

TWO POLYPHONIC NARRATIONS: THE SPLITTING OF THE RED SEA AND THE TREATY WITH THE GIVONITES

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POLYPHONIC NARRATIONS

Polyphonic Narration is a biblical literary technique for presenting two competing narratives “almost simultaneously.” In its Creation Story, the Torah presents two views of man. The first chapter describes man as intrigued by the drama of the cosmos and entrusted with conquering and mastering nature, the second chapter describes man in covenantal terms as submitting to something greater than himself with whom he can share in a community. These two narrations are presented consecutively, one chapter after another.¹

However, life is not usually easily compartmentalized. Contrasting narrations need not necessarily reflect an inner contradiction in the nature of man, what R. Soloveitchik describes as “[m]an’s dialectical seesawing between the cosmic and covenantal experience of God...”² They might just as well reflect competing perspectives on the nature of an event. Rather than presenting two narrations consecutively, the narrations might be presented “almost simultaneously” as a polyphonic narration, as if two narrators are standing side-by-side, each alternately interrupting each other to present one and then the other version of the story. When seen this way, the contradictions and repetitions that commentators have noticed over the centuries suddenly make sense. There are repetitions because each is narrating the same event; there are contradictions because they have competing perspectives.

The Flood is the first biblical story so presented. The Flood was a cataclysmic event on both the cosmic and covenantal level. Its narration encompassed not only the rupture of nature, but the breach of the relationship between man and the God who breathed life into him and imposed on him a moral order. These two narrations are presented in a polyphonic form, the particulars of which are presented in fullness and detail elsewhere³ and not repeated here. We present here two further examples of Polyphonic Narrations, one from the Torah and the other from the Prophets.

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THE STORY OF THE PARTING OF THE SEA

Chapter 14 of Exodus relates the story of the Parting of the Red Sea. The Israelites are standing by the sea and Pharaoh's army is closing in on them. The Israelites cry out in terror and God parts the sea for them. When the Egyptians chase after them, the sea closes on them, leaving the Israelites saved and the Egyptians killed.

But, as we read the chapter closely, some questions arise. For example, verses 4 and 17-18 seem to duplicate each other as in both God announces he will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will pursue the fleeing Israelites. How was it that people of faith who *cried unto the LORD* (Exodus 14:10) suddenly in the next verse turn with complaints to Moses, an inconsistency noted by Ramban on the verse. Indeed, what was the result of the Israelites' complaint? There were times that the complaining of the Israelites in the desert changed the course of Jewish history, says Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.⁴ But what would have happened differently here had the Israelites not protested in panic?

These sort of difficulties are resolved if we read the chapter as presenting two narrations that the Torah chooses to present "almost simultaneously." One describes the original plan as if it had played out and another describes the actual outcome after the Israelites responded in complaint when seeing the Egyptians closing in on them; the two have subtle differences in their details.

In the first narrative, God announced His intention to force Pharaoh to take his army to pursue the Israelites to the sea, and Moses said to the people that God would battle for them. The angel of God and the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of the people to behind them to protect them from the Egyptians as they moved through the sea bed blown dry almost naturally by a strong east wind. The Egyptian army was thrown into panic when they saw what was happening as they reached the sea. As the waters returned to their natural state they tried to flee but God destroyed them, leaving them dead on the shore of the sea.

In the second actual narrative, the people panicked when they saw the Egyptians approaching – apparently not having been told by Moses that this was part of God's plan, seeing as a more dramatic demonstration was required to reestablish confidence in God and Moses. The sea was not parted

almost naturally by a wind but rather was split with the water miraculously forming a wall on the right and the left as Moses lifted his hand. The Egyptians were drawn into the created channel and drown when the wall of water collapsed upon them, again as Moses lifted his hand. *And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the LORD had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD; they had faith in the LORD and His servant Moses* (Exodus 14:31).

The following presentation of the chapter exhibits the two characteristics of a Polyphonic Narrative: (1) Reading down each column, we see each narrator has a complete story to tell. (2) The narrators continually interrupt each other in an attempt to present their own story.

