



Living in the Double Exposure

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

Parashat Ki Teitzei 5785

I was eight years old in Basel, Switzerland the day I learned about the way places have layers.

It was a chilly, autumn *shabbos*, and my father and I were on a walk by the river. My father pointed out different sights as we walked: there is the house where his elementary school friend lived. There is the gate they walked through to get to school, there is the shop run by the woman rumored to be a witch. And there, he said, pointing to a small, shady area, is the place where they burned the Jews in the 14th century.

The rest of the afternoon was like a double exposure: there are the roasted chestnuts, there is the witch, and there is the place where they burned the Jews. For the first time, I began to understand what it is like when something so beautiful becomes, while retaining all its magic, something terrible as well.

Egypt, from Shemot through Devarim, is associated almost exclusively with Jewish suffering. In this week's *parashah*, however, we encounter a new *mitzvah*, one which throws our understanding of Egypt into the dizziness of the double exposure:

דברים כג:

לא תתעב מצרי כי גר היית בארצו:



Devarim 23:8

You shall not despise an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in that land.

Rashi, in his comment on this *pasuk*, highlights this suffering and the reason for this *mitzvah*

רש"י שם

"לא תתעב מצרי". מכל וכל, אף על פי שזרקו זכוריהם לַיָּאֹר. מֵה טַעַם? שֶׁהָיוּ לָכֶם אֲכֻסְנִיָּא בְּשַׁעַת הַדְּחָק

Rashi on Devarim 23:8

"You may not despise an Egyptian"—despite it all, even though they threw your boys into the Nile. Why? Because they were hosts for you in a time of need.

You may not despise an Egyptian, even though you endured terrible suffering at their hands, even though their nation is the paradigm for persecution. Why? Because you were a stranger in their land. Because, Rashi explains, they hosted you in a time of dire need.

Once, generations earlier, Egypt was a place of safety for Ya'akov and his family in a time of famine. And so, despite the subsequent years of persecution, we are commanded to remember that initial hospitality. We are commanded to remember the good beginning of what became one of our darkest stories, and we are commanded to let that memory guide our treatment of Egyptians in the future. In memory of the time we spent there as strangers, we are commanded never to hate them.

Egypt is a place caught in a double exposure. For the Jews, Egypt has long been a nightmare, a place of slavery and oppression, of beatings and cold-blooded murder. One imagines that for the Jews in Egypt, every place must have a secret meaning: beautiful houses as places of servitude, cool bathing spots in the river as the place where baby boys drown.

The first plagues do the work of making that double exposure visible to the rest of the population. Both of the first two plagues begin in the Nile where Jewish boys were drowned.



The first, blood, makes it clear that the Nile, the source of life for the Egyptian people—the place where even Bat Paroah, the woman who saved Mose bathed—is actually a site of mass murder. All of Egypt, suddenly, is forced to confront the truth that what is life-giving and sustaining for them has been the locus of unbearable suffering for the people they oppress. The second plague, the frogs, exposes the horror even more explicitly. The frogs, we are told, emerge from the Nile itself—still, presumably, filled with blood. In picturing the image of the frogs—small, slimy creatures crawling out of the river used as a mass infant grave—it is easy to imagine that as the frogs started to emerge, people thought that they were seeing thousands of ghosts emerge from their watery graves.

Read this way, the first two plagues are a way of exposing the hidden underbelly of Israelite suffering to the Egyptians, of making explicit and raw what denial and callousness may have disguised. They are a way of bringing the Egyptians out of their day-to-day understanding of their country and of making the other, blurry side of the double exposure unbearably clear.

In Parashat Ki Teitzei, the tables are turned: while until now this story was one in which the Egyptians are made to see the truth about their land—unambiguously evil for Benei Yisrael—in this moment, we, the readers and inheritors of the Torah and the narrative of slavery, are forced into the dizziness of double exposure. In this moment, however briefly, we are forced to recognize that there are aspects of Egypt to which we owe gratitude. In this moment, it is we who are forced to learn that the multivalence of places does not allow us to neatly cordon off the beautiful and ugly: we are touched by the meanings of other people and groups. It is impossible, in this reading, to fully separate the memory of nightmarish tragedy from miraculous safety.

The Torah resists the temptation to tell a single story about Egypt. It is not the place of dreams we might have expected from Yosef's brief reign, but the Torah is still unwilling to overwrite those parts of our story in order to create a single narrative. We are reminded that our story in Egypt is one of beauty mixed with pain, gratitude mixed with deep resentment.



We are commanded to give room to both, to treat our stories with the integrity and nuance they deserve.

We are commanded, in this *mitzvah* not to hate the Egyptian, to remember the past in all its complexity: not to forget the suffering that we endured, but at the same time, not to allow our memories to become exclusively dark. We are commanded to remember honestly. We are commanded to remember moments of beauty and kindness even as we remember suffering, persecution, and darkness. We are commanded to live in the only truly honest way: in the double exposure.

