

Slavery, Plagues, & Exodus: Hope for Victory in the Jaws of Defeat

How did they view and value the story of the Exodus during the realms of Hezekiah and, later, Josiah? That question has been on my mind lately through our morning class in Isaiah. We usually think in terms of the way the pre-history of slavery in Egypt, the Exodus and the covenants that followed affected Israel afterwards: A social-political national entity emerging from slavery and forging models of leadership through Divine covenant would have unique characteristics. I would stand this view on its head and ask: What made this tale of Israel's "sojourn" under Egyptian slavery and having been brought out by Divine-prophetic leadership and covenant so attractive that it was re-told and preserved, even prior to the Babylonian Exile? II Kings tells us clearly that the Passover Festival was observed during both Hezekiah's reign (though delayed by a month by impurity, somewhat like the "Second Pesah") and Josiah's. Perhaps they preserved the story out of sheer duty and obligation to tradition. But unless they saw use and appeal in this, I tend to think the memories and observances connected to the Exodus would not have been so highlighted. It's likely that many Asian peoples were part of the Hyksos who dominated Egypt and were later expelled, but only the Israelites recount such a history in the Bible's particular way.

Obviously, positing an origin in slavery might tend to make a people humble and grateful, although suggesting that God chose them and vanquished their foes would instill some degree of confidence and pride. Additionally, these stories are capable of instilling great loyalty. If my people were redeemed by God from slavery in Egypt, then I might value my freedom all the more and would attempt to repay the great debts of gratitude and loyalty which I owe my people and my God. If I remember being subject to burdens as a slave, I might gladly be more apt to submit to the burdens I must take on in order to preserve my freedom. Positing an origin in slavery would better dispose a people to accept the yoke of discipline in building a society where they have greater degrees of freedom. For a small nation, building up such an intense and singular loyalty could give it the discipline and coherence to face great adversity.

Tribal societies, which think of themselves as family, might be more likely to take responsibility for one another and behave equitably towards one another. Their members might act more like brothers. If the laws are considered covenanted, required by God of society's members prior to their enforcement by any government, then they are obligatory **not just** because any government says so. Following the law is a religious and social/national duty, apart from any government and even before any social contract sets up a society's institutions and governance. People are expected to follow the law and distinguish right from wrong even when there are no institutions to declare and enforce laws. And the stories project this "tribalism" back even before and during their enslavement. Indeed, in reasoning which makes little sense except through divination or hindsight, Pharaoh cites the separate tribalism which will ultimately result in Israel's establishing itself as a potential adversary on the Canaanite border as **the very reason** the Israelites must be enslaved and then why their male offspring should be annihilated.

What use was there in remembering God's Might in bringing on the plagues and defeating Israel's early tormentors? The Exodus' contrast between utterly powerless slaves and Israel's powerful victory over their oppressors through the Plagues and later at the Red Sea is striking. One has trouble imagining Greeks or Assyrians, who prided themselves upon their strength and valor, positing anything like this type of origin for themselves. To strong and proud nations/empires such as these, attributing to themselves a weakness which led to enslavement would have been seen as an embarrassing disparagement of their origins. On the other hand, positing that a nation could start out in abject and utter weakness and domination and then be able to turn the tables victoriously and strike back at their oppressor, the mightiest empire of the time, is to depict a greater and more wondrous and unusual Israelite strength. This is perhaps why the plagues must trounce Egypt so soundly: To pose the greatest contrast and emphasize the wondrous strength which can be Israel's when Israel follows God. It is a strength which can allow a small and vulnerable but disciplined people in vassal-ship to Great Powers to turn the tables on the greatest Empires of the world, trouncing them in defeat. For a relatively small state like Hezekiah's Judea, repeatedly subjugated and besieged by Aramaeans and Assyrians and under the thumb of the great powers Egypt and Babylonia, not to mention the neighboring Philistines, this notion of a small tribal nation holding its own and turning the tables upon the Great Powers must have had exceptionally potent appeal. Against "doomsday" odds, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, these stories held out hope.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Vaera

December 31, 2021-January 1, 2022

SCHEDULE

*While our choir takes a break this Shabbat,
together let's fill the sanctuary with music and prayer*

Candle Lighting | 4:20 pm

Friday Evening Services | 4:30 pm

Zemirot | 8:30 am

Shahrit | 9:00 am

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Levy | Led by teen leaders and Mrs. Lisa Rohde

Outdoor Kiddush | following services

NO Shabbat Afternoon Class this week.

