

## Parashat Bo

There are a couple of morally troubling issues in today's Torah Portion. One is the idea of God hardening Pharaoh's heart in response to plagues six through nine, and another is the tenth plague, the death of the Egyptian first-born.

There are two classic answers about the first issue in our commentaries. After each of the first five plagues, Pharaoh hardened his own heart, so God supposedly was just reinforcing Pharaoh's own mean-spirited nature for the later plagues. Another classic response among our Medieval commentaries is that God felt the need to demonstrate power over Pharaoh, and modern commentators point out that the plagues specifically attack some of the pagan gods of the ancient Egyptians.

The other issue is even more morally complicated, the death of Egypt's firstborn. We Jews know all too well about genocide in general and against our children in particular. Yad VaSem is Israel's main Holocaust Memorial and Museum, and I visited it on each of my several trips to Israel. When they opened their new Children's Memorial, I went through it with other Cantors who had seen the rest of Yad VaShem before. It was so emotionally devastating, every single one of us was crying as we emerged.

So how do we make sense of the tenth plague? Is it retribution for Pharaoh's attempt at genocide of the Israelites by killing all male babies? Or, as some modern scholars are now saying, is the God of the Hebrew Bible an aggressive, dominating power?

There are two groups of scholars who are wrestling with this last issue in particular. Some of the Christian scholars who have been suggesting this since before WW II are liberal Christian Protestant Bible commentators and scholars, mostly from "main-line denominations" rather than the more religiously conservative evangelicals. A Jewish group that has been wrestling with this issue during the last 25 or 30 years is some of the women scholars in all of the religiously liberal movements of modern Judaism - Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative.

What many scholars in both groups have in common is a deep belief in human free will. That can account for human evil which God does not prevent, such as the Holocaust. However, the sticking point is when the Bible gives God credit for acting in a way that we consider to be unacceptable if not perhaps immoral by our standards.

One way out is to insist that everything in the Hebrew Bible be viewed in the context of the world in which it was written, and the audience for whom it was originally intended. Scholars who feel this way ask, "What was happening in Israelite society and among their neighbors at the time of composition for a particular episode in the Bible?"

This is not the time and place to give any easy answers. Let me simply leave you with an observation that informs my pastoral care, especially for those bereft by deaths in their family. We do not know the so-called "Mind of God", neither in the way things happen now, nor the way the Bible records past events. That is why God is God, and we are mere human beings, trying to live as best we understand how God guides us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hazzan Neil Schwartz