

## **A Tale of Commitment: Reflecting on Passover**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 28, 2021**

They were a suffering people, and they were a determined people. They were a people in bondage, and they were a people of faith. The Israelites lived a life of enslavement to the Egyptians, and yet what we celebrate today is their journey towards freedom. We celebrate their commitment to that which was much bigger than their individual selves – their God and their community and their faith. Their commitment to a better life. We celebrate their exodus – the flight of the Hebrew slaves, a people who freed themselves from bondage and created a nation.

It is impossible to capture the entirety of this powerful Jewish story of Passover in but a few minutes, but we'll try. We have a prophet named Moses who served as a conduit between these people of faith and God, and who led them from a life of enslavement in Egypt to the Promised Land via a journey through a desert. We have the story of Pharaoh who, previous to this exodus, held these people in bondage in Egypt with a hardened heart. He did not let the Hebrew slaves go even when hearing a plea from God, nor after a series of plagues were inflicted upon his people by God. He did not let them leave until the first-born son of every Egyptian household was killed. We have the Israelites whose sons were saved from this fate – who were passed over – as Moses instructed them to paint the blood of a lamb on their doorposts, letting God know that those households were the homes of the Israelites, permitting their children to live. We have a people who, after this God given opportunity, quickly fled from their houses, bringing with them for sustenance their unleavened bread, escaping so quickly that there was no time for the dough to rise. We have a people who wandered through the desert for forty years, searching for the Promised Land.

There are several images in this story that stand out to me. When God first spoke to Moses God did so through the guise of a burning bush – the divine taking physical form, flames lashing about the leaves and twigs as God gave Moses his instructions. A mortal interacting with the divine. We have the imagery of the matzah – of that unleavened, cracker-like bread symbolizing the urgency in which the Israelites fled. We have the parting of the Red Sea – God separating the waters of the sea – walls of the liquid towering to the left and to the right – creating dry ground for the Israelites to escape on. The waters then crashed down behind the escaping Israelites onto the Egyptians in pursuit, killing them all. God helping the oppressed find freedom. Powerful images scattered throughout this Biblical story, peppering this tale of freedom with stories of miracles and stories of determined intentionality. This story of Passover is crucial to the Jewish faith and is central to Jewish life. It commemorates freedom and the birth of a nation. It is a story of hope and promise. It is a quest for freedom and a search for what Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick calls redemption.<sup>1</sup>

The Israelites were committed to a better life – committed to healing. Just as, I hope, are each one of us. Healing is a commitment, and it is a hard commitment. Healing, on a smaller, more individual scale may require therapy or 12-step groups. Yet, in the triumphant story of today, healing is an exodus from a land of enslavement. These individual Israelites, in committing to a better life, dedicated their lives to something much greater than their individual selves. In this story there are never individuals but a community – the faith community to which they were each committed. And there was a commitment to their holy – a much greater entity who these Israelites called God. In devoting themselves to something bigger, in dedicating themselves to a better life, they committed to a life of trust amongst doubt, to leaving one hardship only to enter into the unknown, to a life intertwined with both miracles and intentionality. We can emulate this.

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<sup>1</sup> *Living Judaism* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick pg. 174

We can truly enter into a state of healing and betterment when we take the focus out of ourselves and instead direct it towards those things that are greater than our individual selves – just as the Israelites did. They escaped for the better of the whole – for the betterment of their faith community. So too can we escape our afflictions by bettering our own communities – reacting to stigma with activism or to an untimely death with a medical career – healing ourselves while working to heal the greater whole that surrounds us. So too is this with the sacred, whatever that may be to each one of us. Living by having faith that there is something much greater than ourselves – whether we call that God or nature – that can help orient us, give us meaning, and give us direction when we feel destitute. Rabbi Menachem Schneerson wrote that the theme of Exodus “enables us to undergo a personal exodus from Egypt by transcending our individual limits.”<sup>2</sup> In each of our lives we undergo an Exodus from the harmful to the healing, and when we do this within the embrace of community we transcend our own limitations. This is what we are reminded of today. We are invited to depart from our pain with such haste that our bread cannot leaven.

They were committed to their God, following Moses – to whom God gave God’s instructions – out of the bondage of slavery and into the wilderness – the desert. They were committed to God as they followed an unknown and unknowable path – just as our paths often are – for forty years. Author Bruce Feiler urges us to enter into this very story ourselves, reimagining ourselves as a people in bondage. What do we feel as we experience this God for the first time – God trying to save and liberate? Awe, fear, apprehension, perhaps a sense of expectation. He suggests we embrace an ignorance of our own holy – an acknowledgement that we cannot truly understand the sacred. He expresses an inherent need for this sacred being – just as the Israelites did with their God as expressed in the Passover story. This God that, on God’s own accord, freed an entire people. The rabbi notes that we each need to commit to

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<sup>2</sup> *Essential Judaism* George Robinson pg.123

something bigger than ourselves – even if we do not fully understand it. Only then were the Israelites free.<sup>3</sup> Only then, when we connect to something greater than ourselves - to a God of many names, to perhaps nature - only then are we free.

