

EXPENDABLE YOUTH

The story is told in the ancient midrash *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, which dates back to the fifth or sixth century of the common era, of the tenth plague, the Killing of the Firstborn. Moses and Aaron warn Pharaoh of this disaster about to befall Mitzrayim, but Pharaoh, as he did in the prior nine instances, stands firm. “I’m running the most powerful empire in the world, not a waffle stand,” he says to Moses. “Take a hike.”

The firstborn of Egypt hear of this looming threat and are understandably alarmed. They turn to their “fathers,” the leaders of the country, saying, “Every prediction made by Moses and Aaron has come to pass! You must do something to save us.” The elders of Egypt respond, “Well, each of us has many children, and if this is the price we have to pay, then so be it.” There were greater principles under assault. It was a test of their resolve, a challenge to the rule of law, an attack on the foundations of the economic system. There was too much at stake for the elders to buckle to the protests of these radical and foolish youth.

Not satisfied with the response of the elders, the firstborn of Mitzrayim turned directly to Pharaoh. Since Pharaoh was himself a firstborn, they expected he would identify with them. “Every prediction made by Moses and Aaron has come to pass! You must do something to save us,” they entreated. But Pharaoh responded, “Dolts! I have stood up to Moses, Aaron and Miriam nine times already. I’m all in. I’m not compromising the right to have slaves – this is a fundamental freedom of the Egyptian people that cannot be infringed. Our way of life depends on it. Egyptian slaveholders don’t kill children – Hebrew gods do. Be gone.” And on the way out, Pharaoh gave each youth delegate a clonk on the head.

This was a moment of clarity for the youth of Mitzrayim.

Riots broke out. Tens of thousands of elders were killed by the youth, who believed they were acting justly to save their own lives and the future of their society, and to oust the corrupt and selfish ruling class of the empire. It was a youth revolution. And so the freedom of the Hebrew slaves and the beginning of the end of the empire came only after the tenth and most terrible plague -- the Killing of the Firstborn.

The story of the Exodus as told in our Torah in the language of an epic myth is of course a fantasy from the ancient world. There could not possibly be a society that would value the rights of the wealthy

above the interests – let alone the very lives – of their own youth. It is not as if children are transported in fume-choked busses without seatbelts while money is transported in armored cars, instead of the other way around. We cannot imagine a society so morally bankrupt that the young people – even the children without voting rights – have to break the rules, organize themselves, and take control of their own destiny in the face of corrupt, impotent, moronic or malicious elders. And so it is hard for us enlightened moderns to appreciate the perspectives of these ancient

teachings, but we are commanded to stay up all night, if we have to, trying. As Rabban Gamliel taught: “In each generation, one should view [or show] oneself as having personally exited Egypt, as Scripture says, ‘You shall tell your progeny on that day, ‘for this purpose God took action for me when I left Egypt.’” If you don’t get it, your progeny will have to figure it out for themselves.

למִפְנֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּכֹרֵיהֶם בְּיַלְעוּלָם חֲסִדוֹ:

Praise Adonai: Who struck Egypt through their first-born, for Adonai’s steadfast love is beyond the bounds of time and space. (Psalm 136)

