

Lieve Teugels

Zakhor. Do later troubles cause the former ones to be forgotten?

Assuredly, a time is coming – declares the Lord – when it shall no more be said, »As the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt«, but rather, »As the Lord lives, who brought out and led the offspring of the House of Israel from the northland and from all the lands to which I have banished them« (Jer 16:14–15/23:7–8). [...]

They told this parable. To what is the matter similar?

To someone who was walking on the road and he encountered a wolf and he was rescued from it and he would repeat what happened to him with the wolf. He encountered a lion and he was rescued from it. He forgot what happened with the wolf and he would tell what happened to him with the lion. After that he encountered a snake and was rescued from it. He forgot what happened with both of them and he went on and told what happened to him with the snake.

So also do later troubles cause the former ones to be forgotten.

Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Pischa 16

The above is a rabbinic biblical commentary, or midrash.¹ It is found in a third-century Midrash² on the book of Exodus, the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael. The midrash contains a parable, to which I will turn later. The commentary bears on a remarkable prophecy by Jeremiah,³ who lived before and during the Babylonian

¹ Parallels of this midrash are found in Mekhilta de rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Shirata, the Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 13a, and other rabbinic sources. See Lieve M. Teugels: *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot. An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2019, 107–114.

² I use Midrash with a capital to refer to a specific rabbinic work containing biblical commentary, and (a) midrash to refer to a specific unit of rabbinic biblical interpretation, or to the process or phenomenon of rabbinic biblical interpretation.

³ The biblical quote is a combination of Jer 23:7–8 and 16:14–15. Many modern commentators believe this »oracle of restoration« or »proclamation of salvation« does not belong in Jer 16:14–15, others are of the opinion that it is not original to Jeremiah in either

Exile (597–539 B.C.E). Jeremiah's prophecy implies that, when the Babylonian exile will have ended, that latest rescue will »replace« the slavery in and exodus from Egypt in the memory of the people. Jeremiah himself was not exiled to Babylonia, but he may have sent this prophecy in a letter to encourage his fellow Israelites who were deported to Babylon. Probably he himself was in Egypt at the time, which would make the contrast »Egypt« – »the northland« even more relevant.

The exodus from Egypt is the main example of divine liberation in Judaism, starting with the Hebrew Bible. The covenant between God and Israel is irrevocably connected to this historical experience. Thus, the first commandment in the Jewish tradition reads:

I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (Ex 20:2)

To affirm that the return from the Babylonian exile will overrule the Exodus in the experience of the people is therefore an extraordinary statement by the Prophet. This can only be explained by the fact that the presently felt trouble is always more urgent than some experience from a remote past.

In rabbinic literature, the Exodus continues, and is even developed more, as the prototypical liberation; the slavery in Egypt as the prototypical suffering; Pharaoh as the prototype of evil; and Moses as the prototype of the Jewish saviour and leader. The fact that Jeremiah is often depicted as the new Moses in rabbinic texts, may be an additional reason why the rabbinic interpreter chose to elaborate on these two prophetic verses in a commentary on the book of Exodus.⁴ His being considered the »new Moses« may have mitigated the daring lesson at the end of the passage: »So also do later troubles cause the former ones to be forgotten.« How else could the forgetting of the Exodus be explained, the one holiday, next to the Shabbat (Ex 20:8), of which it is emphatically stated in the Bible that it should be »remembered«?

Moses said to the people, »Remember (zakhor) this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the Lord brought you out from this place«. (Ex 13:3)

place. See William L. Holladay: *Jeremiah. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, 1: Chapters 1–25*, Philadelphia: Fortress 1986, 621–22. In the present discussion of a midrash, this is not relevant, as the rabbinic sages take the order, chronology and authenticity of all passages in the Bible for granted. They do, however, try to explain the verses as they appear in this context. The present midrash is an endeavor to do just that.

⁴ See Jewish Encyclopedia: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8586-jeremiah>. Some reasons for this comparison are that, like Moses, Jeremiah initially refused to head to his calling; and like Moses, Jeremiah spent some time in Egypt.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in his iconic book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, writes about rabbinic thought:⁵

Unlike the biblical writers the rabbis seem to play with time as though with an accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will.

History and myth merge in the remembrance of the Exodus. I already mentioned that of both the Exodus and the Shabbat, it is stated that these should be »remembered« (*zakhor*). The connection between the two holidays is in a way symbiotic. Indeed, the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt, and the divine delivery thereof, are remembered every week, in the blessing of the Shabbat:

You made the holy Shabbat our heritage as a reminder (*zikkaron*) of the work of Creation. As first among our sacred days, it is a remembrance (*zekher*) of the going out of Egypt.

