps people full for a long time, and is hard to digest. It's as though God was sending sermon material to Rabbis everywhere, when we desperately needed "a win."

While cackling gleefully at the blessedly resolved misfortunes of a stuck ship on Pesach may sound Jewish, but it might actually be antithetical to Jewish values. Today, when we said Hallel, we did not recite all the paragraphs; instead, we recited the shortened version, known as "Half Hallel." In fact, we have been doing this since the first day of Chol Hamoed. Why do we switch to the half Hallel after the first days of Chag? Rav Tzidkiyahu HaRofeh, in his commentary *Shibolei HaLeket*, says that we switch from the full Hallel to the shorter version out of sadness for the drowning of the Egyptians. Even though they were our tormentors and oppressors, we are told in the book of Proverbs (24:17-18)

בְּנֶפֶל אוֹיְבֶיךָ [אֲוִיְבֶךָ] אַל־תִּשְׂמַח וּבְכַשְׁלוֹ אַל־יִגַּל לְבָבְךָ:

*If your enemy falls, do not exult; If he trips, let your heart not rejoice,*

פְּוִירָאָה יְהוָה נִרְעַ בְּעֵינָיו וְהִשִּׁיב מִעַלְיוֹ אָפוֹ:

*Lest the LORD see it and be displeased, And avert His wrath from him.*

The Shibbolei Haleket's statement is based on the Talmud (Sanhedrin 39b), which describes the celestial scene that transpired as the Egyptians were drowning. The heavenly hosts, beholding the demise of the evil oppressors, requested permission to sing praise to God. This request was firmly denied. "My creations are drowning in the ocean," God said, "and you wish to sing praise to God!?"

This Talmudic statement, and this Halacha, are perplexing. When the kid who bullied you moved away, didn't you feel a sense of relief and gratitude? How many of us are rejoicing at the prospect of life returning to normal now that we have been vaccinated? Conversely, if we are really supposed to be sensitive to the drowning of the Egyptians, and empathize with their loss, shouldn't we refrain from saying Hallel altogether in the latter half of Pesach?

In his work *Lifrakim*, Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg suggests that this is precisely the message. Our fate is linked with that of the rest of humanity; as long as there are people in the world who are still oppressed, even if they are our historic enemies, we must change our lives as a result. The Jewish people have suffered at the hands of Moslems at various times throughout our history, but at the moment, Uighur Moslems in Northwest China are

experiencing a physical and cultural genocide right now, as are the Rohingya Moslem ethnic group in Myanmar- and we must raise our voices in response. The soil of Europe is soaked with the blood of Jews spilled by Christians in the name of Christianity, but it should bother us that Christians are a seriously persecuted minority in several Moslem nations. As long as these are still happening, we don't have the right to full happiness.

But beyond the concerns we should have for other groups, I'd like to suggest that in this Halacha, there is a valuable lesson for us as individuals. The Torah often phrases commandments in the extreme, to raise sensitivity when vulnerability is at its height. For example, the Torah tells us we must be mindful not to cut down fruit trees when we are laying siege to an enemy city, because when we are engaged in a fight for our very lives, we are not likely to be considerate of the implications of cutting down a few fruit-bearing trees. In using the wicked Egyptians as the source for empathy, our sages were teaching us that if we must be sensitive to *their* plight, we must certainly do so for our friends. Yom Tov is a day for rejoicing, for experiencing happiness- but we have to temper it a bit, because there are people who are drowning. Some are drowning due to difficult family situations, and others are drowning in poverty and debt. Some are drowning in addiction and others in the effects of verbal and physical abuse. Some are drowning in bad habits and poor choices, and others are drowning in their

mental health challenges, where they cannot see any hope for their future, any reason to rejoice and feel uplifted, and possibility of celebration even on the most joyous of days. King David calls out to God,

מִן הַמְצָר קִרְאתִי י-ה

I call out to God from the straits- like a ship walled in on both sides, stuck steadfast with no evident way of breaking free. Indeed, The Hebrew word for Egypt- מצרים - is spelled identically to the word *metzarim*, or straits. Sadly, so many of these people will suffer in silence, projecting the image of joviality while concealing deep pain within. We have no way of knowing what is happening in their internal lives, and how stuck they feel- and sometimes we may not know until it's too late. Jewish law wants us to feel joy; it *commands* us to be happy on the Yamim Tovim- but it wants us to recognize that our joy cannot be complete until we care enough about those who cannot feel the same way. This is our challenge as we cross the sea ourselves today. The Scottish author known by the pen name Ian Maclaren is believed to have said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." If there is someone whom you know is drowning, help them find the lifesaving device they need to change their situation. And for everyone else, let's not take at face value what is presented to us. Let us find ways to look beneath the surface, and feel their pain- only then can our joy be complete.