Intended outcome	Actual outcome
<p><i>1 The LORD said to Moses: 2 Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baalzephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. 3 Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, "They are astray in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them." 4Then I will stiffen Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD. And they did so.</i></p>	
	<p><i>5 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart about the people and said, "What is this we have done, releasing Israel from our service?" 6 He ordered his chariot and took his men with him; 7he took six hundred of his</i></p>

	<i>picked chariots, and the rest of the chariots of Egypt, with officers in all of them.</i>
<p><i>8 The LORD stiffened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he gave chase to the Israelites. As the Israelites were departing defiantly, 9 the Egyptians gave chase to them, and all the chariot horses of Pharaoh, his horsemen, and his warriors overtook them encamped by the sea, near Pi-hahiroth, before Baal-zephon. 10 As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the LORD.</i></p>	
	<p><i>11 And they said to Moses, "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? 12 Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?'"</i></p>
<p><i>13 Moses said to the people, "Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the LORD will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. 14 The LORD will battle for you; you hold your peace!"</i></p>	

	<p><i>15 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. 16 And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground. 17 And I will stiffen the hearts of the Egyptians so that they go in after them; and I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his warriors, his chariots and his horsemen. 18 Let the Egyptians know that I am LORD, when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”</i></p>
<p><i>19 The angel of God, who had been going ahead of the Israelite army, now moved and followed behind them; and the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up a place behind them, 20 and it came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel. Thus there was the cloud with the darkness, and it cast a spell upon the night, so that the one could not come near the other all through the night.</i></p>	
	<p><i>21a Then Moses held out his arm over the sea</i></p>
<p><i>21b and the LORD drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground.</i></p>	
	<p><i>21c The waters were split, 22 and the</i></p>

	<p><i>Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. 23 The Egyptians came in pursuit after them into the sea, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and horsemen.</i></p>
<p><i>24 At the morning watch, the LORD looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. 25 He locked the wheels of their chariots so that they moved forward with difficulty. And the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."</i></p>	
	<p><i>26 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen." 27a Moses held out his arm over the sea,</i></p>
<p><i>27b and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the LORD hurled the Egyptians into the sea.</i></p>	
	<p><i>28 The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen—Pharaoh's entire army that followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. 29 But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for</i></p>

	<i>them on their right and on their left.</i>
<i>30 Thus the LORD delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea.</i>	
	<i>31 And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the LORD had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD; they had faith in the LORD and His servant Moses</i>

THE STORY OF THE TREATY WITH THE GIVONITES

The narrative of the treaty with the Givonites is presented in Joshua chapter 9 with what seems to have at first glance problematic duplications. For example, Joshua asks whether the Givonites are from afar after the same question is asked by the people. Also, there are two contracts of peace and two discoveries of the deception.

However, the duplications are understandable when we read the chapter as two competing narratives being presented “almost simultaneously.” The Givonites speak to Joshua and also the people and the chieftains, not knowing to whom their plea should be addressed. The people grab the microphone, so to speak, and ask if they are locals, mistakenly thinking that a peace treaty cannot be offered to locals. Joshua ignores their assumption of authority and himself asks from whence they came, knowing that the law is that locals and others are treated equally if they accept surrender, and differ in consequences only when they refuse.⁵ The only part of their response that concerns Joshua is that they were instructed to *go to them and say: We will be your subjects; come make a pact with us* (Joshua 9:11). The people, however, mistakenly thinking that the Givonites suing for peace would be irrelevant if they are locals, focus on the part of their response that was irrelevant to Joshua: *This bread of ours, which we took from our houses as provision, was still hot when we set out to come to you; and see how dry and crumbly it has become. These wineskins were new when we filled them, and see how they have*

cracked. These clothes and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey (Joshua 9:12-13). Without seeing the need to seek guidance, the people and the chieftains made a pact with them. Joshua, ignoring their action, makes his own pact.

After three days, everyone finds out the deceit, but they react differently. The chieftains are furious that they have been tricked out of being able to kill them as they understood was required. On the other hand, Joshua is angry at the unnecessary deception, but aware that the Givonites were well entitled to a treaty without any deception required for a peace treaty.

Chapter 9 is presented below as a Polyphonic Narrative. Again, reading down each column, we see that both narrators have a complete story to tell, and they continually interrupt each other in an attempt to present their own story.

