

A Passover Puzzle

Mr A. had always been an outsider. But even the few acquaintances he did have could not foresee that one day – accompanied by a distant relative only – he left his hometown to sail westward across the water.

Against all expectation, he became a successful cattle-breeder over there. Following a short if hefty clash about water rights, he even got along with the Indians. Probably their Chief could feel his wild spirit. Of course he changed his and his wife's names: they wanted to leave the past behind.

Mr A. always dreamed of abundant progeny. But in fact he drove his elder son from hearth and home, and he nearly killed the younger one, called I., by his axe when, out on a hike one day, turning into an inexplicable mental state. Having survived that event was to shape I. for all his life, paradoxically giving him a new lease of life, an outlook he was able to hand down to his descendants.

One of I.'s grandsons was a bit of a loudmouth and got on everybody's nerves. But in the end, he proved to be successful, becoming chief adviser to the Emperor of Mexico and thereby having the entire family travel over to join him, a family that in the mean time had grown to a clan of 70 people. And hardly had they arrived in Mexico when they made Mr A.'s dream come true and multiplied to their heart's content — in accordance with A.'s lyrical prediction "as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the seashore."

In the course of time, though, frictions with the Mexicans came to happen. For greatly worried that A.'s progeny would gain the majority, the Mexicans did everything they prophylactically could to keep their numbers down. At first, they employed them for

starvation wages on the building sites, but soon they found this too risky, not the least because some imprudent acts of violence had occurred. So they created special reservations for A.'s descendants, separated from the rest of Mexico by a wall, put up five hundred roadblocks and generally made their lives hell on earth. Needless to say, there was scattered resistance but the Mexicans could easily cope with that.

Yet then something unbelievable occurred. One of A.'s descendants, coincidentally having been brought up at the Imperial Court, according to unconfirmed rumours due to him being an illegitimate child of the Emperor's daughter, changed sides. This M. went into the walled-in settlements, declared himself the spiritual and political leader of the oppressed, and demanded in all seriousness from the Emperor of Mexico to put an end to confinement, so that the immured people might migrate to the desert "to serve the Lord our God there". Of course, none of his oppressed fellow men was at first truly enthusiastic about such a half-baked fundamentalism. But with the situation getting more and more desperate, with the old nationalist leadership being either assassinated or corrupted by the Mexicans and with the Mexicans being afflicted with a mysterious chain of calamities and mishaps – just, in fact, as M. had predicted – he met with success. In a delirious collective banquet, the downtrodden people said farewell to Mexico and, ecstatically enthusiastic, even smeared the blood of the slaughtered lambs on the doors of their cottages and houses before streaming out into the desert of Nevada where indeed they did not hunger, for they took large stocks of crispbread with them. And then when the Mexican Army, as if by a miracle, fell victim to a tsunami, the long oppressed descendants of A. – after seven weeks full of hardship and deprivation in the

desert – declared their willingness to follow M. and his moral conceptions.

Had he been able to witness the day, Mr A. would have been most delighted. He had always had a spiritual vein.

For many a reader an unnecessary commentary

I have related this myth, in a nutshell, as it is told in the first and second of the five books of the Torah. I did not mention God, because Mr A. was the only to recognize God at his time, and also M. had to convince all others of the existence of the One God.

Needless to say, the water crossed by Mr A. was not the ocean but the River Euphrates. Yet cross it he did, in the same manner as the emigrants of the 19th century: never to come back. And thus it was that A. came to be the progenitor of all emigrants who seek their fortune in faraway places. For as he crossed the river, he became an " 'ivri", anglicized "Hebrew", meaning "one from over there", a crosser, a wanderer. (See for more details Halter, 2002).

The Indian chief's name was Abimelekh. The well where they fought and made their peace, has been called Be'er Sheva ever since, and Mr A. and his wife changed their names from Avram and Sarai to Avraham and Sarah. Illinois or Colorado or California or wherever Mr A. made his fortune is the land of Canaan, and the country in which the big mouth Joseph, inventor of dream interpretation and later secretary of state for nutrition & finance, accommodated his clan is called "Mitzrayim" in the Bible — which to our ears today might indeed sound more like Mexico than Egypt. The crispbread is *matza*, the unleavened bread. Only in describing the oppression, I allowed myself some poetic license, of which more later.

And tell your child tomorrow ...

The exodus from Egypt is the central myth of Judaism. Which is why *Pesakh*, the Feast of the Passover, has been celebrated by Jewish families for thousands of years as the most important festival of the year. I could receive this tradition at home, as I told in my book (Verleger, 2008):

The nicest festival was Passover. Days beforehand it was obvious that the festival was coming: the whole house would be cleaned because the chametz – breadcrumbs, flour, anything fermented or leavened – had to go. On Passover Eve, my father would, at the light of a candle, go through the house and gather in the pieces of bread which had been put there for that very purpose. The pickings were burnt in the garden on next morning, which rendered our house free of leaven. Then the meals were prepared for the two Seder evenings: raisin wine for the children, charoset, eggs, saltwater, red radishes, chicken soup with matza balls, chicken. Anyone feeling bold could grate the horseradish. The table was covered with a white cloth, the matza lay under its fine cover, there was a cushion on each chair, the candles were burning. All of us knew how the evening would proceed but even so the youngest child, pretending to be completely surprised, had to ask the four questions:

"Mah Nishtanah haLaylah hazeh miKol haLeylot" - "what makes this night different from all nights"? Whereupon my father, reading from the book of the evening, the Haggadah (the "telling") told the story of the exodus from Egypt, of slavery and liberation. We drank four cups of wine, ate a lot, as was prescribed, and sang the traditional songs.

