

We Are Those Who Have Departed Egypt

We read in the Haggadah, *hayav adam lirot et atzmoh ki'ilu who yatzah miMitzrayim*. "It is incumbent upon everyone to see themselves as if they have departed from Egypt." This suggests that inspiration for our lives will come in seeing our personal and collective unfolding mirrored in the narrative of the Hebrew people's departure from Egypt

We tell the Passover tale as a liberation journey, how a generation of Hebrew slaves were set free under the Full Moon of Nissan. But what followed was not instant liberation, but a slow, circumambulating journey of unknown hills and valleys, a forty year trek of uncertainty and trepidation on the way to the Promised Land.

Today, in Coronavirus times, we are like the Hebrew slaves, with no idea how long this journey will last, unaware of the adversaries and misadventures to appear along the way. Waking each day, with the familiar and predictable stripped away, we don't know what the next newscast will bring in the way of local, national and global responses to this pandemic. Like the Children of Israel, we are truly wandering in unfamiliar and strange terrain.

Just as the slaves left behind routines and comforts of life in Egypt—"If only we had meat to eat!...we remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic." (Num. 11:4-5)— we have been forced to give up familiar elements of life. Things we have taken for granted, routines of our jobs, trips to the grocery, restaurants, Starbucks, visiting friends and family, children heading off to school, senior proms, college graduations, hugging grandchildren, all these and more have disappeared overnight. Like those meandering in the wilderness of Sinai, we are in between yesterday and an unknown future and cannot go backwards. COVID-19 and the implications of this global pandemic is here. Like the wandering Israelites, we can only proceed, one day at a time, accepting what is, not knowing what tomorrow will bring.

To guide us on this journey, we have to remember that our Biblical ancestors experienced divine blessings along the way: “*By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light...*”(Ex. 13:21). And we in the wilderness of our lives have to remain open to blessings and protection to guide us through the darkness. This time of quarantine is forcing us to look at our explore what meaning, faith and the divine means to us. And while there may not be immediate answers, in the facing the threat of illness and death, we certainly have time available to reflect on these “matters of ultimate concern”.

Life has slowed down, the entire corporate production enterprise keeping our world in a non-stop mode creating toxins and pollutants is being forced to take a Shabbat break. And just as on Shabbat we are given a *neshama yetirah*, an extra soul, enabling us to perceive Shechinah’s presence, in this era of quarantine perhaps we can take time for self-care and spiritual nourishment cultivating a renewed and deepened relationship with God. With the constriction of travel and commerce, our inherent spiritual wisdom can emerge to guide our lives through crevices and chasms we encounter in this time of darkness and confusion. Helpful guidelines for COVID-19/Coronavirus times.

Death in the Wilderness and Learning to Live with Grief

Wandering in the wilderness of uncertainty we are experiencing an underlying malaise and gnawing angst. News of the COVID-19 death count pierces our comfort zone evoking a sense of dis-ease, a subterranean turbulence of conflicted emotions.

In *The Denial of Death* Ernest Becker asserts that the most fundamental problem of humanity is the fear of death. Underneath trepidation and consternation about Coronavirus is fear of our mortality. Conditioned to avoid death, we use polite euphemisms to gingerly

tip-toe around the topic. But in this pandemic, death is staring us right in the face, pushing all our buttons regarding our fears of death, and of dying alone.

But tales of the wandering Israelites can be a model for us today. Torah tells us that upon departing from Egypt Moses took with him Joseph's bones (Ex. 13:19). Through forty years of desert wandering, these bones were carried along with the Ark of the Covenant (Sotah 13a-13b). The Sinai journey was both a pilgrimage to freedom, and a funeral procession honoring the dead. For our Biblical ancestors awareness of life and death, eternal spirit and mortal finitude were visibly interwoven in the public square.

And even more: in Numbers we read of the twelve spies on a forty-day reconnaissance mission to report on the Promised Land, and its inhabitants. Due to the distorted, dishonest and hyperbolic recounting of these spies the entire generation of Israelites were condemned to die over the course of forty years of desert wandering: *"In this wilderness your bodies will fall...not one of you will enter the land ...except [for the truth-tellers] Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun."* (Num. 14:30) Tradition tells us 600,000 people departed Egypt, excluding women and children. We can assume over a million people died in the desert. Mega-death was a constant companion in the communal lives of our Biblical ancestors. *Midrash Eichah Rabbah* tells us every year the people would prepare for death by digging their own graves. Death and the accompanying grief were visibly interwoven into the reality of life, in ways that we have failed to do in our materialistic death-denying culture.

These days we are being called to encounter and accept the reality of death as it shows up for us front and center. We enter grocery stores and pharmacies protecting ourselves and loved ones from COVID-19 because we don't want ourselves or those around us to get sick and die. Simultaneously, we are dealing with an underbelly of grief: that which was familiar to us has been taken away and the discomfort we are feeling is grief. Even more, there is an

anticipatory grief we are experiencing as we envision in our minds worst case scenarios of this virus run amok.

In a sense we are like our ancient Israelite ancestors, being called to respond to the reality of death and grief as it impacts our lives, whether we like it or not. While we can do all we are asked to avoid social/interpersonal spreading of the virus through healthy hygiene and physical distancing practices, we cannot necessarily guarantee that there will be no death or grief impacting our lives. However, I believe we are being called to transform our relationship to death, grief and loss, to see it as part of our human experience, without denial, resistance or avoidance. That is certainly one of the lessons we stand to harvest from this pandemic.