

Parshat Bishalach- 2019/5779

On a Monday evening, on March 5, 1770, members of the British 29th Regiment of Foot Soldiers, having been placed in Boston to protect crown-appointed colonial officials from collecting an unpopular tax, opened fire on a harassing mob, who sought to vent their anger at the Crown on these regular soldiers. In an instant, three colonists were killed, with two more dying later of their wounds. As made famous by pamphleteers such as Paul Revere and Samuel Adams, this incident became known as the Boston Massacre, and was described as a dastardly attack on innocent civilians by armed British soldiers. Adams and Revere heavily disseminated their publications- which were effectively the Tweets of their time, under the names, Sons of Liberty, to encourage rebellion against the British authorities.

This initial incident, along the Boston Tea Party and the Battles of Lexington and Concord, are among those taught in Junior High School textbooks in the U.S. as historical flashpoints that led to and justified the American Revolution.

But was this what actually happened that night of March 5th?

In reality, the story is quite different and quite nuanced. After retreating to their fort on Castle Island, Acting Governor Thomas Hutchinson had eight soldiers and one officer arrested. In their trial on November 27, 1770, they were defended passionately by a young lawyer and future U.S. President, John Adams, who, as chance would have it, was Samuel Adams second cousin. John Adams presented eye-witness testimony that the soldiers, although quite scared, held their ground and did nothing in the face of taunts and insults over the first 20 minutes. However, as the mob became more unruly, some attacked the soldiers with clubs, stones, and snowballs. A more careful analysis showed that the snowballs were fashioned around sharp oyster shells- a formidable weapon. These attacks left the soldiers bloodied and fearing for their lives, and is what justified their officer to order them to open fire.

Adams argued that the soldiers had fired in self-defense, something that any jury would be sensitive to. Yet most don't know that Adams also stated in court that the soldiers were attacked by "*a motley rabble of saucy boys,*

negroes and molattoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jacktars." Jacktars were either low level merchant seamen who often were paid in rum in place of coin. Alternatively, Adams was referring to "jackatars", northerners of mixed French and American Indian descent who made their way to Boston for work. One should remember that juries in those days were made up of only men, and only white men who owned property or businesses. In Adam's plan, if his argument of self-defense didn't work, he would appeal to the jury-members' sense of prejudice. And it worked: 6 of the soldiers and the officer were acquitted, and two soldiers were given suspended sentences for manslaughter.

Why do I bring this event up? It is because this Shabbat is given the name *Shabbat Shira*, the Shabbat of song, referring to the *Shirat hayam* section in this week's parsha in which the Children of Israel "sing" praises to G-d for delivering them from death at the hands of Pharaoh's chariots by parting the Red Sea and then by drowning Pharaoh's soldiers. It has become traditional that many congregations use this occasion to have sing-a-longs and choir performances that celebrate song. Except, as with the Boston Massacre, the story is much more complex and nuanced.

The *Shirat hayam* portion is actually written in the Torah scroll in the form a poem, with individual lines spread out from right to left. Just to drive home to us that this is indeed a "song", the text says:

אֲזַיִר מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאֹמֶר
אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי גָאֵה גָאֵה סוּס וָרֶכֶב וַרְמָה בַיָּם
עָזִי וְזַמְרַת יְהוָה יְהִי לִי לִישׁוּעָה
זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאַנְוָהוּ אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי וְאַרְמְמָנְהוּ

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:

*I will sing to the Lord, for G-d is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver G-d has hurled into the sea.
My strength and the song of G-d; this, for me, has become my salvation.
This is my God and I will praise him, my father's God and I will exalt him.*

The first 4 lines alone have song or sing 4 times.

But lest anyone think this will turn into a Burt Bacharach medley, the text quickly turns just plain militaristic:

*The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name.
Pharaoh's chariots and his army, G-d has hurled into the sea.
The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea.
The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, Lord, was majestic in power.
Your right hand, Lord, shattered the enemy.
In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you.
You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble.
By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up.
The surging waters stood up like a wall; the deep waters congealed in the
heart of the sea.
The enemy boasted, 'I will pursue, I will overtake them.
I will divide the spoils; I will gorge myself on them.
I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy them.'
But you blew with your breath, and the sea covered them.
They sank like lead in the mighty waters.
Who among the gods is like you, Lord?
Who is like you— majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?
You stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies.
In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.
The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia.
The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will seize with
trembling, the people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall on
them.
By the power of your arm they will be as still as a stone—
until your people pass by, Lord, until the people you bought pass by.
You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—
the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, your hands
established.
The Lord reigns forever and ever. (here ends the poem)*

*When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the Lord
brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked
through the sea on dry ground.*

*Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all
the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing.*

*Miriam sang to them: Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.*

In reality, this sounds more like the Vikings than the Israelites. Weren't the Israelites, just days before, a ragtag mass of ex-slaves who were freed because the 10 plagues had devastated Egypt and sapped them of their will as oppressors. and also, this does not sound like is what we currently call "song".

So, what is this episode here to teach us? Rabbi Neil Gillman, a Professor of Jewish Philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, published many articles that argues that many of the stories in Torah are not meant to be taken as literal historical fact, events that could be corroborated by archeological findings or contemporaneous notes. He argued that all nations at their birth require mythologies, justifications for why they exist and why their institutions should be sacred and protected. Two great examples for him were the parting of the Red Sea and the giving of the 10 Commandments- the tablets, on Mount Sinai. That no physical or corroborating evidence of these events exists is not the point of what the Torah is trying to convey, he argued. What is being conveyed is a birth-of-a-nation narrative, with a mighty, militant G-d as the main character. Thus, although the Israelites in the story were physically weak and easy prey for Pharaoh's crack soldiers, they had the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob on their side. The 10 plagues- they were nothing, because if even some of the world's best soldiers try to attack us, you'll end up dead, sinking to the bottom of the Red Sea as stones. Suddenly, the Hebrews, 90-pound weaklings at best, could preen their chests with pride that they were no longer pushovers. For a new nation, this was the type of mythology that would instill pride and confidence, that would allow them to defeat militant tribes such as the Amalekites in the Sinai. They could now think, "with G-d as our mighty protector, we will fight our way back to the Promised Land." So important was this *Shira* that it is included in the daily *shacharit* prayers.

How do frightened ex-slaves, amassed on the Egyptian shore of the Red Sea, not knowing what to do next, wailing in despair, become a confident nation with a singular purpose, able to marshal an army to fight their way to their Promised Land? We are told in the Midrash that the Red Sea did not

part until Nachshon ben Aminadav, jumped in and walked until his nose was under water. For all the bravado in the *Shirat hayom*, for all its focus on G-d's supernatural acts in defeating the Egyptian soldiers, the one heroic human act by Nachshon is not mentioned. I submit it is because the Torah wants us to know that G-d will not act until one of us does first. Faith alone, prayer alone is insufficient; heroic action is needed. In this way, the *Shirat hayom* story is so similar to the stories developed around events such as the Boston Massacre. It's the story of people, in this case, colonists, taking the first steps of revolution. No matter what really happened in Boston in 1770 or on the banks of the Red Sea, the message for future generations is that discovery, no innovation, no new nation will form unless regular people act, even when the outcome is unclear. My hope for you this Shabbat is that each of us might strive to find that moment in time when we, too, can take that first step. And though this likely would not enshrine our names as heroes in the resulting story, that first step might create a whole new world.

Shabbat shalom