

**“My Children are Drowning . . .”**  
Sermon for Rosh Hashanah Morning, 2013/5774  
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There are tons of stories from the Bible which most Jews, and indeed culturally literate people in the western world, know. The Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel. The burning bush, Samson and Delilah, and on and on.

There are only a few stories from Talmud and Midrash, on the other hand, that most of us immediately recognize. One which is sufficiently well known at least among Jews that I hear it with some regularity is the Talmudic embellishment of the biblical account of the Egyptians drowning in the Sea of Reeds as the Israelites escaped from Egypt.

Let me remind you: we come to the water, with our families and livestock and other possessions, hundreds of thousands of us, the Torah reports. Pharaoh’s armies are in sight behind us. There is no place to run and no place to hide. Then Moses, at God’s behest, raises his staff. The waters part and we cross on dry land! As the last of us emerge from the waters, the Egyptians are in hot pursuit with the waters now a wall on either side of them. God sends the waters crashing back, and they drown. First Miriam and the women, and then all the people, break out in songs of jubilation— *me chamochah ba’elim adonai!*. God has saved us! They are dead! We are free!

That is all in the Torah. Pharaoh’s choicest captains “went down to the bottom like a stone.” The early rabbis, a couple of thousand years later, were clearly embarrassed by the

rhetoric, the gloating. But they scarcely felt entitled to rewrite the Torah. So they tried to blunt its impact on future generations by adding—Tractate Sanhedrin, 79b, of the Talmud—the following:

“When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the ministering angels broke out in song before the God. God silenced them and said: “My creatures are drowning, and you sing praises?!”

No, I am not confusing Pesach with Rosh Hashanah. I am trying to lay out a basic Jewish value before turning to the news of the day as 5773 ends and 5774 begins. Basic Jewish morality: God could understand the spontaneous exultation of those who had just escaped our enemies. We are not angels, God knows. But the ideal for those with a little distance from the fray, and certainly for angels who by definition express divine values, is that no one should ever forget that every soul is precious, that each person is created in God’s image. Even enemies? Yes. Even Egyptians and Assyrians, classic enemies of the Jewish people.

Forced to fight, you want to win, which means you want your enemy to lose. But the situation itself—violence, war—is tragic. The messianic vision, the way things should be and—says Jewish tradition—some day will be, is not only the beating of swords into plowshares and the lion lying down with the lamb, but—explicitly naming these classic enemies—reconciliation:

In that day there shall be a highway from Egypt to Assyria with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on earth, for the Lord of hosts will bless them, saying, “Blessed be My people

Egypt, My handiwork Assyria, and my very own Israel. In that day, Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on earth. (So spoke the prophet Isaiah, chapter 19:23-24.)

What a miserable mess Egypt is today! And at least so far the Egyptians are not nearly as bad off as the Syrians. (For historical purists let me add that I do know Syria is quite not the same as Assyria. That symbolic road of peace that Isaiah pictured running from Egypt through Israel to Assyria would actually pass first through Syria and then reach Assyria (today's northern Iraq). I rather suspect a contemporary Isaiah would dream of that road going on past Assyria, too, to Iran, biblical Persia.

I am just beginning to receive mail with messages about homeless Syrian refugees and desperate parents and children in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon. Won't we please make a contribution to CARE, UNICEF, (the Jewish) Joint Distribution Committee or the like? For this Jew, at least, that creates a moral dilemma. Can anyone expect Jews—or, more pointedly, can God expect Jews—to lament the disintegration of Syria? 100,000 dead; millions of refugees? No end in sight. I have to admit it is not easy to feel bad for Israel's long-term enemy *as a nation*. If the civil war there ended tomorrow ... I fear the average Syrian would be happy to direct their hostility towards Jews again rather than toward one another. Let the record show, while we are on the subject, that the Syrian civil war has nothing to do with Israel. Arabs are killing Arabs. Israelis and other Jews have been insisting for years that the Arab world's problems are rooted in their own corrupt regimes, not in the presence of a small Jewish state in the neighborhood. It is hard to

feel bad for Syria as an abstract entity, a political unit which has remained hostile to Israel for decades. But it is Holy Day season, when we are supposed to measure ourselves against our highest values. God's children are drowning. Lets not sing praises. People are being bombed and even gassed by their own government. Parents and children are seeing one another killed. Just change the focus a bit and these really can be "My children drowning" and not my enemy going "down to the bottom like a stone."

And Egypt? The world—and most of us Jews, too—were thrilled at the thought, now over two years ago, of people overthrowing an oppressive regime—one of several falling (or still threatened) in the ironically named "Arab Spring." Egypt had its first true elections in all of history! And whom did they elect? The Muslim Brotherhood! Sworn enemy of the west. Antisemitic to the core. The United States and many others warned the new government: if you want to build a democracy you need to bring in all parties. If President Mohammad Morsi was not quite as bad as he might have been, he nonetheless lacked any sense of what it meant to compromise and collaborate with those who did not share his radical fundamentalist agenda. He tried to bluff his way through what observers knew: that the army ran Egypt before Mubarek fell, and still had the power afterwards. The army told him he needed to bring his opponents into a coalition—and if democracy rather than theocracy were the goal, he would have. But the Muslim Brotherhood (in Israel they are called Hamas) just didn't have it in them. We hoped for visionary leadership (I did, at any rate; plenty of people did). But Morsi and company were not about to become George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Lets note again, not so incidentally, that Egypt's problems had and have little to do with Israel. Mubarek had kept the peace, and Morsi knew which side his bread was buttered upon, too. The United States—and the Egyptian army—kept the Muslim Brotherhood from going off the deep end. But now there is near-chaos in Egypt, elected fundamentalists vs. unelected generals. With no certainty who will come out on top, you have to feel sorry for diplomats in Jerusalem and in Washington. When Egyptians learn to live with one another (and they at least have more of a tradition and history of that than do Syrians or Iraqis), we—Jews, Americans, much of the world—would still like to see peace.

