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Avniel
Spatz

Some Lessons of Cross River Dialogue
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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.

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Companion Volume:

Recounting Exodus Along the Anacostia: 49 Stages from Narrow Place to What Next? Some Lessons of Cross River Dialogue (ebook) ISBN: 978-1-7344418-3-3

Starting Points

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.

מצרים *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.

צר *Tzar*

The Hebrew "*tzar*" means "narrow" and the plural "*tzarim*" 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.

Locating Ourselves

Note that "we" **and** "they" are "in here," this Narrow Place.

They. On the one hand, we are exploring characters in a story that comes to us via the Book of Exodus, which is set at least 2500 years ago. From that perspective, *Mitzrayim-ites* and *Yisrael-ites*, as collectives, and individuals, including Moses and Pharaoh and the midwives and the taskmasters, are all "they." Perhaps we resemble one or more characters or identify with a whole people in the tale, even imagine what it might be like to live through the Exodus narrative as one of "them." But they're still not exactly us.

Versions of the story have also come to us through movies and books and other art forms over the centuries. Those interpretations provide different perspectives on what "they" of Exodus do and feel, and we might identify with or resemble them as well. But we are still readers or viewers or listeners outside the narrative situation of the art, usually long ago and far away.

We. At the same time, it is a common Jewish practice to read the Torah from inside the story: It is happening to "us" right now, with "us" understood in many ways, depending on the interpretation. This is particularly true of the Exodus story, which Jews are told we must understand in each generation as though we ourselves experienced rescue from *Mitzrayim*.

Crucial Note:

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

Rereading Exodus is NOT about any religious community's understanding of covenant.

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

...Note: "we" in the previous sentence means "Jews." In addition, my "we" is sometimes DC's people or participants in the Cross River Dialogue or another collective of which I'm part. I also use "we" for "you and me" as we read together on this *Rereading Exodus* journey.

Of course, the first-person plural is a language feature most of us navigate regularly without much thought. But figuring out who "we" are at any given point is an important part of this book's journey, and it's a crucial part of intergroup effort, from "Dialogue" to collaboration building...

I. I personally am just as conscious of being firmly inside *Mitzrayim*, trying to understand who is in here with me and how we might get ourselves out, as I am aware of sitting a mile from the Anacostia River trying to puzzle out who are the parties around me, how we relate well and not-so-well to each other, and how we might move ourselves toward Liberation for all.

Us. Even if this way of reading is strange to you, I invite you to join me in this trip, beginning simultaneously

- on the banks of "The River" in the biblical Narrow Place,
- on the banks of the River here in DC, and
- in your own location, with its narrowness and its possibilities.

As we go along, there will be many opportunities to (re-)consider

- who we are in the Bible tale we're exploring;
- who we are in the story unfolding around our physical residence -- geographically, politically, socially;
- and who we are as individuals with a variety of identities.

This book shares elements of my own journeys through the Exodus text, in the context of cross-community work here in DC, and it presents some specific tools to support this effort. Please use what is helpful and discard the rest...and/or let me know where the journey went wrong and might profitably try a new path.

One of our starting points is ourselves. Fuzziness on our own identities and assumptions can unduly complicate our travels, for ourselves and others.

Clarifying Tools

Several years ago, I happened upon a "Bible Readers' Self-Inventory," in *People's Companion to the Bible* (see box). The inventory is a set of questions about both social location and orientation to biblical text. The former includes basics like family background, race, ethnicity, class, and education -- which are not always so "basic" to answer. The latter looks at ideas about communal standards and authority in teaching, exposure to Bible and development of ethics; this includes assumptions many of us received, however haphazardly, in childhood and have never been prompted to examine.

Factors in our social location influence how we read anything, including the Bible. Approaching Bible, in particular, often brings along strong feelings about how the text, or some of its interpretations, appeared in our personal lives: maybe as source of judgment and harm; maybe as new-found or lifelong comfort; maybe something in between or largely irrelevant for us. Bible also comes to us with its history of use in colonization and oppression as well as a source of cultural development, for better or worse.

