

Passover Retold

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The story of Passover begins long before, when Joseph, the son of Jacob, was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. Things went badly and Joseph was thrown in prison, where he was joined by the Pharaoh's wine steward and baker, who had the misfortune of offending the Pharaoh.

The wine steward and baker suffered bad dreams, which Joseph interpreted, telling them that the wine steward would be restored, but that the baker would be hanged. When these things came to pass, the news eventually reached the Pharaoh, who was having bad dreams of his own. Joseph explained that the Pharaoh's dreams foretold of seven years of plenty that would be followed by seven years of famine, and advised the storing of surplus grain for hard times ahead.

When these events took place as predicted, the Pharaoh made Joseph his Grand Vizier, a position of great power and influence. When the tribes of Israel went to Egypt to escape the famine, Joseph was in a position to welcome them and give them shelter, which he did.

The Israelites prospered in their adopted land, and integrated into all sectors of the society there. But there came a time when a new Pharaoh arose, one who was distrustful of the foreigners amongst them. The book of Exodus relates that he said to his people, "These Israelites have become too many and too strong for us. We must take precautions to see that they do not increase any further; or we shall find that, if war breaks out, they will join the enemy and fight against us. . . So they were made to work in gangs with officers set over them," enslaved to build new cities and monuments in order to break their spirit. But the Israelites continued to prosper, so they were treated with ever-increasing severity, enslaved at hard labor.

The Passover story retells this history, how the Israelites went from being outsiders to becoming integrated into an oppressive society in which they helped the ruling Pharaoh, and eventually forgot their own traditions, and how a new Pharaoh arose who saw them as a potential enemy and found it easy to convince his own people to enslave them. They lived for hundreds of years as enslaved people

before yet another Pharaoh saw them as so dangerous that he ordered a genocide of Hebrew children.

It tells of Moses growing up in the palace but who eventually identified with his own people, who were enslaved and oppressed. Moses killed an Egyptian poiceman who was beating an Israelite slave and fled to Midyan, where he heard God’s voice through a fire and returned to Egypt. Moses implored the Pharaoh to “let my people go,” but he responded by increasing the oppression. Moses was even shunned by his own people who accused him of being a troublemaker who who was only making things worse.

But, following a series of environmental disasters, Moses convinced the Pharaoh that the plagues would stop if he let the Israelites go. Even though most didn’t leave, it was a great and joyful celebration for those who did leave by making the huge leap of faith in believing that transformation was really possible.

The holiday of Passover celebrates this moment of courage, taking the giant step into the possibility of a change in the status quo, reaffirming in freedom the absolute value of human dignity.

MEDITATION

(Victoria Safford)

They had no idea where they were going, when they left that night, in the dark, without lights, without shoes, without bread, their children smothered against them so they would make no noise.

They had no idea what they were getting into, following this Moses, this wild-eyed one who claimed visions and made promises but who after all could guarantee them nothing, except death if they were caught.

They had no idea, these slaves, what it could mean, this promise of land (their own country) and life abundant. Of freedom they knew nothing, except what they could taste by living in its opposite, slavery, and that taste became a hunger, and that hunger became insatiable till they were ravenous for freedom, and they went out then—but no one knows to this day whether they were led by Moses or by the outstretched arm and mighty hand of something else, of something eternal (as

they would afterwards and always claim), or whether their own human, hungry will made them flee that night from Pharaoh.

They went into the wilderness. There they wandered forty years, which in those days was a lifetime. Forty was a good, old age, so many of them died before getting anywhere, and many were born in the desert and grew to adulthood knowing nothing but the journey—not slavery, not freedom, just the going. They whined and complained and muttered, and some mutinied, for they were a stiff-necked and rebellious people (you can read it for yourself); ungrateful people, even when manna rained down from heaven and quails were sent to feed them; unhappy people, longing, out loud even, for the familiar security of Egypt, of all places, where at least they knew what to expect, as awful as it was; impatient people, making cheap little idols and gods of metal to bargain with in secret when the traveling got hard or merely dull, and the days and years became monotonous.

