

The High Cost of Freedom

Passover 5766

Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn

Temple Sinai

New Orleans, Louisiana

Some time ago, Dr. Hans Goedicke, Chairman of the Johns Hopkins Department of Near Eastern Studies, and noted Egyptologist, proposed an intriguing hypothesis on the Exodus. After 20 years of analyzing a variety of archaeological and historical sources, Goedicke points to some inscriptions which he claims offer the first solid historical evidence for fixing the date of the Exodus as occurring in the year 1477 B.C.E. This new date, which is some 200 years earlier than had been assumed, enabled scholars to theorize an accounting of the parting of the waves of the Sea of Reeds, in which the Israelites escaped bondage and Pharaoh's troops were destroyed.

According to Dr. Goedicke's hypothesis, the Exodus coincided with the volcanic eruption at Thera, an island 70 miles north of Crete, and the home of the Minoan civilization, which was wiped out by the eruption. The resulting tidal waves could have inundated the low coastal lands of Egypt, which was presumably the route of the Israelites' escape. We know all too well of the potential of flooded coastal land, don't we? Well, here is what Dr. Goedicke suggested:

The Israelites started their escape on the northern and shorter route to Palestine that borders the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Realizing that the pursuing Egyptian troops were catching up, the Israelites stopped to defend themselves on a low plateau overlooking the sea-level desert.

While the Israelites prepared for battle, the Egyptian chariots on the plain were wiped out by a flash flood eventuating from a towering tidal wave which was set off by the volcanic eruption at Thera, a distance of some three hours away from the Egyptian coast.

An interesting hypothesis, is it not? It matters little whether, in fact, the dividing of the sea and the drowning of Pharaoh's troops is scientifically derivable or remains a matter of theological belief and trust. No matter what, we will continue to cherish those triumphal words of the Song of the Sea, one of the Torah's oldest and most beautiful poetic passages:

Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spoke, saying: I will sing unto the Lord, for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider hath He hath thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation; this is my God, and I will glorify Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him.

One may only wonder what happened to our ancestors after they sang this wonderful song. I mean, what took place as they turned their attention from the waves that overcame Pharaoh's troops, and turned then toward their future? What can we say

about our ancestors, the children of Israel, after the singing was over? We know that the Torah goes on to record their series of rebellions, of squabbles, of complaints, and their insurrection against their saintly leader, Moses.

“We’re hungry, Moses, better that we should never have left Egypt.” And, “We’re thirsty, Moses, did you bring us to this desert only to die of thirst?”

In short, Scripture reveals a contentious and troubled people, disillusioned by the realization that freedom was not as easy as they had first thought.

This very festival of Passover has been called through the centuries the “Zeman Cherutenu – the Season of Our Freedom.” According to Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the saintly founder of American Reform Judaism whose 106th Yahrzeit we recently observed

Freedom is the indispensable condition of goodness, virtue, purity and holiness... Take away freedom from human nature and whatever remains of it is an anomaly, some nameless thing of human form and animal indifference.

But, if freedom is dear, then so is its price. When discussing freedom, our rabbinic ancestors looked first to the individual human being. They seemed clearly aware that what operates on the collective is merely a manifestation of our individual reality. What shall we say of the individual and his or her free will?

About the year 500, Rabbi Huna, a Talmudic sage, made the observation that “A man is led the way he wishes to follow.” In short, according to our rabbis, every moral failure is ours alone, because our choices are our own. Our city and its residents face a period of stern testing. Our resolve to rebuild, our love for this city’s culture, and our ability to take care of more than our own needs and concerns in a generous, perhaps even sacrificial manner will tell the tale of what kind of people we really are. Are we “hosts” in life, or do we see ourselves as the “guests” at life’s table?

Passover invites every Jew to become a contemporary of Moses and the generation of the Exodus. Once again, we are able to re-experience not only the lash of oppression, but also the exaltation of deliverance. This is the season when we take into our hands the matzo of freedom and the moror of slavery, and we blend them and taste of them both. It is this intense reliving of our past which both illuminates and gives meaning to our present. For in the time of freedom, there must be knowledge of servitude; and in the time of bondage, there must ever remain hope for human redemption.

At this post-Katrina Pesach, 5766, that is a challenge worthy of our every effort. A happy and blessed Passover to one and all!

Amen