The Peoples' Companion to the Bible (Fortress Press, 2010) aims to put “cultural diversity at the very center of reading the Bible.” The Introduction alone (free PDF on their website) is a useful resource and includes the “self-inventory” for Bible readers.

Their self-inventory is designed for Christian readers, especially seminary students, so all the questions will not suit everyone. In particular, Jewish experience is not an exact fit, so I adapted it for myself and others. “Toward a Jews' Self-Inventory for Bible Readers,” is available on “A Song Every Day” blog and at Academia.edu. Neither may suit you exactly, but at least some of the questions will likely be useful to every reader.

I could have told you most of that before I encountered the “Bible Readers' Self-Inventory.”

Until I did, though, I had not really paused to think in careful detail about how my own background actively influences my Bible study and teaching, from my knee-jerk reactions to some male-centered language to deep concern over treating particular expressions of Judaism as “authoritative.” Prior to working through the self-inventory, I don't remember consciously examining how my own economic circumstances, and changes in those over the years, might be affecting my reading.

Some of us have more experience than others in considering the basics of our social location in general:

Readers who enjoy certain privileges in society—because of wealth, education, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors—may find themselves thinking that these factors “don't matter” for them as much as they might for others. If a [factor] seems unimportant or irrelevant, one might well ask *why?*

-- Neal Elliott, *Peoples' Companion to the Bible* (Fortress, 2010 xxix)

Learning to be more explicit for myself, and able to articulate to others, where I'm coming from in Bible study has been illuminating for me. And I have found that the exercise made me more conscious of what I am bringing when I show up anywhere.

I highly recommend trying such an inventory or finding another way to explore location questions. Failing to recognize and name some of our basic assumptions can lead to confusion and undo conflict. Conversely, finding ways to identify our perspectives and bring them clearly to others helps expand horizons for everyone and contributes to deeper, stronger communities.

Another powerful resource is *The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities through Mindfulness* (see box). Author Rhonda V. Magee hopes that working through this book will offer “space to become less reactive and to choose how we respond to injustice.”

ColorInsight and The Inner Work of Racial Justice

Rhonda V. Magee, professor of law, writes and teaches on combining mindfulness and racial justice work:

...because race is a cultural feature of societies built on racism, notions of self include notions of race....Mindfulness helps us understand and expand our notions of race. And yet, talking about race and racism and examining these through the lens of mindfulness is uncommon. This is not to say that it is not being done at all. But many practitioners of mindfulness have been taught, whether explicitly or implicitly, that looking at racism and exploring efforts to address it—or to otherwise engage in talk of “justice” or “politics”—go against the core commitments of mindfulness.
— p.19, *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*

Magee explains that “racial difference has not been the dominant mode of oppression” where mindfulness teaching originated, adding:

And on top of that, most of the Western teachers of mindfulness are white in white-dominated cultures. As a result, they have had to work harder to see their own race and racism in the world, and to break the cultural norms against doing so. — p.20, *The Inner Work*

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 some free resources, including her 2015 article, “The Way of ColorInsight.”

Just flipping through this book, it might appear lightweight or old-hat. Don’t be fooled. Working through the book is illuminating.

Us. Them. Me

As mentioned above, Exodus opens with some individuals showing up in a place that is new to them:

Now these are the names of the sons of *Yisrael*, who came into *Mitzrayim* with Jacob; every man came with his household:
-- Exodus 1:1

Here are a few questions to ponder as we begin to approach the text:

Do we identify with the new arrivals or those already living in the place?
Have we been taught to consider one group as "our people"? [1]
What were we taught about the other group?
Who gets mentioned and who is named?

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43	44	45	46	47	48	49

It is within my lifetime, and only after years of feminist/womanist Bible teaching and scholarship, that it became common to note that "these are the names" includes only men, to wonder about those not mentioned, and to realize how quickly the few women in Exodus disappear from the story. It is still far less common to recognize that some gender expressions and sexualities are not reflected at all in the Bible or in most Bible teaching.

