

November 2018

As a teenager, I would rarely win any concessions in arguments with my Mom, but on the occasion I did score a logical or style point, she would sometimes say, with mock ruefulness, “You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din.” We were a family of Anglophiles, so it was normal for her to cite a bit of British popular culture. The poem “Gunga Din,” published in 1890, was Rudyard Kipling’s sentimental tribute to a lowly Indian waterboy, and it was intended to prick the conscience of a complacent British public. The speaker is the generic British soldier Tommy, or Thomas Atkins. Mr. Atkins arrived in India as a casual white supremacist, secure in his belief that dark-skinned non-Christians were “lesser breeds without the Law.”¹ Their lives don’t matter, and any Englishman, however humble he might be back home, can treat them like slaves, so Tommy and his mates routinely abuse and beat Gunga Din. But Tommy also sees the saintly constancy with which the doomed waterboy tends the wounded, oblivious to the storm of bullets on the battlefield. And when a bullet inevitably finds its mark, Tommy assigns Gunga Din a place in the soldier’s *olam ha-ba*, a kind of semi-Christian Valhalla, and recognizes Gunga Din’s superior moral status:

"Tho' I've belted you and flayed you,
By the livin' Gawd that made you,
You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!"

Now when my mother, of blessed memory, quoted that line, she was making the analogy between her surprise at an intelligent comment from me, and Tommy’s amazement that a member of a despised race could do what Gunga Din does.

Using a principle from today’s haftarah, I want to offer a Jewish reading of “Gunga Din,” which means imagining both Mr. Din and Mr. Atkins as Jewish characters, and I hope to find something novel to say about identity, which is the BEIT theme this season. The context of the haftarah is that G-d is offended by Israel’s laxity in worship, and the prophet Malachi reminds us that at least among Gentiles *outside of* Israel, Israel’s G-d is treated with maximal respect. *Yigdal elokim may-al ligvool Yisrael*--“The Lord is magnified, or praised, beyond the borders of Israel!” (Malachi 1:5). And Hashem adds that it’s almost universal: “From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is...revered among the nations” (Malachi 1:11-12).

The Lord *of Israel* is magnified and praised outside of Israel, beyond its borders: like most provocative prophetic pronouncements, this has theological and political implications. First the theological: In the Pentateuch, there is an explicit connection between peoples and their gods. Our G-d executes judgement “against all the gods of Egypt” (Exodus 12:12); rival gods like the Moabite Chemosh and the Ammonite Molech are mentioned in tandem with their peoples (Numbers 21:29, e.g. Leviticus 18:21). Each nation has its god or gods; ours is just the real, true, and all-powerful one. And when Thomas Atkins said “By the living Gawd that made you / You’re a better man than I am,” he was making the same point as Malachi. In Hebrew Tommy would say *Yigdal Adon Angli may-al ligvool Angliah*—“The Lord of England is magnified beyond the borders of England.” Having ventured far from his homeland, this Englishman finds that his God has preceded him overseas, and that the right-and-wrong he learned in his native land might be portable, even universal values. The world is a bigger place than Tommy ever guessed, but his God turns out to be a much bigger God, one who spurns national, linguistic, and racial boundaries.

¹ “Recessional,” 1897.

Malachi is not the only prophet who delivers this message: in the haftarah for Acharei-Kedoshim, which we'll read in May, Hashem says bluntly, through the prophet Amos: *Halo chivnei Chooshiyim atem li, b'nei Yisrael*—"To me, Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians...it's true that I brought you up from the land of Egypt, but I also brought the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir" (Amos 9:7). Amos is going for shock value here: dark-skinned Ethiopians don't look like most of us, and the Philistines and Arameans are frankly our enemies, who you'd think would also be enemies of Israel's G-d. But it turns out Hashem managed *their* Exoduses too: *our* G-d brought the Philistines up from Caphtor.

It's an unsettlingly expansive theology. If the G-d of Israel is praised beyond the borders of Israel, then G-d may have names and faces that would shock us. Let's take the Philistines, who presumably *noticed* when they were taken out of Caphtor and brought to Eretz Pleshet. They presumably thank their god Dagon for facilitating their Exodus; but since we know that Hashem was actually responsible, and that the G-d of Israel is praised just over the border in Philistia, this makes a plausible case that Dagon *is* Hashem. Likewise with Thomas Atkins, whose encounter with a righteous Hindu might plausibly lead him to conclude that Gunga Din's god or gods—perhaps the *Trimurti* of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—is the same as the Anglican *Trinity* they worship back home.