Peoples' and Chieftains Narration	Joshua's Narration
	<p><i>9:1 When all the kings west of the Jordan—in the hill country, in the Shephelah, and along the entire coast of the Mediterranean Sea up to the vicinity of Lebanon, the [land of the] Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—learned of this, 2 they gathered with one accord to fight against Joshua and Israel. 3 But when the inhabitants of Gibeon learned how Joshua had treated Jericho and Ai, 4 they for their part resorted to cunning. They set out in disguise: they took worn-out sacks for their asses, and worn-out waterskins that were cracked and patched; 5 they had worn-out, patched sandals on their feet, and threadbare clothes on their bodies; and all the bread they took as provision was dry and crumbly. 6 And so they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, “We come from a distant land; we propose that you make a pact with us.”</i></p>
<p><i>7 The men of Israel replied to the Hivites, “But perhaps you live among us; how then can we make a pact with you?”</i></p>	
	<p><i>8 They said to Joshua, “We will be your subjects.” But Joshua asked them, “Who are you and where do you come from?” 9 They replied, “Your servants have come from a</i></p>

	<p><i>very distant country, because of the fame of the LORD your God. For we heard the report of Him: of all that He did in Egypt, 10 and of all that He did to the two Amorite kings on the other side of the Jordan, King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan who lived in Ashtaroth. 11 So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country instructed us as follows, 'Take along provisions for a trip, and go to them and say: We will be your subjects; come make a pact with us..''</i></p>
<p><i>12 This bread of ours, which we took from our houses as provision, was still hot when we set out to come to you; and see how dry and crumbly it has become. 13 These wineskins were new when we filled them, and see how they have cracked. These clothes and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey 14 The men took [their word] because of their provisions, and did not inquire of the LORD.</i></p>	
<p>.</p>	<p><i>15a Joshua established friendship with them; he made a pact with them to spare their lives,</i></p>
<p><i>15b and the chieftains of the community gave them their oath</i></p>	
	<p><i>16 But when three days had passed after they made this pact with them, they learned that they were neigh-</i></p>

	<i>bors, living among them.</i>
<p><i>17 So the Israelites set out, and on the third day they came to their towns; these towns were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim. 18 But the Israelites did not attack them, since the chieftains of the community had sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel. The whole community muttered against the chieftains, 19 but all the chieftains answered the whole community, "We swore to them by the LORD, the God of Israel; therefore we cannot touch them. 20 This is what we will do to them: We will spare their lives, so that there may be no wrath against us because of the oath that we swore to them." 21 And the chieftains declared concerning them, "They shall live!" And they became hewers of wood and drawers of water for the whole community, as the chieftains had decreed concerning them.</i></p>	
	<p><i>22 Joshua summoned them and spoke to them thus: "Why did you deceive us and tell us you lived very far from us, when in fact you live among us? 23 Therefore, be accursed! Never shall your descendants cease to be slaves, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the House of my God." 24 But they replied to Joshua, "You see, your servants had heard that the</i></p>

	<p><i>LORD your God had promised His servant Moses to give you the whole land and to wipe out all the inhabitants of the country on your account; so we were in great fear for our lives on your account. That is why we did this thing. 25 And now we are at your mercy; do with us what you consider right and proper.” 26 And he did so; he saved them from being killed by the Israelites. 27 That day Joshua made them hewers of wood and drawers of water—as they still are—for the community and for the altar of the LORD, in the place that He would choose.</i></p>
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CONCLUSION

Biblical narratives at times present difficulties involving duplication and contradiction. Over the years various approaches have been suggested to resolve these difficulties, from the traditional to the critical. The concept of Polyphonic Narration can be used to read the Bible in a different way, a way that may resolve some of the textual difficulties readers encounter.

NOTES

1. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Magid Press, 2012), reprinted from *Tradition*, 7:2, Summer 1965.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 56, n. 1.
3. Joel B. Wolowelsky, “Reading Noah’s Polyphonic Story,” *Milim Havivin—Beloved Words*, volume 6 (2012- 2013), pp. 13-29. Available at <https://library.yctorah.org/files/2016/09/Reading-Noahs-Polyphonic-Story.pdf>
4. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “The Inversion of Jewish History,” *Vision and Leadership*, eds. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler (Toras HoRav Foundation, 2013), pp. 164-175.
5. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:1,5. and Ramban to Deuteronomy 20:10.



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