The Book of Exodus is already richer and deeper than the one available when I was a child. Queer and other perspectives that used to be kept at the margins, if given space on the page at all, have already changed the shape of the text. But we are still in a Narrow Place in many aspects of our reading and have much work yet to do.

Example and Disclosure: Completing a Bible self-inventory was clarifying for me. I highly recommend giving it a try and share brief excerpts from my own as an example and to offer a few more details about how I approach Bible. As the *Peoples' Companion* reminds us: "...whether we are approaching it for the first time or have read it often.... none of us comes to the Bible as a 'blank slate.'"

Bible Self-Inventory Excerpts

I read as a woman valuing all gender expressions, egalitarianism, social justice, Judaism beyond borders, and cross-community understanding.

Bible wasn't a big influence in my earliest years; from age 11-ish, I learned that my own readings set me outside the community in which I was raised and that being a girl limited my options for influencing that community. Many years later, I found my way into Bible through female and other characters at the margins and through teaching stressing transformative possibilities.

More Generally: My upbringing includes the snobbery of "regular folks" toward the better-heeled; cis-het privileges as well as confusion and anger of a woman in a patriarchal religious world; benefits and challenges of growing up white on Chicago's West Side, with an enriching and relatively violence-free youth, followed by huge upheaval of the '60s, Urban Renewal, White Flight, and the complete dismantling of my childhood neighborhood.

Now, I try to prioritize sources, for study and citation, that affirm my values while also seeking variety in viewpoints.

The First Episode

In Hebrew, "Exodus" is known as "*Shemot* [Names]," and it begins:

Now these are the names [*shemot*] of the sons of *Yisrael*,
who came into *Mitzrayim* with Jacob;
every man came with his household:
Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah;
Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin;
Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.
Altogether there were seventy persons of Jacob's issue;
and Joseph was in Egypt already.
-- Exodus 1:1-5

The first lines assume we already know a lot: Who is *Yisrael*? Where were his sons before? Why did they go into *Mitzrayim*? Is this story only about men? And who is Jacob?

...Supposing we already know that Jacob and *Yisrael* are two names for the same person, that raises a different question: Why is the text using both names?....

We can plow ahead in the story, even if we're feeling like we tuned in late or are getting the wrong reel of a movie (not that most devices are tuned these days or movies distributed in reels). We might wish for a hint, like the one opening *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter" (Mark Twain, 1885). Maybe we just assume these verses reference a previous narrative installment and seek that out.

Where to begin reading or studying is one important decision. Where a story starts is crucial to its telling.

Think of playmates explaining to their adult "who started it." Consider a public official announcing the decision not to run for re-election or a restaurant closing for the last time: A political journalist might start these tales at one point and a business reporter at another, while an oral storyteller might make a third choice. There isn't one clear "START" for all purposes.

Part of the work of *Rereading Exodus*, or Torah exploration more generally, is to add layers of experiences and perspectives to each aspect of the story.

Names

Books of the Torah and weekly readings, "portions," are titled in Hebrew by their first distinct word. The book known in English as "Genesis" is called "*Breishit* [In the Beginning]" in Hebrew. The Book of Exodus is called "*Shemot* [Names]" in Hebrew, as is the first weekly portion in the book.

How might the title we use affect how we read the book?

Getting used to doing this is a tool we can also apply to many situations in our daily lives. And figuring out where a story does, or should, start is one element of that work. See below for two disturbing but crucial examples.

As *Rereading Exodus* continues we will take a sort of traveling-cartography approach, stepping back into the Book of Genesis and looking ahead to later books of Torah, to figure out where we are and add details as we go along. We will also be gathering material from our current circumstances to add to the mix. It is my fervent hope that exploring Exodus will help illuminate life in DC -- and/or wherever you are at the moment -- especially in terms of cross-community understanding. And vice versa.

[2]

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Where does the story of a killing by police start?

