

Over and again, commentaries remind us that the purpose of the Exodus narrative is to demonstrate that God is the God of history. If we recall Genesis, the primary message at its beginning is that God is the Creator of the Universe. The difference between the two revolves around the word providence. Providence describes the relationship of God to His creation. It suggests that God is involved in human affairs.

Parshat Bo unmistakably depicts a providential God. It asserts that the God of Israel is the God of History. What is not meant by history is that we can verify whether what is described in our *parshiot* occurred. The meaning is much more abstract and basic. History is composed of events, and events bear the mark of a force or being that intervenes in human affairs.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the first *parshiot* of Exodus. The assertion that God acts in

history is captured particularly well in the following

verse:

וְעָבַרְתִּי בְּאֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה וְהָכִיתִי כָל-בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם מֵאָדָם וְעַד-בְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרַיִם אֶעֱשֶׂה
שְׂפָטִים אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק

For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the LORD.

(12:12)

God is described anthropomorphically – in human terms – as passing through Egypt and killing the first born men and beast. The purpose of God’s killing

the first born man and beast is a punishment of “all the gods of Egypt...” God’s goal is to demonstrate that He is supreme that He is the only true God. The Egyptians’ lack of protection exposes that their gods are false.

What strikes me about this verse is how the human, animal, and divine realms are intertwined. In order to demonstrate the falseness of Egypt’s gods, the God of Israel must bring harm upon the bodies of the Egyptians and their animals. The harm

inflicted upon them, however, also speaks to their complicity in Pharaoh's oppressive regime.

Throughout the Exodus narrative, the three main actors on the Egyptian side have been Pharaoh, his courtiers, and his magicians. The Egyptians themselves were never specifically mentioned as oppressors of the Israelites. Their punishment here, however, suggests that they were involved.

At first, that may seem deeply unfair. Pharaoh is a dictator. Defiance of his will invites punishment

and death. While the Israelites were slaves, the Egyptians could not consider themselves free. All were subject to the whims of Pharaoh's will.

Here, returning to the topic of providence and the notion of God as a God of History is important. Initially, we may think that if we accept the idea of providence and recognize God's role in history that we are adopting a submissive posture. The caricature of religious people is that they assume no responsibility. Everything that occurs is God's will.

Humans, then, have no role to play in the unfolding of events. The opposite is, in fact, true.

Paradoxically, God's intervention in history is consistent with the idea of human responsibility.

Rather than being passive players that God manipulates, we are actors in the drama of events alongside God.

The punishment meted out to the Egyptians has been one of the stimuli for the development of political systems that provide avenues for people to

take responsibility for the events that transpire in the world.

To go further, the primary message that the Exodus conveys is freedom. *Bnei Yisrael* will transform itself from unfree – that is slaves – into free people. The oppression of the dictatorial regime will cease. Freedom will triumph. God's intervention in human affairs is consistent with the idea of freedom. Were God not capable of acting in

history, He would not be free. A god who lacks freedom is no god at all.

One of the ways in which being created in the image of God works is that we aspire toward freedom, which is a feature that God already possesses. We have to aspire to be free, however. I understand the position of the Egyptians. Defiance of a dictator is dangerous stuff. In all likelihood, one risks imprisonment and probably death. That recognition, however, must confront the reality of

oppression and injustice, which is the lifeblood of every dictatorial regime.

With this in mind, the character of Moses becomes more clear. He is the central actor in the drama that has unfolded. His maturation has been so swift since his initial statements betraying inadequacy that we almost don't notice how much he has changed within the first three *parshiot* of *Shmot*.

The Torah devotes time to describing his birth, infancy, and upbringing. The Torah does not do this for any of the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. We may learn of their births, but the Torah jumps from birth to adulthood. Not so with Moses. What is crucial to understanding Moses is his dual affiliation. He is both an Egyptian and a Hebrew. Not only is he an Egyptian, he is an Egyptian who resides in Pharaoh's palace. He occupies a position of status and of power. That must be kept in mind as

we recall his first adult act: his killing of the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating the Hebrew slave. The scene described highlights Moses' lack of deliberation. Not being seen is as far as he goes before he decides to act. His act is almost impulsive, instinctual. Had he reflected, he might have asked himself, Am I prepared to lose my status and power? His aversion to injustice, however, was so powerful that he simply acted.

This is the quality that the Egyptians at large lack. They know that *bnei Israel* is enslaved; they know of Pharaoh's decrees regarding the killing of the males and his order that the slaves not be given straw to form the bricks they use for building. In spite of that, they were not moved to overthrow Pharaoh.

The political systems that we in the west have developed were all formed with this problem in mind. Having to choose between rebelling against

injustice or imprisonment and death – which is the dilemma every person who lives under a dictatorship must face – is too difficult. Moses is rare; he is unusual; he is unique. Most of us are not as courageous or as repulsed by injustice as he is.

Democrats may lament the lack of witnesses permitted to testify in the impeachment trial, and Republicans may complain that the impeachment should never have occurred at all, but the trial of President Trump in the Senate is a reminder of how

we have developed a political system that has addressed the problem that Pharaoh poses. The Egyptians never had the option of impeaching Pharaoh. When our founders wrote the Constitution, the impeachment clause – among many other items – was one of the mechanisms they instituted to surmount the problem that has plagued and continues to plague humanity: centralized control and authority in one person: the dictator.

The question we as Americans are wrestling with and have been wrestling with since the attacks of 9/11 is how to live in a world in which dictatorships persist. The opposing poles can be neatly drawn between those who favor isolation and those who favor engagement and even intervention. Our country is not perfect. Our systems were finely developed but in human hands still may not function as we'd like them to, but they have been successful in protecting us from the fate of the Egyptians.

Affirming that each person is created in the image of God immediately brings us to the precipice of a very difficult decision. We have constructed the least imperfect system of governance on earth. Should not all people be given the opportunity to construct that same system. As 2020 gets started and the presidential race gets moving, you can be sure that this topic will be discussed often. As you listen to the candidates, keep in mind this *parsha* and the *parshiot* we have read the last two weeks. The

confrontation between God and Pharaoh is not restricted to the pages of the Torah. It lives in our contemporary world. The battle for freedom over and against injustice and oppression may have made great inroads here, but it continues across the globe.

Let our Torah be our guide and inspiration as we consider this challenge.