

## When the Nile Gave Up Its Terrible Secret

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Rabbinic commentators, in referring to an earlier exegete, sometimes say, “His interpretation requires its own interpretation.” All the more so it can be said that a midrashic interpretation sometimes needs its own midrashic interpretation, for in an effort to solve theological or textual difficulties, the midrash can present us with farfetched, even phantasmagoric, scenarios. Upon deeper reflection, however, we often discover that these phantasms are actually manifestations of profound truths. Let’s consider such a midrash, which both illuminates and is illuminated by a passage in this week’s Torah portion.

A straightforward reading of Exodus suggests that the Israelites were enslaved by two pharaohs consecutively. First, there was the “new sovereign . . . who knew not Joseph” (Exod. 1:8). Subsequently, after the description of the enslavement of the Israelites and the decrees promulgated against them—including the casting of all male Israelite children into the Nile—we read, “A long time after that, the king of Egypt died” (Exod. 2:23). Moreover, when God commands Moses to leave Jethro’s house and return to Egypt, “for all those who sought to kill you are dead” (Exod. 4:19); presumably, this would include Pharaoh. The plagues were thus not inflicted upon the pharaoh who initiated the persecution of the Israelites but upon his successor, thereby allowing the first pharaoh to evade retribution for his crimes. Perhaps for this reason, the midrash (Exodus Rabbah 1:34) claims that the meaning of Exodus 2:23 is not that Pharaoh *died* but rather that he became a leper, which for the rabbis was the equivalent of death. The same pharaoh who issued the decrees of enslavement and mass murder was also the one who experienced the full fury of the ten plagues.

The rabbis proceed to make a strange, even horrific, claim in order to deal with a difficulty in the next phrase in the

verse: “The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out.” One could reasonably ask: Why would the death—or illness—of the pharaoh be a cause for anguish? If anything, might it not be a reason to hope for relief from bondage? The rabbinic answer: Pharaoh’s magician-priests advised him that he could only be cured of his leprosy by bathing twice a day in the blood of newly slaughtered Israelite infants. It was this that caused the Israelites anguish.

The image of a pharaoh bathing in the blood of Israelite infants seems plucked from a Hieronymus Bosch painting. But further consideration reveals that this midrash is inspired by verses in this week’s Torah portion and is in fact a graphic rendering of their deeper significance.

In Exodus 7:14–18 Moses is told to warn Pharaoh of the imminent advent of the plague of blood, a punishment for Pharaoh’s refusal to release the Israelites from bondage. This warning is to be delivered to Pharaoh at the banks of the Nile (v. 15). With the exception of the plague of *arov*, whose advent was also announced on the shores of the Nile, Moses would come to Pharaoh’s palace to inform him of a forthcoming plague. Why, then, did God choose this locale for the announcement of the first plague?

God’s command to Moses begins, “Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile” (Exod. 7:15). The language suggests that Moses would be meeting Pharaoh in a time and place where Pharaoh was not functioning in his official role but rather engaging in a personal task. Perhaps, and let us imagine that this was the case, he was heading to the Nile to begin his day by bathing in its waters. Moses is to accost Pharaoh where he is neither surrounded by a phalanx of guards nor adorned with all the

symbols of his exalted status. It is a meeting of—actually, a confrontation between—two men.

Both men had intimate, but radically different, connections with the Nile. Pharaoh, as his people's protector, bore responsibility for their economic well-being, which depended on the rising of the Nile at the proper time and in proper proportion. Indeed, Ibn Ezra assumes that the meeting between Moses and Pharaoh took place in the summer, when the Nile floods, and that Pharaoh was checking a nilometer, a graduated structure that was constructed near the riverbank, to see if the Nile had risen sufficiently. In short, Pharaoh is closely linked with the Nile as Egypt's life-source.

Moses had a very different relationship with the Nile; if not for the kindness of Pharaoh's daughter he, like countless other Israelite infants, would have become its victim. As a survivor of the Pharaonic decree, Moses is able to speak on behalf of those who were never able to do so, and he does so by announcing the plague of blood. "You, Pharaoh," Moses is saying, "blithely regard the Nile as a source of blessing and pleasure. You have no qualms about drinking and bathing in its water even knowing as you do that the Nile is tainted by the blood of countless innocent victims. You are literally bathing in their blood. Somehow, you and your people have managed to shut out this horrible truth. You are now looking at someone who was almost killed as a result of your evil deeds, someone who is here to tell you that feigned ignorance will no longer be possible. All of the blood that the Nile contains as a result of your crimes will now surface. You will have no choice but to behold the evil that you have wrought."

The Torah is describing a turn of events that victims deserve but are rarely granted—that their suffering is commemorated in a way that cannot be denied. More often, victims not only endure torture and death; they also suffer the indignity of being forgotten and their suffering denied.

Usually, but not always. In modern times, another river has been forced to give up its terrible secret. The Danube, into which countless mortally wounded Jews were thrown by the

Hungarian Arrow Cross police in December of 1944 and January of 1945, quickly ran blue after the atrocities of those months. It was only in 2005 that film director Can Togay, together with sculptor Gyula Pauer, created *Shoes on the Danube Promenade*. In addition to cast-iron signs memorializing the victims, the installation consists of 60 pairs of 1940s-style shoes, true to life in size and detail, sculpted out of iron. Based on the fact that the victims were forced to remove their shoes before being shot—shoes were a valuable wartime commodity—the memorial uncannily evokes both the imagined presence and the physical absence of the victims.

The Jewish people have recently been the victims of atrocities the likes of which have not been experienced since the Holocaust. What will be—or already has been—denied? Will the stream of history continue to flow as if this moment never happened? Will nothing be learned? Or will the voices of the victims be heard and heeded?