

Passing Over and Moving Forward

A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

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Readings

From Exodus:

And HaShem spoke unto Moses, saying: 'Speak unto the children of Israel, that they turn back and encamp...between Migdol and the sea...And Pharaoh will say: They are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in. ... And it was told the king of Egypt that the people were fled; And he made ready his chariots, and took his people with him. And he ... pursued after the children of Israel. And when Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians were marching after them; and they were sore afraid; and the children of Israel cried out. And they said unto Moses: 'Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to bring us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we spoke unto thee in Egypt, saying: Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? It were better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness.'

HaShem said unto Moses: 'Wherefore criest thou unto Me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward. Lift thou up thy rod and stretch out thy hand over the sea and divide it; and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and HaShem caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon dry ground; the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand and on their left... the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea...

Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea and the sea returned to its strength when morning appeared...the Egyptians fled against it and HaShem overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered all the host of Pharaoh that went in after them into the sea. But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea....

From Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

So the Israelites followed Moses and his God only to wind up between the approaching Egyptian chariots and the abyss of the Red Sea. Now there was no turning back, no moving forward.

It is logically impossible. It cannot be done. You can either be in the midst of the sea or you can be on dry ground. But you cannot at the same time be both. The Hasidic Master Dov Baer of Mezritch teaches that there is a place, an order of being, called ayin, (eye yeen) Nothingness, through which anyone (or anything) must pass before it can become something new. Just a split second after it is no longer what it was but before it is what it would become. All bets are off. You could become anything – or remain nothing, forever. Such a place contains both a thing and its opposite. Sea and dry ground. Life and Death. Good and evil. Slavery and freedom.

In the Chasidic tradition Rabbi Bunam said: At the Seder we eat the Matzah first and the bitter herbs next, though the reverse order would seem more appropriate since we first suffered and later were free. There is a reason for this. As long as they had no hope of redemption, they did not feel the real bitterness of their lot. But as soon as Moses had spoken to them of freedom, they awoke to the bitterness of their slavery.

Sermon:

My grandparents on my father's side spent their last years in the Jewish Home in Rochester, New York – across town from where my family lived. We'd visit each week. Sometimes I'd wander off and seek the peace of the large sanctuary on the main floor. In the center, behind velvet curtains on the bima, the stage, I discovered one day, the Torah was hidden. Well – I didn't know it was the Torah – I just knew it was a large velvet clothed object. Clearly important and definitely mysterious. Even if I had known what it was, I wouldn't have known much about it anyway. The little I did know I got from the Exodus story which my family shared at Passover every year. It was frightening, though ultimately it turned out alright – at least for the Israelites. And it taught me that there are histories of suffering in the world and labors of liberation. It taught me that, as Jews, once slaves and now free, once oppressed and now finding acceptance, we had a responsibility to be laborers for liberation on behalf of other people. It was a dense religious lesson one evening a year. It was the power of the story and sense of its continuing into the present day that first grabbed me. It got my attention first in the matzoh that we ate year after year – because, as the story goes, there had been no time for the bread to rise. So each year we ate the bread of affliction so that we could taste the urgency of the race toward freedom. And even though my very secular parents thought they were simply giving me a taste of culture and a lesson in politics – the Seder meal created in me a hunger for something that I could not quite name – nor could I quite see – but that I pursued until I found my way to ministry.

Each year I'd hear the story and feel the weight of that ethical responsibility to all other people. I could feel the great longing for liberation that was at the heart of the story. It was a longing for freedom, that, in my very 1960's childhood, I saw reflected in social movements in my own time. Particularly in the civil rights movement. I was mystified by the story – I mean – it's mystifying and epic: pyramids, plagues, the parting of the seas. Forty years in the desert. Awesome. Once we were slaves and now we are free. Once we were crowded into gas chambers and now we sit at this large table. Suffering happens and redemption happens. I will redeem you with outstretched arm. Of course I didn't really believe in the story as a literal story – even back then. I mean it was thoroughly impossible. It was impossible that the sea parted, let the Israelites through and then neatly zipped shut to drown the Egyptian troops. It was impossible that the people wandered in the desert for 40 years. It was impossible that the God of that story had the power to turn the rivers red like blood, talk through a burning bush, and yet not simply free the people without killing the firstborn.

But particularly this one moment seems impossible – when the people turn to face the sea – a moment that they'd seen coming had walked toward since there was no where else to turn and HaShem said “and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground.” The children of Israel look at the predicament that they're in and start arguing with Moses. “we told you we didn't want to come – we were safe in slavery – now we are in danger in freedom. We said we wanted to stay put – now we are walking to our deaths.” Moses isn't entirely certain either. He cries out to HaShem as the rest cry out to him.