In the springtime we remember: the promised land is not a destination—it is a way of going. The land beyond the Jordan, that country of freedom and dignity and laughter—you carry it inside you all the while. It is planted in your mind and heart already, before you ever start out, before it even occurs to you that in order to leave that life in Egypt, the intolerable bondage of that life, what you need to do is stand up and walk forward.

Passover Explored

Passover celebrates a pivotal moment in the history of the Hebrew people. But, like all such stories, it goes much deeper than that. As I've said, there are thousands of ways to read the Bible, but only one wrong way: literally.

So we have the story of an historical event, but its true power lies in its relevance to our lives, today and every day: we do not need to accommodate ourselves to oppression and abuse.

When we go back in the history of the Hebrew people, we find this message embedded in nearly every tale and story: change is possible – there is even a cosmic power that supports transformative change, and it is called “God.”

We can see a bit deeper into the implications of this ancient tradition with the help of the network of spiritual progressives and *Tikkun* magazine. They provide us with a radical definition of what they mean by the word, “God.”

Tikkun points to the universal celebrations of springtime's renewal and its message “*that rebirth, renewal, and transformation are possible, and that we are not stuck in the dark, cold, and deadly energies of winter. Judaism builds on that universal experience of nature and adds another dimension: it suggests that the class structure (slavery, feudalism, capitalism, or neoliberal imperialism) can be overcome, and that we human beings, created in the image of the Transformative Power of the Universe, can create a world based on love, generosity, justice, and peace.*”

Tikkun goes on to say, “*We understand God in part as the Transformative Power of the Universe – the force that makes possible the transformation from that which is to that which ought to be, the force that makes it possible to transcend the tendency of human beings to pass on to others the hurt and pain that has been done to us, the force that permeates every ounce of Being and unites all in one transcendent and imminent reality. In short, we understand God in part as the ultimate Unity of All with All, of whom we are always a part, even if we are not always conscious of the part of God we are, or the part of God that everyone and everything is. . . even though the God we are talking about is not a big all-powerful and judgmental superman in heaven, it is precisely when we become the fullest conscious embodiments of who we actually are (namely, a cell in the totality of All Being and a manifestation of this God of transformation and healing) that many of us feel empowered to become part of the*

liberation story of the universe of which the Passover celebration is at once a commemoration and a renewal."

Although some may find this language challenging, is it really any different from the deepest understanding of our seventh principle, the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part?

The possibility of radical change is the foundation of the Hebrew, or Jewish, tradition. Again, the historical accuracy of their stories is really beside the point. A close reading of the story of Exodus suggests that more than several hundred thousand people fled from Egypt into the desert. It makes a striking story, but an extremely unlikely one. The point is the possibility of change rather than the details.

It's much more likely that these stories were developed out of the needs of a bunch of escaped slaves about three and a half thousand years ago. They gathered in the mountains and caves of Judea, a few at a time. Sometimes a whole family would escape and join them, once a fairly large group probably escaped from Egypt and found their way to the safety of the Judean hills. As they grew in number, they wanted to portray themselves as a legitimate people. So these ancient people, called the *Api'ru*, or Hebrews, did something audacious: they came up with a new story about the world.

The Hebrews no longer depended on prehistoric gods to decree what was to be done and by whom. Their God was a unique, powerful being that had created the world, had marked Israel as a chosen people, and who periodically intervened to help change the course of events. The Hebrew stories were shot through with messages of transformation and renewal, raising human dignity above the commands of mere earthly monarchs.

It began with their creation story, the forming of the universe in seven days. Many Biblical literalists choose to believe that this is an accurate representation of how everything came into existence, rejecting modern scientific understandings. But the truth of this story is, again, completely outside the realm of the literal. The whole point of the creation story is that it created time as a succession of 7-day weeks, with one day off, a day of rest. Can you imagine a more potent development than this for a group of escaped slaves who used to work endlessly, every day, without rest? They created a story where their God rested after six days of work, and required them to rest as well. Now that's an historical development we can all appreciate!

