

## REFLECTIONS OF READERS

### THE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES OF PHARAOH

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While reading Exodus 14, I noticed something I had never noted before, namely, that the Midrash seemed to be heaping praises – either consciously or unconsciously – on Pharaoh for the manner in which he prepared his army for the battle against the escaped Israelite slaves. The following are some examples from Rashi's commentary to Exodus 14:6, taken from the midrashic *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*. When mustering his army, the text states, Pharaoh personally took care to ready his own mount rather than have his servants do this for him – an unconventional act which must have impressed his troops. This positive remark about Pharaoh stands in contrast to the way we usually have interpreted Pharaoh's act. The traditional view, found for example in the commentary of Hizkuni, emphasizes Pharaoh's wickedness and eagerness to punish his runaway slaves, who failed to return after worshipping their God in the desert. However, as I read Rashi's comment here, especially in the light of his other comments which I shall cite, it seems that Pharaoh's act of preparing his own mount was but a first step in a series of acts intended to win the loyalty of his troops, whose mission was to attack and re-enslave or kill the Israelites.

Rashi also brings the midrash that Pharaoh's next move was to promise his troops that he would not be like other kings – who take most of the loot of their defeated enemies for themselves – but would share all future booty equally with his soldiers. This is the way the Midrash interprets the word *lakah*, literally "to take," understood here to mean that he "took" his troops with his convincing words. Pharaoh then assured his troops that he would personally lead them into battle and not be like other kings, who send their troops into battle while they themselves remain in the rear. The Midrash comes to this conclusion by noting that the word *hikriv*, rather than *karav*, is used in the text (Ex. 14:10) as Pharaoh and the Egyptian army close in on the Israelites encamped by the sea. Now the Hebrew verb *le-hakriv* means "to

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sacrifice", which in this case can mean a willingness to sacrifice one's own life. Indeed, when troops see their king or general leading them into battle, they are inspired to follow him despite their realization that it may cost them their lives.

As I read the midrashic description of Pharaoh's moves to win the support of his army, my mind turned to other generals in history, such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon, who were also able (perhaps by using the same methods as Pharaoh) to inspire their troops under the most difficult conditions when going to war against their enemies. The midrashic comments about the Israelites' enemy, Pharaoh, can be viewed similarly to the way President Abraham Lincoln, during the American Civil War, viewed his and the Union's chief opponent, General Robert E. Lee. His wish was to have a Union commander in chief as talented and skillful as the Confederate general. We know that for the first three years of the war Lincoln was disappointed in all of his top generals and changed them six times, because he could not find one as brilliant as Lee. It was only in the fourth and last year of the war that he chose Ulysses S. Grant, who was finally able to defeat and accept the surrender of the Confederacy. However, in the opinion of many historians, the vanquished General Lee ranks higher as a military commander than the victorious General Grant. One could cite another historical example where an enemy general was greatly esteemed: during World War II, many Allied leaders – including British and American generals – did not conceal their admiration for the Afrika Korp's General Erwin Rommel, known as "the Desert Fox", and were in search of generals who could outwit him on the battlefield.

The midrashic "praise" of Pharaoh, a military commander who was able to win the loyalty of his troops, reminded me of the words of Marc Antony in Shakespeare's play: "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him." It was surely not the intention of the Midrash or Rashi that readers would take this commentary to mean that they praised or admired the Egyptian king, although it can lend itself to such an interpretation. What led the Midrash to "praise" Pharaoh's leadership was perhaps the contrast between Pharaoh – the successful military commander – and Moses, whose political leadership was clearly rejected by the people as they stood on the banks of the Red Sea in sight of the pursuing Egyptian army. Moses' disappointment must have been great

when, despite the fact that the Israelites were armed (*hamushim*; Ex. 13:18) and initially displayed an upbeat attitude (*yad ramah*) when they left Egypt (14:8), the sight of their pursuers made them beg Moses to take them back to Egypt, which they claimed was better than dying in the desert (14:11). The defeatism of the Israelites, as compared with the strict discipline of the Egyptian soldiers following their leader even to their doom, may explain why the Midrash viewed Pharaoh as a more successful leader of his people than Moses appeared to be at this stage of the Exodus drama. Moses was never able to gain the full confidence of the Israelites even after the many miracles that he and God performed in Egypt and during the forty-year sojourn in the wilderness.

The question as to why the Midrash chose to describe in detail Pharaoh's process of winning the loyalty of his army may be explained as follows: there are lessons to be learned even from one's enemies, which is useful advice for potential leaders at all times and in every place.



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