What is the essence of this evening?

Martin Buber (1949) tells the story of the Hasidic Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (d. 1809) who had once been very proud of the way he had held the Seder evening — until he heard a voice: "What are you so

proud of? More worthy to me is the Water Carrier Chayim's Seder than yours". The irritated Rabbi had a search put out for this Chayim. So he was found, a simple uneducated man, who was sleeping off the effects of a drinking session. When he was awakened the Rabbi asked him "How did you hold the Seder?"

The Water Carrier replied: "Rabbi, I shall tell you the truth. You see, I have always been told that it is forbidden to drink schnapps for the eight days of the festival and so yesterday morning I drank enough for eight days. Whereupon I became tired and fell asleep. Only to be woken up in the evening by my wife who said to me: 'Why don't you hold the Seder as all Jews do?' To which I said: 'What do you want from me? I am untaught, my father was an untaught man, and I don't know what may and may not be done. But see here, one thing I do know is this: our forefathers and our foremothers were captured by the gypsies and we have a God who led them out of captivity into freedom. And lo and behold, now we are again in captivity and I know it and I can tell you that also we will be led by God into freedom'. And then I saw the table standing there and the cloth that shone like the sun and on it were spread out bowls full of *matzot* and eggs and other food and bottles of red wine. And so I ate of the *matzot* with the eggs and drank of the wine and gave my wife to eat and drink. And I was overwhelmed with joy and lifted a cup to God and said: 'See here, God, I am drinking this cup to you. And you look down on us and set us free!' And so we sat there and drank and were happy, together with God. And then I got tired, laid down to rest and fell asleep."

And who can still believe in that?

Over the centuries, Judaism was an ideology of liberation, of the possibility of the coming salvation, of healing the world through God's grace. Thereby, Judaism gave a meaning to the lives of those its adherents,

who could, by joyfully fulfilling God's commandments, bring the world closer to salvation (Scholem, 1967).

The traditional text of the Haggadah reaffirms at the end of the telling about the exodus from Mitzrayim, that "in each new generation, it is man's duty to see himself as if having come out of the land of Egypt. For it is said (in the Torah) that 'thou shalt say unto your child, on this day, "Therefore did God do that for me during my exodus from the land of Egypt"'. That is to say that not only our ancestors were delivered by the Holy One – blessed be He – but along with them also we were delivered."

To see themselves as if still suffering under the Egyptian oppression and as if still waiting for deliverance from slavery was no difficult feat for the Jews in Central Europe, because conditions were usually disagreeable in the Christian Occident and because the hope for freedom, though ever-present, was seldom fulfilled. Deliverance was a magic word and has remained so until the present day.

So the Feast of Passover has reminded us Jews that our traditional role is the role of victim. And that, even though God may have the axe fall on us – just as Mr A. at first believed that this is what God had ordered him to do to his son Isaac – the very same God will stop the axe in its swing – just as did happen with Isaac – or at least God will mete out common justice to us posthumously, ultimately delivering us. And even if yesterday the Pharaoh was called Hitler, today we have been freed from him, and thanks to the merits of our beloved murdered ones, God has sent us new deliverance with David ben Gurion as the new Moses ...

Thus it has been until now.

All of a sudden, though, and parallel to this thousands-year-old victim myth, the story of oppression in the land of Mitzrayim may be read in a completely different light. What

the Egyptians feared most was that this other people would proliferate so much that they might become the majority — and that would put an end to the Egyptian character of the state. It is this very same fear, of the loss of the character of the “Jewish state”, that forms the background to the paralysis of Israeli politics as regards the occupied territories on the West Bank. For politics in Israel is trapped in the dilemma between the desire to expand state territory on the one hand and, on the other hand, the democratic practice of granting full civil rights to the inhabitants of such areas as they will become citizens of Israel. And so the myth still tells of us, but no longer as the heroes of the story. I had inserted only few words in my version of the oppression myth, which irresistibly triggered other associations: a wall, five hundred roadblocks, incarcerated people bursting forth into the desert, *let my people go*. This time, the new Israelites come from Gaza and again they are streaming through a wall into the desert, but this time they do not come with Passover lamb roast in their bellies and crispbread in their rucksacks but with empty shopping bags and empty petrol cans. And again their leaders are God-seeking fundamentalists, just like Moses.

Was David ben Gurion therefore the first in a new series of pharaohs? And if it is Jews who now play Pharaoh's role, or even merely seem to play it: What, then, will become of Judaism? What will become of our myth, of our religion, of our view of life? Whom do we see when we look at ourselves in the mirror?

References

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