

Passover and Time Travel in the Torah

Imagine a group of writing students tasked with an assignment to write a narrative of the events in today's Torah portion, Bo. What incredible material! This parsha brings us the drama, the climactic moments leading to the Exodus –preparing for the hurried getaway, the horrific final plagues, the building wrath of the showdowns between God and Pharaoh, the first Passover celebration in Egypt, the people marking their doorposts and finally - the great escape. It is absolutely cinematic!

But there is something in the way that this great, dramatic history is told that always catches my eye. We are in the middle of this unbelievably exciting story, we have been immersed for 11 chapters in this tale of high drama, and suddenly the Torah stops and gives us a whole series of rules about the calendar, and cooking, future Passover sacrifices and the perpetual eventual mitzvot of telling the story, of the special status of the first-born, and the wearing of tefillin.

No good writer telling a spectacular story of the past would interrupt the most dramatic moments of the tale with a set of minute legal details about later observances. This is not constructed as a cliff-hanger – keeping us on the edge of our seats, waiting to hear what happens next. Rather, these insertions interrupt and change the whole tone of the account – in one line we go from high drama and larger than life moments to a dry list of rules and regulations. From a literary point of view, it is a puzzling way to construct a narrative.

And, would it not have been more logical for the text to tell the story of the Exodus, and after the Israelites were safely out of Egypt, for God to then command how they should remember the events that had just occurred? Instead, we read that they are standing - with their belts tightened, their shoes on and their walking sticks in hand, poised and waiting to make their lightning escape, and they hear about calendars, chametz and matzah, tefillin and how they will tell their children about events that have not yet even happened!

The construction of the story is like a time warp. This text about the past cannot seem to **stay** in the past, or even in its own present; the story constantly jumps into the future. I think of Kurt Vonnegut's character Billy Pilgrim – maybe you are familiar with him – he is 'unstuck in time' and moves seamlessly between past, present and future. Here we have a kind of time travel in the Torah. Is it a case of bad editing? I think not. I think the Torah's literary approach to this story is carefully designed to teach us. It has to be– this story, the Exodus, is the foundation story of the Jewish people, it marks our beginning as a nation and as a people in relationship with God.

Among many lessons embedded in this grand story, the lesson that emerges from being unstuck in time can be traced through the use of one Hebrew word in the story – shamor – the root that means to guard. Four separate times in this parsha, right in the middle of the Exodus, God commands that the holiday of Pesach be “shamored” - observed, guarded or protected- for all time. And in a most intriguing verse, that same word – shamor - is used to describe the night before the Exodus. That night is called a “leyl shimurim” for God and a “shimurim” for all the children of Israel

throughout the generations. Not just for then – but for all time. A night of guarding for both God and Israel.

Shimurim is an unusual term – leyl shimurim. Our JPS translation translates it as a “vigil.” Everett Fox translates it similarly as a “keeping-watch.” All of the traditional Torah commentators weigh in on this word and on the way the Torah connects it to both past and future. Rashbam, calls the shimurim a kind of quiet anticipation. God is watching or waiting for something. Rashi says that God is eagerly anticipating finally fulfilling the promise that God made long ago to Abraham, to redeem the people. For the Israelites it is also a night of shimurim – of being guarded and safe from harm. Just as they were guarded from harm on that first Passover Eve, we their descendants will be guarded on that night for all generations. This is one basis for the idea of opening the door at the seder, to show that we are not afraid, that we feel completely protected by God on the night of Pesach.

Ramban views the verse a little differently, saying that in the past, God was watching and waiting for the time when the Israelites were worthy of being redeemed. Then, for all of the future years, Passover eve becomes a leyl shimurim – a night that the people guard for God, the night is set aside, designated for all time as a night to sing God’s praises. Similarly, another commentator, Ibn Ezra, notes that just as God guarded us on that first night, the Jewish people are obligated to guard the memory of that night and its laws throughout all time.

The Torah makes it clear that this core story of our people, the redemption from Egypt, is meant to be timeless, unstuck in time. It was never meant to be only an event in our past, as essential as that event was. We were liberated on that one occasion, but redemption and the need for redemption is an ongoing process. And so, we are asked to be guardians – shomrim – of a future in which we remember the story and carry its lessons forward. We are given a set of rituals to help us guard the memory of liberation, so that we will carry its lessons forward for all time: the injustice of oppressing others, the nature and shape of evil leadership, a call for empathy for those who suffer and for those who find themselves in a foreign place, and always - the possibility of redemption.

The Passover haggadah picks up on the time travel idea with the familiar injunction that on Pesach every Jew should actually re-experience the Exodus, and imagine that he or she is living through it in the present moment. That idea begins with the telling of the story in today’s Torah portion. It suggests that what we do with that story in the present and in the future is at least as important as what happened in the past. So we might say that the text keeps interrupting the story of past events because the real story is how we are living the story right now, and what we will do with it in the future.

This model for how we understand history is also a model for how we deal with the important events of our lives. It teaches us to not just remember our struggles and our joys – to not keep the things of the past fixed in time, only in the past.

The Torah teaches us here that we are responsible for giving meaning to the heartbreaks and the blessings of our past through our ongoing actions and the way we live our lives. Maybe God’s leyl shimurim – God’s night of vigil and waiting is *also* a perpetual event – as God watches to see how we

bring the past forward into the present and the future - what it is we do with our freedom, with the lessons of history, and with all the challenges and gifts we are given each day. Today.

Shabbat Shalom