In *Five Cities of Refuge* – a book of Torah reflections by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner and writer David Mamet – they explore this impossible story and decide that it *is* impossible. Rabbi Kushner says “ You want to know what happened at the sea? I’ll tell you. The waters didn’t literally split. The people all walked into the sea and drowned. Then they walked up onto the opposite shore, reborn as free men and women.” So, he had me up to “they walked up onto the opposite shore.” It couldn’t be real and yet he means something totally real. The Israelites were a frightened people – used to a limited view of life. Their minds as well as their bodies were enslaved. Their imaginations were shriveled. They had no vision. Their habits had to die so that new freedoms could be born.

How could they even imagine it – they who had lived for generations in Mitzrayim – a narrow place – a place of narrow vision? Sure sounds like a metaphor to me! How could they even imagine a wider view? The idea of freedom has to be in our minds before we can reach for it with our hands. I remember in second grade – I was miserable about something. I think some antagonism from the boy next door. I decided to run away from home. I had heard the expression somewhere. It sounded good to me. I headed down Mulberry Street with fire and purpose in my step. And, half a block later, I stopped short in my tracks. It was Goodman Street. A busy thoroughfare. So much traffic. I looked back and forth, thinking about the “away from home” that waited across the street. Some sort of new beginning. So close. And then it hit me – I wasn’t allowed to cross the street by myself. The power and logic of that reality came home to me. I turned around and walked back home and made my peace. I couldn’t imagine “away from home” – so I couldn’t walk toward it. A childlike fact. Probably life saving for me. But in large, grown ups face this reality as well. We can’t create the future we cannot somehow sense. At the same time, it is never given to us to see it clearly – that’s the nature of the future.

We may drown staying back or moving forward. Think of all the years that we knew that there was a resource crisis. We knew that our dependence on fossil fuels was undermining the health and security of our world. But until an Inconvenient Truth came out and the gas prices shot up – until people were faced with the chariots on one side and the sea on the other – we couldn’t move. I drive our smaller car, now. We think twice about every car trip.

We can be caught in the limited view of the moment. No escaping. I need that tank of gas, that Chilean grape, the inexpensive scarf made in China. Can I imagine life with another choice? Freedom – peace – new human conditions require our imagination to come into being. And, while children have fertile imaginations, they cannot imagine certain new kinds of realities, any more than we can.

Who teaches us to walk across the street for the first time – to imagine our way to a new vision? The Hebrew Bible – is full of stories of people who imagine new ways of being – step by primitive step – until they arrive in the present. It’s tempting to dismiss the stories of the Bible – as improbable and sometimes as offensive -- I mean – who wants to believe in a God that slays the first born? At the same time, when we read them thoughtfully, as metaphorical meditations and reflections on the human predicament – they are astonishingly rich. Rich enough to give birth to a nourishing tradition of rabbinical commentary – in the Talmud and in Midrash – that has continued to the present day.

It was stories like this one that gave Martin Luther King, Jr. the courage to keep moving forward – after his home was firebombed. It was this story in particular that gave him courage when he said in Memphis in 1968 “Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to

know... that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!" He was caught between those chariots and the sea and he knew that he had to move forward – to do the right thing - the courageous thing – the unimaginable thing.

It's only people of imagination who carry us from one way of being to another – who can think beyond the way it is to the way that it could or should be. It was only through the work of people with imagination that this week the Iowa Supreme Court struck down a ban on same – sex marriage. In the text of their decision the court cited the words of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, "It is revolting to have no better reason for a rule of law than that so it was laid down in the time of Henry IV. It is still more revolting if the grounds upon which it was laid down have vanished long since, and the rule simply persists from blind imitation of the past." Well – amen. This week I rejoiced as new freedoms were won. The struggle isn't over – in fact if we could see the struggle ahead of us it might look like an uncrossable sea – overwhelming.

It is not for seeing the certainty of positive outcomes that people push toward a better world – but for doing the right thing – creating the right thing. We need a sense of possibility but we don't need blueprints to move ahead – in fact we never get them. Life simply doesn't come with such guarantees. Its overwhelming unpredictability is the reason that we make music, write poetry, preach sermons, create artwork – labor for fairness and peace. There is something in the imagination that drives humans into seemingly impossible places. At Passover the challenge is made to face the sea and set foot in it – somehow the compass of the religious, the moral imagination, knows that there is life ahead in spite of the visible hopelessness.

