השתא הכא

A justice-oriented Haggadah reader with contributions from members of Halachic Left, All That's Left, and HaSmol HaEmuni

❧ Pesach 5784 / 2024

Contributors:
Rabbi Arik Ascherman
Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein
Rabbi Lexie Botzum
Max Buchdahl
Noa Gendler
Gabriel Gendler Yom-Tov
Rabbi Lara Haft Yom-Tov
Rabbi Avigayil Halpern
Allen Lipson
Raphael Magarik
Mikhael Manekin
Rena Yehuda Newman
Laynie Soloman
Aron Wander
Noam Weinreich
Netanel Zellis-Paley

Edited by Max Buchdahl, Liz Bentley, Maya Rosen, Aron Wander, *and* Netanel Zellis-Paley

Typesetting, design, and additional copy editing by Caroline Morganti.

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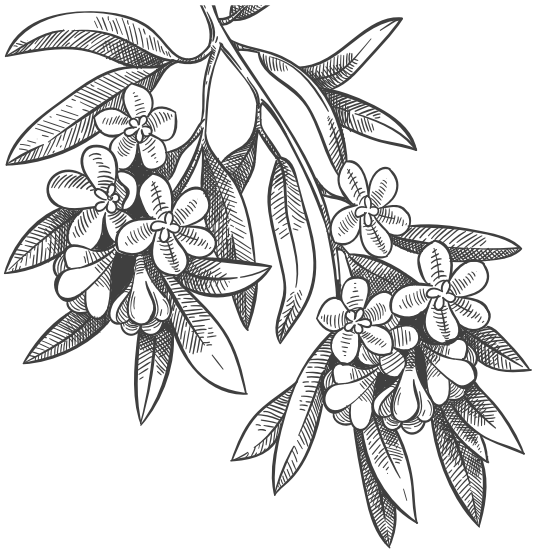

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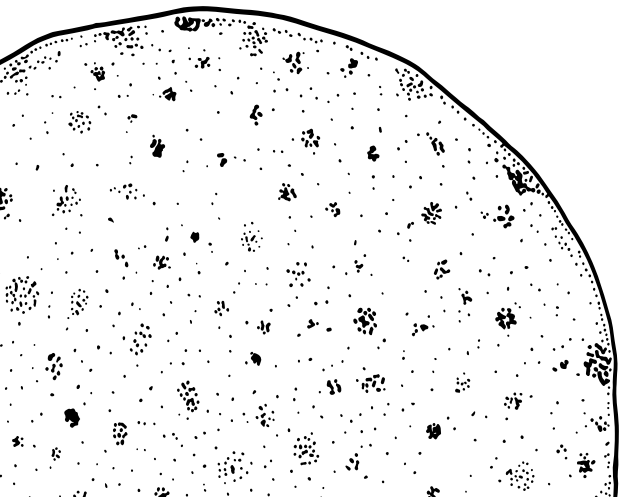

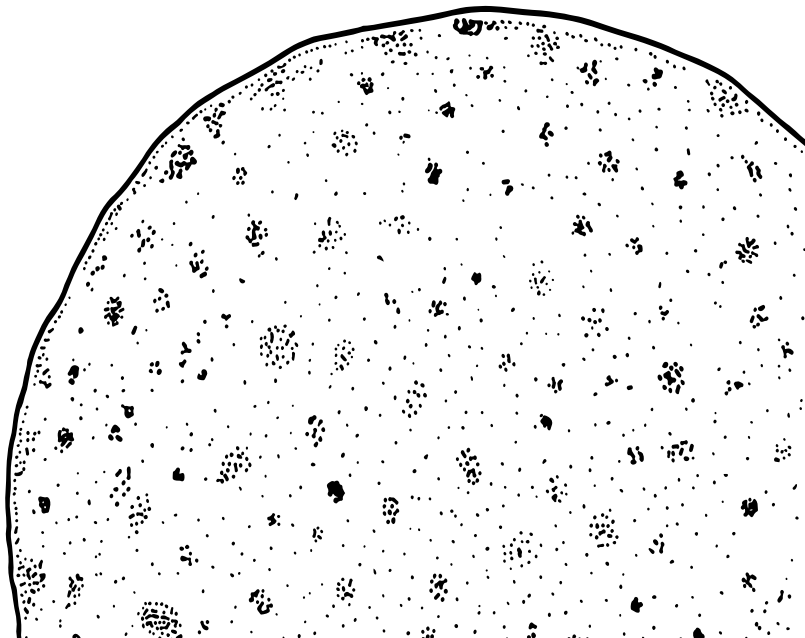

Rest for Radicals: Shabbat HaGadol as General Strike

by Raphael Magarik

The Shabbat before Passover is called "Shabbat HaGadol," which is usually translated as "The Great Sabbath." But according to Rabbi Joseph di Trani (1568-1639, Greece), perhaps it should be translated as "The General Strike." He teaches us something deep about the relationship between Shabbat observance and revolution, between our weekly, regular interruption of the labor cycle and the possibility of radically transforming the social order.

The background to di Trani's interpretation lies in an odd line in the Shabbat morning prayers:

> *Moses rejoiced in the gift of his portion*
>
> …when he stood before you on Mt. Sinai.
>
> And he brought down two tablets of stone in his hand
>
> And "observing the sabbath" was written on them.

Perhaps Moses is overjoyed simply that he merits to mediate God's revelation, but then why the specific connection to Shabbat? The medieval halakhist R. Yaakov ben Asher offers a striking answer:

> *When our ancestors were in Egypt, and Moses saw the weight of the enslavement which the Egyptians imposed on them, he requested from Pharaoh that Pharaoh give them one day a week for rest. And he gave it to him, and he chose the seventh day. And when they were commanded about the shabbat day, Moses rejoiced that he had chosen it. And thus: "Moses rejoiced in the gift of his portion."*[1]

In this *midrash*, the Israelite observance of Shabbat begins with Moses bargaining for rest. Perhaps Moses is making a tactical demand, calculated to lead to a broader liberation. When we say, as we do weekly in *kiddush*, that we observe Shabbat "in memory of the Exodus," we are remembering the struggle for liberation. We are insisting that, as the day off was a step toward our liberation, so too our Shabbat must be a step toward further liberation. The day off is the pathway toward the general strike.

But, as my friend Avi Garelick pointed out to me, one might read the Tur differently. Perhaps this Mosaic Shabbat is an alternative to liberation—a safety valve, negotiated between Israelite leadership and management, calculated to prevent revolt. Here is where R. di Trani enters the picture. Explaining (in his father's name) how Shabbat HaGadol got its name, he writes:

> *When Israel was in Egypt, Moses asked from Pharaoh for one day of rest, and he*

1 *Sefer Arba'ah Turim*, Oraḥ Chaim 281.

> *got Shabbat. Nonetheless, when Shabbat ended, immediately, they would go out from rest and pleasure to toil and oppression, but on this Sabbath… they did not return to slavery on Saturday night. Thus, it is called, "Shabbat Hagadol," the Great Sabbath, that is to say, the extended day of Sabbath.*[2]

The actual Exodus would not be for several days. But that Saturday night, having rested for a full day, knowing that the liberation was coming, something broke for the Israelites, and they said, in essence: "We're not going back to work, we are on strike." And they stopped, and the Sabbath continued; and they were right, and that oppressive regime ended. Before God's miraculous intervention, before the slaughter of the lamb and the painting of the doorposts, before the Angel of Death and all that jazz, something else happened: the people decided that Shabbat was no longer going to be part of the cycle of labor. Shabbat became a strike, a great strike, a general strike.

R. di Trani's story suggests that the optimistic and cynical readings of the Tur are not as different as they might seem. Shabbat might start as a negotiated concession, intended to forestall further agitation; it nonetheless contains the seeds of a more radical transformation. His reading of how a day off becomes a general strike reminds me of the great Black Marxist thinker W. E. B. Du Bois's account of enslaved people's auto-liberation during the American Civil War:

> *As soon, however, as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods he had used in the period of the fugitive slave. He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army… this withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war. … Transforming itself suddenly from a problem of abandoned plantations and slaves captured while being used by the enemy for military purposes, the movement became a general strike against the slave system on the part of all who could find opportunity. The trickling streams of fugitives swelled to a flood. Once begun, the general strike of black and white went madly and relentlessly on like some great saga… This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work.*[3]

Like R. di Trani, Du Bois imagines slaves freeing themselves. Recognizing the possibilities of their historical moment, whether those present themselves via God's plagues or, *lehavdil*, an invading Union army, the oppressed seize upon their pre-existing modes of refusing work, transforming them into a collective movement for liberation.

Whether in R. di Trani's Egypt or Du Bois's South, the people put their bodies on the gears and made them stop. And they were right. That, in the most basic possible way, was how slavery ended. That's what we commemorate every year on Shabbat HaGadol. And God willing, sometime soon, that will happen again — for good this time.

—

Raphael Magarik is an assistant professor of English at the University of Illinois Chicago.

2 *Tzafnat Paaneaḥ*, quoted in *Haggadah Shleimah*, 52.

3 *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46.

