

Troubling Traditions

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Like Dr. Mary Boys, my initial problem with this assignment was choosing which troubling text to share with you. There are, as she suggests, so many, and confronting them is often painful. I remember what it felt like to be the only woman in my rabbinical school class thirty-five years ago as we studied the section in the *Mishnah* (a foundational rabbinic legal text) that described sex with a girl less than three years old as “like putting a finger in the eye and therefore of no legal significance.”

This was years before there were women teachers in my rabbinical seminary, before the pioneering work of Dr. Rachel Adler and other scholars like her who helped the Jewish world confront these “texts of terror.” The Torah of my life challenged much of the Torah of the tradition... my own experience as a woman demanded that I ask different questions from those my male classmates and teachers were asking. In those days it felt pretty lonely to be asking those questions. Not any more, thank God.

I could have chosen one of those many texts, the story of Dina, perhaps, or perhaps even more important, the story of the epiphany at Mt. Sinai and the troubling possibility that Moses’ admonition to the people (Ex.19:15) “Be ready against the third day; do not go near a woman” suggests that women were not part of the community who experienced revelation. But while wrestling with patriarchal texts at best, or misogynist texts at worst, remains crucial, in the past thirty years the flowering of feminist interpretation and scholarship has changed the ways we look at those texts. Merle Feld describes it best in her wonderful poem “We All Stood Together”:

My brother and I were at Sinai
He kept a journal
of what he saw
of what he heard
of what it all meant to him

I wish I had such a record
of what happened to me there

It seems like every time I want to write
I can't
I'm always holding a baby
one of my own
or one for a friend
always holding a baby
so my hands are never free
to write things down

And then
as time passes
the particulars
the hard data
the who what when where why
slip away from me
and all I'm left with is
the feeling

But feelings are just sounds
the vowel barking of a mute

My brother is so sure of what he heard
after all he's got a record of it
consonant after consonant after consonant
If we remembered it together
we could recreate holy time
sparks flying ⁱ

In the years since my ordination and the more than twenty-five years since Merle wrote her poem, we are remembering it together... and sparks are indeed flying.

And then I read Mary's powerful paper. What moved me most was her courage in confronting what she calls "a telling," and how a faith community "tells" the central truth of a tradition through ritual, symbol, and prayer, as well as narrative.

Her courage challenged me to choose a different approach to troubling traditions – to choose a text that is part of a ritual fundamental to the master narrative of the Jewish people: the exodus from Egypt as it is re-lived every year in the Passover *seder*. The troubling text begins in Hebrew: "*Shefokh hamatkha*, Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that know You not, and upon the families that call not on Your name; for they have devoured Jacob, yea, they have devoured him and consumed him, and have laid waste his habitation." (Psalms 79:6,7) "Pour out Your wrath on them; may Your blazing anger overtake them." (Psalms 69:25) "Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord." (Lamentations 3:66)

Shefokh hamatkha appears in the *hagaddah*, the script that creates the *seder* experience, late in the *seder*. Surprisingly, this call for vengeance against our enemies appears exactly at the moment we open our door for Elijah, the forerunner of the messiah.

What I would like to do is to explore this troubling text, this prayer, this piece of ritual, through Mary's rubric of a fivefold telling.

A Trembling Telling:

First, a bit of history. This prayer, which is composed of different verses from Psalms and Lamentations, doesn't appear uniformly in *Haggadot* until the early medieval times, although there are

variations which appear earlier. I don't need to detail the blood libel charges against Jews that made Passover such a dangerous time for Jews, beginning in that period. Mary alluded to that in her paper. What is surprising is that the ritual calls us to open the door at this point. Wouldn't it make more sense to open the door at the beginning of the *seder*, when we invite all those who are hungry to come eat with us?

Some scholars believe that that used to be the tradition, until it became too dangerous for Jews to let strangers into their homes. Hostile authorities watched the *seder* ceremony to prove the blood libel, particularly at the beginning of the evening. But later at night, it was less likely that the ceremony was being watched by those who would want to hurt us. So only then could we open our door and vent our "trembling" anger born out of fear and experience. Not only the biblical story of slavery and the night of watching described in Exodus, but also the centuries of oppression and persecution, make this "trembling telling" so true.

A Troubling / Tragic Telling

In general, Judaism is not a tradition that emphasizes revenge. Though one finds other passages (for example, in the Book of Esther), it is relatively rare to find a call for revenge so explicit. Troubling becomes tragic, as Mary points out, when the power to act on the telling is real. Throughout the centuries, when Jews had little political power, it would have been impossible to act out this telling. But now that Israel exists as a Jewish state, it is, theoretically at least, possible that this telling of vengeance could become tragic. All the more reason why it is important for Jews all over the world to support the democratic values that are at the core of Israel's Declaration of Independence.