Consider how we report violence, especially killings, by police officers. Where we start the telling has a great influence on how we understand what happened and this, in turn, has lasting implications for policy and other consequences....as well as for our own orientations in the universe.

Deon Kay, RIP

Consider the shooting death of 18-year-old Deon Kay (9/2/20) by DC's MPD (Metropolitan Police Dept): Do we start that story with MPD reporting a justified fatal shot? With reports of the officers' earlier actions? With young Deon's life?

We could start instead with what the DC Auditor called the "entirely improvised" and "reckless" approach of the officers (Office of DC Auditor: *The Metropolitan Police Department and the Use of Deadly Force: The Deon Kay Case*. 5/25/21) Or we could take a wider look at use of force in MPD, officer training, supervision, etc.

We could start with legal analyses of the relatively new DC Justice Lab or reports from the older policy groups, Stop Police Terror Project DC or Black Lives Matter DC. Or, should we step back further and begin where Kelly Brown Douglas does in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Orbis, 2015)?

For the record: I did not know Deon Kay personally, but I know people who did. I know others who join me in mourning this young life cut short and all of our failures, as adults responsible for the safety of our youth.

May his memory be for a blessing.

Where does the story of a hostage situation start?

Colleyville, TX is not geographically near DC, but the hostage situation that took place there reverberated along the Anacostia. And, while there is no DC Auditor's analysis or similar document to reference, there were affects in DC, and we can profitably consider how this story was reported.

Congregation Beth Israel, 1/15/22

Do we start with police and FBI sources outside, saying "hostages rescued"? Or do we begin with the story from inside, describing an escape without external intervention?

Does the story start with R' Charlie Cytron-Walker's decision to value hospitality and allow a cold stranger inside the synagogue?

Does it maybe start with this history?

[The suspect] chose a Jewish synagogue, because he thought that Jews control the world. He thought that he could take Jews hostage, call up an influential rabbi** and she would snap her fingers and give him what he wanted. He truly believed that Jews control the media, that Jews control the government, that Jews control everything.

...Over the centuries entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews drank the blood of non-Jewish children. Entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews wanted to torture communion wafers. Entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews were responsible for all the bad things in life – that we are the root of all evil.

...Far too many Jews have died because of it. This isn't distant history. This is a month ago. – R' Cytron-Walker, 2/17/22 testimony U.S. House Subcmt. on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security

**Does the story start with the career of R' Angela Buchdahl, prominent rabbi (and one of the country's most prominent rabbis of color), and how the alleged perpetrator came to think her in charge of what he wanted?

Does it start with the individual who admits that, a few days before the incident, he sold a stolen, semiautomatic weapon to the suspected gunman, who claimed to need it for intimidation to settle a debt? Or with a judicial system that can make this Black man the face of an anti-Jewish hate crime/act of terrorism that he did not commit?

See also: R' Buchdahl. "Captives of Hope," 1/21/22 sermon, Central Synagogue (NYC). AP/Fort Worth Star Telegram, 2/17/22.

Getting Out, Getting Somewhere

In addition to the starting point, another crucial map element for a journey is its end: Sometimes the whole point is to get out; sometimes the journey has a pre-determined a destination; and sometimes the aim is the journey itself. The Exodus story can be read with all three end-points in mind:

- Much of the drama, in popular tellings and in the Bible itself, and Narrow Place;
- Early in the Exodus tale, Moses is told that God has a "better place" destination in mind, while the Genesis prequel suggests a sense of returning home as well; and
- The Jewish calendar sends us on a journey that keeps us wandering in the wilderness for much of the year. [3]

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43	44	45	46	47	48	49

Getting Out

Getting away from oppression in *Mitzrayim* is the climax of an epic full of promises, plagues, and politics. We might picture the story as told in Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), or DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* (1998). Or perhaps we rely on other artistic renderings, biblical teachings and/or Passover tellings. Whatever our sources, escape from *Mitzrayim* is dramatic and often treated as decisive and final:

Oppression behind us;
freedom ahead;
halleluyah!
And, on Passover: "Let's eat."

