



When Feeling Trapped: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Shemot*

Exodus 1:1 – 6:1

I have noticed that my prayer life often becomes richer when my life becomes more challenging. When things are going well with me, it's easy for my heart to close to both the uncertainty and the possibility of the present moment. I start to believe that I'm in control of my life, and that I don't need anyone's help -- least of all, God's.

The first time I really prayed the Psalms I was on the bus, headed to the doctor's office for a biopsy. My partner was pregnant with our son, and the prospect of dealing with a serious illness at the same time that I was about to become a parent felt like falling off a cliff and not knowing if I'd crash into the rocks or if a parachute would open so I could float to a gentle landing. That time, it was the parachute. But before I knew that, my heart opened to God in a way it never had before.

There's an ancient teaching about our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah that tries to explain why they were childless until their old age. It says that "the Holy One longs to hear the prayers of the righteous." As long as Abraham and Sarah yearned for a child together, they called out for God's help and needed God to answer.

There's a subtle but important difference between believing in a God who makes people suffer as a way of entering into relationship (which I don't) and being aware of the ways that suffering and longing can draw us near to God (which I try to be).

In the psalms we learn that the very act of crying out to God, of calling out for help when we feel trapped, can open up a new space for something to shift. "*Min ha metzar karati Yah anani b'merhav Yah*" From the narrowness I called out to God, God answered me with expansiveness. (Psalm 118:5)

This is exactly what happens in this week's Torah portion. The beginning of the book of Exodus picks up after the Israelites have relocated to Egypt (*Mizrayim*, in Hebrew, or the "narrowness"), driven out of their homeland by a terrible famine. They flourish and multiply and become prosperous in Egypt, only to become enslaved a few generations later. In their prosperity, God disappears from the story. There's even a break in the story of their enslavement until "a long time later," when the crying out of the Israelites in their suffering arouses God's attention.

"The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning and God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and took notice of them." (Exodus 2:23-25)

It is the Israelites' cry for help that activates the divine-human partnership. This is the beginning of the Israelites' journey from narrowness, *Mitzrayim*, to their uncertain freedom in the expanse of the wilderness.

Min ha metzar karati Yah anani b'merhav Yah

From the narrowness I called out to God, God answered me with expansiveness.

I see a rhythm of expansion and contraction over and over again, in the story of the Exodus, in the expansion and contraction of my lungs as I breathe, in the release and constriction of my pumping heart, in the narrowing and widening of the symbol for infinity, in the waxing and waning of my intimacy with the Holy. We read this story in the Torah again and again each year, reminding us of the infinite nature of the cycle.

When we are sick or caring for a loved one who is ill we may feel squeezed into a very narrow place. We are in the part of the cycle of life that is about constriction and oppression and it may feel hard to believe that our horizons will ever open again. Our life has indeed been constricted to a *Mitzrayim*, narrowness, within a limited body, in the walls of a hospital, or in a restricted schedule. By calling out from the narrowness, we may crack open the shell that can encase our hearts, letting the Holy in through the cracks. This is why prayer can be so powerful when life is challenging.

In our times of narrowness and fear may we have the courage to "call out from the narrows" and be blessed with expansive opening.

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