

Passover VII 5786

Were the Egyptians Guilty? Innocent? Or both?

Rabbi Alex Freedman

Chag Sameach!

Passover is a happy story for us, but there is a lot of pain and suffering along the way. Not just for the Israelites, who were enslaved, but for the Egyptians. I'm not talking about Pharaoh, since he was all wicked. But ordinary Egyptians. Should we feel bad for them that they suffered through the plagues, including the death of the firstborn? Should we feel bad for them that they had their gold and silver taken at the end, and had their army drowned in the sea?

Maybe we should, since not all of them were taskmasters cracking the whip. Some were just ordinary people trying to live their life.

Or maybe we shouldn't, since the whole society was complicit in the slavery of another nation and benefited from its exploited labor. There is no record of an internal insurrection or rebellion on the part of ordinary Egyptians.

So what are we to make of this dilemma? Were ordinary Egyptians innocent, guilty, or some of both? As in life, this question is complicated.

Let's look at two Midrashim that offer a voice in this conversation...

*Read Source 1 (and narrate)*

Today we would say this is about "reparations." This text makes the case that all Egyptians bore some guilt. All Egyptians - even those not active taskmasters - benefited monetarily from Israelite slavery, so it's fitting that all would have to pay up. We also don't have a record of ordinary Egyptians protesting Pharaoh or in support of the slaves. The fact that the Torah records the brave actions of three Egyptian women - Shifra, Pua, and Pharaoh's daughter - tells me they were the only ones who protested. Otherwise the others would have been mentioned or rewarded in some way.

There's a case to be made that all Egyptians were somewhat guilty - some more, others less. It reminds me of a debate about the extent to which ordinary Germans were complicit in the Holocaust. Daniel Goldhagen wrote a book titled "Hitler's Willing Executioners" in which he argues for collective guilt, that the vast majority of ordinary Germans were "willing executioners" because of a deep "eliminationist anti-Semitism"

that was part of the German political culture. That's one way to look at ordinary Egyptians, that most of them were perfectly fine having Jews do the dirty work of slavery. And if they weren't okay with it, they didn't seem to speak out against it.

This text makes the case that all Egyptians shared some guilt. And that none were completely innocent.

*Read Source 2 (and narrate)*

I bet some of you are familiar with this Midrash's punchline: that G-d rebuked the angels saying, "My children are drowning in the sea, and you would sing a song in My presence!?" In other words, How dare you? Indeed, this Midrash may have come up at your Seder table when you got to the 10 plagues and spilled drops of wine with your pinky finger. We do that to represent that because innocent Egyptians died, we should lessen our joy - represented by the wine, traditional symbol of joy.

But this Midrash in full is so much more ambivalent and tense. We see G-d in the first part seemingly unsure what to do. It seems that G-d has not decided if they are innocent or guilty. That's why there is a vote, albeit a heavenly vote.

G-d's measure of mercy and justice are engaged in a back and forth battle. It's a tie and needs a tiebreaker, the vote. The moment when G-d sees the dead Jewish infant encased in a brick, that does it: G-d's side of Justice prevails, and G-d then drowns the Egyptian army in the sea. Strict justice prevails. Remember, these are no ordinary Egyptians. These are soldiers who were perhaps taskmasters, and indisputably acting to bring back fugitives and enslave them again. On pain of death.

At that moment when the Egyptian army is drowning, the angels seem to have a change of heart and decide to sing to G-d, seemingly in agreement with G-d's decision. Surprisingly, G-d silences them and seems to swing back to the other side, of feeling compassion for them. G-d silences their song and calls the Egyptian army - indisputably the opposite of ordinary citizens and certainly wicked men - "The works of my hands."

Was G-d feeling compassion for them, or something different altogether? I think this Midrash is actually *not* making the case that they are all completely innocent, for G-d does not regret drowning them. G-d simply refuses to allow a celebration in this moment, making it known that it is inappropriate to celebrate the downfall of an enemy.

The last line on its own might lead us to think that the Egyptians were blameless. But taken together in the full story, it's more complicated than that. They - certainly the army

- were guilty, and justice was done. But G-d insists justice must be done with seriousness and restraint. Because the death of any people - even wicked people - is for us to observe but not celebrate.

Chag Sameach.