Shabbat Afternoon Services | 4:20 pm

Habdala | 5:06 pm

No Virtual Habdala Service this week.

Weekday Service Times

Morning Services

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Thursday: 7:05 am

Evening Services

Sunday-Thursday (Minha/Arbit): **4:30 pm**

Reminder: MASKS REQUIRED FOR ALL INDOORS. If you choose not to wear a mask when permissible, you represent & warrant that you're fully vaccinated. If requested, you must wear a well-fitted mask wherever & whenever required.

We urge you to get vaccinated & boosted. Many upcoming activities will require proof of UP-TO-DATE vaccination & boosters. Please send UPDATED vaccination card(s) to info@shearithisrael.org.

THIS SHABBAT



Let's Fill the Sanctuary with OUR Voices!

While our choir takes a break this Shabbat, together let's fill the sanctuary with music and prayer.

WE'RE HIRING YOUTH LEADERS!

Want to help make Shabbat and Holiday mornings special for kids aged 5 -12, or know someone who does?

We're hiring youth leaders!

College students and beyond welcome to apply.

Check out our emails or our Facebook page to view the job description and apply now - or share this opportunity with your friends.

MAKE YOUR YEAR-END GIFT TODAY

Now is the time to support Shearith Israel, our societies, and special funds (e.g. rabbi's discretionary fund, Sisterhood, Hebra, etc.) with an end of year gift. These gifts are a crucial part of our budget and enable Shearith Israel to maintain the high standard to which we are all accustomed.

Refer to our emails for instructions on how to submit your gift and to select any and all funds you wish to support.

If you have any outstanding balances, now is also a good time to take care of those.

Members, remember that you can pre-pay your 2022-2023 dues now at this year's rates - until January 15, 2022.

KIDDUSH

Sponsor a Hot Outdoor Kiddush!

Enjoying our new outdoor kiddush? We could use a couple of sponsors each week to help maintain the warmth of our community!

To sponsor, visit shearithisrael.org/outdoor-kiddush.

COMING UP

Parent-Child Learning - with S'mores!

Next session: Saturday Night, January 8 | 6:15 pm

This session will be led by Rafe Sasson

For elementary school children and their parents or grandparents

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/csiyouth5782.

Youth Trip to the Tenement Museum: *At Home in 1911*

Sunday, January 16 | 10:30 am | Meets at the Museum: 97 Orchard Street

Full vaccination required - bring proof!

ONLY 2 SPOTS LEFT! In the event that we are oversubscribed, we will start a waitlist and keep you informed. Members will be given priority.

Our youth are invited on a special tour of the recreated 1910s apartment of an Eastern European Jewish family earning a living in the garment trade. Step into their home and experience what daily life was like for an immigrant family in 1911 – balancing work, family, community, and an evolving cultural identity.

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/csiyouth5782.

The Sisterhood Presents:

The History of Jewish Comedy

Saturday evening, January 8 | 8:00 PM | on Zoom

with comedian Geoff Kole

*who will present the "long and short history of Jewish comedy"
followed by Q & A*

Advance registration is required. Admission Fee: \$5.00.

Registrants will receive the zoom link.

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/sisterhood-comedy.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to Raquel & Steven Herz, upon their son, Jack, becoming a Bar Mitzvah.

We mourn the passing of our member and Honorary Shamash, **Arnie Goldfarb**.

If you are aged 65+ or immunocompromised, **NYC will send a trained clinician to your home to do a free PCR test.** Available 7 days/week, 9am-7pm.

Call 929-298-9400 to schedule an appointment.