



Light of Torah

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Learning to be free

In the Book of Exodus two biblical masterpieces conclude the account of the liberation from Egypt. Chapter 14 tells of the crossing of the Red Sea. Chapter 15 is a song of victory. Our focus here will be Chapter 14.

Read Chapter 14 of Exodus. The battle imagery is blatant, isn't it? The whole chapter reads like a war scene: advancing armies, entrapped camps, chariots, leaders issuing strategic orders and battle-cries. Even God appears as a kind of warlord.

We needn't be surprised by this. The bible's historical context reflects the views of ancient cultures which understood their deities in war-like terms. Our interest here, however, is the creative analysis of the Jewish sages who dug deeply into the biblical story seeking spiritual meaning for their lives.

We might begin by asking: if it is a battle, why don't the 600,000 strong Hebrew slaves turn around and fight for their lives?

Here Ibn Ezra¹ leads us to consider the inner turmoil of the Israelites. Despite their 'defiance' (v.8), so traumatized were the Israelites by their years of captivity that they were psychologically incapable of mounting a fight. With this in mind, re-read 14:6-14. They "caught sight of the Egyptians" (v.10). What did they see? 600 chariots? Or something more? One can sense that Israel is mentally overpowered by the very sight of Egypt. Egypt! An empire of wealth, culture; the mightiest power on earth. Continue to ponder the text, staying close to its detail, and share your observations with a friend.

A further suggestion along these lines is that the Israelites harbored ambiguous feelings towards Egypt. Yes, it was a place of bondage, but it was also a land where they were fed! Note the repetition of the name 'Egypt' in 14:11-12. Rabbinic commentary will often hear the repetition of a name (e.g., *'Abraham! Abraham!* in Genesis 22:11) as a sign of deep affection. And the name 'Egypt' occurs no less than five times here, like the sound of babies crying for their mother's

milk! Is this the warped affection of the victim for the oppressor? No wonder the Lord has to take matters into divine hands and perform miracles to pull this people through!

Still, let's not overlook the signs of hope: the Israelites have marched out of Egypt and begun to grasp, however tentatively, a new life of freedom. In Jewish tradition we find this comment:

"R. Eliezer said: This reflects great credit on Israel. For when Moses said to them: 'Arise and go forth,' they did not say: How can we go forth into the wilderness when we have no sustenance for the way? But they had faith and went after Moses."²

Table-topic: Sometimes we prefer the familiarity of captivity to the terrifying work of freedom. Discuss. Share an insight that you take from Exodus 14.

1. 12th C Torah scholar, Spain.
2. Cited by Leibowitz, 240.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY: 1995); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996); Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1991). Scripture: JPS.