PESACH 5784

YACHATZ

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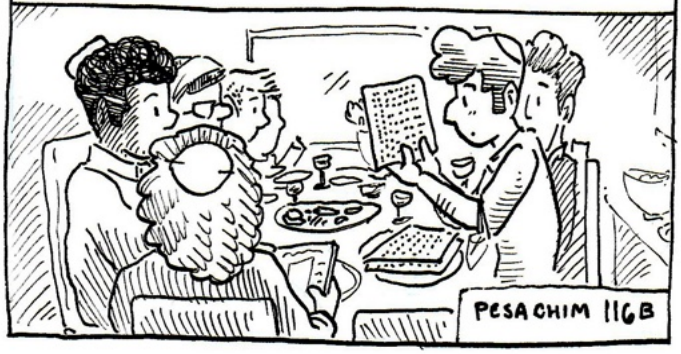
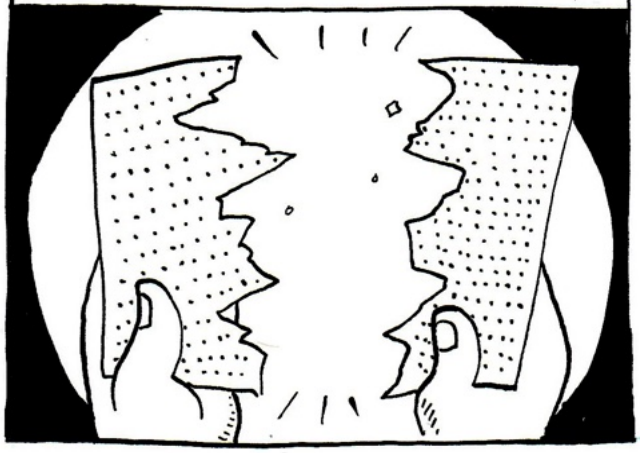
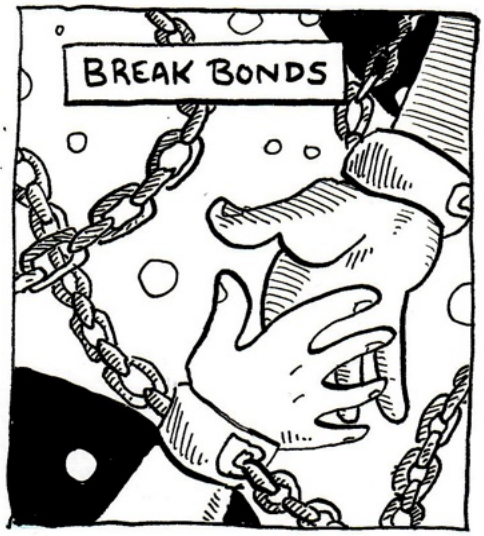
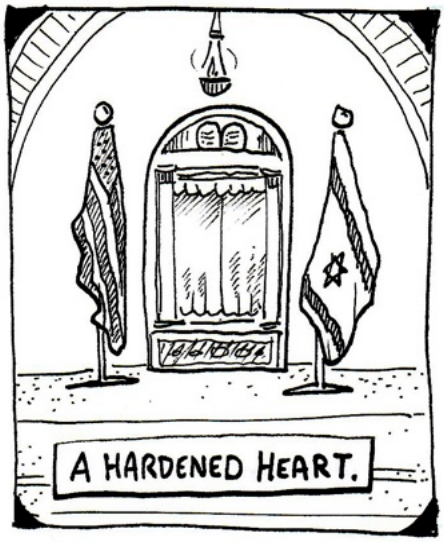
IN EACH GENERATION, A PERSON MUST VIEW THEMSELF AS THOUGH THEY HAVE PERSONALLY LEFT EGYPT.

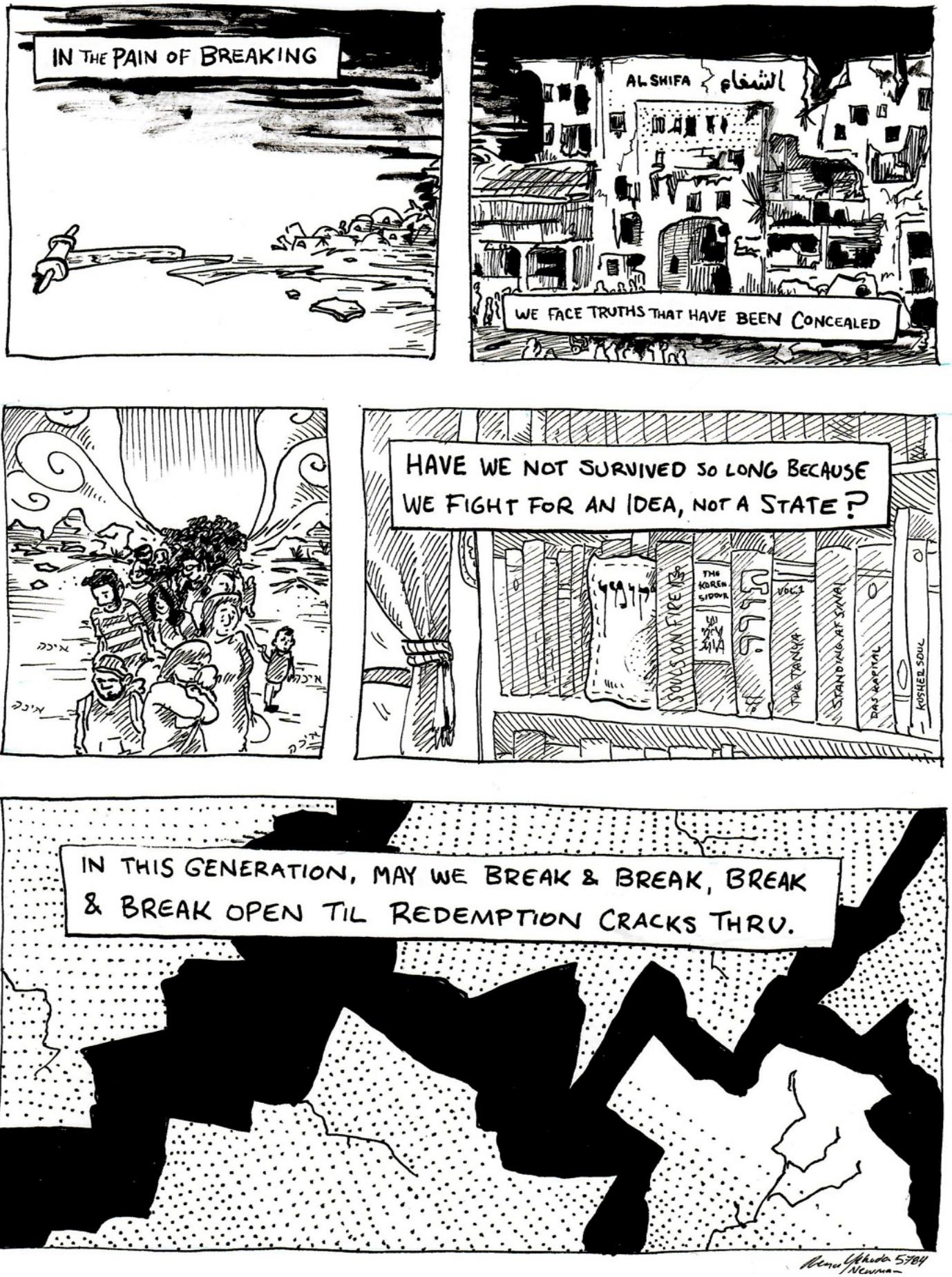


BUT TO LEAVE, ONE MUST BREAK.









Rena Yehuda Newman (they/them) is a transgender illustrator, writer, and editor wrestling with G-d in Brooklyn, NY.

Let All Who Are Hungry Come and Eat

by Rabbi Lara Haft Yom-Tov

הָא לַחְמָא עַנְיָא דִּי אֲכָלוּ אַבְהָתָנָא בְאַרְעָא דְמִצְרָיִם. כָּל דִכְפִין יֵיתֵי וְיֵיכֹל, כָּל דִצְרִיךְ יֵיתֵי וְיִפְסַח. הָשַׁתָּא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דְיִשְׂרָאֵל. הָשַׁתָּא עַבְדֵי, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין.

This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat; let all who are in need come share our Passover.

Ha lachma anya, the very first line of Maggid, is meant to be an unambiguous, immediate call to feed the hungry, understood easily by every Jew.

While most of the text of the seder is in Hebrew, *ha lachma anya* is written in Aramaic. This text was added to the Seder by the Jewish community of Babylonia, for whom Aramaic was the vernacular.[1] It is written in the lingua franca, using simple language that would have been understood even by young children. Beginning in the 14th century, many Ashkenazi communities were careful to translate *ha lachma anya*, specifically, into the vernacular.[2] For hundreds of years, Jewish tradition has emphasized the importance of everyone at the seder understanding this declaration in its simplest meaning.[3] Medieval commentators described ha lachma anya as a literal invitation: Jewish people would open their doors on Pesach, proclaiming to those on the street that "all who are hungry should come and eat."[4]

This Pesach, we must ask if there's any meaning left in the words we are saying.

At this year's seder, the same war criminals who have forced Palestinian families to flee their homes will lift up their matzah and wax poetic about the Israelites' rush to escape Egypt. The same politicians who have manufactured a famine in Gaza, leading millions to the brink of starvation, will proudly declare: "Let all who are hungry come and eat."

What was once the simplest line of the Haggadah has become gibberish.

