

## **Pesach 5780** **“Pesach Mitzrayim”**

In the Pesach Haggadah, Rabban Gamliel teaches:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים

*In every generation, each person must regard themselves as if they themselves had left Egypt.*

We normally skip over this passage in the Haggadah - not least because it comes just before dinner. But this year we might want to linger over it for a moment.

Rabban Gamliel is teaching that it is our sacred obligation to locate ourselves in the story of the Exodus. We joke that just as for every other Jewish festival, that task is fulfilled by reminding ourselves that “they tried to kill us, they failed, let’s eat.” But our circumstances this year mean that we are fulfilling this obligation in a different way.

The Torah describes two rites of Passover. The first is the one the Rabbis call “Pesach Mitzrayim” - the original Pesach that involved the taking of the lamb, the tenth plague and the actual moment of the Exodus itself. The Pesach we keep is the other one, the one the Rabbis call “Pesach Dorot,” marked by the clearing away of hametz and the eating of matzah.

This year we can’t keep Pesach Dorot the way we like to. The familiar routines leading up to Pesach have been stripped away. Our Seder tables will be small, even tiny. The closeness that we cherish this time of year - which for many families is their one full reunion - is being fragmented into icons on a screen. We can’t even lift up our voices together in song.

Israel itself is on lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus.

But that first Pesah - Pesah Mitzrayim - is coming in to much sharper focus.

The word *Mitzrayim* comes from the Hebrew word *tzar*, meaning ‘narrow’ or ‘constricted’. That feeling of being limited, shut in, shut down, even - that’s what will define our Pesach this year.

I want to stop and say something obvious here. The parallel isn't an exact one. Tempting though the analogy is, I think it's problematic to think of the coronavirus as a plague like the other plagues in Egypt. We need to be very careful with tropes like 'tyrant' and 'punishment' and 'vengeance'. As I explained to the minister who showed up at Shir Chadash last week to exhort us to repent and pray for deliverance from God's anger because that's what it says in 'your Torah,' we live by the Torah as it is interpreted, not as taken literally. And I think it's unlikely that we'll be daubing anything on our doorposts this year either.

But as we read over the narrative of Pesach Mitzrayim (in Exodus 12 and 13), other parallels to our situation leap to the eye.

Right at the beginning of the narrative (12:1), the children of Israel are commanded to begin to count time. Ten days then elapse - ten days that the Torah telescopes together, telling us nothing about them, as if nothing distinguishes one from the next. On the tenth day comes the commandment to take a kid or a lamb, *seh l'mishpachah*, one for each individual family unit. The lamb is to be kept as a *mishmeret* for a further four days before being sacrificed, at night. It's to be eaten in a rush, dressed for travel - the only hint the people are given that the Exodus itself might be coming.

What did the children of Israel do in those four days? We don't know: the Torah doesn't tell us. But we do know that they must have been waiting. And that key word - *mishmeret* - turns up in different language later in the story as well, when the night of the Exodus is described as *leyl shimurim* - a night of vigil - of watching, and hoping, but most of all, of waiting. I think it's Rashi who teaches that on this night, the Holy One was waiting too, longing for the slavery to end and for freedom to begin. Perhaps that's true of the time we are living through, as well.

Many teachers describe the Exodus as the birth moment of the Jewish people. And as every mother knows, birth itself is a process that involves a huge amount of waiting.

The contemporary spirituality teacher Carolyn Myss describes waiting as a spiritual process. She writes:

*We have to reconstruct ourselves from the inside out, a process that always brings about numerous changes in our lives. I have yet to find a person pursuing a path of conscious awakening who has not experienced a time of 'waiting', during which his or her interior is reconstructed. And as with all matters of the spirit, once we start along the path, there is no turning back.*

What will be born out of this year? What will our waiting and watching make possible?

Well, we won't go 'back to normal.' Anyone who has ever given birth knows that it changes their life irrevocably. Rebecca Solnit has pointed out that 'emergency' is related to 'emerge,' which only underlines that when we come back out, it won't be to the same place or state.

4 is the traditional number for this time of year, so let me offer 4 ideas.

The first is the idea of personal awakening. As we are forced to turn inwards in isolation, we may discover aspects of ourselves. Maybe we have an interest we never had the time to pursue, a conflict we never had the will to resolve or memories we never had the time to enjoy. Now is the time to take them out, examine them, explore them, develop them.

The second is the idea of new connections. I heard the other day of a household having a conversation - a really important conversation - that they'd never had before. And outside of the boundaries of our homes we are discovering new ways to be in contact, a new kind of glue that holds communities together. Our intolerance of others' idiosyncrasies has melted away as we reach out to each other by technology, by phone, by notes on doorsteps, by waving as we pass each other at a distance on the levee, because we have learned anew the importance of community.

The third is the idea of goodness. There has been an outflow of *hesed* - pure love, tenderness, generosity, which should awaken our deepest gratitude. Perhaps our Dayyenu this year looks something like: if we only had our garbage collectors, dayyenu; if we only had the workers at grocery stores and food banks, dayyenu; if we only had our exceptional, brave medical professionals, dayyenu. We can add our own verses at our own Sedarim as we acknowledge the new goodness pouring through the cracks in this broken world. And we can ask ourselves how we can be part of that goodness.

And finally, there is the idea of the story itself. I suggest that after the Sedarim we each sit down and record an account of our Pesach this year - in drawings, in writing, on the computer, by a collection of objects we set aside, in a video recording, in a dance, in whatever form works for us. I suggest we keep that record in our haggadah so that next year at this time it rises up to greet us, becoming part of our own story of the journey from the stringency and pain of *mitzrayim* across the sea, to the mountain of revelation and on to the promised land.

Leshanah haba'ah shuv b'yachad - next year, may we be together again.

Have a safe, sweet, kosher Pesach.