



Torah Reflections on *Pesach*

15-22 Nisan 5780

April 8-16, 2020

(First Seder on April 8th)

I once spent a lovely Shabbat afternoon in a botanical garden watching goldfish swim about in the Japanese gardens. In a large pond fish as big as a muscular forearm splashed about happily, while in a small pool the fish were only the size of my thumb and index finger. A gardener walking by stopped to chat with me and he explained that goldfish, like potted plants, will grow to inhabit whatever space you offer them. They remain stunted in bowls and tanks, but grow into incredible dimensions when placed in spacious ponds. I laughed when I heard this and responded “Just like all of us!”

This teaching from the gardens struck me as the perfect Torah, the perfect spiritual instruction, for this time of year. Passover is a festival which is all about making room in our lives for expansion. We read in the Mishna, the oldest layer of Jewish law (from the 1st Century CE): “In every generation one is obligated to see oneself as someone one who **personally** went out from slavery in Egypt.” (*Pesachim* 10:5) These words were included in the Passover Haggadah and have been repeated by Jews in every generation and across the globe, each year at our seders. But what does it mean to feel as if we ourselves came out of Egypt?

This text is often understood as a call to remember slavery, but in fact it is asking us to identify with *leaving* slavery. When we talk about leaving ‘Egypt’ we are not referring to a physical location, and certainly not modern-day Egypt. The Hebrew word for Egypt is *Mitzrayim*, a narrow place of contraction and oppression. Leaving *Mitzrayim*, is creating space in our lives to grow. It is the Exodus that happens in our lives when we find the room for our souls to expand. The 18th century Jewish mystic Rabbi Nachman of Breslav says: “The Exodus from *Mitzrayim* occurs in every human being, in every era, in every year and even on every day.”

Sadly, it is probably not too hard for most of us to relate at least in part to the experience of being oppressed in *Mitzrayim*. We know what it means to feel our lives compressed. Some of us have survived political or domestic violence, emotional or physical trauma, or enforced confinement. And most of us have been squeezed by the pressure to conform to external ideals of beauty, to other people's definitions of financial success, or by our own lack of self worth. Our growth has been stunted by living with other people's ideas of what we can and should do “at a certain age” or given our disabilities. We have felt the contraction of all the obstacles that restrict our lives and encourage us to be less fully unique and powerful beings.

Every Passover we are reminded that Jewish tradition wants us to see ourselves as spiritually free no matter how harshly and unfairly our lives have been circumscribed by external circumstances. However, this holiday also teaches us that it is not at all easy to see ourselves as free beings – if it were simple to be liberated we would not be

reminded to relive the Exodus each and every year at this season no matter how young or old, wise or innocent we are.

It is hard in the best of times, to feel truly free. And these forces of contraction may feel particularly strong when we are struggling under the weight of mental or physical illnesses, when we are vulnerable in the hospital, isolated at home, or feeling our options contract as we care-give to someone who is ill. We may have recently lost a range of movement in our bodies, freedom in how we spend our time, our capacity to work or support our families. We may even have lost some of our identity as we are increasingly related to as an illness as opposed to as a person. These contractions in our lives are real and extremely painful. And yet in the eyes of Jewish tradition we *all* are liberated from *Mitzrayim* over and over again, which means that each of us is a whole, free person (not an illness, a diagnosis or just a care-giver), even in the most challenging moments of our lives.

As the Pesach seder comes to a close we chant Hallel, the group of psalms that are sung on major holidays, thanking God for the opportunity that we had to throw off the shackles of slavery and to grow as individuals and as a people as liberated beings. We sing: "From narrowness I called out to God, and God answered me with expansive opening." This season, when we call out from our narrow places may we be granted expansive opening in wide open ponds.

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