The midrash recounts a story about the evil cities of Sedom and Amorah before they were destroyed. Two young girls were drawing water when one girl noticed that the other was weak from hunger. Without hesitation, the healthy young girl switched their jugs, filling the starving girl's with flour. When this child's actions were revealed to the people of Sedom, they seized

1 Perush of the Ritva on the Haggadah, "הא לחמא עניא"
2 Kol Bo quoted in the Beit Yosef, Orach Chayim 473
3 Rema on Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 473
4 Perush Kadmon on the Haggadah, "כל דכפין ייתי וייכל"

her and burned her to death,[5] as feeding the poor was against the laws of Sedom.[6]

In another midrash, the rabbis teach that the destruction of Sedom and Amorah happened during Pesach. Such an account seems anachronistic, given that Sedom and Amorah were destroyed many generations before the Israelites were ever enslaved in Mitzrayim. Yet, perhaps there is something so fundamental about Pesach that it transcends even time itself. The 15th of Nissan is a sort of primordial witching hour, when Divine, thundering anger blazes against violent regimes. As we sit down for our seders under the full moon, this time has come once again. The world becomes ripe for the un-making of civilizations like Sedom and Mitzrayim, regimes that celebrate the starvation of children and punish anyone who dares resist.

Pesach stirs us to proclaim the simple truth, which is understood intuitively by kids, whether the young girl of Sedom or the children at our Pesach seder. That life is sacred. That God hears the screams of the oppressed. That we have to feed those who are starving.

We must commit ourselves to these simple truths of our tradition, never surrendering them to rancid metaphor.

This is the bread of affliction. Let all who are hungry come and eat.

—

R. Lara Haft Yom-Tov (they/them) is Jewish educator and community rabbi living in London.

5 Bereshit Rabbah 49

6 Etz Yosef on Bereishit Rabbah 49:6:4

השתא עבדי / This Year We Are Slaves

by Rabbi Lexie Botzum

Avadim hayinu, we were slaves, begins one version of the Haggadah's tale. When those words are uttered, my mind instantly supplies a follow-up: *atah b'nei chorin, b'nei chorin*. And now we are free people, we are free.

So goes the classic song following the four questions. Right here, from the very beginning of the seder, we've encapsulated the whole narrative–summarized the entire arc. The story begins in bondage; it ends now, in salvation. We were slaves, but no longer. This was the story I heard growing up: we recall enslavement to savor the sweetness of freedom.

It's puzzling, then, to review the text with which *maggid* begins: "*Ha lachma anya*, this is the bread of affliction. We invite all who are hungry to come and eat, and declare: Now we are here, next year in the land of Israel. This year we are slaves, next year we will be free people."

So which is it? Are we free people triumphantly recalling our salvation, or an oppressed people still waiting on redemption?

Examining the actual text of *Avadim hayinu* as it appears in the Haggadah, we find a partial answer. We were slaves to Pharaoh; the Lord took us out with Their mighty hand and outstretched arm; were it not for this, we and our descendants would still be slaves to Pharaoh.

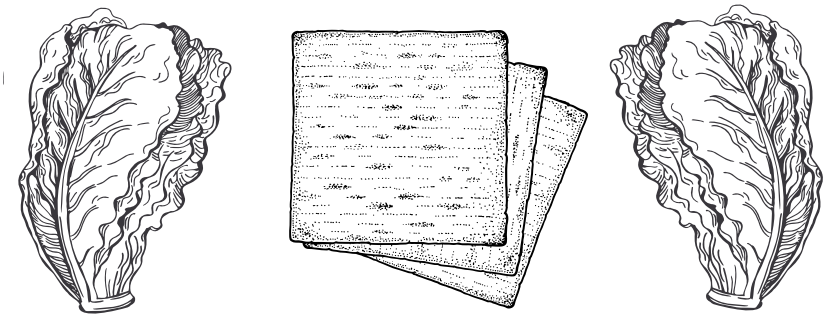
What are we now? Not slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, the text confidently asserts; but are we free people? It doesn't go so far. The song's joyous claim is nowhere to be found. Perhaps we are only slaves to a different master.

Picking at the threads of the seder ritual, we find more puzzling contradictions that indicate a similar tension. When the time comes for each cup of wine, we ask fellow guests to pour our cup, luxuriate in being served. When drinking, or eating matzah, we recline to the left, a Greco-Roman aristocrat at the height of leisure. We are not only free, but noble.

Yet the matzah itself, our seder's centerpiece, is a fraught symbol — a reminder both of our salvation and our deprivation. The bread of affliction, of haste and terror; the bread of poverty, thin crackers we're forbidden to enrich. Still, Rashi says, we recline when eating the matzah, this reminder of the haste *before redemption*, the food clutched in our hands as we left.[1] But when eating the maror, the bitter herbs? We remain upright. These recall only slavery.

I remember delightedly gathering pillows before the seder every year as a child, scouring every inch of the house for odd-shaped cushions to recline upon. The leaning, it felt so silly and lush. Silly, because it was a dramatic role I assumed these two nights every year. When a friend pours my wine, when I drink awkwardly propped against a tilting cushion on an upright chair

1 Rashi on Pesachim 108a, ד"ה מצה צריכה הסיבה



in a vague approximation of an ancient aristocracy, I am playing the role of a free person. Why must I play at freedom, if it's my given state?

The Haggadah seems to cycle through narratives and positionalities–enslavement, freedom, nebulous in-between. On the one hand, as the mishna says,[2] we begin the story with *genut* (shame) and end with *shevach* (praise): a linear narrative from slavery to freedom. But on the other hand, we begin with the unambiguous statement: *this year we are slaves*. We say we are no longer slaves to Pharaoh, we wine and dine *like* the free and wealthy, and we pray that next year, we will be well and truly free. We state that in every generation a new foe arises to destroy us, and also that Hashem defeats them — an internal narrative of countless falls and redemptions. Not one story, but dozens. We say that every person must see themself as though they personally were a slave in Egypt — as if they themself were enslaved, and they themself tasted the sweetness of liberation. We thank G-d for all They've done, every act that was more than we could possibly have asked for. And we conclude with the plea: *next year, in a rebuilt Jerusalem*. Next year, redemption.

The song *Avadim Hayinu*, such a staple at contemporary seders, is of relatively recent origin. While the first phrase is found in the haggadah, the second half of the refrain — *atah b'nei chorin*, now we are free — was crafted by Shlomo Postolsky, a writer living on Kibbutz Ein Harod in Mandate Palestine.[3]

There's an intuitive logic to this; this arc undergirds the Zionist narrative — a past of persecution, redeemed by a return to the land, a restoration of agency and freedom. Many medieval and contemporary commentators view the lines, "Now we are here, next year in the land of Israel. This year we are slaves, next year free people," as connected; to be a free people is to return to the land and offer the Pesach sacrifice in Jerusalem as in days of old. Perhaps a Zionist Haggadah should skip *Ha lachma anyah* entirely; begin with *Avadim hayinu*, sing *ata b'nei chorin*, and the rest is commentary.[4]

The dilemma of the Haggadah's narrative arc, the uncertain position from which we're reciting it, brings us to a deeper underlying question: what is the purpose of the seder? What is meant to be communicated through our recitation and performance of the Haggadah, and what commanding force does it hold? What claims does this narrative make upon us today?

In his seminal work *Zakhor*, historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi argues for the distinction between Jewish history and Jewish memory. For most of our existence, he insists, Jews have

2 Mishna Pesachim 10:4

3 עבדים היינו – ויקיפדיה

4 Many haggadot printed in the years immediately following the state's creation do, in fact, emphasize that for the first time in 2,000 years, Jews are celebrating as "a free people back in their own land"; according to these haggadot, השתא עבדי has become an anachronism.

been deeply uninterested in history — the project of unearthing and recording precisely what happened and when. The Jewish project was rather one of *memory*, making meaning and forming/perpetuating collective identity through a shared narrative that is both sacred and commanding.

The Seder is one of the most powerful examples of the living, embodied memory, writes Yerushalmi:

> *"Ha lahma anya"—"This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in the Land of Egypt." Both the language and the gesture are geared to spur, not so much a leap of memory as a fusion of past and present. Memory here is no longer recollection, which still preserves a sense of distance, but reactualization.*[5]

The seder is a reenactment, the process of making selected memory lived and relevant. We eat the matzah; we taste the bitter herbs. According to the Rambam, we must not only see ourselves as having left Egypt, but *present* ourselves as such,[6] embodying the transition from enslavement to liberation. Feel what it was to be a slave and then freed; feel what it is to be still enslaved, still waiting on redemption.

Yerushalmi notes that in recent centuries, Jews have turned to the previously unfashionable vocation of history — a trend which "begins at a time that witnesses a sharp break in the continuity of Jewish living and hence also an ever-growing decay of Jewish group memory." As a historian himself, Yerushalmi wrestles with the question of how one can value and engage in historiography while maintaining the sanctity and commanding power of memory.

Zionism is a curious example of this phenomenon. On the one hand, Yerushalmi notes its desire to studiously ignore over a millennia of diaspora history, or present it as an undifferentiated timeline of subjugation and decline. On the other hand, the past they *do* preserve is related to more as chronicled history than as living memory, particularly following the establishment of the state. Returning to the land en masse and erecting an ethnostate becomes something of a messianic and inevitable end of history, the Bible a land deed.

Discussing Yudka, a Zionist character in a modern Hebrew novel who professes a distaste for Jewish history, Yerushalmi comments:

> *Yudka…has a past, only with an intermission of almost two millennia. It grinds to a halt with the fall of Masada in the second century and resumes again with the return to Zion in the late nineteenth.*[7]

Yudka's relationship to Jewish history typifies the linear narrative arc suggested by Postolsky: we were exiled, and we returned. We were slaves, we suffered, and now we are free.

