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Arlington Street Church
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Because We Were Strangers

Tomorrow night, a miracle will happen. Something on the order of 93 percent of all Jews in North America – “Religious Jews, secular Jews; [Reconstructionist], Reform, Conservative, Orthodox Jews; Jews who are in shul every week, and Jews who never go to shul”¹ – many of them with interfaith guests in tow, will make their way to a seder, converging to celebrate Passover: the Exodus from Egypt and the long walk to freedom.

Liberation and freedom are the central message of Passover. Jews are commanded to tell the Exodus story in the first person. Jewish law² obligates people of every generation to view themselves as if they, personally, were brought out of Egypt.

Rabbi Barry Leff writes, “No disrespect to my grandfather, but when I was a kid ... our seders consisted of speed reading the Maxwell House haggadah so we could get to the food. It was mostly in Hebrew, so I had no idea what was going on. I can’t say the experience did much for my connection with the true meaning of Pesach, although it was fun to see my cousins and the food was great.”³

How do we bring alive the spirit of Passover? It’s an amazing story. I invite you to imagine yourself inside it:

The Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt for 430 years. G*d sends Moses to Pharaoh, demanding that his people be released from bondage. Pharaoh refuses, and G*d sends down ten plagues: the waters are turned to blood; hoards of frogs, lice, and wild animals swarm the land; the livestock is

¹ Rabbi Barry Neff, *The Meaning of Passover*, 3/21/10. Please see neshamah.net/2010/03/the-meaning-of-passover.html

² Mishnah: an authoritative collection of exegetical material embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law and forming the first part of the Talmud. (Wikipedia)

³ Rabbi Barry Neff, *op cit*

stricken with disease; the Egyptians contract a terrible skin infection; hail destroys the crops; locusts swarm the land, eating their way through the remaining food; and the earth is covered with darkness. Finally, the Angel of Death takes the firstborn of every Egyptian animal and every human family. This is where the word Passover comes from: The Hebrews were “passed over” and spared.

Finally, Pharaoh changes his mind. In the middle of the night, Moses leads 600,000 men plus woman, children, and livestock out of Egypt. They flee on foot, not even waiting to let their bread rise, which is why we eat matzoh – unleavened bread – in memory of the Exodus.

Then Pharaoh changes his mind yet again, and sends the Egyptian army in 600 chariots to chase after the Hebrews. They’re trapped: to the south and west, there are mountains; Pharaoh’s army is closing in from the north; before them, to the east, lies the Red Sea. When the Israelites reach its shores, the waters part, allowing them to cross. When the Egyptians wade in, it rushes back in, and they drown.⁴

I’m told that a boy came home from Sunday school one day and, when his mother asked him what he had learned, he told her, “The Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army were chasing them. They got to the Red Sea, but they couldn’t cross it. The Egyptian army was getting closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie, and the Israeli air force bombed the Egyptians. Then the Israeli navy built a pontoon bridge across the Red Sea, so Moses could cross.”

His mother was shocked. “Is that what they told you?” she asked. “Well, no,” the boy admitted. “But if I told it to you the way they told it to us, you’d never believe it!”⁵

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I like to imagine us – us, here, this beloved community – as heirs to the spirit of the Israelites, mounting a daring resistance and making a death-defying journey to freedom with a god that is on our side.

⁴ When the Israelites reached the far shore of the Red Sea, they celebrated. But G*d rebuked them, saying, “How can you sing as the works of my hand are drowning in the sea?” (Talmud: Megillah 10b) This is a stunning reminder of Unitarian Universalism’s “inherent worth and dignity of every being.”

⁵ *ibid*, p. 56

There's a long history of that thinking. Enslaved African Americans took heart from the Exodus story, and encoded their field songs with directions to escape to the Promised Land of the free north. Apparently, white slave owners did not see themselves in the story, or they would have seen Pharaoh in the mirror.

