War Crimes!--Thoughts for Parashat Vaera

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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Imagine how modern media might report charges of war crimes in the biblical story of Egypt and the Israelites. Here is how Pharaoh's position might be presented.

PHARAOH: On behalf of the people of Egypt, we lodge the charge of heinous war crimes against the Israelite nation. Their leader, Moses, ruthlessly murdered one of our best soldiers who was merely prodding his workers to labor more efficiently. Moses and his brother Aaron brought a host of terrible plagues upon Egypt, poisoning our water, afflicting our cattle, murdering our first-borns. Their plagues spared no one, causing hardship and death to innocent civilians. The Israelites took Egyptian property and fled our hospitable land; they caused many of our bravest soldiers to drown in the Red Sea while they stole away in safety.

The Israelites have shown themselves to be criminals—murderers and thieves. They have betrayed the trust and honor of the Egyptian people and of all humanity by their unconscionable deeds of malice and violence. We demand justice!

Here is the response of Moses, which the media would most likely not report.

MOSES: The Egyptians enslaved the Israelite people for centuries. They tortured and brutalized us. They ordered that our male babies be cast into the river to die. They taught their own children to hate, disparage and commit violence against us. It must be remembered that the Israelites had done no harm to Egypt to warrant such treatment, but rather had been of great help to Egypt. Our ancestor Joseph saved Egypt from famine. Yet, in spite of our peacefulness and goodwill, the Pharaohs enslaved our people and treated us like animals of burden.

Yes, I murdered an Egyptian soldier. But it was because that soldier was mercilessly beating a downtrodden Israelite slave! Any moral person would have done the same, or at least would sympathize with the one who sought to protect

an unfortunate slave from his oppressor.

Yes, the Almighty brought plagues on Egypt; but Pharaoh could have stopped these plagues in an instant, as we told him so often. All he had to do was to free the innocent Israelites from servitude. The people of Israel are human beings, after all; we too have rights; we too have dignity. But Pharaoh's hard heart would not yield, would not admit a drop of sympathy for Israel, would not entertain the possibility that the Israelites had a rightful claim to freedom.

Pharaoh neglected to say that it was the Egyptians themselves who freely gave Israel gold and silver, in recognition of their centuries of unpaid slavery. Pharaoh neglected to say that even as the people of Israel were finally leaving their bondage in Egypt, Pharaoh ordered his troops to go after them and destroy them. By miracle, the Israelites were saved and Pharaoh's men were drowned. But that was a miracle of God! Pharaoh wanted to murder each and every Israelite and would have done so if given the opportunity.

War crimes?? Yes, there are many war crimes in this story—and all of them are crimes of Egypt against the people of Israel! Israel's "crimes" consisted of wanting to be free, wanting to resist the ongoing brutal oppression and dehumanization inflicted on them by the Egyptians. When Egypt enslaves and tortures and murders us—this is nothing? But if we rise in our own defense, this is a war crime?

We bring our case not to the media and not to human courts: we bring our case to Almighty God, the true Judge.

And here are some news headlines that might appear in some media:

ISRAELITES CHARGED WITH WAR CRIMES

EGYPTIAN CIVILIANS SUFFER AS ISRAELITES DANCE AT THE RED SEA

PHARAOH MAKES HIS CASE AGAINST MOSES

And the accompanying photos will depict Egyptians mourning the deaths of their first-borns. There will be no photos of Israelites suffering in slavery or of Israelite babies tossed into the Nile to die.

Context? Who cares about context? The public needs to be fed half-truths and misleading images. Justice? Who cares about justice? What's important is being "politically correct," slanting the news to increase our circulation and our profits. Truth? We have our own version of truth.

To the media, politicos and anti-Israelites of the world, we quote the imagined words of Moses: “We bring our case not to the media and not to human courts: we bring our case to Almighty God, the true Judge.”

Angel for Shabbat