

After the Charlie Hebdo Attack in Paris

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Congregation B'nai B'rith

This week, we begin the second book of the Torah, Exodus, and are plunged immediately into the darkness of slavery and genocide. A new Pharaoh, King of Egypt, comes to power and becomes alarmed at the growing numbers of the Hebrews. So he enslaves them, seeking to control them, and when they continue to produce more and more babies, the Pharaoh issues an order that every Hebrew male child that is born shall be thrown into the Nile River and drowned.

It is the first Holocaust in Jewish history.

And in the midst of the death and the darkness, the first ray of light shines from two women. We are even told their names: Shifra and Pfuah. They are the Hebrew midwives. Two courageous women who defy the direct order of the most powerful man in the world, the Egyptian god/king Pharaoh, and they refuse to carry out his order....and they get away with it. Pharaoh learns that his order is not being carried out and demands to know why and they reply with what sounds like a joke!:"the Hebrew women are chayot....they are animals! Before we can get to them, they have already given birth!" The now enraged king responds by ordering that all male babies...even the Egyptians....be drowned. The Pharaoh is still capable of violence and destruction, but already in the first chapter of the book, a tiny lamp glows in the darkness. The light of Shifra and Pfuah.

The Torah says nothing further about Shifra and Pfuah, but in the midrash, Jewish legend says that these were alternative names for the mother and sister of Moses....known to us otherwise as Yocheved and Miriam. And the legend even tells us why Miriam had the nickname of Pfuah. It was because she *hofiah panim* before her father Amram...she got in his face. The legend tells that Amram was head of the community of Jewish slaves in Egypt and when he heard the decree that all baby boys were to be destroyed, he became depressed and stopped sleeping with his wife....seeing no point in making new babies. And all the other Jewish men did the same. Then his daughter, little Miriam...aka Pfuah...stepped up to him and said "you are worse than Pharaoh! Pharaoh decreed only against the boys, but the men are following your example and because of you there will be no boys OR girls!" This is another story of a small and powerless person standing up and telling the truth to power. But this time, the man in power is Amram, father of Moses.

Our redemption story tells over and over again of a challenge to power...whether that power is Egyptian or Jew. Soon, Moses begins to speak truth to power, coming before Pharaoh and demanding "Let my people go." And a few chapters later, Moses speaks the truth to God Himself...when God is enraged by the Jews worshipping the Golden Calf and ready to wipe them out. Moses says "Hold on. Think of the headlines: God brings Jews out of slavery and then wipes them out in the wilderness!"

In our sacred book, even God...the ultimate power....gets challenged, and even made fun of. According to one legend, Moses says to God "Look, this calf can really help you out. You can rule make the wind blow and he can make it rain. You can rule the day and he can rule the night." And God says to Moses "Moses! What's the matter with you?? That calf has no power!" At which Moses says "So why are you so upset?"

In this religion, we don't mind even making fun of God. He can take it.

On Wednesday, twelve people were gunned down by Muslim extremists in the offices of Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical magazine. The editor and cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo were apparently targeted because of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed and making fun of Islam....as well as just about everybody else. As you have probably heard, there were more hostages today, and four more are dead...as well as the attackers.

I have felt my emotions welling up within me in response to images on the internet: the crowds in the public squares in Paris holding up candles spelling NOT AFRAID, and an outpouring of cartoons from around the world...most of them summoning the cartoonists of the world to take up pens and pencils in response to the violence, and the black signs lifted up saying Je Suis Charlie, "I am Charlie" in every language. In this moment, a tidal wave of protest has risen up, defending free speech, and the right to make a joke.....even one in bad taste, even one that makes fun of religion.

I was also moved to see a lengthy thread of comments from Islamic leaders and ordinary Muslims denouncing the attack: This is not my Islam! "These are criminals, barbarians. They have sold their soul to hell. This not freedom. This is not Islam and I hope the French will come out united at the end of this."

There have been other, quieter voices asking: while condemning utterly the massacre, the murders, should we be not also be asking about what are the limits of free speech. What about hate speech? Were some of those cartoons hate speech? The Muslims of France are an oppressed minority; what protection exists for their dignity?

Amidst all of the articles and comments I read yesterday and today, one comment in particular left me thinking. It just appeared on a long thread of comments, saying "I believe that nothing is sacred; or rather, that nothing sacred is made less so by a joke." I do not know who wrote it, but it stopped me and made me think. First of all, the writer began to say one thing and then ended saying something very different. He began to say "I believe that nothing is sacred"...a statement which leaves me feeling empty and cold. But then he changed to say "or rather, nothing sacred is made less so by a joke."

This I think is our old Jewish wisdom about the sacred and humor.

Ever since Abraham and Sarah named their son "Isaac," which means "laughing," we have understood that humor smashes idols and that the true God is not hurt in any way by a joke. On the contrary, God is found in the surprise, the completely unexpected truth that is revealed when we burst out in laughter.

The editors and cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo were at times obscene, and at times insulting and abusive. But in the end they gave their lives for the true God,

who remains alive and ablaze after all the idols have been smashed. May their lives be for a blessing. Shabbat Shalom.