And yet when we connect with something greater than ourselves we do not simply mean the divine, we also mean each other. We mean our communities. The Israelites were a group – a people of faith – committed to each other’s freedom in ways that produced their own, individual freedom. It would be exceedingly difficult to find freedom and healing while isolated. Would a random assortment of people fleeing from bondage make it? Could the Israelites have survived if they embarked on individual journeys, not maintaining that sacred connection to the whole? What about us – could we make it without those in our immediate surroundings – perhaps friends, family, or our own faith community – Channing Memorial Church. Could we make it without those in our broader communities? We are called to work intentionally for personal healing and to embrace that sacred opportunity to use our healing to better the interdependent web of which we are all a part. We survive because of each other and we flourish because of each other – we heal when we help others heal. I am reminded of the alcoholic who finds the community of Alcoholics Anonymous. I am reminded of the struggling adolescent who finds the community of the soccer team. I am reminded of the dejected teen parent who finds a faith community. I am reminded of the new mother suffering from postpartum depression finding a support group. I am reminded of all of those struggling who found some sort of sacred – whether nature or God or any other form of the holy. All of these vignettes of stories of real people who healed by finding something bigger than themselves – and who used their own experiences to help others – to better the communities they committed themselves to.

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<sup>3</sup> *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses* Bruce Feiler pg. 184

The story of Passover also reminds us of trust amongst doubt – the Israelites trusting Moses for forty years even when their minds may have been filled with doubts – yet eventually making it to the Promised Land. Doubts, perhaps, of crossing the Red Sea, and yet they were met with a miracle of God and able to pass through what was seemingly impossible. As the story goes, when they arrived at the banks of the sea, they saw nothing but an impassable expanse of water. With trust in their sacred, they continued their journey, for, as Moses waved his arm over the sea so did God part the waters and make way for the tired travelers – when met with doubt their faith brought them a way forward – with their trust in something greater than themselves they proceeded.

The Israelites trusting the journey – trusting what was greater than themselves – trusting that if they kept going, they would find a better life. Filled with doubt on their own path towards healing, and yet continuing this difficult journey filled with basic trust – trust in each other and trust in the whole. They kept on their wondering journey for forty years – and made it. This trust is a commitment to healing, just as we each need to trust our own journeys as we actively work toward betterment.

Not only is there this basic need for trust but there is that scary endeavor of leaving what is known – even if what is known is hardship. It is a common tale that a potential unknown in the future is even scarier than what we are facing now even if our current predicament is one of hardship. The Israelites faced this. They were in the bondage of slavery and looking for a better life – so they fled. They fled into the unknown with such haste their bread did not rise. They fled into the unknown of the wilderness, into the mysterious and dangerous desert that had surrounded them their entire lives. They fled to freedom, itself an unknown amongst a community of slaves. With not much more than that sacred commitment to a better life, they left what they always knew and took that first, timid and yet empowered step into the unknown. And in that unknown there was hardship – desert life at its core is one of suffering, especially if all one is armed with is meager belongings, basic food, and trust. And yet

with these limited belongings they – as a people, even if not as individuals – they survived for forty years, eventually finding the Promised Land. We can emulate this. We can leave behind that which is harming us – departing from what is troubling us – committing ourselves to a better life – even if this is scary. We can leave our own lives for that of the Promised Land. Here I am reminded of a woman stuck in a painful marriage, suffering where she was and yet terrified of what would happen if she left – venturing into the unknown – even if she imagined it to be a better life. And yet this woman I know, she did this, she survived, and she thrived. I am reminded of a man struggling with his faith and his sexuality, knowing that where he was was hurting him psychologically, leading to great inner turmoil, and yet scared of what would happen if he left the known that was this faith community. But he did. He entered his own desert. He wandered, losing his way at times, but he healed.

The vignettes I have shared are those of intentionality – of deliberately working to create a better life – just as the Israelites did. Each of these stories shared details of a life of hardship met with healing – after intentionally committing to making it so – after becoming part of something greater than oneself and entering into the unknown. I think of the burning bush in each of these stories – Moses speaking to his God as if a flame that did not destroy that which it engulfed, dictating how to take his people to the Promised Land. I think of my own burning bush – that miraculous thing I speak to when I connect with my own holy - all the times I spoke to my sacred in times of hardship with an intention to heal. Or that unleavened bread that all of these struggling people brought with them, leaving that which caused them pain in great haste. Or when my friend was met with the insurmountable sea that was her marriage in shambles, not seeing a way to the other side but having faith in the journey, trust that she could make it, as something greater than herself parted the waters, and she safely made the journey to freedom. The thread connecting all these tales is one of commitment – of a commitment to a better life. Of meeting doubt with trust. Of connecting with community and with the sacred – whatever that sacred may be to each and every one of us. Just as the Israelites followed Moses to freedom, just as the

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only true thing they brought with them and held with them throughout that journey was a commitment to a better life – so too can we heal. So too can we recover. So too can we reach the Promised Land.

May it be so, and Amen.