

## Rescue Me! You! Us!



R' Benno Jacob (see "Scattered," above) presented a view of *Mitzrayim* in which *Mitzrayim-ites* and *Yisrael-ites* had been friendly toward one another, were turned against one another by Pharaoh's propaganda, and then parted with on good terms with gifts (Ex 11:2). Jacob argues that *Mitzrayim-ites'* parting gifts

were a clear public protest against the policies of the royal tyrant. They demonstrated a renewal of public conscience...a moral change.  
-- Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible*, p. 343

A contemporary commentary on this reading confesses skepticism as to whether R' Jacob's analysis jives with the plain sense of the text but adds:

One senses in Jacob's words the insights of a brilliant exegete but also the pain of a rabbi and teacher in a Germany consumed by hate\*....In a world suffused with bigotry and hostility, a world in which people of faith often marshal sacred texts to legitimate acts of cruelty and to extol hatred as a virtue, there is great power in reading Jacob's words and being reminded: At the heart of the religious enterprise is the attempt to soften, and open, one's heart, to God and to one-another. If even [*Mitzrayim-ites*] and [*Yisrael-ites*] can be (successfully!) called to love one-another, then perhaps, even in the darkest of times, slim glimmers of hope are available to us.  
-- Held, Shai. "Receiving Gifts (and Learning to Love?): The 'Stripping' of the Egyptians."  
2015 dvar torah, available via Mechon Hadar

\*Held includes a footnote citing personal communication with R. Walter Jacob (Benno's son) to confirm that his father was working on the Exodus commentary between 1934 and 1939, while still in Germany.

On the one hand, I am all for seeking positive messages along our *Rereading Exodus* journey. I endorse Shai Held's lesson: "...even in the darkest of times, slim glimmers of hope are available to us." On the other hand, I fear falling into what I think of as the we're-all-in-this-together, let's-hold-hands-and-march trap.

It is true that all of our liberations -- like those of the *Yisrael-ites* and the *Mitzrayim-ites* -- are bound together. But that doesn't mean that everyone's experiences -- pre-, midst-, and post-liberation -- are equivalent. That mill-

stone that is *Mitzrayim* may be affecting all who are part of an oppressive system, but that doesn't mean the weight is the same on all involved.

On the other other hand, Jews have traditions teaching that the divine is in exile with the People and so in need of rescue, too. This does not make divine and human experiences equivalent either. It does suggest, though, that maybe we're back to the first other hand, and ought to make this "all-in-this-together" thing work for us.

### **Rescue Yourself and Us!**

Jewish prayers begging for rescue and mercy often take the format, "You helped them; help us." An unusual prayer, attributed to Eleazar Kallir (c.570–c.640 CE), implies that God needs saving, too.

The prayer is translated as something like "Save Yourself and us" or "I and You, may You deliver us both," or "Please rescue me and the divine name" [*Ani Va-bo*]. It includes a chorus of "Yourself and us!" and verses describing God accompanying the People out of *Mitzrayim* and other exiles: "As You rescued the communities You exiled to Babylonia, and Your merciful Presence accompanied them — so save us."

This prayer's line of thought, which has been developing for centuries, is meant to teach that "when there is suffering in the world, God is not on the side of the oppressors. Rather God is with the oppressed and suffers with them" (*Or Hadash: A Commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom*).

### **"Safety" Cards**

The idea that "God is with the oppressed" is too often, I fear, used as a sort of universal *Coup-fourré* card, a "safety" to correct any "hazard," so as to stay on the road.

...For those who never played the card game *Mille Borne*, maybe "ace in the hole" or "Get out of jail free" card will make more sense; but I find *Coup-fourré* — the process whereby one is able to surmount a pitfall and keep rolling along — more apt here...

It is way too easy to let "God is with the oppressed" console the already comfortable while leaving the afflicted with their travails.

On this *Rereading Exodus* journey, all of us must examine our "safety" cards. We must ask ourselves where we are when there is suffering and injustice in the world. If the divine went into exile with us, and something similar is required of us, if we are to make any progress on joint liberation.

Jewish history presents abundant examples of our communities mistrusting and fearing State forces: from ancient Rome, through Medieval Europe, the Pale of Settlement, pogroms, ghettos -- there were reasons for that Golem -- to the mid-20th Century.

Today many in U.S. Jewish communities view our safety as State-protected, regardless of history. Meanwhile, we might know that such protection is hardly universal: not extended equally to homeless, queer, transgender, mentally ill, black, brown, "foreign," and many other people. Somehow, we barely register the inequity.

We must take steps to remove any sense that we are somehow entitled to dwell in safety when others cannot. If God could join us in exile, we can work to dismantle White Supremacy and other protections that can never be equally shared.

If we believe that "God is not to be found on the side of the oppressors," we had better consider where we are standing ourselves.

If we are going to come out of this Exodus experience knowing something new, we have to begin by understanding where we are.

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*-- Virginia Avniel Spatz*

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