The story is longer and messier than we sometimes remember, however, and not nearly as final. Even after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, there are 27 more chapters of Exodus and then the next three books of the Bible, all in the wilderness. The Torah closes, forty years on, an entire generation having perished on the journey and a river still to cross.

Hurston describes this moment from the perspective of Moses, at the end of his work and life:

But here was Israel at the Jordan. If he had failed in his highest dreams he had succeeded in others. Perhaps he had not failed so miserably as he sometimes felt. Israel was at the Jordan inside as well as out.

-- Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, p.283

The leader is aware, in Hurston's telling as in many commentaries, of the ongoing trauma of *Mitzrayim*, the many who never made it out, the cost of the trek and the price still to be paid.

Still a Wilderness

Readers in 1939 were expected to see parallels between the ancient drama and both Black experience in the U.S. and the rise of Nazism worldwide. Eighty years after Hurston's writing, some dynamics she described continue to apply.

National leaders, not unlike Pharaoh, seek war abroad while declaring "We don't have any home problems that I can see" (*Moses*, p.62), for example. And with Facism again (or still) on the rise, we have much work to do toward understanding race and how it works in our overlapping Jewish and Black contexts.

Alicia Suskin Ostriker described the post-Exodus wilderness situation this way:

...The promised land really exists, it really doesn't, are we there yet. Borders unspecified, we will know when we've arrived....

An impossible place, let freedom ring in it. We've been to the mountain. We've seen the land: A terrain of the imagination, its hills skipping for joy. How long, we say, we know our failure in advance, nobody alive will set foot in it.

-- Ostriker, "The Nursing Father," *Nakedness of the Fathers*

We know our failure in advance. And yet.... We learn together. We build community. We celebrate. And we set off one more time, reaching toward a fuller future Redemption.

A Better Place?

In the annual Torah cycle, governing the Jewish calendar for centuries, we begin each Autumn reading of Creation and early ancestors, move through Exodus, then the wilderness and its Revelation, toward the Promised Land. We never get closer than the river bank opposite, though, hopeful but not yet home. Although later books of the Hebrew Bible follow *Yisrael* into the Land, the Torah cycle rewinds every year to "In the beginning."

This circular path is reflected in other aspects of Jewish thought and practice, including themes of the weekly sabbath and the annual festival cycle. Every spring, the festival cycle brings us back into Pharaoh's clutches, and centuries of teachers have considered ways to approach Passover's release....

...a tale we are we are commanded to remember, re-tell, and celebrate, even as we already know what is on the other side: Forty years of wandering that follow crossing of the Sea; Babylon captivity; and more loss and exile....

The circularity might suggest that we are perpetually trapped. But cycles also bring new opportunities.

We can show up better prepared.

We can bring new resources, friends, and colleagues..

We can approach perennial challenges with fresh energy....

We can look at the Exodus narrative new this time.

Decades ago, Michael Walzer concluded *Exodus and Revolution* with this adage about "what the Exodus first taught" --

-- first, that wherever you are, it is probably [*Mitzrayim*]

-- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;

-- and third, that the way to the land is through the wilderness.

There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.

There is much inspiration in this oft-quoted image of "joining together and marching" to that "better place." What was once an urgent call of Liberation Theology, however, has become a kind of platitude. And we are so easily lulled into thinking that we are moving toward a "better place" when, in reality, we've long since reconciled to marching in place.

Perhaps marching as a metaphor for liberation is experiencing a "crash"?

When a Story Crashes

Rabbi Benay Lappe, of SVARA: The Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, teaches that there are three options in the crash of a "master story" -- like ancient Judaism's organization around temple worship in Jerusalem:

1) re-entrench, ignore evidence of dysfunction: For example: there was already a drift away from Temple service even before the destruction in 70 CE; but responses included forms of "Nothing to see here," and then, "All will soon be as before."

2) choose a new story: post-Temple Jews could take up Greek, Roman or Christian stories, e.g.

3) transform the old story.

