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 5 April, 2009

Narrow Straits

Passover, a seven day celebration of the Israelites liberation from slavery in Egypt, begins this Wednesday evening at sundown. One of my very favorite passages in the *Talmud*, a commentary about Passover, says, “Each and every day, every person is obligated to see [themselves] as having personally left Egypt.”¹

The Hebrew word for Egypt is *mitzrayim*. Literally, *mitzrayim* means *narrow straits* – a tight spot we need to wriggle out of. In this Passover season, how are we bound? To what are we enslaved? How might we free ourselves from our own *mitzrayim*?

The Buddha said, *Change your mind!* To leave Egypt, we are called to the spiritual practice of changing our minds. When we change our minds, our lives will follow. And even when we can't change our circumstances, we can transform our relationship to them.

I want to remind us of that amazing statistic I dug up last fall: the actual, physical distance between slavery and freedom – from Goshen, in Egypt, to the banks of the River Jordan, near Jericho, about fifteen miles from Jerusalem – is approximately eight hundred and seventy miles.² “Covering an average of twelve to thirteen miles a day, [the exodus] should have taken seventy days”³ – less than a month and a half. So what took forty years?

Keep in mind that these people – all six hundred thousand of them – had lived in Egypt, in slavery, their entire lives; unrelenting enslavement had endured for four hundred and thirty years. According to my rabbi friends,⁴ the long detour was

1 *Talmud - Pesachim*

2 1,450 km; see shabbatshalomtexas.com

3 shabbatshalomtexas.com/Articles.htm

4 Thanks to Rabbis Howard Berman and Deanna Douglas

necessary to allow time for the people to be transformed and, tragically, for the old generation to die. They couldn't change their minds, couldn't liberate themselves to accommodate their liberation, and so they died, in that liminal place between slavery and freedom. I wonder, and I invite you to ask yourself, Would I have made it to the promised land?

I love the story of the man who went to his rabbi, at his wit's end over his challenging wife and his overcrowded, chaotic household. As educator Max W. Fisher tells it, briefly – explaining that in Yiddish, this would be a thirty minute folk tale – believe it or not, “the wise rabbi counsels the man to [add to the confusion by taking] some chickens, a goat, and a cow into his home.... A day or two later, the man is distraught. [We can only imagine!] The rabbi [then] advises the man to [move] the animals [back out], whereupon the man views his home life as absolute bliss.”⁵

This is one of those stories with a directive I'm hoping we can take figuratively: change you mind without having a cow.

In what way do we persist in living in Egypt? Is our *mitzrayim* the clock? The past? The future? Work? Fear? Money? Addiction? Poor health? Aging? Tragedy? Ugh; what a g*d-awful list! “Let the men go,” advised the Pharaoh's officials. “Don't you realize that Egypt is being destroyed?”⁶

Easier said than done!

So we vow to make a change, for our own good, and we make the change. But then we forget, or something, and, like Pharaoh, who gave and then revoked his permission for the Israelites to leave, we revert to our old habits. So familiar ... and so toxic! Even the Israelites, just a week out on their sojourn to the Promised Land, were ready give up their bid for freedom and return to their wretched but familiar existence. Sometimes, the devil we know – evil as it is – is preferable to the devil we imagine.

Author Lesli Koppelman Ross writes, “Slavery does offer a certain freedom that can be attractive: the freedom from responsibility for ... [ourselves] and others, the freedom from having to ... think beyond the moment ... establish goals, figure out how to reach them.... The danger is that often in those situations, ... [we] don't even know

5 see education-world.com/a_curr/voice130.shtml

6 Exodus 10:7: “... knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?”

that ... [we] are mired in [negativity] ... until [it's] too late.⁷

As long as we are alive, it is not too late. But it's up to us to free ourselves from the *mitzrayim* ... or wander forty years, and let the desert have us. As Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison in 1789, “The earth belongs ... to the living.”⁸

In the past several months, as our collective anxiety about the broken economy has risen, virtually unchecked, flashes of insight in some wonderful conversations among us have illuminated the dark path, this narrow place of fear, anxiety, and despair. Here's what I've gleaned:

Dread is a bad neighborhood: don't walk there. Private dread, in particular, next door to shame and guilt, is a crack house. And fear is exhausting, and counterproductive. The antidote is to stay in the present, even moment by moment. There's no time like the present to get it out into the light of day and talk about it, all of it, with people whom we love, and who love us. And let's celebrate cooperation, and collaboration. Remember that asking questions is a rite of freedom!⁹ Let's have lots of brainstorming and out-of-the-box thinking and changing of our minds! Leaving the *mitzrayim* is a personal as well as a communal passage.¹⁰ And the only way out is through.

