

Politics, Pharaoh and Passover
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Monday, March 25, 2013

The biblical account of the Exodus, recounted every year at the Passover seder, tells us that the Israelite slaves departed in triumph after the entire Egyptian nation – from top to bottom – was decimated by the 10 plagues, including the killing of the first born. While Moses and Aaron went through the motions of negotiation with Pharaoh, they did not engage in real dialogue, seek to understand the inner motivations, culture and psychology of the Egyptians, or offer any significant concessions. No third-party mediators were invited to encourage compromise and co-operation, and if groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (and a few “independent” Jewish voices) had been around, they would have published reports and held press conferences condemning Moses as a war criminal.

In somewhat more modern terms, the story of the Exodus and the Jewish Bible in general reflect political realism, and what philosopher Thomas Hobbes described as “war of all against all” in the anarchy of politics among nations. Indeed, Hobbes incorporated significant parts of the biblical analysis and Jewish history, including the precept that when faced with the threat of destruction, one must arise early and attack first.

In the 21st century, however, this recognition of the need for security and power – military, economic, diplomatic, and in other forms – to survive in a world filled with hate and violence has been erased by the myth that political conflicts are simply the result of misunderstanding, psychological stress and cultural differences. Sadly, Jewish intellectuals and academics with personal axes to grind and only a shallow knowledge of their own history are often at the forefront of this false political religion. Modern-day Pharaohs, oppressors, and terrorists – particularly among Arab and Islamist leaders – are portrayed as victims (the late PA Authority president Yasser Arafat was a prominent example), while the application of military force is automatically condemned as “excessive,” “illegal,” and “immoral.”

Similarly, the concept and understanding of justice that is essential to the Passover story has been distorted and twisted beyond recognition by the high priests of today’s political correctness. The events of the Exodus begin with the enslavement of the Israelites followed by the inhuman drowning of male babies, while the plagues and suffering visited on the Egyptians (“indiscriminate force,” according to Human Rights Watch) were necessary for justice to prevail. There was no other way to end the enslavement and defeat the tormenters. It was not the suffering of the ordinary Egyptians that was celebrated as the Israelites left, but rather their own taste of freedom. Indeed, on Passover, we are enjoined to abbreviate the celebration in the Hallel prayer (psalms of exultation) out of respect for the dead Egyptians, also acknowledged as God’s creatures.

However, in today’s world of public relations, political propaganda, and invented “narratives” instead of history, the connection between cause and effect is often lost. The emphasis on, and sympathy for, the “suffering of the Palestinians” that is widely embraced, even by many well-meaning Jews, erases the racist Arab rejectionism and brutal attacks of 1947-1948, and six more decades of terror and war. And telling the story of Israeli “occupation” and “settlements” without the history of the 1967 war and then-Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s efforts to “push the Jews into the sea” is like reciting the Passover Haggadah without enslavement and Pharaoh’s inhuman order to drown Israelite male babies.

Now, as then, the use of force against violent aggressors and oppressors is sometimes a necessary evil

for achieving freedom, justice and insuring human rights. In 1948 and 1967, if Israelis did not fight for their freedom, we would not be here. And today, we need only to look across our borders, particularly at Syria, to observe the violent “state of nature” in full force.

Jewish tradition, despite the emphasis on caring for the needy, orphans and other weak members of society, does not seek to run away from these political realities. Indeed, the Passover story and the commandment to teach it to our children in every generation are reminders that in political terms, little has changed in 4,000 years.