The last was pursued by Rabbis of the Mishnah, who created what we now know and practice, in many forms, as "(Rabbinic) Judaism" today.

Visit svara.org/crash/ to hear the "crash talk"

...The Exodus story -- as sometimes employed in Judaism, in some Liberation Theologies, and in a variety of artistic works -- is a definitive parting of oppressor and oppressed peoples. This has powerful uses.

But it also has limitations, especially when Passover participants are aware of our resemblance, individually and collectively, to Pharaoh. And such readings do not lend themselves to envisioning collaborative, joint liberation. For some of us, this represents a "crash" of sorts. But centuries of alternative, frequently more complex, readings offer possibilities for transforming the old story to serve post-Crash....

In many of our communities today -- here in DC, is one example -- displacement is a serious form of oppression, with imminent harm for people of color. At the same time, fear of displacement -- by refugees, Jews, Muslims, "them" -- fuels hatred, harsh laws, and violence in our country and beyond. Envisioning *en masse* departure of the oppressed may not be the most helpful metaphor for these circumstances. Maybe sticking around is the more liberatory choice, after all?

At the very least, we must ask some tough questions, of ourselves and our communities, about this concept of marching:

Are we prepared to head toward something truly different?

Will we let go of what we have in order to get there?

With whom have we joined hands? Whom have we left behind?

Have we been marching toward a liberation
that never seems to materialize
for so long that we now wonder if it's worth the upheaval?

Always a Turning Point?

In a long-ago discussion group, someone cited a Bible commentary that hinged on a "turning point," a precarious moment centered between the ten generations leading to that point and the ten to come. Another participant laughed, insisting that all moments -- in- or outside the Bible -- are between what came before and what comes after, that each moment is a "turning point" between one thing and another.

There's a similar scene in the movie "Little Man Tate" (Orion 1991; Jodie Foster, director): Six-year-old Fred Tate is in his elementary school classroom and clearly bored. The teacher writes on the chalkboard a series of whole numbers -- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6... -- and asks: "Which of these numbers can be divided by two?" When no one responds, she calls hopefully on Tate, who responds flatly: "All of them."

"Ten Generations"

The exact commentary in discussion of turning points is lost to me now, and the Sages' fondness for "tens" leaves many candidates. But here is an oft-quoted passage:

[There were] ten generations from Adam to Noah, in order to make known what long-suffering is His; for all those generations kept on provoking Him, until He brought upon them the waters of the flood.

[There were] ten generations from Noah to Abraham, in order to make known what long-suffering is His; for all those generations kept on provoking Him, until Abraham, came and received the reward of all of them. -- Pirkei Avot 5:2

The fictional young genius and my mathematically-focused friend are both correct, of course: Any number can be divided by any other (non-zero) number, and we can view all moments as the center of some timeline. Similarly, if the People always have a Narrow Place to escape, a wilderness to traverse, and a river to cross, we might simply declare: We're born, we wander, we reach the journey's apparent end -- what more is there to say?

Like young Tate, we may be impatient with what can seem limited perspectives. Like my discussion partner, we may find ourselves questioning the

validity of some approaches to the text. If we're not careful, though, what was essential -- properties of odd and even numbers; theological implications of biblical structure -- can disappear from view.

Similarly, we already know the big sweeping views of Exodus, like "the main thing is to head toward what looks like justice," or "God is on the side of the beleaguered," etc. To really learn new lessons from Exodus we have to look very closely at both the text and the challenges we face today, exploring where they inform one another.

And, yes, we are always at a turning point. A good thing, too!

Because we need a new way forward.

The weight of this particular moment -- whenever we're encountering the Exodus text together -- should never be diminished. This is the one moment we have to act. And if we do not, the consequences will be dire for many.

Passover and Exodus

The Exodus story is linked in Jewish thought and practice to the festival of Passover -- *Pesach* in Hebrew. The festival, detailed in the Book of Exodus, is observed for seven or eight days in different Jewish traditions. The first night (or two) is marked with a Passover *Seder* ["order"] ritual, structured around four cups of wine, special foods, and storytelling. Each cup is associated with a different verb (explored later).

