

Recounting Exodus along the

Anacostia

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Virginia
Avniel
Spatz

Some Lessons from Cross River Dialogue
Charnice Milton Community Bookstore

Recounting Exodus along the Anacostia:

49 Stages from Narrow Place to What Next?

some lessons from cross river dialogue

Virginia Avniel Spatz

Charnice Milton Community Bookstore

2022

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Charnice Milton Community Bookstore presents this title as part of an effort to promote literacy and crucial community conversations.

Charnice A. Milton, her memory is a blessing, was a local journalist for whom reading and writing were crucial. Books were refuge and companion throughout her life. As a journalist, Charnice used writing to serve the community in which she was raised. She was killed on her way home from assignment, and her homicide remains unsolved. She is missed.

Visit WeLuvBooks.org for more on the CMCB and on Charnice Milton (June 18, 1987 – May 27, 2015) herself.

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Preface

Thank you for picking up this book. *Recounting Exodus* has been a journey in the making and will be a journey in the sharing. I appreciate everyone who takes even a few of its steps with me.

This volume is a distillation of key ideas in *Rereading Exodus along the Anacostia*. Both books use the Exodus narrative -- a story important to many aspects of popular culture -- as a tool for exploring power, oppression, and clashes of perspectives. The goal is to learn how we got into this "Narrow Place" of inequality, militarism, and racism and how we might get ourselves -- all of us -- out. *Rereading Exodus* includes more Jewish and DC-related background.

This format is meant primarily for those who wish to travel 49 stages in the Jewish calendar period that stretches from the second night of Passover through to the holiday of Shavuot. It is organized around 49 chunks of text with an intention for learning, some questions to ponder, followed by the ritual intention and blessing and the daily count.

Hebrew does not easily allow for non-gendered language, although that is changing slowly. Blessings here are offered in forms that allow speakers to choose how to address God and how to identify themselves in terms of gender. Also provided are both the "traditional" intention for counting each day and one that is focused on this particular journey exploring oppression.

I have hesitated many times in sending this book and its companion out into the world. I hate that it is not exactly right or as good as I think I could have made it with more time. But I am trying very hard to let go of that and share what is undoubtedly far from perfect in the interest of getting some essential conversations going.

I am sure there are mistakes here. There will undoubtedly be typos and nonsense ahead -- for those I apologize and hope they are not too distracting. There will also be more serious missteps -- for those I hope readers will engage the concepts and let me know where future discussions need shifting, as well as advising me of errors or lack of clarity.

Please visit rereading4liberation.com for details about joining on-going discussions and some programming We Act Radio plans on related topics.

-- Virginia in DC, March 30, 2022/27 Adar II 5782

"...what are you counting?"

-- Sefer Yetzirah 1:6

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orienting notes from *Rereading Exodus along the Anacostia*

The Book of Exodus starts with individuals showing up in a place that is new to them. This is not insignificant. Much of *Rereading Exodus* is about what happens -- to a place and its people -- when new folks arrive. It is also about the more usual view of Exodus as a story of getting out.

מִצְרַיִם Mitzrayim

In English, the Book of Exodus takes place in "Egypt." *Rereading Exodus* uses a transliteration of the Hebrew word, "Mitzrayim," instead, to keep the biblical place – and its symbolic meanings – distinct from any actual country, ancient or contemporary. "Mitzrayim" can reference the land or a collective people/nation.

Similarly, a Hebrew transliteration, "Yisrael," is used to distinguish biblical from other usage. In Bible discussed here, it is both another name for Jacob and the name of a people. (At this point in the biblical story there is no place of this name. In instances where the historical or contemporary nation is meant, "Israel" is used.)

"Yisrael-ite" is used for an individual or the adjective form. This book uses an invented parallel term, "Mitzrayim-ite," (rather than "Egyptian") for individuals and the related adjective.

Unless otherwise noted, original language is maintained in quotations.

To truly conceive, what it would mean to escape "the Narrow Place" of the Exodus story we must first explore how all the parties ended up in here and how we/they relate to one another.

צָר Tzar

The Hebrew "tsar" means "narrow" and the plural "tsarim" is "narrow straits."

So, based on Hebrew wordplay, *The Zohar* (a mystical work from 13th Century Spain) suggests that the Exodus story is about escaping from our own "narrow places." Centuries of later Jewish teaching elaborated themes of leaving behind constricted views and narrow-mindedness.

Crucial Note:

The Exodus is an important part of theology for Jews and for Christians.

Recounting Exodus is NOT about

any religious community's understanding of covenant.

It's about the story, "theirs" – as in the Biblical characters – and "ours," as in lessons we learn from the story for ourselves and our communities.

