

Parshat Beshalach

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Jewish Blood Is Not Cheap

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By Rabbi Avi Weiss

Although the Torah often points out the infinite value of every human life, this week's parsha gives a clear message about the value of Jewish life. We are told that no one will be permitted to murder Jews with impunity.

In the Shirat Hayam (Song at the Sea), Moshe (Moses) and the Jewish people use three expressions to describe the downfall of the Egyptians. The Egyptians drowning in the sea are described as "they descended in the depths like stone." (Exodus 15:5) In a second expression, Moshe describes the defeat of the Egyptians in the following manner. "You sent forth Your wrath it consumes them like straw." (Exodus 15:7) There is one other image used to portray the drowning. The Jews sing out that "they sank as lead in the mighty waters." (Exodus 15:10)

One could claim that these phrases seem contradictory. Did the Egyptians sink like stone, like straw or like lead? Which was it?

Rashi notes that these variant similes are descriptive of different Egyptians who were punished in accordance with what they deserved. The most wicked were tossed around like weightless straw--they were allowed to brutally suffer. The best of the group drowned like lead, which of course sinks immediately--they suffered the least. Those who did not fall into any clear category sank like stones.

What emerges from Rashi is the precision of punishment, moreover, the clear statement that those who were guilty of oppressing and murdering Jews would receive their due.

In 1956, Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik wrote that with the establishment of the State of Israel, "God…suddenly manifested Himself." One such manifestation was that "Jewish blood is not free for taking, is not hefker." (Kol Dodi Dofek) During the Shoah, Jewish life, for most of the world, was worthless. It is said that in Hungary it was decided that Jews would not even be gassed before being incinerated. The cost of the gassing was a fraction of a penny. Even in death we were worth nothing.

With the establishment of the state, Rav Soloveitchik declared that one could sense God's presence in that Jews would be protected. No one would be able to spill blood in Israel without a strong response. The Jewish community in Israel was sending a message to Jews in the exile who felt more vulnerable—"Don’t be afraid."

Even as we seek peace – Jewish life is precious. One can only hope that Israel find peace while keeping true to the principle of "Jewish blood is not cheap."