The storytelling is based on "the *Haggadah*," from the Hebrew for "telling." Central to most such texts (plural: *haggadot*) are some elements that were fixed about 2000 years ago -- although fixed somewhat differently in different strands of tradition -- plus biblical passages, songs and readings added over the centuries. In addition to Exodus selections, "the telling" includes parts of Genesis and later books of the Bible. What is incorporated can differ enormously, as can translations, themes, visual illustrations, and many other elements. Some Jews even make a point to create a new *haggadah* each year in order to keep the experience fresh.

Despite this variety, Jews often refer to the text in any version as "the *Haggadah*." Several different texts and supplements are quoted in *Rereading Exodus* with citations intended to make references as clear as possible.

Far Enough?

[4]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	32	33	34	35
36	37	38	39	40	41	42
43	44	45	46	47	48	49

As we launch this journey, it is important to notice....

...Some of us reading and working with this text see ourselves as part of a Jewish or a Christian narrative in which the Exodus plays a key role. Others relate to Exodus through a political philosophy lens. Some may be coming to it as a brand new tale.

...For some of us, telling the next generation "what God did for me" (Ex 13:8) is meaningful and pertinent. For others, not so much.

Simply noticing disparate points with regard to "shared" culture is another key stage in joint efforts. Failing to do so can mean dragging each other from one *Mitzrayim* to another.

One Passover teaching, repeated and discussed for some 1500 years, says that each of us must see ourselves as personally coming forth from *Mitzrayim* (see "In Every Generation"). There are many ways of understanding this commandment, and there is no suggestion that non-Jews are under this obligation. So, it would be a stretch to insist that we -- in this generation in the U.S. -- are obligated to re-read Exodus so as to experience coming forth from the Narrow Place of systemic racism and injustice. But we, especially white people -- in or outside Jewish communities, cannot

avoid the obligation to address racism and injustice. And, in that context, we can see re-reading Exodus as a tool in that work.

The temptation is strong to believe that we've somehow come far enough already. Equally powerful, as exhibited in the Bible story itself and in our world today, is the urge to give up and return to the Narrow Place we sought to escape. It is clear, however, that we have much to learn from careful consideration of Exodus, in its long, messy, boundary-crossing complexity. And we have long known that "none of us is free if one of us is chained."

"In Every Generation"

In each and every generation,
a person must see themselves
as personally coming forth from Mitzrayim.

As it is said:

"And you shall tell your child on that day, saying:
It is because of what YHVH did for me
when I came forth out of Mitzrayim." (Ex 13:8)

-- Mishnah Pesachim 10:5-6 [from early rabbinic writings on Passover]
see also B. Pes 116b [Babylonian Talmud]

Midrash

The term "*Midrash*" refers to a vast array of commentary on Bible, created over the course of thousands of years and still on-going. The word comes from the Hebrew verb *derash*, "to seek out" or "interpret." Often based on close analysis of the language in a verse or comparing two or more passages, *midrash* can be narrative, sometimes called "stories about stories in the Bible," or legal.

For example, the passage above produces an action lesson from an Exodus verse. Elaborations of the text offered above by Zora Neale Hurston and Alicia Ostriker are examples of narrative or poetic *midrash*. Cassuto (below) derives interpretation from literary analysis of the text.

Other forms of commentary focus on plain sense of the text, mystical meanings, or homelitical messages.

Forty-Nine Thought-Prompts/Omer Count

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	Start	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	32	33	34	35
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43	44	45	46	47	48	49

It Begins.

Name one change that you believe necessary but many around you see no urgency to address. What factors fuel your sense of urgency? What factors seem to influence others' comfort with the current situation? Might that change with a different perspective?

Name one change that others around you are demanding but you do not feel drawn to address. What factors fuel their urgency? What factors influence your comfort with the current situation? Might that change with a different perspective?

