

of narrowness, of constricted consciousness, then we may find our freedom and experience a divine expansiveness:

תהילים קיח:ה  
מִן־הַמְצַר קָרָאתִי יְיָ הֵאָנִי בְמַרְחֵב יְיָ:

*Psalms 118:5*

*From the narrow place I called out to God; I was answered with Divine Expansiveness.*

Given that no one is entirely free or entirely enslaved, and that we're all on a continuum between servitude and self-determination, there's no reason to wait to sing. Freedom is expressed through song, but yet our songs themselves may very well lead to freedom. At the moment that we open our mouths, are we not already free?

What's more, the end of the struggles of this world will be brought about by singing. As the Zohar declares:

תיקוני זוהר, הקדמה, ג.  
ישראל סלקין מגו גלותא בנגונא.

*Tikkunei Zohar, Introduction, 3a*

*Israel will arise from exile in song.*

Through the process of composing divine songs, we will build the worlds we dream of, we will transcend our trapped situations, and we will yet emerge from our exiles, where we will then sing again! And now, as we gather at the Seder, let's sing Hallel. Halleluyah! ♦

# LIVING IN THE DOUBLE EXPOSURE

R. Tali Adler

**I** WAS EIGHT YEARS old in Basel, Switzerland the day I learned about the way places have layers.

It was a chilly, autumn *shabbos*, and my father and I were on a walk by the river. My father pointed out different sights as we walked: there is the house where his elementary school friend lived, there is the gate they walked through to get to school, there is the shop run by the woman rumored to be a witch. And there, he said, pointing to a small, shady area, is the place where they burned the Jews in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The rest of the afternoon was like a double exposure: there are the roasted chestnuts, there is the witch, and there is the place where they burned the Jews. For the first time, I began to understand what it is like when something so beautiful becomes, while retaining all its magic, something terrible as well.

Egypt, in the book of Shemot, is a place caught in a double exposure. For the Jews, Egypt has long been a nightmare, a place of slavery and oppression, of beatings

and cold-blooded murder. One imagines that for the Jews in Egypt, every place must have a secret meaning: beautiful houses as places of servitude, cool bathing spots in the river as places where baby boys drown.

The first two plagues do the work of making that double exposure visible to the rest of the population. Both begin in the Nile, the site of the crimes against those Jewish boys. The first, blood, makes it clear that the Nile, the source of life for the Egyptian people—the place where even Bat Par'oh, the woman who saved Moshe, bathed—is actually a site of mass murder. All of Egypt, suddenly, is forced to confront the truth that what is life-giving and sustaining for them has been the locus of unbearable suffering for the people they oppress.

The second plague, frogs, exposes a new layer of horror. The frogs, we are told, emerge from the Nile itself—still, perhaps, filled with blood. In picturing the frogs starting to emerge—small, slimy creatures crawling out of the river used as a mass infant grave—it is easy to imagine

that people thought that they were seeing thousands of ghosts emerge from their watery graves.

In picturing the frogs as they emerged, it becomes easy to read the first two plagues as a reminder to the Egyptians of their crimes. The first two plagues are a way of exposing the hidden underbelly of Israelite suffering to the Egyptians, of making explicit and raw what denial and callousness may have disguised. They are a way of bringing the Egyptians out of their day-to-day understanding of their country and of making the other, blurry side of the double exposure unbearably clear.

But as the Egyptians begin to see the Egypt that the Jews have experienced for so many years, we are given a glimpse, in Rashi's reading, of a different perspective on the Nile. Rashi notices that for the first three plagues Moshe is commanded to inform Aharon to perform the action that will begin the plague rather than being told to do it himself. Rashi explains the reason for the first two plagues as follows:

רש"י שמות ז:יט

לפי שהגין היאור על משה כשנשלך לתוכו, לפיכך  
לא לקה על ידו לא בדם ולא בצפרדעים, ולקה על  
ידי אהרן.

**Rashi on Shemot 7:19**

*Since the Nile protected Moshe when he was cast into it, it therefore was not struck by him, neither with blood nor with frogs, but was struck by Aharon.*

While we, the readers, have identified with the Jewish people's vision of Egypt—the Egypt of violence, of oppression, and of cruelty—in this moment, Rashi reminds us that there is another Egypt that exists, one in which the Nile is life-giving and protective. This other Egypt, this other Nile, Rashi reminds us, should not feel completely foreign to us: it is the Egypt and the Nile that Moshe, our redeemer, has experienced, and the one to which he still owes divinely-affirmed gratitude.

With Rashi's comment, the tables are turned: while until now this story was one in which the Egyptians are made to see the truth about their land, in this moment, we, the readers and inheritors of the Torah and the narrative of slavery, are forced into the dizziness of double exposure. In this moment, however briefly, we are forced to recognize that there are aspects of Egypt to which Moshe Rabbeinu himself owed gratitude. In this moment, it is we who are forced to learn that the multivalence of places does not allow us to neatly cordon off the beautiful and ugly: we are touched by the meanings of other people and groups. It is

impossible, in this reading, to fully separate the memory of nightmarish tragedy from miraculous safety.

While in Shemot this realization is fleeting, hidden in a Rashi, later, in Devarim, it becomes glaringly apparent. In Devarim 23:8, we are commanded: "You may not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land." In memory of the time we spent there as strangers, we are commanded never to hate them, and to allow Egyptians, after several generations, to join the Jewish people.

Most of our associations with Egypt and the Jewish people are images of suffering. Rashi, in his comment on this *pasuk*, highlights this suffering in the starkest possible terms: "you may not hate an Egyptian—even though they threw your babies into the Nile"—even though you endured terrible suffering there, even though it is the paradigm for persecution. Why? Because you were a stranger in Egypt's land. Because, Rashi explains, they hosted you and fed you in a time of dire need. Once, generations earlier, Egypt was a place of safety for Ya'akov and his family in a time of famine. And so, despite the subsequent years of persecution, we are commanded to remember that initial hospitality. We are commanded to remember the good beginning of what became the darkest story we know, and we are commanded to let that memory guide our treatment of Egyptians in the future.

The Torah resists the temptation to tell a single story about Egypt. It is not the place of dreams we might have expected from Yosef's brief reign, but the Torah is still unwilling to overwrite those parts of our story in order to create a single narrative. In Rashi's reading in Shemot and in this *mitzvah* in Devarim, we are reminded that our story is one of beauty mixed with pain, gratitude mixed with deep resentment. We are commanded to give room to both, to treat our stories with the integrity and nuance they deserve.

We are commanded, in this *mitzvah*, to remember the past in all its complexity: not to forget the suffering that we endured but, at the same time, not to allow our memories to become exclusively dark. We are commanded to remember honestly. We are commanded to remember moments of beauty and kindness even as we remember suffering, persecution, and darkness. We are commanded to live in the only truly honest way: in the double exposure. ♦