In this narrative, the past's role is not so much commanding as it is justificatory. We recall oppression to emphasize the necessity of our current "freedom." Enslavement becomes less an embodied experience demanding a changed world and more a threat dangled over people's

5 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, p. 99
6 Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Chametz u'Matzah*, 7:6
7 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, p. 169

heads to uphold the world as it currently is. When reading the Haggadah, the lesson communicated is thus never to become slaves again, not how to get free.

In her latest book, *Doppelganger*, Naomi Klein reflects on how this paradigm plays out in the realm of Holocaust education:

> *"It's re-traumatization, not remembering. There is a difference." When [my friend] said it, I knew it was true. Remembering puts the shattered pieces of our selves back together again (re-member-ing); it is a quest for wholeness… But re-traumatization is about freezing us in a shattered state; it's a regime of ritualistic reenactments designed to keep the losses as fresh and painful as possible. Our education did not ask us to probe the parts of ourselves that might be capable of inflicting great harm on others, and to figure out how to resist them. It asked us to be as outraged and indignant at what happened to our ancestors as if it had happened to us—and to stay in that state.*
>
> *The reason for this frozen quality to our education, I now see, was that the Holocaust was a plot point in a larger, prewritten story we not only were being told but also were trapped inside: a phoenix-from-the-flames narrative that began in the gas chambers of Nazi-controlled Europe and ended on the hilltops around Jerusalem. Though there were certainly exceptions, for the most part, the goal of this teaching was not to turn us into people who would fight the next genocide wherever it occurred. The goal was to turn us into Zionists.*[8]

If the goal of this re-traumatization is to reify the world-as-is, to justify an oppressive status quo where Palestinian subjugation goes hand-in-hand with Jewish "liberation," then what is the alternative posed by living memory? What do we make of our fluid, cyclical haggadah, rather than a linear, triumphant history?

Cole Arthur Riley, author of *Black Liturgies*, insists that "collective memory is a liberation practice." When asked to expand on memory's value, she says,"The thing that feels most true to me in this season is that my hope is actually found in looking back in memory and kind of bridging that space. Because once I remember rightly, or as rightly as I can with the people that I trust, I feel like my appetite for good and health and well-being in the world is refined."[9]

Remembering vividly, remembering rightly, is a means of reorienting oneself to the world. It presents the world as both contextualized and mutable – a reality that is conditioned but not determined.

In his works *Pedagogy of Freedom* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues that this orientation to the world — an acknowledgment of mutability, the radical hope this engenders — is a necessary albeit insufficient step to achieving liberation. The oppressors cultivate their dominance by "develop[ing] a series of methods precluding any presentation of the world as a problem and showing it rather as a fixed entity, as something given–something to which people, as mere spectators, must adapt."[10] In the oppressor's world, history is an inexorable march to a fated and immutable present. And so for the oppressed to wage their struggle

8 Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger*, p. 330

9 "Cole Arthur Riley: Collective memory as liberation," Interview with Faith & Leadership, March 2023

10 Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p. 139

for liberation, "they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform."[11]

This orientation is, arguably, how one resolves the seeming clash between *hashata avdei* and "if it weren't for this, we would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt." If we are still, ultimately, slaves, what is it about the Exodus from Egypt that we celebrate? Several rabbinic commentaries[12] suggest that the unique factor of our enslavement in Egypt was its apparent immutability. Pharaoh's dominance was so absolute, and we were so mired in the idolatrous certainty that the world neither had nor could have ever been otherwise. Had G-d not taken us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, we would still be slaves to Pharaoh, caught in the trap of history's seeming inevitability.

But once we experience that first liberation, even if the freedom doesn't stick — even if we find ourselves at the seder table, enslaved and pantomiming freedom — we've been gifted the memory of rupture. We've been gifted the knowledge that whatever our current world might be, it could be otherwise.[13] When each person is commanded to see themself as one who left Egypt, we are told to feel, in our bones, that the sea can split. That we can cross over.

For all the redemptive power memory holds, it's hard to map this neatly onto the present day when Jews are so demonstrably not the Israelites in the current narrative of Palestine/Israel. What does it mean to declare *hashata avdei*, we are still slaves, while we are the ones wielding genocidal violence? The ones maintaining an intricate matrix of dominance?

Here we can turn back to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In its opening chapter, he declares:

> *It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught; and the contradiction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man: neither oppressor nor oppressed, but man in the process of liberation. If the goal of the oppressed is to become fully human, they will not achieve their goal by merely reversing the terms of the contradiction, by simply changing poles.*[14]

He lays bare, first of all, the fallacy of the Zionist narrative. The presentation of "once we were slaves, now we are free" is not merely a simplification — it's patently false. The creation of an ethnostate isn't freedom, but a mere reversal of roles. We were enslaved; now we're the slavers. We are still caught in the same broken framework, only this time wielding the whip.

But Freire also puts forth a vision for lasting liberation. It's not one in which we as Jews can rely merely upon our own agency; definitionally, caught in this dialectical framework of oppression, it is only with the liberation of the oppressed that everyone can be free of this distort-

11 Ibid., p. 49

12 Naftali Seva Ratzon on Pesach Haggadah, Magid, We Were Slaves in Egypt 2:2, Ephod Bad on Pesach Haggadah, Magid, We Were Slaves in Egypt 2

13 Sefat Emet on Exodus 25: "After the Exodus from Egypt there is a piece of freedom in every member of Israel; and this piece helps a person, prepares them for redemption."

14 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 56

ed, death-loving order, one that dehumanizes both oppressed and oppressor. In supporting the oppressed's struggle for liberation, we affirm both its possibility and its necessity.

This brings us back to the Haggadah's opening and close. Commenting on *Ha lachma anya*, Rabbi Barukh Epstein connects the wish "Next year in Jerusalem" to the sage Shmuel's vision of a messianic future: one in which the basic rules and material realities of the world remain the same, but there is no state subjugation.[15] There may still be poor, this vision concedes, but there will be no class whose poverty or subjugation is guaranteed, no one whose exploitation the system demands. When people are freed from slavery, there is no one to take their place. We get closer to this world, he says, by doing acts of kindness and justice. By carrying each other.

This year we are still slaves and slavers. *Ata b'nei chorin* is a falsehood.

But next year in Jerusalem, we insist. Next year, we could all be free.

—

Rabbi Lexie Botzum is a Torah learner, teacher, and anti-occupation activist based in Jerusalem.

15 Barukh She'amar on Pesach Haggadah, Magid, Ha Lachma Anya 3:3

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch Warns Against the Abuse of Power

by Rabbi Arik Ascherman

Around our seder table we declare both "*avadim hayinu*" ("We were once slaves") and also "*This year we are slaves. Next year may we be free people.*" How strange the contradiction — are we free, or are we still slaves? — but how true.

A central tenet of Zionism is that the solution to the oppression of Jews is to again be in control of our own destiny in our homeland. "Never again." For long centuries of oppression — from Egyptian slavery to the ghettos, inquisitions, crusades, second-class *dhimmi* status in the Muslim world, and the Holocaust — we suffered without the power to defend ourselves.

Our history of oppression has left scars on our souls. The psychologists tell us that those who were beaten as children are more likely to beat their own children. We repeat learned behaviors. We take out on others the anger and pain we feel about how we were treated.

It is natural that we craved power, and it is human that we have abused that power. But Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch, a prominent 19th-century German thinker, teaches us that the Torah both predicts that we will one day have a state and also warns us not to use against others the power we will have, as the Egyptians used their power against us. Is it possible to justly use the power we need to survive or does state power necessarily corrupt?

We are no longer slaves in the sense that we are a free people in our independent country. Yet, we are still slaves to the scars left by our past suffering.

We can have compassion for ourselves, but we must not let either our history of oppression or the fact that we continue to face antisemitism lead us to privilege ourselves or exempt ourselves from responsibility towards those who suffer when we become pharaohs. Palestinians are also created in God's Image. Our abuse of power has led to the suffering of Palestinians living under occupation, Israel's national minorities, oppressed people in other lands whose oppressors use Israeli-made weapons, and fellow Jewish Israelis living in poverty.

As we gather around the Seder table, let us consider these powerful and haunting words from R' Hirsch, who was commenting on God's command: "You shall not wrong a *ger*[1] or oppress him/her, for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20):

1 Many consider *gerim* to refer only to non-Jews who have converted to Judaism. Others understand gerim as non-Jews living among Jews who observe the seven Noahide commandments as basic "ground rules." Ibn Ezra argues that the term refers to converts in verses dealing with *mitzvot beyn adam l'makom* (ritual commandments) and refers to non-Jews in verses relating to *mitzvot beyn adam l'khavero* (interpersonal commandments dealing with ethical behavior, such as the commandments to love the *ger*, not to oppress the *ger*, and more). Professor Ya'kov Blidstein argues that it is possible that Ibn Ezra saw the *ger* as a subset of the "*reah*," generally translated as "neighbor" but better understood as one who is essentially like us. If we are all created in God's image, then we are all *re'im*. Just before this passage, Rabbi Hirsch seems to be taking the former interpretation. In other places, he seems to take the latter.

> The great, meta-principle is oft-repeated in the Torah that it is not race, not descent, not birth nor country of origin, nor property, nor anything external or due to chance, but simply and purely the inner spiritual and moral worth of a human being, that gives him/her all the rights of a human being and of a citizen. This basic principle is further protected against infringement by the additional explanation, "For you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt." … Your entire misfortune in Egypt was that you were "foreigners" and "aliens." As such, according to the views of other nations, you had no right to be there, had no claim to property, to homeland, or to a dignified existence. It was permissible to do to you whatever they wished. As *gerim*, your rights were denied in Egypt. This was the source of the slavery and wretchedness imposed upon you. Therefore beware, so runs the warning, from making human rights in your own state conditional on anything other than on the basic humanity which every human being as such bears within him/her by virtue of being human. Any suppression of these human and civil rights opens the gate to the indiscriminate use of power and abuse of human beings, to the whole horror of Egyptian mishandling of human beings that was the root of abomination of Egypt.