Whom do we root for, and—more importantly for the Jewish community of the world's only superpower—whom do we lobby for? In Syria, absolutely not the Assad regime. A rebel victory would at least be bad for Iran, Syria's patron. But the rebels are a ragtag collection of militias, themselves guilty of atrocities, and including, it is reported, Al Qaida-types. Jews in general and we Reform Jews in particular like to take bold stands, even controversial ones, in the name of conscience and “prophetic Judaism.” But this is no good vs. evil confrontation, only evil vs maybe a little less bad. We should weep for the children and other innocent victims—and be thankful that the Administration in Washington has thus far been smart enough not to be sucked into another Middle Eastern war.

But now there are chemical weapons involved, atrocities! We Jews, God knows, know about people being gassed and the world sitting by silently. So President Obama—with Iran watching, and Israel watching, the world watching—recommends a limited military intervention—

less about regime change than about making a moral point. Any one of us could probably make the case either way. With hindsight, perhaps when masses of civilians started being killed we and our allies—in the name of humanitarian values—should have intervened as President Obama wants to do now. But by now thousands of non-Syrians have flocked to the cause on both sides and there is a vicious war between Sunnis and Shi'ites with atrocities committed on both sides. Tragic! But not our fight. Whichever side emerges as the winner will not likely thank or cooperate with the United States, much less with Israel. As horrible as chemical weapons are, “we are appalled by the chemical-weapons deaths of 1400, but felt no need to do anything about the death by shelling, bombing and bullets of 100,000” is scarcely a credible humanitarian argument. It is a close call, and your political view every bit as valid as mine (it is nice to see democracy and the Constitution being employed for a change!). The Jewish value, as I see it: this may not be our fight, but our coreligionists *are* right next door, and in Syria God's children are drowning. I vote a reluctant “yes” and pray that our involvement will not escalate. The stand against “weapons of mass destruction” will be noticed in Teheran. The failure to take that stand after it was threatened would surely be noticed. If, God forbid, we need to engage in another “boots-on-the-ground” Mid-East War, Iran, not Syria, is the real danger.

The situation is a little more subtle in Egypt. Egypt (and its army) has been the lynchpin of peace in the region—that is diplomatic code language for peace with Israel. The Egyptian generals were fairly patient with the new Muslim Brotherhood regime, giving them every opportunity to bring Egypt together. The Brotherhood wanted to rule; not to manage a democratic process in which the people ruled. Neither Israelis, American Jews, the American Administration

nor leaders of either party, called for the overthrow of Mubarek nor now of Morsi. Our interest—America’s, Israel’s, yours and mine—is stability. Sure our natural sympathies are with the democratic process; but democracy only works with a social contract in which there is respect for the rule of law and minority rights. Recall that democracy brought Hamas to power in Gaza, and within the memories of some here tonight it brought the Nazis to power in Germany. I wish the Muslim Brotherhood had played its hand differently in Egypt. But I say we take our chances with the generals. Israel appears to be fine with that. America can threaten and cajole and use such influence as we have; we can encourage the new regime to write a better constitution and commit, when stability is restored, to further elections. But this is no time for the U.S. to pull the plug on Egypt and watch it descend into Syrian-style chaos.

We can, and should, feel bad for people caught in the middle between powers in the Arab world—or anywhere else. But we cannot run the world. Jews certainly cannot. And even the United States cannot. Being a super-power is not all its cracked up to be. Where our diplomacy can help, by all means let us help. But in our zeal for democratic values we should not forget that the other nations have not elected us to call the shots.

One more biblical text. Isaiah, chapter 1, verses 16-17—a classic repentance text for the Holy Days! It applies to you and me, and also to the U.S. and Israel, and surely to Egypt, Syria and the others:

Wash yourselves clean;

Put your evil doings away from My sight.

Cease to do evil;  
Learn to do good.  
Devote yourselves to justice,  
Aide the wronged.  
Uphold the rights of the orphan;  
Defend the cause of the widow.

When the nations are ready to do that, we—Jews and America--should be there with our hands extended in friendship. But note Isaiah did not say, “cease to do evil and *do* good,” but rather “*learn* to do good.” Likewise in the Talmudic story God does not say to the angels, “My children are drowning, rescue them!” Pharaoh brought the tragedy on himself. No one turns on a dime. Peace is a process, a goal, a sacred quest. There can be greater peace in the world. First we, and the nations, have to want it. That is not a description of the Middle East today. So let us defend our allies, provide humanitarian help, and try not make things worse.

Amen.