### The Song of the Sea: Theme and Variations

By Judy Klitsner

In Parashat Beshalach, the Song of the Sea is presented twice. First—though others join him—Moshe sings as an individual: “I will sing—ashira (Ex. 15:1-2)” Next is Miriam’s song, and a call for communal recitation: “Sing—shiru! (Ex. 15:21)” This new song heralds a transition from the individual to the community, a process that begins early in the exile narrative.

True to the promise of its title, the Book of Shemot begins with a list of names, the individuals that comprise the fully constructed household—bayit—of Israel. But almost immediately the book of names becomes a chronicle of the nameless (Ex. 1:6-14), as the institution of slavery sets in and the bayit begins to crumble.

To incite toward de-legitimization of his guest population, Pharaoh employs an insidious linguistic technique: “Come let us deal shrewdly with him (lo) (Ex. 1:10).” By using plural pronouns for the Egyptians and singular for the Israelites, he assigns diversity—three dimensional vitality—to his own people, while attributing a soulless monolithic nature to the foreigners.

The Midrash assigns an added dimension to Pharaoh’s evil plot: he uses the singular to refer not to the Israelites, but to the Israelite God—let us deal shrewdly with Him. By removing the spark of individuality—the tzelem Elokim—that resides within each person, setting them apart from all others (Mishnah Sandhedrin 4:6), the Egyptians plot to “deal shrewdly” with their “daughters” to create an unbridgeable chasm between humanity and the divine. As Buber writes: “Not before a man…in finding himself—he appears before the divine.” If I do not sufficiently understand who I am, if I have no strong sense of my ani, how could I possibly turn outward toward God, to a lefanecha?”

The Egyptians sought to deal cleverly with the Israelites by erasing their names and their identities and—by logical extension—precluding any possible relationship with their God. And in fact, in the first chapter of Shemot, God Himself disappears along with named characters.

Suddenly, the pattern changes: “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one named Shiphrah and the other named Puah (1:15).” By refusing to conform to their society’s evil dictates, these women are rewarded with names, thus heralding the return of the individual to the Book of Names.
Fanaticism has always been a powerfully malignant force. Fanatic communalists kept much of the human race oppressed, and murdered millions, before the Berlin Wall was finally toppled. Fanatic nationalism and anti-Semitism engineered the Holocaust. Suicide bombing of civilians is a genuinely new tactic, but "kamikaze" has been a word in English since the 1940s.

Many contemporary thinkers believe that the proper response to fanaticism is relativism. In other words, they believe that the way to fight fanatics and fanaticism is to deny the possibility of genuine conviction. Peace and tranquility will come when each person understands that they have no more chance of being right than anyone else.

In a utopian world, perhaps everyone would be convinced, and this response might work. But practical strategies have to work in our world. This means that they need to work even if not everyone buys into them. Fanaticism will always be with us. Rather than fantasizing that we can eliminate it entirely, we need to be able to respond to it effectively.

Relativism can diminish fanaticism, but if even one fanatic survives in a relativistic world, he or she will soon be running it. Relativists can't plausibly fight, as they don't know with confidence that the aggressor is wrong. And as Edmund Burke compellingly argued, "All that is required for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing".

There is a middle ground between fanaticism and relativism, and we desperately need to find it, because we need to fight our enemies with all the power at our disposal - but without turning into them. There is a way to tell a fanatic off without being a fanatic oneself, and to resist fanatic terrorists without unleashing our own terror. Lincoln's words are a luminous beacon guiding us to that way. "With firmness in the right" - effective resistance to fanatics can only come from those who have deep-seated convictions, to the point that they willingly risk their lives in defense of those ideals. How are these resistance fighters to be distinguished from those they are fighting? "As God gives us to see the right" - even as we act on the basis of our best perception of the truth, we need to be fully aware of the possibility that we are erring.

Lincoln's formulation can be seen as a reformulation of a key rabbinic dictum. According to the Talmud, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued for three years as to whose positions would have legal force in Judaism. Ultimately, a heavenly voice emerged and said: "These and those are the words of the living God - but the law follows the House of Hillel". The recognition that there is truth on both sides does not mean that one cannot choose between them, and choosing one side does not require one to dismiss the other as baseless.

The Talmud goes further, and says that the House of Hillel merited having the law follow them because "they were pleasant and forbearing, and taught the words of the Shammaites together with their own - even placing the words of the Shammaites before their own". In other words, the House of Hillel never saw their own positions as infallible, or stopped learning from their opponents. In several recorded cases, they were convinced by the Shammaites and reversed their positions. But none of this stopped them from championing their own positions with all the vigor at their command.

Lincoln's words, which echo the sentiments of our sages, enable us to act with conviction without having to believe that we are infallible. They allow us to make judgments and act on them, without requiring us to ignore inconvenient facts, and thus they leave open the possibility of reversing our judgments in the light of new evidence. They enable us to use force against our enemies when necessary, without requiring us to dehumanize them.

This Lincoln's Birthday, I urge everyone to read the Second Inaugural and take its message to heart. Take the time to examine your convictions, and to make sure that they result from admirable motives and adequate understanding. That done, we should proceed with malice toward none, with charity toward all, and with firmness in the right - as God give us to see the right.

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