Introduction

Recounting Exodus along the Anacostia outlines a thought-journey toward new visions of cross-community collaboration. The eventual aim is to get ourselves -- all of us -- out of this Narrow Place of inequality, racism, and militarism, represented by the early stages of the Passover story, and into a more expansive space where all can thrive. First, as in the Exodus narrative itself, there is some difficult terrain to traverse. The stages explore some workings of oppression, so that we might better hope to address them, and some challenges of intergroup dialogue, so that we might learn to better communicate and work together.

This book began, in the Before Times, as a project of DC's Cross River Dialogue, a small group of white Jews living west of the Anacostia River and Black non-Jews living or working east of the River. *Recounting Exodus along the Anacostia* is informed by my experience with CRD and gratefully shares some lessons learned and seeks new ways forward.

This book is not a group project -- all content, views and mistakes -- unless noted -- are the author's responsibility alone.

Still, the hope is that some CRD lessons can help promote intergroup understanding and address deliberate attempts to weaponize certain topics, across our overlapping Black and Jewish communities.

This book's perspectives come from within Jewish tradition **and** from what Kymone Freeman, co-owner of We Act Radio, calls "the underbelly of the Nation's Capitol." Lessons DC* teaches about related topics and about Exodus -- and vice versa -- apply elsewhere as well.

***Note:** *Re-Counting Exodus* speaks of "DC," sometimes "the District," but rarely "Washington." DC is a city along the Anacostia, a place where people live and work, worship and play, often with no, or little, relationship to the federal government. On the other hand, "Washington" is the seat of national/ international doings.

Liberation and Revelation

Recounting Exodus can be used whenever the time seems right. It is, however, designed for the period called "the Omer" or "*Sefira*" in the Jewish calendar. This period starts on the second night of Passover, with its Liberation theme, and ends with the festival of Shavuot, which is associated with Revelation (somewhat related to the Christian observance of Pentecost).

...Although *Recounting Exodus* is situated in the Jewish calendar, all interested are encouraged to join this Omer/*Sefira*/Liberation journey....

There are three big festivals in the Jewish calendar:

- Passover, associated with the "early" (barley) harvest and the theme of Liberation;
- Shavuot, associated with the "late" (wheat) harvest and the theme of Revelation; and
- Sukkot, associated with the fruit and vegetable harvest and the theme of Redemption.

Oddly, the festival of Shavuot does not have a date of its own; instead, we begin counting on the second night of Passover, counting 49 days and seven weeks, with Shavuot following the count's completion. (The word "*shavuot*" means "weeks" or "sevens," and the holiday is sometimes called "Feast of Weeks.") Passover, the festival of Liberation, is thus tightly linked to Shavuot, celebrating the giving of the Torah...

**...a reminder that escape from the Narrow Place
must be followed by learning and action.**

Counting from one holiday to the next is based on the biblical commandment: "and you shall count for yourselves [*sefiratam*]..." (Lev 23:15). (NOTE: In Hebrew, "Counting (*Sefira*)" has an additional meaning related to divine attributes, which are, in turn, linked to some ways of focusing intentions during this period.) The period is also called "the Omer," for the measure of grain brought as an offering, from the same biblical verse.

Time before a harvest was historically one of worry, as fates were in the balance. In addition, Passover's liberation theme prompted prayers for captives. All this means that Passover to Shavuot is a period particularly suited

- to examine issues that perpetuate bondage;
- to mourn the effects of liberation delayed and denied;
- to explore ways in which our liberations are intertwined;
- to learn, individually and collectively, and prepare ourselves for action.

Race, Bible, Harm and Healing

The content of *Re-Counting Exodus* is disturbing and will affect some readers more deeply than others. It's important to begin this journey with acknowledging this. For anyone taught to aim for "color-blind" discussion, this book may seem overly direct and unnecessarily focused on race. For readers who live with the affects of structural and interpersonal racism every day, *Re-Counting Exodus* may seem to be stating the obvious or not direct enough.

Some of the lessons from our Cross River Dialogue are shared here, and authors more qualified than I to address harms of racism are cited. As we begin, I rely on the work of Rhonda V. Magee for her insight on how race operates in our individual thinking and emotional lives, and for help in approaching these topics in a mindful way.

Rhonda Magee is a professor of law and trained in teaching mindfulness-based stress-reduction; she is also a Black woman with decades of experience operating in white-dominated spaces. Magee describes her life work as "dissolving the lies that racism whispers about who we really are, and doing whatever I can to reduce the terrible harm it causes us all" (p. 16, Magee, *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*).

The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities through Mindfulness. Rhonda V. Magee. TarcherPerigee (Penguin Random House), 2019. The book is now available in paperback, ebook, and audio. The author's website includes her 2015 article, "The Way of ColorInsight," and additional free resources.

