

Echoes of Eden

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The Good, The Bad and The Indifferent

After the Israelites escape the Egyptians and survive the skirmish with Amalek, word of their adventures reaches Yitro (Jethro), Moshe's father-in-law. Yitro travels to see his son-in-law and join the Jews' celebration. As it is described in the text, their reunion is touching and emotional, not only on a personal level but also because Yitro expresses wonderment and gratitude for the great miracles God has performed in redeeming, protecting and sustaining the Jewish People. Yitro's feelings of happiness and empathy seem sincere and earnest.

Rabbinic tradition provides us with certain biographical details about Yitro that serve as a fascinating backdrop for this warm reunion. According to this tradition, some years before, Yitro had served as an advisor to Pharaoh, one of a panel of three respected consultants assembled to address Egypt's "Jewish Problem;" the other members of the panel were Bil'am and Iyov (Job). For reasons real or imagined, Pharaoh had begun to identify the Jews as a "fifth column," a foreign element harboring dual loyalties at the very least, or at worst a seditious sub-culture that posed a clear and imminent threat to the stability of Egypt. Three of the world's most respected thinkers were gathered to draft a policy and chart Egypt's response.

Each of the three members of this advisory panel suggested a different course of action. Bil'am, ever the misanthrope, advised that Pharaoh implement a "final solution" to rid Egypt (and the world) of these dangerous aliens. Yitro, on the other hand, spoke out in defense of the Jews, and appealed to Pharaoh on their behalf, advising Pharaoh to adopt a course of

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peaceful co-existence and understanding. The third advisor, Iyov, was silent. He voiced no opinion, choosing neutrality in a conflict he felt was none of his concern and in which he had no interest.

Pharaoh chose the course plotted by Bil'am, and the final solution was set in motion: All male Jewish infants would be killed at birth, and the females would be subsumed into Egypt's patrilineal society. The Jewish People would cease to exist when its utility as a slave-labor force was outlived. Having fulfilled its mandate, the committee was disbanded, and the advisors went their separate ways. Bil'am collected his reward and made his way home to a hero's welcome, biding his time and grooming his reputation until such time as he would be called upon once again to offer his services as an enemy of the Jewish People. Yitro, whose humanism had turned him into a persona non grata in Egypt's poisoned climate of paranoia and hatred, fled to Midian. Iyov, still silent, headed home to the Land of Utz (Oz).

The information we are given about Yitro shines a new light on his joyful reunion with the Israelites in the desert. His happiness is much more than the relieved response of a father-in-law whose son-in-law has narrowly escaped from peril. Yitro has always believed in coexistence, and his path has been vindicated. However, the background provided by this rabbinic teaching goes far beyond Yitro as an individual. On many levels, this tradition offers us a prototype for Jewish foreign policy, as it were: Coming in the wake of the nightmarish experiences of enslavement, abuse and infanticide of Egypt, the certainty of confrontation with the surrounding Philistine culture, and the belligerence and unprovoked violence of the Amalekites, the nascent Jewish nation might have been tempted to adopt a siege mentality regarding all the other nations of the world. Yitro's story illustrated that, their recent experiences notwithstanding, they should not despair of finding individuals and nations that shared the values of humanism and peaceful co-existence.

My teacher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, suggested that this rabbinic teaching goes far beyond this isolated case, beyond the personal story of Yitro and his relationship with the Jewish People, even beyond the lessons we may learn from his behavior. Rather, it is a timeless observation that imparts profound insight into Jewish thought: Our sages did not believe that non-Jews are by definition good or bad; rabbinic thinking is far more nuanced and far less

xenophobic. The story of Pharaoh's advisors is meant to teach us that people, nations and cultures are not monolithic; some are characterized by empathy while others are defined by hatred. "Advisors" of the type employed by Pharaoh pop up throughout human history; some extend a hand in peace, are open to true dialogue, and offer words of encouragement and sound advice, while others expend their energies plotting ways to make the world *judenrein*. The message of this ancient rabbinic tradition, then, is that we must not lose faith in the possibility of common ground with other cultures and nations. But what of the third group? What are we to make of Iyov, and those whom he represents - those who remain silent? Iyov was neutral; for one reason or another, he declined to take sides in the conflict between Pharaoh and the Jews. Iyov's stance presents us with an unavoidable moral challenge: Is neutrality in the face of genocide a morally defensible position?

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Iyov is certainly not an anonymous character. An entire book of the Bible is devoted to the story of his life, and he is, for all time, a symbol of silence and of suffering. Much like his role as an advisor to Pharaoh, Iyov is described as a man who did no evil – and therein lies the rub: Iyov was considered, by himself and others, to be a great man precisely because he did no evil. But is this enough? Can moral greatness be equated with the mere avoidance of evil, or does silence in the face of evil make one a silent partner in the atrocity?

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested that we reconsider Iyov's difficult life story in light of his neutrality: He had managed to ignore the plight of others, to stand by mutely as Jewish children were murdered and an entire nation was vilified, abused and enslaved. The pain and suffering Iyov eventually endures seem to be poetic justice: Iyov is treated to the only pain he can feel – his own.

Iyov, and those who read of his personal suffering, may be tempted to question God's justice and righteousness, but knowing what we now know about his moral stance in Egypt, is it any wonder that God questions Iyov's

righteousness? Should it surprise us when Iyov is given a harsh lesson in empathy? Iyov's behavior in Egypt should resonate throughout our reading of the story of his life, and should inform the lesson with which his story concludes: The Book of Iyov comes to an end when he steps outside his own small world and prays for others, finally abandoning his stance of neutrality and insularity. The lesson for our own lives is clear: Only when we learn to care for others can our lives have meaning; only those who make it their business to feel the pain of others can know true happiness.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2014/01/audio-and-essays-parashat-yitro.html>