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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## IMAGINING DIVINE EMPATHY

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Texts cannot defend themselves against interpreters, but interpreters can defend themselves against texts. For example, non-observant Jewish readers sometimes defend themselves against Rabbinic texts by creating distance, by adopting the least generous and most ethically off-putting interpretations possible. This prevents the texts from making claims on them. Orthodox readers sometimes defend themselves by assimilating the text to practices and values they already agree with. This prevents the texts from challenging them.

These strategies are not illegitimate. There is no way to read a text without preconceptions. The most we can do is to imagine ways to read with multiple, different, even contradictory preconceptions. People who believe in Torah properly seek to defend it by excluding meanings that we consider implausible, unethical, or even heretical. We can only ask each other to have imaginative and empathetic parameters of plausibility when considering interpretations.

One way a text can help us cultivate the necessary imagination, more-or-less safely, is by presenting perspectives that it clearly does not endorse. For example, the Torah often does not merely condemn its villains; it presents the self-justifications of idol-worshippers, or of libertines, or of those who resist the authority of Mosheh Rabbeinu. Some commentators read these like fantasy fiction, with the goal being to imagine sinners as alien beings having nothing in common with the interpreter. But others engage in imaginative empathy, with the goal being to present sinners as creatures very much like you and me who tragically succumbed to the wiles of our common yetzer hora, or fell prey to intellectual error. Some of the best of these are rabbinic dialogues in which the worst of killers make their decisions on the basis of sophisticated halakhic argument.

Bamidbar 14:13-19 presents a particularly rich opportunity to engage in imaginative empathy. The Torah presents Moshe's presentation to G-d of what the Mitzriyim would say to the Canaanites – presumably convincing them - if G-d destroyed the Jews.

Whose plausibility structure should be used? If we believe that Mosheh's argument convinces G-d to call off our destruction, despite the theological baggage involved in such a claim, then the task is to construct a psychology of Mitzriyim and Canaanites that G-d would find plausible. We are required to consider what G-d would and would not believe about human reactions. Assuming that G-d's beliefs, must be true even with regard to hypotheticals, our construction must fit our own beliefs about Mitzriyim and Canaanites as well.

The text presents Mosheh's argument as follows:

ושמעו מצרים כי העלית בכחך את העם הזה מקרבו,  
ואמרו אל יושב הארץ הזאת:  
שמעו כי אתה ה' בקרב העם הזה  
אשר עין בעין נראה אתה ה', ועננך עמד עליהם,  
ובעמד ענן אתה הלך לפניהם יומם, ובעמוד אש לילה.  
והמתה את העם הזה כאיש אחד, ואמרו הגוים אשר שמעו את  
שמעך לאמר:  
מבלתי יכלת ה' להביא את העם הזה אל הארץ אשר נשבע להם  
וישחטם במדבר.  
ועתה - יגדל נא כח אד-ני, כאשר דברת לאמר:  
*But Egypt will hear that You have taken with Your power this nation  
from its core,  
and they will tell the inhabitants of that land:  
Certainly they have heard that you Hashem are at the core of this  
nation –  
that You have appeared to them eye-to-eye, and Your cloud stands  
watch over them,  
and that in a stand of cloud You go before them by day, and in a stand  
of fire by night.  
So when you put to this nation to death as if it were one man,  
the nations who have heard Your repute will say:*

*“It was out of Hashem’s inability to bring this nation to the land which  
He swore to give them,  
that he slaughtered them in the desert.”  
Now – let the power of Hashem enlarge, in accordance with what You  
said . . .*

Mosheh appears to argue that if G-d destroyed the Jews suddenly, the Mitzriyim would say that He did so because He was unable to bring them to Canaan. The medieval French commentator R. Yosef Cara reasonably asks:

איך אפשר שיאמרו מצרים כן,  
שהרי ראו כמה מכות וקריעת ים סוף?!

*How is it possible that the Mitzriyim would say this,  
when they had just seen many plagues and the splitting of the Reed  
Sea?!*

Given that the Egyptians had just witnessed an extended display of awesome Divine might, how could G-d have believed that the Egyptians would think Him incapable of conquering Canaan?

R. Cara’s answer is that the Egyptians would have argued that G-d exhausted His powers by taking Israel out of Egypt. He supports this reading by noting that Mosheh’s subsequent exhortation for G-d to enlarge His power seems philosophically problematic, but now can mean that He should **express** his power yet more dramatically. The power Mosheh is speaking of is power-in-the-world, not the power to bear with human beings despite their flaws.

Rav Cara’s reading however does not address what may be the most basic question. Why does G-d care what the Mitzriyim would say, and/or how the Canaanites would react? We have to address not only the plausibility to G-d of Mosheh’s presentation of human psychology, but also the plausibility of the theopsychology, of G-d’s reaction to Mosheh’s presentation.

Does R. Cara provides a plausible reconstruction of human psychology? Is it reasonable to suppose that the Mitzriyim and Canaanites would, in the aftermath of the sudden destruction of Israel, have seen the Splitting of the Sea as exhausting G-d’s power rather than demonstrating its inexhaustibility? I think the answer is in part yes, and R. Cara does us a service by exposing this.

As both Yeshayah Leibowitz and Rav Dessler point out powerfully, displays of Divine might do not generate enduring belief. Isaac Breuer argued (I learned this from

Rabbi Chanoch Waxman’s undergraduate article for Hamevaser) that what is miraculous about miracles is not their product, but rather our recognition of them as supernatural, since we instinctively assimilate all new data to models of comprehensible causality. Egypt would have been searching for a way to make G-d finite. Moreover, we have to admit that sometimes tremendous efforts lead directly to and immediately precede collapse. But the answer is also in part no. The instantaneous destruction of the entire Jewish people would itself have been a display awesome enough to put the lie to a claim of Divine exhaustion.

There really is no plausible way for G-d to be worried that His reputation for power to suffer as the result of His destruction of the Jews. Note that in Shemot 32:11-14 Mosheh apparently convinces G-d not to destroy the Jews via the at least equally implausible claim that the Mitzriyim would argue that He took the Jews out of Egypt **because** he hated them.) Moreover – why does G-d care so much about His reputation for power? If necessary, He could always do yet more wondrous miracles and restore his reputation, regardless of what became of the Jews.

But it seems to me that there is something that the other nations might have thought that would be legitimate grounds for Divine concern. They might have thought that it was G-d’s inability to maintain a living relationship with a people that led to the destruction of the Jews. G-d wished to take the Jews to Canaan; He failed. Maybe that failure was inevitable, and will happen every time He tries. This, I suggest, must be Mosheh Rabbeinu’s real argument, both here and in Shemot.

The question then becomes why Mosheh does not, and presumably cannot, make this argument explicitly.

The answer, I suggest, is that it proves too much. Accepting that argument would mean that G-d could never destroy the Jews, ever, no matter how grave their wrongdoings. His reputation is too bound up with their survival to allow Him free reign to punish them. K’b’yakhol – if it were possible to say such a thing – it seems that one arc of the Torah’s narrative is how G-d comes to terms with the ways in which our relationship with Him, as understood by the rest of humanity, limits the extent to which the Attribute of Justice can be expressed in this world relative to the Attribute of Mercy.