Magee's work has been enormous help to me, and she will be quoted a number of times later in this book. I highly recommend checking out her book and/or other resources available on-line.

Re-Counting Exodus makes use of biblical text as well as commentaries from Jewish, and occasionally Christian or other religious, traditions. The purpose of this work is learning and repair. But it must be acknowledged that we are participating in a system that was not designed for most of us and has, over centuries and in the lifetimes of readers, caused a great deal of harm, to some of us more than others. In particular, Bible and racial injustice are inextricably linked. And while many Bible readers, of many traditions, work to transform what we have inherited into something that supports our whole community and globe, approaching the Bible at all can be more of an effort for some of us.

If working on this book in a group, please keep in mind differences in participant background, in terms of Bible and the general topics raised here.

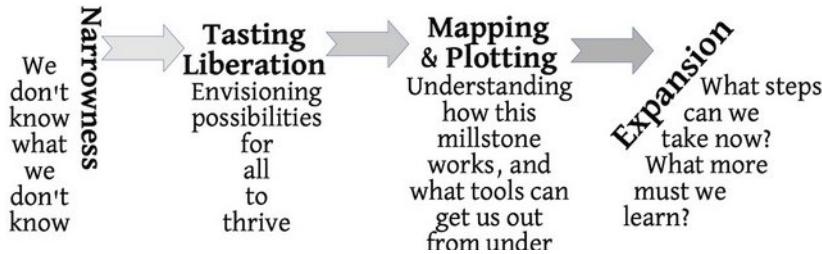
A few more notes on language:

Black and white: In general this book follows Associated Press style (updated in early 2021) on "Black" as an identity and "black" as a color, while "white" remains lowercase except as part of a proper noun.

Jew and anti-Jewish: "Jew" encompasses many backgrounds and histories, although common usage in the U.S. frequently employs the term as shorthand for "Jew of European descent and Ashkenazi tradition." When speaking of a particular experience of Judaism or identity within Jewish communities, the expression "Jew of Color" is sometimes used, along with the more specific "Black and Jewish" or "Black Jew." BIPOC or BIJOC (Black, Indigenous, and Person/Jew of Color) is sometimes used in quotations.

In my own writing, I use "anti-Jewish" and "anti-Jewishness" rather than "antisemitic" and "antisemitism." Usage in quotations is maintained as is, except as noted.

Recounting Exodus



Making the Omer Count

Counting

"Counting the Omer" consists of three basic steps:

- Intention,
- Blessing, and, finally,
- Counting
- addition in some practices: Prayer/intention for captives

The opening words of intention in most prayerbooks are based on the biblical commandment, reminding the counter each day of the related biblical text. See "Biblical Intention." *Recounting Exodus* includes this and also offers additional intentions for this learning journey:

- an overall intention,
- a learning intention specific to the day's content, and
- an interpretive intention for the daily count.

Learning Focus

Overall intention:

For this journey, from the first unknowing steps of freedom
toward revelation and liberation for all,
I undertake to know more today than I did yesterday
about the workings of this millstone of oppression
and how we might get ourselves, all of us, out from under under.

Launch for each day's thought:

Here I am ready to _____ for this journey,
undertaking to know more each day about the workings of oppression,
so that we might get ourselves, all of us,
out from under under this millstone that is the Narrow Place.

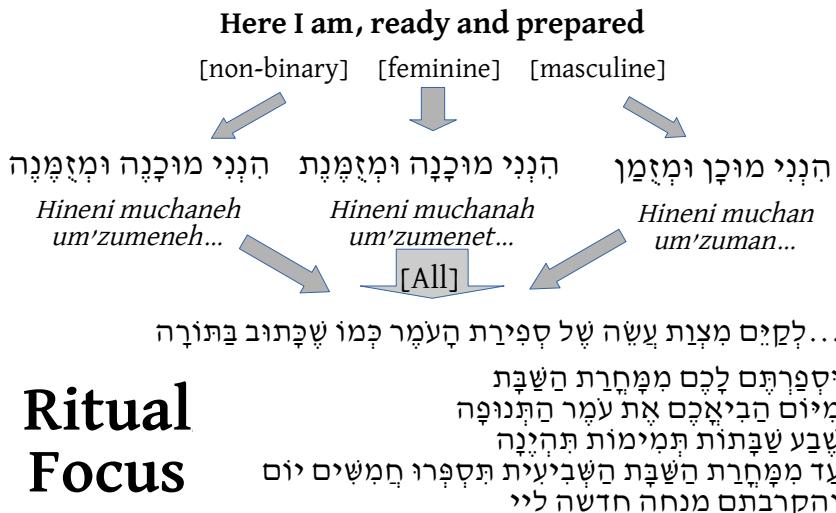
Interpretive blessing for the count:

Here I am, ready and prepared to fulfill this project of counting 49 days,
from Narrowness to Expansion,
seeking to examine oppression and envision liberation,
inspired by the Torah's counting of the Omer,
counting seven full weeks, from Liberation to Revelation,
until I reach fifty days,
and prepare to bring new thoughts before the Eternal and into the world.