Each year, as we finish the Seder – the Passover meal – we say – next year in Jerusalem. That Jerusalem isn't a real place – it's a hope – a place in the human mind. Like home – which is not a place but a state of mind. As I walked in Jerusalem and throughout the Promised Land two years ago – I knew that I was walking not only on Earth in the present – but in a timeless dimension of the human spirit. It was a place where the clarity of the air and the brightness of the sun made life more vivid. And yet, the conditions of life were shocking. I wanted to find that longed for Jerusalem – a place of peace and plenty. Instead I found a place where the level of militarism was eating Israeli culture alive. It was a place where two peoples were promised land – had claim to land – one through history and residence and the other through scripture and imperial powers. Two imperfect peoples. Within the borders of Israel were ordinary neighborhoods, quiet treelined streets, nice cars, trendy shops, western restaurants, Ace Hardware, Blockbuster. On the West Bank everything was coated with a layer of dust, the most solid homes seemed impermanent, the streets were filled with broken cars and beside them, donkeys. Around towns were blockades of cement making roads impassable. To pass between the two areas was to undergo an airport inspection or worse. Two ordinary peoples whose imaginations had stalemated them in a landscape of fear and mistrust. And yet – there were people who could imagine walking through that sea to a real promised land. A few weeks ago I mentioned Daoud Nassar – the Palestinian olive farmer on whose farm I worked and spent a night. He's going to be here – in a few weeks. He's travelling with an Israeli and an American – a man I travelled with two years ago. I hope that you come to meet him because he is one of those rare people who live facing the sea and walk into it every day. His land is situated outside Bethlehem – his family has owned it since the 1920's. The caves they originally lived in are still there. He holds the papers to the land, but the Israeli government has claimed that they can take it. Nassar has raised and spent 165,000 in court trying to keep his land. Above all, they farm it – because land that is farmed can be kept if the family who owns the land keeps the farm going every single year. Although his roads have been blocked and his land and small buildings have

been attacked by settlers from nearby towns, he remains steadfast. Young people come from around the world to work on his farm – and some not so young people – like me. People come because the program there, called Tent of Nations, offers classes in non-violent leadership development, conflict resolution, team building. As he spoke with us one night, looking out from his hilltop surrounded by ancient olive terraces – many of which had been destroyed by settlers – and surrounded on all sides by hostile, illegal Israeli settlements – he said, if you could see way, way beyond that one peek over there you would see the Mediterranean Sea. But as he spoke the distance in his eyes made me feel that he was seeing something even farther away. He could see peace where he looked. He could sense it.

What is it that makes it possible for someone to see peace in the midst of such forces of violence? Somehow, intimations of a sweeter world have taken hold of him. Against all odds. It's not a world other than this one – but certainly this world made better. King put it this way: It's all right to talk about "long robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here... It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee.”

Somehow King could feel that new Jerusalem and his heart was set on it. And somehow Daoud Nassar can feel the new Promised Land and his heart is set upon it. He is going to live it into the world now – by creating a peaceful place in the face of violence – just as the Israelites had to walk into the sea to reach the new dry land.

I think that it's possible for some people to see peace and work for peace in the midst of violence, to see fairness and work for it in the midst of imbalance because they are living so deeply in this world that they can feel its great possibility.

I was taught with every bite at Passover. It brings the world and the history of the people so close you can taste it. It's a meal that tastes of compassion, of freedom, and of unimaginable hope. Bitter and sweet, hungry and sated, flat as a matzoh and fluffy as a matzoh ball – the feast of human dreams. Simply by hearing the story and tasting the food of memory and solidarity I was taught to feel compassion and commitment both. Now I will hope for a new Seder – in which all people see beyond the impossibilities of their governments and strive for peace. May Israel taste new hope and walk toward a risky but peaceful future, may Palestine know quiet after the blitz of the Gaza Strip this winter and in the quiet may they dream again of a strength that can build bridges. May all find new life budding in their hands. We need imagination to make our way into the future – to take the risks that will make life better and human being wiser – to reach for new freedoms for other people and envision new lives that are gentler on the earth and that will give life to future generations. Clumsy as religion can be – it can inspire goodness and creativity – as it did in Martin Luther King – as it did in Daoud Nassar, as it did in generations of the just and righteous.

As I sat in the sanctuary of the Jewish Home, I did not know, but I could feel the power of the scrolls of the Torah. What was hidden behind the velvet curtain was a collection of dreams and nightmares and prayers about the nature of the world and of our place in it. Not blueprints – but poems and intimations – stories against which to react and to rethink. From one book to the next the answers and the questions change. Just we change. May we all know that as the scroll is opened there will always be room for our stories – our impossible stories – that can teach and inspire future generations. May we understand that our purpose, as a religious people

– even outside of traditional religion – that our purpose is to be the new stories – amazing, mysterious, impossible and yet real.