But even as we celebrate the victories of the past, *Tikkun* reminds us to be, “also sadly aware of the oppressive realities of the present. For that reason it is crucial that Passover and Easter not become hollow celebrations of past victories and past resurrections of hope. Instead they should be occasions to remind ourselves of the present depraved social reality on this planet that allows 2.5 billion people to struggle to stay alive . . . In our own country, tens of millions of people are struggling. . . The Occupy movement highlighted the plight of the downtrodden and the immoral social and economic policies that have resulted in their condition, benefitting the rich at the expense of the 99 percent. But many people mistakenly conclude that now that these outlandish realities have been widely publicized, somehow they’ve been taken care of. But they have not – and the suffering continues.

“Today it’s important to understand that the ‘downtrodden’ – those who are hurt by the materialism and selfishness built into the very ethos of global capitalism – are not only the homeless, the jobless, the millions of people in our jails and prisons, . . . the underemployed, the African American young men who are often targets of random violence from police or others, those working more than one job in order to help support their families, those whose mortgages have inflated to levels that they cannot pay, those who can’t afford to attend college or university as states are forced to raise the fees of public education. . . .”

Tikkun goes on to say, “While some of us don’t suffer from the[se] forms of deprivation . . . all of us do suffer from a spiritual and psychological deprivation generated by the ethos of the global capitalist system. Many of us find ourselves surrounded by others who seem endlessly selfish and materialistic or by people who see us only in terms of how we can advance their interests or perceived needs. No – it’s not just strangers. People today increasingly report that even their friends, spouse, or children seem to see them through the frame of the question, ‘What have you done for me lately?’ or ‘What can you give me to satisfy my needs?’ ”

Tikkun continues, “No wonder people feel unrecognized, disrespected, and very lonely, even when they are in a family or a loving relationship. The psycho-spiritual suffering generated by the way people internalize and then act out with others the materialism and selfishness that are at the core of the ethos of global capitalism guarantees that almost everyone, even those who materially benefit from this system, are also its victims. The deprivation of love and generosity crosses all class lines . . . The

spiritual distortions of the contemporary capitalist society are transmitted daily through each of us to the extent that we ourselves and others around us look at each other and the world through the framework of our own narrow self-interest and fail to see the holy, the beauty, the uniqueness, the commonality of all human beings.”

This is why the people at *Tikkun* encourage us to ask ourselves, as part of our Passover, “*what part in our society’s much-needed transformation can I participate in?*”

They point out that “*the Hebrew word for Egypt can also be understood as the narrow place of consciousness. To be a slave is to see only the small picture placed in front of you by the powerful. Understood that way, the liberation struggle is a process that must continue from generation to generation.*”

“*When faced with the enormity of the environmental crisis that advanced industrial societies have played a major role in creating, the temptation is to take a little piece of the crisis and see what we can do to fix it. Recycle here, stop fracking there, or oppose a new oil pipeline. Yet for every struggle won, the dynamics of capitalist economies – which must continually find new raw materials and create new markets – guarantee that larger forms of destruction will continue.*”

Tikkun calls for “*a New Bottom Line so that all our social, economic, and political systems and institutions are judged ‘efficient, rational, or productive,’ not to the extent that they maximize money and power . . . but to the extent that they maximize love, generosity, environmental sanity, and sustainability, and enhance our capacity to transcend a narrow utilitarian or instrumental attitude toward each other by treating one another as embodiments of the sacred and toward Nature by responding to it with awe, wonder, and radical amazement, rather than just exploiting it.*”

“*Unrealistic? Yes. Just like every other liberation struggle and attempt to move beyond the narrow consciousness of what is possible that has been drummed into our heads by the Pharaohs of every age. Passover must become the time to replenish our energies to become the agents of an expanded consciousness that can envision and create a world that lives in harmony with planet Earth.*”

May it be so.