[Intention, Blessing, Count]

הַיּוֹם יוֹם אֶחָד לַעֲוֹמֵר *Hayom yom echad la-omer.*
Today is one day of the Omer.



We counted 1.

Were we taught to consider either *Yisrael* or *Mitzrayim* "our people"? If so, how do we relate to the other group?

Do we identify with attachment to home and feelings about building community with newcomers? And/or do we identify with feelings about leaving home and hopes for a better future?

Do we sympathize more with a group of 70 seeking refuge, as *Yisrael* and family are introduced here, than with the large population we will meet in just a few verses? Why? Do our sympathies change with the state's labeling: welcome workers, economic threat, or potential enemy/fifth column?

How do we imagine these groups in terms of family structure, ethnic background, sexuality, wealth and other factors? Are they like or unlike us?

Can we explain, for ourselves and others, how our background influences our perspectives on what is happening in the opening verse of Exodus?...or anywhere in the world?

[Intention, Blessing, Count]

הַיּוֹם שְׁנַי יָמִים לַעֲוֹמֵר *Hayom sh'nei yamim la-omer.*
Today is two days of the Omer



We counted 2.

Consider reports violence, especially killings by police officers. Compare reports from your own town or look at 18-year-old Deon Kay killed by DC's police (9/2/20): Do we begin with MPD's report of a justified fatal shot? With earlier actions of the officers and/or Deon? the DC Auditor's report on the officers' "entirely improvised" and "reckless" approach? with Kelly Brown Douglas's *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*?

Consider reports of the Colleyville, TX incident. Do we start with sources outside, saying "hostages rescued"? with inside accounts of an escape sans external intervention? with R' Charlie Cytron-Walker's welcoming a cold stranger? with R' Angela Buchdahl, one of the country's most prominent rabbis of color, and how the alleged perpetrator came to think her in charge of what he wanted? with the individual who admits to selling a stolen, semiautomatic weapon? or with a judicial system that can make this Black man the face of a hate crime/act of terrorism that he did not commit?

[Intention, Blessing, Count]

הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים לְעֹמֶר *Hayom sh'loshah yamim la-omer.*
Today is three days of he Omer



We counted 3.

With a view to "getting out" --

- what Narrow Place are you, personally, attempting to escape this year?
- what Narrow Place does your community need to leave behind?

Considering a "better place" --

- do you have a destination in mind, as you leave the Narrow Place?
- what do you envision, at the end of the road, for your community?

On this journey --

- is there something essential to be learned from the wilderness itself?
- how might your community benefit from accepting that some things have been left behind, while the destination is still out of sight?

Does one view of Exodus from oppression seem more apt than another, for you personally and for your community?

[Intention, Blessing, Count]

הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לְעֹמֶר *Hayom arbaah yamim la-omer.*
Today is four days of the Omer





We counted 4.

Has the Exodus/Passover story experienced something of a "crash" for you? for your community? At the very least, we must ask some tough questions, of ourselves and our communities, about this concept of "joining together and marching":

Are we prepared to head toward something **truly different**?

Will we **let go of what we have** in order to get there?

With whom have we **joined hands**? Whom have we **left behind**?

Have we been marching toward a liberation -- that never seems to materialize -- for so long that we now wonder if it's **worth the upheaval**?

[Intention, Blessing, Count]

היום חמשה ימים לעֹמֶר

Hayom chamishah yamim la-omer.

Today is five days of the omer.



We counted 5.

Can anyone be brought out "from under the millstone that is [*Mitzrayim*]" while they themselves remain unmoved?

Is rescue possible for those who remain chained to old ideas, accepting enslavement, for themselves or others, as due course?

Can anyone be redeemed "with an outstretched arm and formidable judgments" without experiencing disruption to life as usual?

Can a Liberation experience have an impact for us or for anyone else, if nothing changes in our commitments?

[Intention, Blessing, Count]

היום ששה ימים לעֹמֶר

Hayom shishah yamim la-omer.

Today is six days of the Omer.

