

SHABBAT STUDY TEXTS

Shabbat HaGadol

5778

Hillbilly Elegy by J. D. Vance, pps. 85-87: I'll never forget Lindsay's face as she marched upstairs to bed. It wore the pain of a defeat known by only a person who experiences the highest high and the lowest low in a matter of minutes. ... I ... asked Mamaw a question that had been on my mind ... I knew what she'd say, but I guess I just wanted reassurance. "Mamaw, does God love us?" She hung her head, gave me a hug, and began to cry.

The theology she taught us was unsophisticated, but it provided a message I needed to hear. To coast through life was to squander my God-given talent, so I had to work hard. I had to take care of my family because Christian duty demanded it. ... I should never despair, for God had a plan.

When I asked Mamaw if God loved us, I asked her to reassure me that this religion of ours could still make sense of the world we lived in. I needed some reassurance of some deeper justice, some cadence or rhythm that lurked beneath the heartache and chaos.

Exodus 2:23b-25: The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

New American Haggadah, "House of Study" by Nathaniel Deutsch, p. 54: The most theologically shocking moment in Exodus is not when God appears in the burning bush, or splits the Sea of Reeds, or even when he gives the Ten Commandments at Sinai. It is when God remembers his covenant with Israel. ... God, who spent the better part of Genesis cultivating the people of Israel, has, by only the second chapter of Exodus, forgotten that they are his nation and, therefore, his responsibility. Here, stripped bare, lies the theological root of one of the deepest fears in the collective Jewish psyche, the fear of forgetting and being forgotten.

And yet, according to the Haggadah, there is a remedy for God's amnesia: Israel's voice, our voice. ... if we want a relationship with God, we must remind him, with wails if necessary, to remember his covenant with us.

New American Haggadah, p. 22: Slaves is what we were – slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. ... And if the Holy One, blessed is He, had not taken our fathers out of Egypt, then what of us? We, and our children, and our children's children, would be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.

New American Haggadah, p. 49: An alternate reading: *And He saw*. What did He see? That the children of Israel had compassion, one for the other.

Comment: The Haggadah, like Judaism itself, had multiple theologies. One is that God took care of us; that were it not for God, we'd still be in Egypt. Another is that God acts/ saves in response to human initiative, even if it's only crying out.

Questions:

- Which belief feels better: that God cares and has a plan that God will carry out? Or, that God only acts in response to human initiative?
- Does a belief in a divine plan work at all after the Shoah?
- Is the belief that God and people are partners, that "God helps those who help themselves" the only real theology that works in 2018?
- If so, what of the 12-Step theology of "Let go, let God?"