The Jewish Week

By Steve Lipman April 3, 2012 12:00 am

Diane Sharon recently taught a course on ancient Egypt at Temple Emanu-El's Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning.

The Jewish Week asked Sharon, a Riverdale resident, to put the Exodus story, related in the Haggadah at the Passover seder, into historical context.

Lipman: The title of the recent course you taught at the Skirball Center is "Ancient Egypt in the Bible: Myth or History?" What's your answer?

Sharon: Every episode of the Bible asks the theological question, "What is our proper relationship with God?" and not the historical question "What actually happened?" Biblical theology holds the values of Israel: What does God ask of us? What happens if Israel doesn't live up to God's expectations? These are the concerns of each biblical episode, more than what actually happened or whether it actually happened at all.

Lipman: Does science — i.e., archaeology, historical texts, etc. — "prove" the biblical version of what happened to the Israelites in Egypt and what happened afterwards in the wilderness? Did the Hebrew slaves actually build the pyramids?

Sharon: There is no direct evidence corroborating any specific element of the story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, though some scholars do suggest that elements of Egyptian history fit the spirit and setting, if not the actual events, of Israel's experience in Egypt. For example, between 1700 and 542 B.C.E., during a disruption in Egyptian dynastic succession called the Second Intermediate Period, the Hyksos, a mixed group of mostly Canaanite tribes, infiltrated and took control of Lower Egypt. The story of Joseph's rise to power may be set during this period. Their expulsion, and the re-establishment of Egyptian dynasties, suit the background of the biblical account in Exodus 1:8 of the advent of an Egyptian king who knew not Joseph.

Similarly, the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II, 1290 to 1224 B.C.E., is known for an extensive building program, including his capital city named after himself, conscripting many, especially foreigners, into forced labor. In Exodus 1:11, the Israelites are said to have built a city called Ramses. Toward the end of his reign, Egyptian power waned, which might have allowed for the establishment of Israel in Canaan. Thus, perhaps the period between 1700 and 1200 B.C.E. offers the most likely setting for the Israelite experience in Egypt, although there is still no corroboration that any specific event recounted in Exodus actually happened, including whether the Israelites actually built the pyramids.

Lipman: Is it heresy or simply a matter of empirical research to question the authenticity of the Torah's ancient Egypt scenario?

Sharon: There is a general misconception that history is more valid than theology. But if you base your belief on historical "facts" that are later falsified, where does that leave your faith? Much as we want to believe that the biblical accounts are historically accurate, they may be even more powerful for what they tell us about ourselves, and about our relationships to God and to each other. Israel's relationship with Egypt is a metaphor for the theological choice between two different paths: either follow the God of Israel toward Salvation, or remain enslaved in the ways of the world. For us, as Jews, there is no more powerful idea than that.

Lipman: If there's doubt about these basics, does it undermine the foundations of Jewish history and of the seder?

Sharon: The theological ideas that God redeems us from enslavement and reveals the divine word to us at Sinai are the very foundation of the seder, and of the way we make sense of ourselves as Jews. The idea that there are "70 faces" of the Torah invites us to continue to find new interpretations so that the Torah continues to be a living document for Jews of all denominations, in all time periods.

Lipman: How does your expertise on ancient Egypt affect your own seders? Do you pepper the seder table with arcane references?

Sharon: My uncle, Rabbi Joseph Greenstein, modeled a focus on social justice for our family seders; today, my seders incorporate into the traditional ritual a spirit of feminism, of social justice and of the wider metaphoric meaning of liberation from narrowness to expansiveness. Not only Jews, but people of all backgrounds, resonate with the powerful biblical archetypes of enslavement in Egypt and a miraculous Exodus to freedom. The American black struggle for freedom and equality took on this narrative, as did the Catholic grass-roots liberation theology movement in the slums of Brazil. These cultures resonate, as each of us is commanded to do at every seder, with the powerful biblical archetypes of Egyptian enslavement and an Exodus to freedom.