This Passover, may we learn from our experiences as Israelites to ensure we do not become Egyptians.

—

Rabbi Arik Ascherman has been leading Israeli human rights organizations for over 28 years. He is currently the Executive Director of Torat Tzedek-Torah of Justice.

The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Safety and Power at the Seder

by Noam Weinreich

Stories are potent. They often serve as framing devices with profound implications for how we interpret the past, the future, and the present. They prime us to pay attention to specific features of our environment and direct us to the questions we should ask in response to those features. The Haggadah is purportedly interested in telling a story, specifically the story of how God saved us from slavery in Egypt. However, on closer examination, the Haggadah is often more interested in *how* we tell this story.

Before we even arrive at the Exodus narrative, the Haggadah provides us with several meta-narratives (literally stories about telling stories), which include the stories of the four sons, the rabbis learning in Bnai Brak, and the Derasha of R' Elazar Ben Azarya. These meta-narratives explore which questions we should ask about the Exodus, when and for how long we should tell the story, and which words we should use when telling the story. Where the Exodus story even begins is not obvious for the Haggadah, which at points starts discussing Terach, father of Avraham, and Yaakov with his father-in-law Lavan. Clearly, on this night it is not merely the facts of a story, which particular events happened, that should matter to us. How we tell and frame a story can have as much impact, if not more, than the story itself.

Immediately preceding the "core" narrative of the Haggadah that discusses the Jews' enslavement in Egypt, we are provided with a final framing device in the passage of *Vehi Sheamda*:

> וְהִיא שֶׁעָמְדָה לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ. שֶׁלֹּא אֶחָד בִּלְבַד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, אֶלָּא שֶׁבְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַצִּילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.
>
> And it is this that has stood for our ancestors and for us; since it is not [only] one [person or nation] that has stood [against] us to destroy us, but rather in each generation, they stand [against] us to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hand.

What is this passage doing? How does it frame the narrative of the Pesach seder?

In one reading of *Vehi Sheamda*, we are condemned to fear our own destruction constantly. The Jews will never be safe and always must be on the lookout for the enemies who will try to destroy us. Applying this reading to our own lives could prompt us to view any communal suffering, or indeed the suffering of any Jew, as evidence of yet another attempted genocide, destined to be repeated every generation, against which we must be ever vigilant.

This way of interpreting *Vehi Sheamda* is a part of our tradition and cannot be ignored. It is also obviously a part of our history, as we have experienced many communal tragedies, attempted genocides, and ethnic cleansings since we became a nation. The Haggadah can be read as further confirming this reading by immediately continuing with a discussion of Lavan's

attempt to destroy Yaakov, a somewhat surprising introduction to the Exodus narrative.[1]

This interpretation comes with risks, however, as well. As mentioned above, the way we understand and frame narratives has an impact on how we interpret the present. By focusing our attention on how we have been oppressed throughout our history, we risk ignoring alternative interpretive lenses, and alternative questions we could ask. Particularly, the above framing seems to be radically decontextualized. It acknowledges our history of oppression, but without exploring the context further, it does not guide us on what to do with that fact.

Other holidays on the Jewish calendar also discuss the history of Jewish suffering but provide alternative framings. On Tisha B'av, we are arguably much more concerned with *why* we have suffered historically, perhaps as punishment for past sins. On Chanukah and Purim, we might ask questions about the pragmatic mechanisms of Jewish salvation, such as via guerilla warfare or political scheming. The Seder does not seem concerned with any of these questions, such as whether we "deserve" to have been enslaved, or whether we "earned" our freedom. What does the Haggadah seek to learn from our history of oppression?

Many commentators understand *Vehi Sheamda*, and the Passover story more generally, not as a story about the history of Jews being oppressed, but rather a history of the Jews being saved by Hashem. Some commentators, such as the Abudarham (14th century Andalusia), go so far as to argue that God actually raises up enemies who attempt to destroy the Jewish people every generation, in order to continuously show how God protects us.[2] On this understanding, Vehi Sheamda is not an invitation to meditate on how much we have suffered over the years, and continue to suffer, but instead an opportunity to reflect on how our existence is not precarious, how we can have complete confidence that we are safe because Hashem watches over us. Paradoxically, our history of oppression that has failed to destroy us is seen as evidence of our safety.

This reading fits with some of the broader themes of Pesach, a night also known as *Leil Shimurim* (*a night that is guarded*). Rashi, commenting on this term (Shemot 12:42), writes that on the night of Pesach, Jews are protected from harm. On Pesach, at the Seder, rather than feeling scared, we feel safe. Perhaps it is additionally an invitation to feel powerful. We spend much of the Seder discussing the plagues God visits upon the Egyptians, with the Rabbis debating whether it was ten, fifty, or two hundred and fifty plagues God visited upon our enemies and discuss at great length all the incredible miracles Hashem performed on our behalf.

This is not a small shift. Understanding Vehi Sheamda in this way opens novel interpretive opportunities and new questions we can ask that we could not otherwise. It is from a place of comfort and power that we can ask questions like how we should respond to the suffering of our enemies, as expressed in the widespread explanation for why we pour out wine during the retelling of the plagues: to acknowledge the suffering of the Egyptians and therefore diminish our own joy.

An even more striking example of the types of interpretation available with this understanding comes from the commentary of Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi (16th Century), as quoted by Rabbi Yaakov Lorberbaum (1760-1832, Galicia), author of the Nesivos on Choshen Mishpat:

> "What is it that has sustained us? The fact that God has allowed us to survive

1 The Haggadah tells the Exodus story using the passages recited when bringing the first fruits to the Beit Hamikdash found in Devarim (26:5-11), rather than using the more extended narrative from Shemot.

2 See Abudarham on *Vehi Sheamda*.

> against overwhelming odds not by destroying those who hated us but simply by allowing us to remain alive. If God had used us to punish the other nations, then it would have appeared that we were simply God's means of punishment for others. The fact that we survived regardless of the other nations was a sign of God's love rather than God's anger. Israel's survival is a sign of God's love."

Similar to the Abudarham above, R' Ashkenazi also sees the history of the attempts to destroy the Jewish people as evidence of God's love, rather than of the precarity of our communal existence. However, he further argues that this love would be *diminished* if God punished our enemies too much to the point of destroying them. This would make it seem as if God was merely using the Jewish people as an excuse to punish others. According to R' Ashkenazi, once we understand *Vehi Sheamda* as being about how Jews have a tremendously powerful God on their side protecting and loving them, we can see there is such a thing as wielding too much power, as going too far when fighting one's enemies.[3]

Narratives can only take us so far. They help shape our worldviews, but how we interpret the present is ultimately up to us and dependent on our particular circumstances. It is, I would argue, extremely difficult to claim that Israel or the Jews are facing an existential threat today in the year 2024, despite the vociferous chorus within our community that claims the opposite. In fact, these claims about the alleged genocidal threats we face have served to prevent us from asking difficult questions about our own behavior that oppresses others. This focus on our own suffering to the exclusion of all else, especially on the night of Passover, falls into the same trap that a decontextualized reading of *Vehi Sheamda* lays.

On the Seder night, we have the opportunity to ask questions not from a place of fear, but from a place of strength. We can and we have poured out our wrath on our perceived enemies. On this night, when we do not fear for our communal safety, when we feel comfortable knowing we do not face destruction, we can ask, we *must* ask: when can we say *Dayenu*? When is it enough?

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Noam Weinreich is a second-year Ph.D. Student in Philosophy at Northwestern University. He primarily works on questions in epistemology, including topics such as epistemic normativity, social epistemology, and how narratives shape our beliefs.

3 Consistent with this line of thinking, R' Ashkenazi also famously interprets the passage recited later in the Seder before Hallel, "Shefoch Chamatcha," narrowly, as only referring to idolaters and not to all gentiles such as Christians and Muslims. See Noa Gendler's essay later in the reader for more on "Shefoch Chamatcha."

Most of Us Didn't Make It Out: The Obligation to Think Radically

by Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר, "וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם" (דברים ו:כג).

In each and every generation a person is obligated to see themself as if they had exited Egypt, as is said, "And you must tell your child on that day, saying, "It was on account of this that YHWH did for me in my exodus from Egypt" (Deut. 6:23).

What does it mean to see myself as though I had personally left Egypt when we all know that I did not? Why do the Sages charge each of us to engage in this leap of imagination? What is required to shift one's perspective from that of a free person to that of someone who is becoming free? What do I see when I put myself into the story of redemption?

In the aftermath of the brutal tenth plague, Phara'oh finally buckles and sends the Israelites out of Egypt. On the face of the Torah's narrative, it seems that the people jumped at the opportunity, leaving en masse: "And the Israelites traveled from Ra'amses toward Sukkot, around 600,000 men walking, aside from children" (12:37). An immediate population movement on that scale stretches the imagination. I've never seen so many people united in action before; how did it happen?

