

At the end of the parsha two weeks ago, the one through which Steve so eloquently led us, God and Moshe have a conversation: Moshe: O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did you send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name he has dealt worse with this people, and still you have not delivered Your people.

God responds: You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh, he shall let them go because of a greater might, indeed because of a greater might he shall drive them out.

So God claims to have a greater might than Pharaoh, claims that its goals will be met, and convinces Moshe that the cause will be successful. Let's take a look at that: God claims a greater might, a strong hand, so strong that Pharaoh will not merely let the people go, but that he will drive them out.

Fast forward through 7 plagues: Blood, wherein all the Nile river becomes foul, and the lifeblood of Egyptian society becomes a poison; frogs, that came up in all the houses and palaces and courts and farms and storehouses and ate and fouled all they came in contact with, and when they died they fouled the land.

And vermin, the lice, the insects that swarmed over the land, eating all that remained on the fields and in the trees and fouled what remained in the storehouses, and then pestilence, affecting the cattle in the fields, then boils on the men and the women, attacking the health of each person, except the Israelites, and finally, in last week's parsha, hail, ruining, if the first 6 plagues had left anything in good shape, whatever was remaining.

Now we have the beginning of our parsha. The Egyptians have suffered the loss of drinking water, of the produce of their fields, of the cleanliness, of the health of their bodies; the herds in the fields are gone. What is left: and God, at the beginning of our parsha has another conversation with Moshe:

God to Moshe: go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart, in order that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and their sons, how I have made a mockery of the Egyptians.

Mockery!! That word really stuck -- I was astounded, mockery connotes making fun of, making a fool of, a little bit of schoolyard teasing, perhaps but not necessarily approaching mild bullying, our God, in order to show the Egyptians that his was a greater might than Pharaoh's, sent these 7 plagues upon them, and he characterizes it as MOCKERY?

In fact, some of the translations use the words, make a fool of or toyed with, for this Hebrew word. "heetahlaltee." Robert Alter's translation uses "how I toyed with;"

Everett Fox says: how I have been capricious.” The New Revised Standard Version says: how I have made fools of. “

I decided first to see how the word is used elsewhere in Tanakh. This is the only place where God uses the word, in each other place it is used by people in a narrative or otherwise in either prose or poetry: Balaam uses it when talking to the animal: you have toyed with me (Alter) or you have made a mockery of me (JPS) in each situation he bemoans his being made to look inane by the acts of the animal. Hardly the same as the seven plagues. In Judges, it is used in a narrative where the bad guys raped and abused a woman. Saul said to his arm bearer: run me through with your sword so the uncircumcised won't make sport of me. Here we have Saul begging and pleading to be killed so he won't be made a mockery by the foreigners. In Jeremiah: King Zedekiah used it to describe the humiliating torture he underwent. And in Lamentations, it is used translated as afflicted in the destruction of Jerusalem. This is the one that is closest, but there it is the poet complaining about God's behavior, not God proudly bragging of his exploits! None of these uses seems to me to be at all similar to the horrendous punishments that the lord imposed on the Egyptians. And none of them is as light or as inconsequential as “mockery.”

Even more dismaying: this is apparently the first time in Tanakh that God actively intervenes in the mind of a deemed adversary. And by the way, was it Pharaoh or the Lord who declared the adversity? And the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, to make him do things that were not in the best interest of either his nation or his position. God found that his purpose, the Exodus and the making of a nation required the existence of an external enemy, even though God controlled the enemy. And Tanakh uses the term mockery! The god we recognize, daily, as the creator, the source of all that is good in the world, the model for our lives and our behavior, when we put on the tefillin, I betroth you to me with righteousness and justice, with love and compassion” whom we ask to save us from vicious people, evil neighbors, corrupt companions. When we say, this is Adonai our God, whose justice fills the earth? And he Mocks the Egyptians?

My argument is with the seeming frivolity of the language: that our job is to tell our sons and them their sons how our God “mocked” the Egyptians. He did a lot more than mock, he tortured, he killed, he took away their lifeblood, their commerce, their produce, he did this to the people of Egypt to convince their leader that his was a greater might.

Who am I to dispute the validity, the power, the mythology of the Exodus story. I try not to, merely to note that there is a whole world of difference, at least today, between mockery and intentional torture, I think that perhaps our tradition might be better understood if we took a closer look at the process of nation building that we underwent so many years ago.