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Pharoah Said No. You Won't Believe What God Did Next.



By Marty Kaplan

Once, at our Seder, our friend Ira gave a running commentary on the Haggadah, offering a scientific explanation for every miracle and wonder in the Exodus story.

The parting of the Reed Sea was a meteorological event. The burning bush was a glowing carbonized acacia bramble above a volcanic vent. The ten plagues? Blood (1) was a red tide of toxic algae in the Nile, which forced millions of frogs (2) to move onto the land, but then they all died, and that brought the biting gnats (3) and flies (4), which spread a livestock epidemic (5), and a disease that made people's skin erupt in boils (6)...

Debunking is too harsh a word for what Ira was doing. He was a reconciler. He wasn't anti-miracle; he was pro-reason. He wanted to make it more comfortable for secular Jews to be present at the Seder table, to explain how belief in the Divine wasn't a requirement, how the story was really about human freedom, not God's plan. To Ira, Passover was based on a true story made truer by obviating the need for supernatural intervention.

Over brisket, we debated the historic accuracy of the Biblical account. If two million Jews wandered Sinai for 40 years, why hasn't anyone ever dug up evidence of that? Why hasn't a single hieroglyphic about the Exodus ever been found — wasn't this as big a deal for the Egyptians as it was for the Israelites?

This was a couple of years before Rabbi David Wolpe would set off a furor in Jewry, not just in Westwood, when he told 2,000 congregants in his Passover sermon that "the truth is that virtually every modern archeologist who has investigated the story of the Exodus, with very few exceptions, agrees that the way the Bible describes the Exodus is not the way it happened, if it happened at all." But this shouldn't matter, he said.

“Knowing the Exodus is not a literal historical accounting does not ultimately change our connection to each other or to God. Faith should not rest on splitting seas. At the Passover Seder we declare: ‘In each generation, each individual should see himself as if he (or she) went forth from Egypt.’ The message does not depend upon whether 3 or 3 million individuals left.”

At our table, similarly, no one argued that the literal truth of the Passover story ultimately mattered. Maybe the plagues came from nature, not God. Maybe there wasn't a Jewish baby in the bulrushes who became a prince of Egypt. Maybe the Jews didn't build the pyramids. None of that subtracts from the meaning of the story — the injustice of servitude, the flight to freedom, the triumph over tyranny.

I can see why Rabbi Wolpe got a big pushback. Ingenious alternatives were offered for the truth of the text. Richard Elliott Friedman, for example, a distinguished scholar, built an elegant case that the Exodus did indeed occur, but just for one fierce tribe, the Levites. When they joined the other tribes, the Levites became the Israelites' priesthood. The task of teaching Torah fell to them, and their own experience became the official version.

“And that is how a historical event that happened to the Levite minority became everybody's celebration—how we all came to say that we were slaves in Egypt, although that was not the experience even of most Israelites of the period. It's not so different from practicing, say, the American cultural tradition of Thanksgiving, which most Americans do, even though most U.S. citizens are not descended from Pilgrims or Native Americans.”

I honor the impulse to rationalize the Passover story, to find a lens through which it looks like history. But I think it may actually be better if the whole thing really were made up.

Rabbi Wolpe is a bit elegiac when he tells us that the Exodus may not have happened, the way parents in another religious tradition admit there is no Santa Claus. He lets us down easy, and guides us to the holiday's enduring lesson. But I think there's a huge upside to appreciating it as a fiction, a masterwork of the human imagination, a brilliant narrative, an origin myth whose aesthetic truth leaves me awe-struck by its moral truth.

Yes, Passover is about the bitterness of bondage and the righteousness of freedom. But it's also about — to me, even more about — our telling the story of bondage and freedom. When we do that, we not only obey a Biblical injunction to teach our children where we came from; we communally experience how literally spellbinding a story can be.

We Jews didn't just give monotheism to the world. We also gave the story of monotheism to the world. If monotheism had been merely a creed or ideology, the world might have paid attention for a bit, and then moved on. But because it's a story, a breathtaking drama, it has held the world in its grip ever since.

Some people contend that monotheism isn't much of an advance over polytheism; it's still theism, and much horror, ignorance and grief in human history can arguably be attributed to worshippers of one god or another. In this account, the problem with Scripture is that the stories are too good — too gripping, too potent, too capable of taking us to a place beyond the reach of reason.

But to me, story is the secret power of Passover. My theism is about experience, not faith; about mystery, not obedience. I experience this mystery — and sometimes call it God — in the unfathomability of time and space; in art and beauty and nature; in the existence of love and friendship; in the existence of anything. I experience them with awe, reverence and gratitude. Science may reduce my awe to evolution, to our adaptive knack for constructing meaning in a random cosmos. Brain imaging may show where story-neurons fire; screenwriting workshops may teach techniques of storytelling; web editors may deploy the suspense of stories in click-bait headlines.

But there is an ineffable thrill in passing the Passover story to the next generation that resists reduction. You don't have to believe it. You just have to tell it.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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