Through all the drama of the first nine plagues, we hear almost nothing about the life of the Israelite community, other than that the latter few plagues did not affect them. Like so much history writing, the narrative focuses on the battling leaders. What was heard on the Israelite streets, though? How did they explain what was happening in Egypt? Was everyone excited about the plagues? Were there Phara'oh apologists? Did some Israelites eschew Moshe and Aharon as "stir-up Jews," and those who followed them as rabble-rousing radicals? Were there oblivious Israelites, just trying to focus on their day-to-day lives? How did they make the transition from collective rage at Moshe and Aharon for making their bad situation worse (5:20-21) to leaving suddenly and collectively in the space of only one year?[1] What was that time like in the Israelite community? How did they all get on board with believing in a radical cause supported by supernatural miracles? Even in that generation, how did each and every person see themselves as going free?

The simple answer is: They didn't. A lot of the Israelites aligned with their oppressors and suf-

1 Moshe was 80 years old when he returned to Egypt (7:7) and 120 when he died (Devarim/Deuteronomy 34:7), and they spent forty years in the desert, so the Rabbis deduce that the plagues transpired over, at most, twelve months (Mishna 'Eduyot 2:10).

fered their fate. Our Rabbis doggedly push us to understand our mythic history not as utopian fantasy, but as Divine intervention into real, human history, with humans acting as humans act. At the beginning of Parashat BeShallaḥ, we read, "So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds, and the Israelites went up *ḥamushim* out of the land of Egypt" (Sh'mot 13:18). The meaning of the somewhat obscure word "*ḥamushim*" is debated. One view, following a verse in the Book of Joshua (1:14), says that it means "armed": our ancestors left Egypt strong and ready to hold their own as a new, free nation. Not everyone accepted this view, though, with a majority of Sages preferring to ground the word "*ḥamushim*" in the Hebrew word "*ḥamesh,*" meaning five:

> *"'Went up* ḥamushim*' — one out of* ḥamishah*/five.*
>
> *Some say: one out of* ḥamishim*/fifty.*
>
> *Some say: one out of* ḥamesh me'ot*/five hundred.*
>
> *Rabbi Nehorai says: I swear! Not one in five hundred went up…but many of the Israelites died in Egypt. When did they die? During the three days of darkness."*[2]

I still remember the palpable shock I felt when I first learned this midrash. Beneath the veneer of confident unity on the surface of the exuberant liberation narrative was a bruised, divided, ravaged people: only 1/5 of our ancestors made it out…at most. It slowly sank in: it couldn't have been otherwise. Escaping oppression to freedom is a radical act. Faith is a radical act. Collective, organized action is a radical act. And most people do not sign on for radical acts. Of course those who were ready for freedom did not have everybody on board.

This sobering midrash points us back to the dramatic tension just before the breaking point in the exodus story, the Israelite community's experience of the plague of darkness. After eight plagues ravishing the Egyptian water, earth, wildlife, and livestock, the ninth Divine attack escalated to new levels of spooky terror: "YHWH said to Moshe, 'Stretch out your hand across the heavens, that there be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness one can feel.' Moshe stretched out his hand across the heavens and there was pitch dark in all the land of Egypt for three days. No one saw one another and no one rose from where they were for three days, but all the Israelites had light in their dwelling places."[3] The Rabbis wonder what the point was of this plague in a striking midrash:

> *"Why did the Holy Blessed One, of blessed name, Who shows no partiality and Who probes the heart and searches the mind, bring darkness upon them? Because there were criminals among the Israelites who had Egyptian patrons and had wealth and status and did not want to leave. The Holy Blessed One said, 'If I bring a plague upon them in public and they die, the Egyptians will say: Oh, just as [God] crossed the line with us, [God] crossed the line with them!' Therefore, [God] brought three days of darkness, so that [the Israelites] could bury their dead, without the haters seeing them, so they praised the Holy*

2 Midrash Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmaʿel, Tractate Vayehi Beshalach 1:7-8

3 Sh'mot 10:21-23

Blessed One for this."[4]

Of course there were lots of oppressor-apologists among the Israelites. Of course the Egyptian power structure bought off some Israelites (on the cheap, one can assume) to serve as their fig leaves: How can you say Phara'oh oppresses the Jews? Look at So-and-so! Of course some rank-and-file Israelites looked at those bought-out Israelites, saw the only people in their community with some comfort and status and aspired, futilely, to be like them, even as those Israelite assimilationists experienced the plagues along with the Egyptians because they wouldn't separate. Of course the bulk of Israelites identified with the oppressors who had stripped them of the ability to identify with their own. And, of course, their presence prevents the Egyptians from breaking down, understanding the folly of their supremacist ways, and acknowledging the Holy Blessed One. God's message to the Egyptians with the plagues was that they, the Egyptian people, were punished for oppressing the Israelites and would be attacked until they sent the Israelites free. That message was undermined as long as there was a significant population of collaborator Israelites. How could the Egyptians see themselves as targeted for Divine punishment if most Israelites aligned with them, experiencing Divine punishment with them and insisting on loyalty to the tyrannical empire? Their complicity undermines the Divine message, allowing the Egyptian leadership and masses to reassure themselves: We're not being punished. We're just going through a hard time now. It happens.

Liberation work is lonely and uncertain, shrouded in darkness. Our Rabbis are telling us that when we feel that way, when we feel incredulous that so many people who should be on the liberation train persist in wanting to "see both sides" or, worse, in identifying with the empire, we must press ahead. Even in our mythic paradigm for liberation, the freedom fighters felt drowned out by sellouts and apologists. The Rabbis urgently say to the moderates, the apologists, the sellouts, and turncoats of today: don't let yourself wind up like the Israelites who died unseen in the plague of darkness. Make yourself a part of this story: break with Phara'oh. On seder night, each and every one of us is required to see ourself as one of the dissident radicals, one of the minority who hated exploitation, who despised oppression, and who remained committed to going free.

—

Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein lives in Chicago, teaches in various Jewish social justice contexts, and is a Senior Editor of Jewschool.com. An earlier version of this essay previously appeared on the Avodah blog.

4 Sh'mot Rabbah 14:3

The Incomplete Redemption

by Gabriel Gendler Yom-Tov

At the end of *Maggid*, we recite a paragraph-long *bracha*, which invokes God's past redemption of the Jewish people and a belief that we will again bring the relevant sacrifices. The blessing concludes with the familiar formulation:

ברוך אתה ה׳ גאל ישראל

"*Blessed are You, God, who redeemed Israel*"

What does it mean, during a genocidal attack on Gaza by a military embedded in Jewish language and symbols, to claim that we are living in a redeemed world?

In the Yerushalmi, amidst a debate over the structural rules of long *brachot*, R. Yose cryptically suggests that the *bracha* of *ga'al yisrael* is somehow "two" — either two separate brachot, or one bracha containing two themes.[1] While the *petiḥa* (introduction) and the *ḥatima* (conclusion) both invoke the language of redemption, *ge'ula*, they are referring to distinct acts of *ge'ula*:

שתים הנה: אחת לבוא, ואחת לשעבר

"There are two — one is to come, and one is in the past."

Medieval commentators offer competing interpretations of R. Yose's "two". The Rashba[2] argues that we really are reading two distinct *brachot*. The first ends with the words *matza umaror* and describes the redemption that occurred millenia ago during *yetziat mitzrayim*, culminating in our annual celebration of Pesach, with its *matza* and *maror*. The second begins with the words *ken... yagienu* and describes our hopes for a future redemption in which we will return to eating the *korban pesach*.[3] But the historical moment of redemption we envisage in this *bracha* is not described explicitly. If we follow the Rashba's reasoning, what is this second *ge'ula*?

Before we can answer that question, it is helpful to examine in greater detail the first *ge'ula*. If the historical achievement of *yetziat mitzrayim* was the liberation of Jewish slaves, then the moral achievement was that God inverted the contours of power in the world. A military and economic superpower was brought low; a community of the vulnerable and the oppressed rose up in triumph. Men who considered themselves in command of an empire were outwitted; women who had spent years preparing for a freedom that nobody else could imagine were vindicated. Most crucially, a political doctrine which asserted that Pharoah's military and economic capacity to oppress and brutalize made him partly divine was dismantled in favor of the idea that the very laws of nature will eventually bend for those who want to serve God.

1 Y. Brachot 1:5
2 B. Brachot 11a
3 This division of the bracha goes back to the Rabbis who formulated it. See Mishnah Pesachim 10:6.

Although this reversal of power occurred locally and temporarily, it demonstrated God's vision for a global, permanent reversal. *Yetziat mitzrayim* set in motion a long movement towards that reality — a movement which is still in process, constantly encountering new resistance and also continually finding new wellsprings of support. The *ge'ula* which has not yet come to pass, which forms the essence of Pesach, will be the total reconfiguration of the world in line with the new truth that God introduced, on this night, millennia ago.

The Jewish right attempts to suppress this vision in their defense of militaries, empires, autocrats, and capitalists. They have a simple agenda on Pesach: they want to elide this second *ge'ula*, by instead drawing all attention to the first. They will argue that the lasting vision of Pesach is Jewish victory and non-Jewish death. Our task, however, is to remember the *ge'ula* that has yet to come. When we recite the *bracha* of *ga'al yisrael* on seder night, we must remember that we are thanking God both for freeing us from slavery and for the vision of freedom, justice, and peace that God gave us on that night.

