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Monday 15th of November 2010 8 Kislev 5771

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Was Moses a war criminal?

Thursday, 18 March 2010

This year, in reciting the Passover story and Exodus from Egypt, I suggest extending the discussion to include stories that might have been featured in newspapers, blogs, and nightly news broadcasts of 4,000 years ago (give or take a few centuries).



Gerald Steinberg

In this not-so-imaginary world, the headlines and video clips highlight stark images of blood flowing in the Nile and the devastation from frogs, boils, locusts and other plagues. The BBC sends a team of reporters and producers to document the devastation in Egypt for a 10-part series – one for each plague. In Canada, daily editorials in the Toronto Star attack the government for its pro-Israelite ideology, and the CBC Radio team of Carol Off and Barbara Budd hold moving interviews with carefully chosen Egyptian victims, reached in their servant-less Cairo villas.

These media stories are accompanied by United Nations Human Rights Council resolutions condemning the Israelites for brutal violations of international law and the disproportionate use of force. (European, accompanied by some Canadian diplomats, are seen squirming awkwardly in their seats and wagging their fingers at the Israelite delegation.)

In parallel, the leaders of moral non-governmental superpowers and watchdog groups, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, hold press conferences and give sage-sounding interviews to voice their condemnations, while demanding independent investigations and prosecution of Moses. HRW's Middle East division publishes glossy research reports filled with Egyptian eyewitness testimony and characterizing each of the 10 plagues as collective punishment, a war crime on an unprecedented scale. The Richard Goldstone of the time is appointed to head a committee that collects all of these NGO claims into a United Nations report for use in the case against Moses, Aaron and the 70 Israelite leaders.

Nowhere in these reports is there any mention of the almost 400 years of slavery and brutal treatment that preceded the plagues and march to freedom, with little more than hard crackers for food. Instead, in this narrative, the Israelites are presented as foreign occupiers who conspired with Joseph to steal the land of Goshen from the natives. The record of failed negotiations, which could have ended the conflict peacefully, is completely erased, as are Pharaoh's trail of broken promises (peace breakthroughs of the time) to let the Israelites go.

On university campuses, NGO activists mark Israelite Apartheid Week (actually two weeks, but who pays attention to such details?). Frogs and red water are brought in to simulate the suffering caused by the plagues, and mock trials are held, which start with the conclusion that Moses is guilty. At York University, speakers at conferences and mass rallies call for a campaign of boycotts, divestment and sanctions to punish and isolate the Israelites.

Then, as now, these condemnations and activities are supported by a small but noisy group of disgruntled Israelites, motivated by an exaggerated sense of self-importance and the belief that a right-wing conspiracy led by Moses is responsible for all of the problems. Through grants provided by the New Israelite Fund, these "independent voices" join the demands that the Israelites return to Egypt immediately, apologize and provide compensation for damages.

And these problems did not end with the parting of the Red Sea, or Sea of Reeds, and the drowning of Pharaoh's army (another war crime) in hot pursuit of the runaway slaves.

Later, in the desert, as the Israelites prepared for returning to their homeland in the Land of Israel, first Moses and then, 39 years later, Joshua dispatched groups of spies to prepare for the invasion. The biblical text provides many details of these complex intelligence operations, including the role of double agents, but it doesn't describe the nature of the passports they used, or whether they were disguised. Today, this action would have led to pompous denunciations about the invasion of Jericho's

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sovereignty, and calls for more investigations.

Thus, as our generation struggles for justice, as did our ancestors, the Passover story and the Exodus remain very relevant. The names and details may change, but the overall situation has a great deal to teach us, 4,000 years later.

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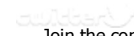
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