

Vengeance Versus Empathy

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The haggadah teaches, "In every generation, every individual should feel as though he or she had gone out of Egypt." Now comes the tough question: "What will we do with our memories of slavery?" Will we use them to renew empathy or vengeance? As free people, the choice remains ours. But history suggests that the urge for vengeance often proves irresistible. Passover should renew our capacity for empathy.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Oppressed people can not remain oppressed forever." But it is also true that oppression has been with us forever. In fact, the fight for freedom often ends with one repressive regime's replacement by another. The French Revolution, with its slogan, "liberty, fraternity, equality," produced a reign of terror more brutal than even that of the worst French kings. The Russian Revolution gave birth to a totalitarian state, more coercive than most autocratic czars. And in Africa, the struggle against colonialism brought to power a slew of regimes that ultimately proved more abusive than the most domineering colonial overlords.

Why does this disillusioning pattern reoccur throughout history? Part of the answer lies in the fact that liberation rarely frees us from the desire or the emotional capacity to oppress others. The fiery cauldron of revolution, seething with moral contradictions, stands far from the cool ideal of justice. By the time the freedom fighters have finally won, their moral integrity has often dwindled to that of the overturned regime. Principles become the rebellions' first casualty, the human rights of those on either side are the next casualties. Locked in a spiral of brutal strife, the tactics of the oppressed and the oppressor become increasingly difficult to distinguish. And then the liberation movement turns inward, purifying itself, silencing the murmuring, divisive voices within its own ranks.

Let's look at the elements of this pattern within the Exodus story itself. With God fighting the war against Pharaoh, the Israelites themselves were spared from violently rebelling against the Egyptian king. But they must surely have observed that the forces for and against oppression, Pharaoh, and God, ultimately restored to similar tactics; the slaying of children. To prevent the Israelites from becoming too numerous, Pharaoh orders the murder of their newborn sons. To persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, God slays the Egyptians' firstborn sons.

The murmuring against God, Moses, and Aaron begins in Egypt but increases after the Exodus. Unable to find water for three days after the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites yearn for Egypt:

The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat beside the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death." - EXODUS 16:2-3

The height of the murmuring comes when the Israelites build the Golden Calf. Moses smashes the Ten Commandments and sentences the counterrevolutionaries.

Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, "Whoever is for the Lord, come here!" And all the Levites rallied to him. He said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel; Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin." The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day. - EXODUS 32:26-29

To enforce the first commandment against idol worship, Moses violates the sixth - "Thou shalt not kill." So revolutions go. The sanctity of human life pales in the blinding light of more exalted ideals.

Liberation struggles often whet an evil appetite. Revenge is sweet. Frantz Fanon was a French psychiatrist who studied the effects of oppression. Descended from African slaves, Fanon found himself irresistibly attracted to the Algerian fight of the bloody war between France and Algeria, he described the circumstances and inner feelings of oppressed peoples: The town belonging to the colonized people... is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet, he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place." It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. He is in fact ready at a moment's notice to exchange the role of the quarry for that of the hunter. The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor...

This is the Pharaoh's Egypt and it is all around us, from the grinding decay of America's worst inner cities to the brutal dictatorships that still dominate much of Africa and the Middle East.

But the desire to humiliate one's former master explains only part of the cycle in which the oppressed become the oppressors. Subjugation of another reflects more than quenching an old thirst for revenge. The capacity to oppress another human being represents a fundamental rupture of human empathy, the bond of understanding that links us with our brothers and sisters and enables us to put ourselves in their shoes. Eliminate empathy and one group begins to treat another as inhuman objects - as machines to build cities in Egypt, as beasts to be captured in Africa, as insects to be exterminated in Nazi concentration camps. Expose a people to a world without empathy and you forge the next link in the chain of oppression. Nations respond this way and so do individuals. Scratch a parent who

abuses a child and you will usually find someone who suffered abuse as a child.

If vengeance and a lack of empathy are the germs that breed oppression, neither the Israelites who left Egypt nor we today are immune from the disease.

As the very climax of their struggle for freedom, the children of Israel rejoice when Pharaoh's soldiers drown in the Red Sea. A tide of other emotions submerged what compassion they may have had - revenge, relief, and the joy of salvation: "Then Moses and the Israelites and this song to the Lord. They said: I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver he was hurled into the sea" (Ex, 15:1). For the Israelites dancing on the shore of the Red Sea, the Egyptians were hardly the object of human concern. They were the enemy, not young men whose mothers would mourn them, whose firstborn brothers had just been slain by God, soldiers following orders of a Pharaoh whose heart had repeatedly been hardened by the Lord of Israel.

In reminding us of our experience as slaves, Passover renews our collective empathy. We are neither slaves stripped of our dignity, nor are we fully free to rejoice in the fall of our enemies. We must remember their humanity, even when they have forgotten ours.

So, before we sing 'Dayvenu' we spill a drop of wine from our glasses for each of the ten plagues. A common interpretation explains that our joy cannot be complete because our redemption was achieved at the cost of great suffering to the Egyptians.

The passion for vengeance cools slowly. Dignity destroyed takes years to rebuild. The scars of slavery take generations to heal. That is why we needed forty years in the desert before entering the Promised Land. But time alone does not heal all wounds. If they are deep enough, active intervention and treatment are essential. And for the Jewish people, that intervention came in the form of the Torah, a code for transforming the bitter memories of oppression into a commitment to building a more just and humane society.

As the Rabbis of the Talmud wisely observed, the commandment to respect the rights of minorities appears thirty-six times in the Torah, a reminder that with power, the oppressed themselves often become oppressors. It is the Jewish people's responsibility to remain strong and to help break this tragic cycle. When Hillel, the great sage, was asked to teach the entire Torah to a man while standing on one foot, this is what he said: "What is hateful to you, do not do to other. All the rest is commentary. Now go and study."

Let your bitter memories enlarge the well of human empathy. Overcome your lust for vengeance. Overcome your readiness to deny others their humanity. For who has not dreamed - at least once - of sitting on Pharaoh's throne?