Our prophets set up this theological case, and they allow us to consider its political implications. The N'viim and Ketuvim present depictions of righteous Gentiles: from the widow of Tzarfat, who shares her last morsel with Elijah (1 Kings 17:11), to the sailors who recoil from throwing Jonah overboard (Jonah 1:13), to Job, Ruth, and the others. They support the universalist notion that we might transcend nationhood and live as one big human family. It's this hopeful interpretation of "Gunga Din" that gave the poem's two Hollywood movie adaptations a strong Jewish subtext. First, the Oscar-winning 1939 film *Gunga Din* was scripted by the Zionist Ben Hecht and featured Shlomo "Sam" Jaffe in blackface as the Indian waterboy: to prick the conscience of an isolationist public, its political message was that foreign-looking folks, i.e. Jews, could be good Brits or Americans too. And then *Gunga Din* was remade as the Western *Sergeants 3* in 1962. Now, to prick the conscience of a racist public, the message was that black Americans could be just as brave and patriotic as whites, but the Gunga Din character was *still* played by a Jew—this time Sammy Davis Jr.!

But while the prophets and sages provide openings for campfire universalism, they don't ever quite preach it. The most universalist we get is the messianic idea that all peoples will eventually come to worship at *our* G-d's holy mountain (Isaiah 56:7 et al.). And as we say in the Aleinu, quoting from Zechariah: *bayom ha-hu yihyeh Hashem echad oosh'mo echad*: "in that day, the Lord shall be one, and G-d's name shall be one" (Zechariah 14:9). What might the one-ification of G-d's name look like, using the examples we have discussed? The Philistines, Moabites, and Ammonites would suddenly realize that Dagon, Chemosh, and Molech are actually Hashem, and they would lift up their eyes to the Judean hills, from whence cometh their help, and Tommy Atkins and Gunga Din would share a tearful reconciliation in Yerushalayim—not on the shores of the Ganges, and surely not in East London.

In other words, Jewish universalism has its limits, and one of them is the centrality of our sacred places. Jewish texts have prepared us for, and been a reaction to, the pressures of cultural exchange. At first we were a wandering people, encountering other cultures and ways of being one by one. Then we became indigenous to an intertidal zone of empires, with waves of imperial cultures-and-ways-of-being breaking over us destructively, one after another. And then most of us were exiled, always remembering Eretz Yisrael, where we met G-d and developed our nationhood. Just recently, half of us have returned to indigeneity in our land, and half of us have chosen to remain out here, more or less comfortable in the Diaspora. Quite a history, and one that could not have been achieved by a universalist people, one willing to melt into the big human family.

In the last years of Josef Stalin—may his memory be blotted out—Soviet official anti-Zionism labelled Jews as ‘rootless cosmopolitans.’ But while Stalin, *yimakh shemo*, was right about the Jews’ cosmopolitanism—fairly comfortable anywhere, albeit very comfortable nowhere—he was so wrong to call the Jews rootless. In fact, a more *rooted* cosmopolitan people may never have existed. Every hill, every wadi of the ancient homeland was held in the heart and traced by the tongue, and had been for millennia. Because these were the boundaries within which we met our universal G-d, the G-d who could be praised outside the boundaries of Israel, the G-d whose precepts we could follow in our exile, from where the sun rises to where it sets.

1890 was the high-water mark of the British Empire, the empire on which the sun never set, and in the same year that Kipling wrote “Gunga Din,” British physician Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a historical novel about medieval British soldier-adventurers abroad.² After the happy ending, when all the noble knights and stout yeomen have returned to their native soil, to sire children and eventually produce the English-speaking peoples of the present, the narrator draws back the camera for a parting look at these ancestors: “So they lived, these men, in their own lusty, cheery fashion—rude and rough, but honest, kindly and true. Let us thank God if we have outgrown their vices. Let us pray to God that we may ever hold their virtues.” And then the narrator looks into a dark and dangerous near future: “The sky may darken, and the clouds may gather, and again the day may come when Britain may have sore need of her children, on whatever shore of the sea they be found. Shall they not muster at her call?”

Many good stories end with a question mark that, like the haftarah we read at Yom Kippur, and the verse of “The Star-Spangled Banner” we sing at public events. “And should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand clueless people, and also many cattle?” (Jonah 4:11). “Oh say—does that star-spangled banner yet wave?” ‘Yes, you should take pity on Nineveh, even if they are nasty Assyrians,’ and ‘Yes, the flag is still waving, and “thus be it ever.”’³ But the political question Doyle asks, “shall they not muster at her call?”, hangs in the air. It isn’t about Thomas Atkins any more. This question is for the Atkins family in the British diaspora: Tommy’s cousins in America, Australia, Canada, South Africa. Will they come to the aid of the old home country when storm clouds gather over her? Should they, even?