Biblical Intention

The intention (Hebrew: *kavanah*) is, in many Jewish traditions, considered essential to focus the speech-act of counting. The *kavanah*/intention used in many Jewish traditions begins with an announcement of readiness. The basic statement, "Here I am, ready and prepared," incorporates in Hebrew, being a gendered language, assumptions about who is speaking. Many prayerbooks list only default, masculine language. Some include a feminine option as well. Only very recently has there been a non-binary option. (Visit nonbinaryHebrew.com for details.)

Here are the three current options, borrowed from Keshet: For LGBTQ Equality in Jewish Life, for the opening line. The text that follows, a direct quotation of Leviticus 23:15-16, is left unchanged.



...*ləkayyem mitzvat aseh shel səfirat ha-omer, kəmo shekatuv batorah: us'faratem lakhem mimacharat hashabbat, miyom havi'akhem et omer hat'nufah, sheva shabbatot temimot tih'yena, ad mimacharat hashabbat hash'vi'it tis'pəru khamishim yom, vəhikravtem minkha khadasha l'adonai.*

... to fulfill the mitzvah of counting the Omer, as it is written in the Torah:
And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Shabbat,
from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the wave-offering,
you shall count seven full weeks.
Until the day after the seventh Shabbat, you shall count fifty days,
until you bring a new gift to the Eternal.

(Leviticus 23:15-16)

Blessing

In Hebrew, blessings incorporate divine gender, with masculine as default. Below are blessings with masculine and feminine God-language again from Keshet. Non-binary language is adapted from *Siddur Dvar Hadash*, put together by Brin Solomon (it/itself). "Voix" is an English alternative to use of "They" for God. More at inclusivesiddur.com.

Bless

Blessing with Masculine Language for God

ברוך אתה ייְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם

אשר קדשנו במצוותיו

וצונו על ספירת העומר

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'olam
asher kidshanu bemitzvotav
v'tzivanu al sefirat ha'omer.

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe
who has made us holy with His commandments,
and commanded us to count the Omer.

Blessing with Feminine Language for God

ברוּכָה אַתְּ יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רֹוח הָעוֹלָם

אשר קדשנו במצוותה

וצונו על ספירת העומר

Brukhah at Yah, ru'akh ha'olam
asher kidshanu bemitzvotah
v'tzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are You, Yah, our God, spirit of the universe
who has made us holy with Her commandments,
and commanded us to count the Omer.

Blessing with Non-Binary Language for God

Brukhah ateh YHVH

ברוּכָה אַתְּ תְּהִי יְהֹוָה

Elohéinu hei ha'olamim

אֱלֹהֵינוּ חֵי הָעוֹלָמִים

asher kidshétnu

אִשְׁר קָדְשָׁתָנוּ

bemitzvotéihé v'etzivétnu

בְּמִצּוֹתֶיהָ וְצִוְתָנוּ

al sefirat ha'omer

עַל סִפְירַת הָעֵמֶר

Blessed are you, YHVH,
our God, Life of endless worlds,
who made us holy
with Voix commandments and commanded us
to count the Omer.

Count

The bible mentions counting 49 days and counting seven weeks. These are considered separate commandments, so we mention both days and weeks in each day's count. Moreover, the commandment is to bless then count. So, we avoid telling someone who is observing *Sefira* the the current day's count, instead offering the previous day's count: E.g., "yesterday we counted four." This facilitates the right count once the blessing has been recited.

This yesterday-focused practice can also offer another form of mindfulness for the journey, serving as a reminder that we are always arriving from where we've been.

Count

היום _____ יומם _____ שבעות ו _____ ימים לעמך

*Hayom _____ shehem
_____ shavuot v'_____ yamim laomer.*

Today is _____ which is
_____ weeks and _____ days of the Omer.

Final intention/prayer

Those so moved add something like, "In the spirit of the Exodus, I set an intention (pray) for release of all whose bodies and spirits remain captive," along with any thoughts/prayers/actions to support release of captives.

To recap: Focus, Bless, Count (and Pray)

- 1) Intention: Biblical Intention in Hebrew and/or English AND/OR Recounting Exodus version (English-only).
- 2) Blessing: in Hebrew and/or English, choosing one of the forms of address for God above or making up your own
- 3) Count days and weeks in Hebrew and/or English.
- 4) If so moved, add a prayer or intention for captives. (English -only as provided here -- some add Psalms or other prayers in Hebrew.)