



A Learner's Journey: How Will We Tell Our Story?

Passover 5779

Here it is—one of the greatest, most potent, terrifying and exalting stories ever written. *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt: the story of a band of slaves, humiliated, degraded and oppressed for hundreds of years under a ruthless tyrant hellbent on the desecration of the human body and spirit. The story of a people who emerged from the deepest darkness and began the long journey toward dignity and freedom.

As I read this story this year, I hear the wisdom of my dear friend Rev. Ed Bacon, who used to hold writing workshops that would challenge us to consider not only the stories we tell, but the way that we tell them.

First, he'd ask people to identify one compact, meaningful moment in their lives in which they were the victims. Go and write, he'd say.

In every generation each of us is challenged to see ourselves as though we, personally, left Egypt. So let's try Rev. Bacon's exercise now, with the victim narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. What happened to you? Who was responsible? How did it affect you?

This is a story of generations of degradation and humiliation. It's a story of Pharaoh and his taskmasters ruthlessly and systematically enslaving our people with crushing harshness, embittering our lives for centuries (Ex 1:13-14). Ours was a bondage was so heavy it took our dignity and our breath, leaving us dispirited and despairing (Ex 6:9).

Speaking those truths—that narrative of victimization—is a matter of setting the record straight. Naming the names of our oppressors and speaking openly about the trauma they've caused is one step on the path to the restoration of our dignity.

But then Rev. Bacon would ask people to take the very same story and write it again, this time casting themselves as the heroes of the tale.

Let's try that now too, heroes of the Exodus. What did you make happen? How did you take responsibility? How did your actions affect others?

Of course, through this lens, a dramatically different story emerges. In the hero's journey, we are active agents of not only our survival, but our redemption. Though we were few in number, we were fruitful and became strong, filling the land (Ex 1:7). The fiercest tyrant of the ancient world tried to stamp us out, but as much as he would afflict us, we only grew more mighty (Ex 1:12). Even through generations of oppression, we became a great nation, never forgetting our roots, honoring the customs, the language and the ways of our people (Pesikta Zutrata Parashat Tavo 46:1). And when we could bear the suffering no more, we cried out to God and we were led to freedom with a strong hand and an outstretched arm (Ex 6:6). Yes, we suffered, but we endured. With faith and courage, we survived.

That story matters too.

And yet, there's one more version of our story Rev. Bacon would ask us to tell, one that we'd be especially wise to share on Seder night. This one casts us neither as victims nor as heroes, but as learners. As people who train their hearts and minds to experience the world not reflexively, but reflectively. To experience both the tragedy and the triumph, and to come out with a deeper understanding of who we are and who we're capable of becoming.

What does a learner discover in this story?

We learn of our eternal vulnerability, of how quickly we might fall from power to powerlessness, from statesmen to slaves (Ex 1:9-10). Don't get too comfortable, children of Jacob, our story cries out. Those who embrace you now may turn on you in an instant.

We learn that when despots create an atmosphere of rage and terror, they can make otherwise decent people behave in profoundly indecent ways (Ex 1:11). And we learn of the potency of fear as a political weapon that quickly normalizes even the most monstrous ideas, dragging an entire society into depravity (Ex. 1:15).

We learn about how regular people with a conscience can stand up even to the greatest tyrants, holding solidarity with those who strive for freedom (Ex. 1:17). We learn that women and girls—nearly invisible in the ancient world—can rise up as heroes of the resistance, fighting for their people's liberation with courage and spiritual strength (Ex. 2:1-10).

We learn how hard it often is to train our eyes to see human suffering, until we identify with those in pain. And we learn how one moment of illuminated awareness can awaken us from our slumber and shift the course of our lives (Ex. 2:11).

We learn that sometimes we can still love, even when our hearts are shattered (Ex. 2:21).

We learn that we must turn aside and pay attention to the quiet messages whispering to us from the natural world, for the Holy One is everywhere, even in the lowly pricker bush (Ex. 3:2).

We learn that we cannot escape injustice; there's no running away. There is no peace in Midian while Egypt aches under the weight of oppression. We are, as Dr. King would later remind us, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny (Ex. 4:19).

We learn that to achieve social and political change, we need both Moses, raised in the palace with all the assumptions of power, *and* his brother Aaron, who had never breathed a day of freedom, but understood from his core the toll enslavement had taken on his people (Ex. 4:27).

We learn that power and privilege are rarely shared willingly, that we either work to dismantle oppressive systems, or our inaction becomes the mortar that sustains them (Ex. 5:2).

We learn that sometimes our bodies have been so demeaned and our spirits so crushed that we nearly miss the opportunity to walk toward our own liberation, resigning ourselves to the imprisonment of the status quo (Ex. 5:21, 6:9).

We learn that God acts in strange and wondrous ways in our world (Ex. 7:3), and we learn about the uncompromising strength of the human heart: our ability to persevere, even in the darkest of days.

The essence of the seder, we're taught, is *higadta l'vinkha*—to tell the story of the Exodus to the next generation (Ex. 13:8). But how will we tell our story this year? We're living in a time of heroes and victims, fervently reinforcing narratives of national tragedy or triumph. It's just that those narratives seem not to be serving us or our people particularly well.

This year, I pray that we expand our hearts and tell our story—to each other, to our children, to anyone who will listen—not as victims and not as heroes, but as learners, on a timeless journey from narrowness to great expansive possibility.

Hag Sameah—may Passover bring you meaning and inspiration—

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