And it is important to be honest with ourselves. From time to time there are people, Jews, who have turned this troubling telling into a tragic one. I think of Baruch Goldstein, who, on Purim morning in

1994, entered the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a site sacred to both Jews and Moslems, and massacred twenty-nine Moslems and wounded one hundred fifty others who were gathered there in prayer.

A Transformed Telling

So what do we do about this passage? One could do what I did growing up. We just skipped it. It had been deleted from the *hagaddot* of my childhood, edited out by the Reform Movement which was frankly embarrassed by it. We live in America now, a place we feel safe and free. There is no need for revenge.

But of course, by editing it out of the *hagaddah*, we never had to face this dark side of our tradition. It didn't exist; it was simply invisible. Easy then to say, "What is wrong with those other religions! Jews could never be religious extremists violently acting out what they believe to be God's word." Easy to say... but perhaps not true. Pretending troubling traditions don't exist is not confronting them.

And the truth is, feelings of revenge are real. How can a Jew think of the holocaust without thinking of revenge? Or see the double standard to which Israel is subjected without sometimes feeling a sense of rage? Even I, progressive and liberal as I am, I confess: I have moments of imagining revenge.

So ought I recite this text? And how ought I to do it? Loudly and with celebration? Or quietly, with awareness both of the history of my people and the danger that could come if some fantasies come true?

Part of the extraordinary power of the *seder* experience is the opportunity to raise questions. We tell the story of the exodus through questions and discussion. This moment in the *seder*, this troubling tradition, can open up an important conversation.

One way to provoke the conversation is by introducing new interpretations, transformed tellings, of the troubling text along with the original. There are many versions of this prayer, many different interpretations. Among the transformed tellings of this text is that of Rabbi Leopold Stein (1810-1882), a German Reform rabbi:

Pour out Your spirit on all flesh
May all nations come to serve You
Together in one language
Because the Lord is the Sovereign of Nations

Another, more recent version, challenges us to remember that Jews have not always been alone:

Pour out your love on the nations who have known
You and on the kingdoms who call upon Your name.
For they show loving-kindness to the seed of Jacob
and they defend your people Israel from those who
would devour them alive. May they live to see the
sukkah of peace spread over your chosen ones and
to participate in the joy of your nations. ⁱⁱ

These versions are transformed tellings. And, in juxtaposition with the original, they can open up an important discussion at any *seder* table.

Another way to provoke the conversation is by introducing new rituals. One we use in our *seder* is to invite our guests to participate in the filling of Elijah's cup by pouring some of their wine into his cup. This custom, introduced by Rabbi Naftali of Ropschitz, symbolizes that redemption will come when we all work together to change the world.

A Transforming Telling

Mary concludes her paper with the statement: “I believe it is absolutely crucial that we Christians learn to tell our story in ways that do justice to its complex history... [and then she goes on] ultimately we seek a retelling that will be transforming, inviting us to new depths of commitment.”

I would say the same thing about the Jewish story. In fact, *shfokh hamatkha* invites us to seek a retelling: a retelling that reminds us that vengeance can only be in God’s hands, not ours. It underscores that the central message of Passover and the master narrative of Jewish tradition is one of liberation and redemption, not one of revenge: “in every generation it is incumbent on each of us to look upon ourselves as though we really had come out of Egypt, that narrow place.” Yes, we were once slaves, yes, horrible things have been perpetrated against our people (and other peoples), yes, in our lives there are often narrow places. *Shfokh hamatkha* reminds us to be mindful of the danger that anger can cloud our vision of what we are called to do: to open the door for Elijah and the work we need to do as individuals and as a people to redeem the world.

ⁱ Merle Feld, “*We All Stood Together*,” first published in the Reconstructionist Siddur, *Kol Haneshamah*, 1989.

ⁱⁱ This prayer was first published by the bibliographer Naftali Ben-Menahem in 1963. It was supposedly discovered by Rabbi Hayyim Bloch (1881-ca. 1970) in a beautiful manuscript on parchment from the estate of Rabbi Shimshon Wertheimer (1658-1724). The Haggadah was supposed to have been edited in Worms in 1521 by “Yehudah b”r Yekutiel, the grandson of Rashi,” but the manuscript was lost during the Holocaust. However, a number of scholars have pointed out that this prayer was probably invented by Hayyim Bloch himself, who was born in Galicia and later moved to Vienna (ca. 1917) and New York (1939). He was one of the rabbis who published the Kherson letters attributed to the Besht and his disciples, which later turned out to be forgeries. He also published a letter from the Maharal of Prague, whose authenticity was already disproved by Gershom Scholem. (from “Three Customs Regarding ‘Pour Out Thy Wrath,’” by Rabbi David Golinkin, from [My Jewish Learning.com](http://MyJewishLearning.com))