The seventh day is called »a remembrance of the going out of Egypt«. A remarkable thing is happening here: the seventh day of the creation of the world is celebrated as a remembrance of something that would happen much later: the exodus from Egypt. In the Pesach Haggadah we read:

In every generation, each person must regard himself as if he himself had come out of Egypt.

Chronological time does not count here. Every trouble and every delivery is measured against that prototypical event.

Now let's shift our attention to the parable which takes up most of our midrash. In this *mashal*, a person is subsequently rescued from several dangerous animals. After each subsequent rescue, he goes and tells his friends about the latest danger, and how he escaped from it. He forgets the previous experience: the danger and the rescue.

As often, the *mashal* and its application (called *nimshal*) do not fully match.⁶ The *nimshal* (»Later troubles cause the former ones to be forgotten«) mentions

⁵ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi: *Zakhor. Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies, Seattle: University of Washington Press 1996, 17.

⁶ A rabbinic parable has a stereotypical structure that as a rule consists of two parts: the parable proper (*mashal*) and the application (*nimshal*). Both *mashal* and *nimshal* are generally introduced with stereotypical formula. Here, we find the common introductions »They told this parable. To what is the matter similar?« for the *mashal*, and »so also« for the *nimshal*. In parables in midrash, the *nimshal* is an inherent part of the literary form: it is not a later redactional addition as is sometimes said of the applications that are connected to some of the parables attributed to Jesus in the gospels. Often the *nimshal*

the forgetting of the trouble, but not the remembering of the escape and rescue that take centre stage in the parable. Also in the verses from Jeremiah, the focus is on the remembering of the delivery: from the Egyptian slavery, and from the Babylonian exile. On the other hand, the application, which reminds us of the epimythium (moral) of a fable, does match both situations in that it is the chronological order of the events that counts, not their severity. A snake is not worse than a wolf or a lion. Similarly, the Babylonian exile was not worse than the Egyptian slavery: it just came later.

We find two models of remembrance here: history and memory. The first chronological, the second a-temporal. Both occur side-to-side in the Bible and in the rabbinic tradition. And thus they also occur in our lives.

Do recent escapes of recent troubles indeed diminish the memory of earlier rescues from earlier troubles? Can subsequent historical dramas, such as wars and genocides, be compared with each other?

These are important and ever-topical questions. They touch upon the essence of history as a science and as a lived experience. On the fourth of May, the Netherlands remember the troubles of the Second World War. On the fifth we remember the freedom that came with the liberation. Nowadays victims of other »troubles« claim their place in the remembrance- and liberation ceremonies: victims of colonization and slavery, for example, and of other wars. Some older and some more recent than the Second World War. In one of the recent celebrations of the 75 years of liberation of my town 's-Hertogenbosch, the event was laced with talks and performances by Syrian refugees. Troubles remind us of other troubles, and the before or after is perceived as less important.

This seems only natural: humans have a tendency to stack similar events on top of each other. We pile up experiences so as not to forget anything. In Judaism, this accumulation of events is found in almost all holidays. The most memory-stacking happens on the fast day of Tisha-be Av, the Ninth of the month Av in the summer. On this day, only losses are remembered, not deliveries. Jews mourn the loss of the first temple as well as the destruction of the second temple, and many other calamities and losses experienced in the course of Jewish history.

Sometimes people cannot deal with stacking. Only one trouble at the time seems to be enough. Even more: a previous trouble might detract the attention from the severity of the present, own case. In a recent visit to Ukraine, I saw the painful side-effects of the rise of nationalism. The infamous Chmelnysky, the Cossack leader who was responsible for many pogroms against Jews, is still, and increasingly, celebrated as a national hero, including the erection of new

ends with the repetition of the base verse. In the parallel to this parable in the Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the verses from Jeremiah are in fact repeated at the end of the passage (see note 1). See e.g., Lieve Teugels: *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot* (see note 1), 13–15; David Stern: *Parables in Midrash. Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1991, 16–19.

monuments. In several places, there is a struggle going on about who »owns« the memorial sites for the victims of the Nazis: the patriots who gave their life for their country in the Second World War, or the Jews who were massacred, thousands at a time, in these spots. Many similar examples from other places can be given.

Later troubles cause earlier troubles to be forgotten was not meant as an advisory lesson by the rabbis. It may be an observation of something that happens often, but not something to be encouraged. The task of a historian is to give each event its rightful place, document and interpret it, with as additional task to educate people in how they can learn from history. So that troubles will not be repeated because they have been forgotten.