This question, ‘shall they not muster at her call?’, was answered once, in Doyle and Kipling’s lifetime, when Britain, its colonials, and its American cousins fought as allies in the Great War, which ended a century ago Sunday. And then it was answered a second time, resoundingly, when Britain was in dire trouble in World War II. It would have cheered the old imperialists to see how Canada made itself the training ground for the free world’s airmen, how Australian forces battled from island to island, and how our United States led the largest invasion of Europe the much-invaded continent had ever sustained, all to obliterate Britain’s enemies. Truly the “New World, with all its power and might,” had “stepped forth to the rescue and liberation of the Old.”⁴ In our terms, the British Diaspora, the *Galut Anglit*, had mustered to redeem the British Yishuv.

While it’s simplistic to say that English speakers mustered in support of the mother country on sentimental or cultural grounds, and there was surely economic and political self-interest in the mix, cultural nationalism was not absent. The shared language, the shared literature, and the partly shared history made it much easier to convince colonials and ex-colonials to join the fight. As a thought experiment, let’s imagine the political heavy lifting involved in getting North Americans or New Zealanders to fight for England in trouble in 1940, as

² *The White Company*.

³ 4th verse of “Star-Spangled Banner.”

⁴ Churchill, 1940.

compared to other allies-in-trouble such as Czechoslovakia in 1938, or the Republic of China in 1949. One task was distinctly easier than the others. And this brings us back to our Jewish reading of “Gunga Din.”

The Thomas Atkins of “Gunga Din” was a provincial Englishman once, but he isn’t one any more. He has spent years in India, and he can “sling the bat”⁵—that is, speak pidgin Hindi—with the best of his mates. By dint of service abroad, he has achieved an outside perspective on the mother country. Kipling asks the rhetorical question “What should they know of England, who only England know?”⁶ The answer, of course, is ‘not much,’ and that makes the Tommy of “Gunga Din” a man of the diaspora: he is ‘*may-al ligvool Angliah*,’ outside the borders of England, and he has seen that the G-d, and the values, and the culture he learned in that ‘nation of shopkeepers’⁷ are still valid out here in the big world: he has traveled from where the sun sets (Britain) to where it rises (the far East), and he sees that verily, his gods are revered among the nations. Just as he is now able to see in Gunga Din a true Christian and a true Englishman, so he can now look back from India and see England’s true worth. For all the heartache of exile, there are lessons in both humility and in justified pride that you only get when you go *may-al ligvool*.

So now that we’ve identified the Jew in both Gunga Din and Thomas Atkins, let’s consider ourselves. Of course, the Jewish diaspora and the English one happened for different reasons—one was a long process of seeking refuge, the other a willful imperial adventure—but eventually, the cultural effects of *any diaspora* are similar. We diaspora Jews are the Gunga Dins who, through our conspicuous morality and integrity, teach the majority to respect the stranger in their midst. We diaspora Jews are the Thomas Atkinses who, because of exile, grow in knowledge and faith, and provide a conduit and a filter for other cultures’ influence on our own. We diaspora Jews have hybrid cultural identities, and the host country’s culture is an important part of the mix—for example, our honestly inherited, albeit also appropriated, Anglo-ness. We are Jews who answer to English names; we speak and dream in English. Admittedly odd, hybrid kinds of people, but here we stand—quite comfortably most of the time, and uncomfortably on occasion, like two weeks ago in Pittsburgh, the city proudly named for the father of British imperialism.⁸

We diaspora Jews have made the free choice *not* to make *aliyah*, not to take up the responsibilities of living as an indigenous majority in our own nation-state. We have accepted a different, in some ways more traditional set of Jewish responsibilities, that acceptance being the more explicit now because Israel provides a viable alternative: out here in the diaspora, we accept the duty to build our community with our own labor and resources; the responsibility to maintain the good name of our people among the nations; the duty to keep our children Jewish, the responsibility not to assimilate too much; and the duty to cherish the welfare of our incomparable host countries⁹--these precious havens that offer “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”¹⁰ And, critically, one more responsibility: The sky may darken, and the clouds may gather, and again the day may come when Israel may have sore need of her children, on whatever shore of the sea they be found. Shall we not muster at her call?

⁵ “Route Marchin’,” 1892.

⁶ “The English Flag,” 1891.

⁷ Barère, 1794.

⁸ Tree of Life synagogue massacre, October 2018.

⁹ Jeremiah 29:7.

¹⁰ Washington, 1790.