But there's a second way to read R. Yose's claim in the Yerushalmi that the *bracha* is "two." R. Yehuda b. Yakar[4] writes that while the text is referring to two separate acts of *ge'ula*, they are concurrent throughout one long *bracha*. In this spirit, the Lubavitcher Rebbe observes that the words

אשר גאלנו וגאל את אבותינו

"...who redeemed us and redeemed our ancestors"

(in what the Rashba would view as the first bracha) could have been shortened to *asher ga'al otanu v'et avoteinu* — "who redeemed us and our ancestors"; he argues that the repetition of *ge'ula* points to the redemption that has yet to come.[5] Similarly, the Rebbe reads *ge'ulateinu* ("our redemption") and *pedut nafsheinu* ("the saving of our lives"), phrases in the Rashba's second *bracha*, as referring respectively to these two distinct moments of *ge'ula*. In this reading, both the beginning and the end of the *bracha* contain references to both our liberation from slavery and the *ge'ula* of the future.

What does it mean for us not only to take note of these two acts of redemption but actually to understand them as inextricably linked? Reckoning with this teaches us that each *ge'ula* is dependent on the other. By liberating the Jewish people from Egypt, God set out a blueprint for the universal freedom for which we are now compelled to fight; when those who profess to be our allies in that fight are unable to tell us why our freedom and safety matters to them, then we know that the *ge'ula* which they are imagining is no *ge'ula* at all. On the other hand, we ourselves must reckon with the fact that our redemption from Egypt was bound up with a greater pursuit, and we were recruited to that pursuit when we were freed. The entire Jewish project is justified by our contribution to hastening the second *ge'ula*. May it come *bimheira beyameinu amen*.

—

Gabriel Gendler Yom-Tov is a mathematician and rebbetzin in London.

4 R. Yehuda b. Yakar, *Maayan Ganim,* s.v. "who redeemed us"

5 Divrei Menachem commentary on the Haggadah, s.v. "who redeemed us"

Lot's Matzah: Imagination and Possibility

by Rabbi Avigayil Halpern

The image of people frantically fleeing, attempting to bring as much food as they can carry while under the shadow of an empire's military assault is an essential part of the Pesach narrative. This is the story of matzah, carried on the backs of the Jewish people as they fled enslavement in Mitzrayim. We are commanded every year to eat matzah in a way that echoes this panic:

וְכָכָה תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ מָתְנֵיכֶם חֲגֻרִים נַעֲלֵיכֶם בִּרְגְלֵיכֶם וּמַקֶּלְכֶם בְּיֶדְכֶם וַאֲכַלְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בְּחִפָּזוֹן פֶּסַח הוּא לַה׳:

> This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly: it is a passover offering to Hashem.[1]

This mitzvah instructs us to reenact the original conditions under which matzah was made and eaten:

וַיֹּאפוּ אֶת־הַבָּצֵק אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם עֻגֹת מַצּוֹת כִּי לֹא חָמֵץ כִּי־גֹרְשׁוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְהִתְמַהְמֵהַּ וְגַם־צֵדָה לֹא־עָשׂוּ לָהֶם:

> And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.[2]

In their rush to flee the Egyptians, Am Yisrael was only able to bring some flour and water with them.

The images of panic, people frantically grabbing for flour, searching for sustenance while soldiers bear down upon them, are all too familiar to us. Mohammed al-Simry, a resident of Gaza, described to al-Jazeera his experience of what has been termed the "flour massacre":

> We'd talked about what we needed, how we would bring it to our starving children and eat until we finally beat the hunger. Sadly, that never happened. Not only did I leave the convoy hungry, I left without a loved family member who had only wanted a bite of bread.[3]

We do not need to reach back into Jewish religious imagination to envision scenes of panic and blood, fleeing with only a little flour. So what will it mean when we eat *matzah* this year – and how can we navigate that we are eating matzah simultaneously with people who are perpetrating these very scenes of scarcity and horror?

1 Exodus 11:9
2 Exodus 12:39
3 Simon Speakman Cordall, Mohammed R Mhawish and Mat Nashed, "When Israeli soldiers shot at hungry Palestinians," *Al Jazeera*, March 5, 2024

So many of my friends and comrades are struggling with how we can observe a holiday of liberation when so many of our fellow Jews will eat matzah around seder tables and endorse ideas and actions that are anything but liberatory. It can be isolating and alienating, even within the long history of leftist uses of Seder rituals for radical political aims. But Pesach has always been observed by people whose values and praxis are out of step from how we envision the lessons of our liberation..

I am finding a kernel of hope in the idea of Lot — Avram's nephew — baking matzah.

In Parshat Vayera, when two angelic messengers come to warn Lot and his family of the forthcoming destruction of Sedom and Amora, Lot offers them hospitality. The messengers initially decline, but the text states:

וַיִּפְצַר־בָּם מְאֹד וַיָּסֻרוּ אֵלָיו וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם מִשְׁתֶּה וּמַצּוֹת אָפָה וַיֹּאכֵלוּ׃

> But he urged them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.[4]

Rashi explains that the reason Lot baked matzah is that it was Pesach. But how are we to relate to a Biblical character observing this chag hundreds of years before the exodus from Egypt? And even more so, a character like Lot, who is largely condemned by the rabbinic tradition?

Lot is criticized in midrashim and commentaries in no small part for his abuses of the land of Cana'an and the people in it. Rashi explains why Lot's original split from his uncle Avram occurs:

לְפִי שְׁהָיוּ רוֹעִים שֶׁל לוֹט רְשָׁעִים וּמַרְעִים בְּהֶמְתָּם בִּשְׂדוֹת אֲחֵרִים, וְרוֹעֵי אַבְרָם מוֹכִיחִים אוֹתָם עַל הַגֵּזֶל, וְהֵם אוֹמְרִים נִתְּנָה הָאָרֶץ לְאַבְרָם, וְלוֹ אֵין יוֹרֵשׁ, וְלוֹט יוֹרְשׁוֹ, וְאֵין זֶה גֵּזֶל וְהַכָּתוּב אוֹמֵר וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי אָז יֹשֵׁב בָּאָרֶץ, וְלֹא זָכָה בָּהּ אַבְרָם עֲדַיִן.

> Since Lot's shepherds were wicked men and grazed their cattle in other people's fields. Avram's shepherds rebuked them for this act of robbery, but they replied, "The land has been given to Avram, and since he has no son as heir, Lot will be his heir: consequently this is not robbery". Scripture, however, states: "The Canaanite and the Perizzite abode then in the land," so that Avram was not yet entitled to possession.[5]

In other words, Lot is distanced from Avram and Avram's community because of his false sense of entitlement, his arrogant assumption that everything in Canaan was his to have and use. And yet, we have this story that imagines him baking matzah. Lot, in the midrash, observes Pesach, which rightly ought to involve stepping into an imaginative world where he has almost nothing save the food on his back.

Perhaps we can view Lot's entrance into a Pesach mindset--this shift from feeling entitled to everything toward imagining having nothing--that gives Lot a push to act with urgency to feed those in need, even as everyone around him attempts to harm them. The pasuk says that "וַיִּפְצַר־בָּם מְאֹד," "he urged them strongly," pushing the angelic messengers to accept his invitation for hospitality and food.

4 Genesis 19:3
5 Rashi on Bereshit 13:7

In the time between my beginning writing this piece and working on its conclusion, Israeli airstrikes killed aid workers bringing food in an attempt to avert famine in Gaza. The most basic attempts to feed people are under threat — those who would offer sustenance are in danger. Even those we might see as our people have moved to Sedom and Amora. So many people with whom we learn and daven, who we share meals and laughter with, are supporting and even perpetrating these horrors. They are not learning the lessons of matzah, and it is breaking our hearts.

Sarah Aziza, writing in *Jewish Currents*, says that

> Perhaps the fundamental work of witness is the act of faith — an ethical and imaginative leap beyond what we can see. It is a sober reverence of, and a commitment to fight for, the always-unknowable other. This commitment does not require constant stoking by grisly, tragic reports. Rather than a feeling, witness is a position. It insists on embodiment, on sacrifice, mourning and resisting what is seen.[6]

The mitzvah of matzah ought to push us all to make that "ethical and imaginative leap." Ideally, it would push even the Lots of the world, the people whose entitlement and cruelty have distorted their relationship with the Land and with humanity so deeply that they are in a space like Sedom and Amora. But even if matzah cannot push others, we can allow it to push ourselves. We can take up witnessing and remembering and resisting. We can make it so that next year in the Land, everyone is nourished.

—

Rabbi Avigayil Halpern (she/her) is a writer and educator whose work focuses on queer and feminist Torah.

6 Sarah Aziza, "The Work of the Witness," *Jewish Currents*, January 12, 2024

Pour Out Thy Wrath: A Reframing for 5784

by Noa Gendler

שְׁפֹךְ חֲמָתְךָ אֶל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יְדָעוּךָ וְעַל־מַמְלָכוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁמְךָ לֹא קָרָאוּ. כִּי אָכַל אֶת־יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת־נָוֵהוּ הֵשַׁמּוּ.

"Pour out Thy wrath on the nations that do not know You, upon the kingdoms that do not invoke Your name; for they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home."

So we read after the third cup, these lines taken from Psalm 79. And the psalm continues, "דלונו מאד" — we have sunk very low. These words are not included in the Haggadah, but perhaps they should be.

I didn't know that "Pour out Thy wrath" existed in the Seder until I was a teenager. As a small child, my grandmother would take me and my brother to open the front door for Elijah. I remember the cold of the street, the hushed tones and excitement as she'd whisper to us that he was coming. We would listen and wait, and then return to the table where the grown-ups would insist that the amount of wine in Elijah's cup had decreased. Then we would pour the fourth cup.