During the Civil Rights era, Dr. King told his people that he, like Moses, had been to the mountaintop and had seen the Promised Land, a land of justice and freedom for all Americans. Apparently, white racists did not see themselves in the Exodus story, or they would have seen Pharaoh in the mirror.

When our freedom depends on the enslavement of others, none of us is free. One of the blessings of the seder meal calls for the liberation of all people everywhere:

This is the bread of affliction,
which our forebears ate in the land of Egypt.
Let all who are hungry come and eat.
This year, we are here.
Next year, may we all be in Israel.
This year, we are still slaves.
Next year, may we all be free.

One of the most-repeated phrases in the Torah – thirty-six times, to be exact⁶ – is, “because you were strangers in Egypt;” “remember, you were slaves in Egypt.” In other words, Jews are commanded to bring empathy and mercy to those who are now as they once were. This is the message of Passover: not only to celebrate resistance and freedom, but to remember slavery, and to carry that knowledge into our lives.

There are many ways to live this story – to choose between the spirit of Moses and the spirit of Pharaoh – and we are invited to seek and find them. We are commanded to look in the mirror.

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Most people’s favorite moment in the seder is the reenactment of the plagues. Drops of wine are splattered onto the tablecloth, diminishing our joy; the lights go out to represent darkness descending on the land; and tiny

⁶ Rabbi Barry Neff, *op cit*

marshmallows rain down onto our heads to symbolize the plague of hail. Admittedly, some of the direness is lost in translation.

My favorite moment of the seder is when the door is thrown open, and the spirit of Elijah is welcomed in. Even at the most crowded table, an empty place is set for the prophet whose return is said to herald the coming of the Messiah. At the appointed moment, everyone sings *Eliyahu, Hanavi*:

Elijah, show me the path, renew my joy, and bless my home.
May you come soon to us, bringing the Messiah.

Elijah is the quintessential stranger, but there's a hitch: He comes disguised as a beggar – in modern times, a person who is homeless, or suffering with mental illness or addiction, or perhaps a refugee. How do we know if it's he? We don't know. Hoping for Elijah to show up reminds us to welcome the stranger – because we ourselves were strangers ... and don't miss the possibility of a blessing.

Thirteenth century Persian poet and Sufi mystic, Rumi, wrote,

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
[They] may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.⁷

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In this Passover season, we awaken every morning to a news cycle of modern day plagues, named by Jewish Voice for Peace as ignorance; lies; divisiveness; hatred; thievery; tyranny; chaos; war; environmental ruin; and death.⁸ The New England Jewish Labor Committee's haggadah reminds us that we have been here before – that we have seen fascism, racism, Islamophobia, transphobia, and anti-Semitism before – and we have survived.

“Before the 8th and 9th plagues, Pharaoh got desperate and tried to pit the [Hebrews] against one another, saying he would let the men go free but leave the rest enslaved. And even though they were desperate and afraid, they did not abandon one another. They said no to Pharaoh’s deal....”⁹

Like the Israelites, we can resist. We survive “by crying out and chanting on street corners,” says the haggadah, “with voices that wake the heavens and remind the powers that be [that] we are here. By [making] safe spaces. By marking moments of resistance. By telling stories of times we got free.”

This is how we get out: together.¹⁰

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we bring alive the spirit of Passover.

Let us tell the story of liberation in the first person:
as if we, ourselves, were brought out of Egypt.

⁷ Jelaluddin Rumi, *The Guest House*, trans. Coleman Barks

⁸ Thanks to Laura Evonne Steinman for sharing with me these ten new plagues from Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, *Dayenu! Basta! Halas! We've had enough!* in Jewish Voice for Peace's haggadah

⁹ Thanks to Laura Evonne Steinman for sharing with me New England Jewish Labor Committee *Seventeenth Annual Labor Seder Haggadah*, March, 2017

¹⁰ *ibid*

Because we were strangers,
we are commanded to look in the mirror.

Remember to make room for Elijah.
Don't miss the possibility of a blessing!

We are heirs to the spirit of the Israelites.
May we celebrate resistance and freedom,
until everyone is free.