In a story from the Middle East, a man who is wrongly imprisoned is visited by a friend. The friend leaves him the gift of a prayer rug. The prisoner is disconsolate; he had hoped for a hacksaw. But there was nothing else to do, so he began to bow in prayer on the rug. And as he “became more familiar with the pattern woven into the rug, ... he started to see an interesting image there. It was a diagram of the lock that allowed him to open the cell and escape.”¹¹

“Earth scholar” Thomas Berry writes, “The obligation of each generation ... is to attend to the creativity inherent in the moment.... Certainly, no amount of questioning and no hypothetical answers can remove the mystery of the future; the future will remain hidden. But as we learn to embed ourselves in creativity more ancient and more

7 Lesli Koppelman Ross, *Celebrate! The Complete Jewish Holiday Handbook*. see

www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Passover/Themes_and_Theology/Self-Liberation.shtml

8 The entire quote is, “The earth belongs in usufruct to the living.” (9/6/1789) “Usufruct,” according to dictionary.com, is “the right of enjoying all the advantages derivable from the use of something that belongs to another, as far as it is compatible with the substance of the thing not being destroyed or injured.”

9 please see Micah Bazant and Dara Silverman, *The Love and Justice in Times of War Haggadah Zine*, p. 16, available at <http://colours.maahost.org/events/haggadah.html>

10 *ibid*

11 Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, p. 192

powerful than the human's alone, we can begin to participate, however gropingly, in an energy that built the stars."¹²

Creativity is an antidote to the *mitzrayim*. I've heard this next story told two ways. Which way does it speak to you?

1. Zen monk Ryo□kan came home to find that his little house had been robbed. Every last thing was gone. He sat down on the bare floor and gazed out the open window through which the thieves had fled. "O, look!" he exclaimed. "They left me the moon."

2. Zen monk Ryo□kan came home to find that his little house had burned to the ground. "My house having burned to the ground," he said, "I can now see the moon."

Creativity: change your mind!

At Passover, unleavened bread – matzoh – is eaten in memory of the fact that the Israelites had no time to wait for the bread to rise. One of my favorite traditions associated with Passover is eliminating the *hemetz*, the leaven, from the house. Observant Jews go through their cupboards and remove all leavened grain products, which also affords them an opportunity to fulfill the commandment to care for the hungry; many Jews donate their *hemetz* to a food bank. And as they search their homes, so they search their hearts. What internal *hemetz* has accumulated and "puffed them up?" What has intervened between them and their good inclinations, their best intentions? What has turned them from the paths they most deeply wanted to follow?¹³

You can't leave the narrow straits if you're puffed up! The passage to freedom asks of us that we practice humility. Spiritual teacher Ram Dass' guru, Neem Karoli Baba,¹⁴ said, "The best form of service is that which gives rise to humility." Again and again, love and service: the best possible exit strategy from the *mitzrayim*.

Ram Dass, at age 78, is now twelve years out from surviving a stroke which left his right arm and leg numb. He also suffered aphasia – brain damage that affects language. Ram Dass maintains that "silence deepens the spirit."

¹² Thomas Berry, *An Amazing Journey: the Universe and Me*"

¹³ *op cit*, p. 17

¹⁴ (known by his students as Maharaj-ji)

"My words are in a bombed-out closet," he says. "The words are there in the closet, but I can't open the door to get the clothes, and when I do, nothing is in the right place."¹⁵

He continues, "After any major physical 'insult,' as they call it, it's all too easy to see yourself as a collection of symptoms, rather than as a total human being, including your spirit – and thus to become your illness. Fear is powerful and contagious, and at first I allowed myself to catch it.... But now I'm learning to take my healing into my own hands. Healing is not the same as curing; ... healing does not mean going back to the way things were, ... but rather allowing what is now to move us closer to G*d."¹⁶

Ram Dass is a close friend of meditation teacher and author Sharon Salzberg. In her book *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, she writes that throughout the course of the night she learned of Ram Dass' stroke, "I sat side by side with fear. As I acknowledged it, ... my heart began to open. I met the unknown....

"With fear no longer dominating my mind, my love for Ram Dass could arise freely." As she accepted the fact of his stroke, surrendered to her inability to control the outcome, and relaxed into the "vast space of not-knowing," her sorrow was joined by a sense of peace.

About a year later, Sharon Salzberg sat with Ram Dass on his front porch. "Haltingly, ... a few labored words at a time, he asked her how work on [the] book was going. 'It's really hard,' I told him.... 'I've never had to go so deep inside myself before and bring out the words.'" Ram Dass looked at her and said, slowly, "That's how I am every day now." And then he added, "It seems I've taught more about love through this stroke than I have through all my thirty years of lecturing about it."¹⁷

And so Ram Dass has emerged from the *mitzrayim*, profoundly changed, and with a whole new teaching to share. "I realized that the stroke was Maharaj-ji's grace," he says. "I had been superficial and arrogant, and the stroke helped me to be humble. I had gotten power from helping people, and now I need help for everything. That was the grace. The stroke happened to the ego, and when I could witness the pain, my life got better."¹⁸

15 USA Today, 6/26/2002

16 see velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2007/01/ram_dass_still_.html

17 Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, p. 82-92

18 USA Today, 6/26/2002

My spiritual companions, in this Passover season, may we be mindful of the directive of the Torah: Each and every day, every one of us is called to see ourselves as having personally left Egypt.¹⁹

How are we bound? To what are we enslaved? May we change our minds, and pay attention: the key to navigating these narrow straits may well lie in the prayer rug at our feet, given by a friend.

May we trade in dread, shame, guilt, and fear for abiding in the present, a devotion to creativity, and a commitment to making this journey, together: love, service, justice, and peace. The passage to freedom can begin right here.

19 *Talmud - Pesachim*