When I was a little older, my younger cousins took on the responsibility of opening the door, and I learned that there was a text that accompanied this tradition. "Pour out Thy wrath," the Haggadah reads, "on the goyim that do not know You, upon the kingdoms that do not invoke Your name." In other words, punish the non-believers; let those who are not like us feel Your might and fear You. My grandmother, though, refused to have it read out loud. Leila was well-travelled, career-oriented, open-minded and worldly. To her, the word "goyim" was more vulgar than an f-bomb, and to pray for the destruction of people of other faiths was a despicable act of segregation. She believed in multiculturalism, diversity, tolerance and forgiveness.

Although in recent years I have whispered this paragraph under my breath, this Pesach my grandmother's message feels particularly shattering. What does it mean for us, the Jewish people, to pray for the pouring out of wrath upon our enemies, when a huge section of our community believes that the slaughter of Palestinians is a welcome fulfilment of that prayer? What does it mean for us to embrace the intolerance of our liturgy, when intolerance is reigning supreme, both in the Holy Land and the diaspora? How can we possibly call for the destruction of our enemies while our relatives, neighbours and friends justify ethnic cleansing on that basis? How can I even contemplate those words, when the same words will be said by Jews all over the world who are celebrating the genocide of the Palestinian people? The idea is repugnant to me, and makes me feel more alienated from my faith than I can bear. I cannot pray for the annihilation of foreign nations this year. A foreign nation is already being annihilated, and it's being done in my name.

Rabbi Jamie Weisbach teaches that the recitation of "Pour out thy wrath" is a late medieval addition to the Haggadah, and that its inclusion in the Seder is therefore based in minhag and not halacha. The Meiri and the Abudarham, two medieval scholars, even specifically say נהגו — it is our custom, not our obligation. Therefore, if it is simply too painful to say this paragraph this year, and you'd rather take the children at the table to open the door for Elijah, you have a comfortable basis for it. Maybe you could take this moment to imagine a world without any wrath at all.

However, if you do feel obligated to read every word of the Haggadah, but this year you need a new reading in order for this passage to make sense, I invite you to reconsider towards whom you direct it. Within the Jewish nation there are those who worship the idols of the state and the military, and who sin either in their direct actions or their complicity in and support for the genocide of the Palestinian people. Within Am Yisrael are voices of those who would have us forget the meaning of *avodat Hashem* (worship of God), and would have us replace it with *avodat milchamah* (worship of war). In my view, it is *they* who do not know God, and they who falsely invoke God's name; it is they who devour Jacob and desolate our home. As Psalm 79 states, "דלונו מאד" — we have sunk very low, but this time the lowness is of our own making. That lowness is the shame of being connected to Jewish violence; it is the despair that my God is being used as an instrument of oppression.

So this year, when we read "Pour out Thy wrath", let us direct our prayer towards the true idolaters, the ones who scream for the blood of strangers and honour flags more than words of Torah. It feels horrifying to me to even consider uttering these words about someone from my own nation; but after all, we have sunk very, very low.

This year, may wrath be poured out upon those who have brought us so low, so that they may be brought to justice and our community may be brought back into the light. And may Hashem's hand stay the violence being inflicted, both within our community and without it, by those who falsely claim to act in Hashem's name. May Am Yisrael be strengthened by acts of peace, mercy and forgiveness, done both by us and by others; may we recognise and obliterate those whose lies seek to divide, oppress and destroy. And may peace be poured out swiftly to all of the nation of Jacob, to all those who rightfully dwell in the land of our ancestors, and to the whole world. Amen.

—

Noa Gendler is a Jewish educator based in London and New York.

Redemption Through Our Tears

by Laynie Soloman

How can we sing Hallel right now? When my students asked this question ahead of Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan, I didn't know how to answer. Since October 7th, I have recited over a dozen Hallels as Rosh Chodesh and holidays have come and gone, and each time I've struggled with what it means to offer praise amidst upheaval, violence, and turmoil—both experienced by and committed by the hands of our people.

Hallel is synonymous with praise and festive joy—it is a series of six *tehillim* (Psalms 113-118) that are recited at particularly praiseworthy moments of the Jewish time cycle. Its role in the seder is made explicit in Mishnah Pesachim 10:5. As we tell the story of *yetziyat mitzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt) and come to see our personal connection to G!d's mighty redemption of our ancestors, we are obligated to "thank, praise, glorify, extol, exalt, honor, bless, revere, and laude the One who performed for our ancestors and for us all of these miracles."

The Mishnah sees Hallel as the natural outgrowth of our gratitude for the miracles G!d made for us and the liberation that ensued. Once truly understand that we, too, were personally brought forth from *mitzrayim*, the Mishnah teaches, we can recite Hallel. In this way, Hallel in the seder is a culmination of our seeing ourselves as liberated; through reciting Hallel, we gratefully respond to the miraculous events that unfolded *for us,* within and as a result of *yetziyat mitzrayim*. The Talmud later recounts that Hallel's recitation serves more broadly as a ritual acknowledgment of the redemption we perceive in the world around us, as the *nevi'im* instructed the Jewish people to "recite Hallel at every moment and every trouble—may it not come to them!—that when they are redeemed, they recite Hallel upon their delivery" (Pesachim 117a). Hallel is our way of collectively appreciating miraculous moments as they unfold and recognizing when we are redeemed from danger or harm. In this moment of tremendous devastation and horror, I am struggling to find myself redeemed. As my students asked, *How can we sing Hallel right now?* The joy that makes praise possible feels far out of reach. But while much of this political moment is unprecedented, this question and the spiritual instincts that guide it have deep roots. On the heels of the Babylonian exile, the Psalmist laments, "How can we sing G!d's song on the land of strangers?"[1] A famous midrash portrays G!d condemning the angels as they greeted the Israelite redemption with song, "The work of My hands [the Egyptians] are drowning in the sea, and you sing?"[2]

These questions in our tradition give voice to the legitimate trepidation we may feel to offer song when confronted with devastating grief and pain in ourselves and the world around us. This perspective understands singing as synonymous with joy, implying that our songs flow from and are manifestations of the happiness and contentment that cuts us off from authentically perceiving despair and suffering.

Song can be a response to our own liberation, yes, but not only.

1 Psalms 137:4
2 Megillah 10b

In some instances, song accompanies liberation, serving as a tool through which liberation is made possible. Rebbe Nachman suggests that the simple practice of communal singing is a tikkun—a form of systemic healing—because it enables us to encounter and take in many voices at once.[3] The Tikkunei Zohar teaches that B'nei Yisrael will rise to freedom from exile בניגונא (be'niguna) —"with," "in," or "through" song.[4] Our tradition offers us these teachings as images of song beyond praise and joy, inviting us to recognize that geulah can come through song, and urging us to use our voices as a tool for liberation itself.

The Sefat Emet joins this chorus of those who complicate the role of song in liberation, as he teaches:

Related to the *inyan* of the parting of the sea after *yetziyat mitzrayim*.	בענין קי"ס (קריעת ים סוף) אחר יצ"מ (יציאת מצריים).
It is written (Tehillim 68:7), "God sets the imprisoned free, securely *(ba'kosharot)*" and the Rabbis teach [that *ba'kosharot* means], "crying and singing" (Sanhedrin 22a). (Here the word "בכושרות" [*ba'kosharot*, securely] is split into two words: "בכות ושירות" [*bikot ve'shirot*, crying and singing].),	דכ' "מוציא אסירים בכושרות" ואמרו חז"ל בכות ושירות.
Because there is *ge'ulah* (redemption) through crying and supplication, and there is *ge'ulah* through song and praise…	דיש גאולה ע"י בכי' ובקשה. ויש על ידי שירה וזמרה.
And the Holy One established *yetziyat mitzrayim* in two ways, to be preparation for eternity to bring forth the sparks of *kedushah* that are spread out among the nations. When we merit to be able to take them out through song, and when we are not meritorious, we bring them forth through crying. Eternally, the strength of the Jewish people is in and through our mouths.	והקב"ה הכין ביצ"מ ב' הדרכים להיות הכנה לדורות להוציא הנצוצי קדושה שמתפזרים בין האומות. כשזוכין יכולין להוציא ע"י שירה וזמרה. וכשאין זוכין הוא עי בכי'. ולעולם כחן של ישראל הוא בפה. [הקול קול יעקב הוא ב' קולות הנ"ל]:

The Sefat Emet begins a discussion of *kriyat yam suf* (the parting of the Red Sea) with a midrash that creatively reads the phrase from Tehillim, "God sets free the imprisoned, safe and sound." This creative reading splits the word "בכושרות" (*ba'kosharot*, securely) into two: "בכות ושירות" (*bikot ve'shirot*, crying and singing), changing the meaning of the verse to "God sets free the imprisoned, through crying and singing. This freedom through crying and singing, he teaches, is what took place during the pivotal moment of *kriyat yam suf*—when the sea parted, enabling B'nei Yisrael to walk through to their redemption.

In the rest of his teaching, the Sefat Emet elaborates on the dual emotional expressions of crying

3 See Rebbe Nachman, Likkutei Halakhot Orach Chayim Hilchot Pesach 2:4, Likkutei Moharan 54; Likkutei Moharan 282.

4 Tikkunei Zohar, Introduction 3a

and singing, along with their role in bringing about *ge'ulah*. Both singing and crying have the capacity to bring forth redemption. "There is *ge'ulah* through crying and supplication, and there is *ge'ulah* through song and praise," he writes. Whether the Jewish people collectively bring redemption through joy or tears in any given moment is dependent upon our merit and capacity: when we are meritorious, we can use song, praise, and joy to reveal the hidden sparks of holiness spread throughout the world, and when do not merit such a joyous revelation of *kedushah*, we can bring forth holy sparks through our crying and supplication.

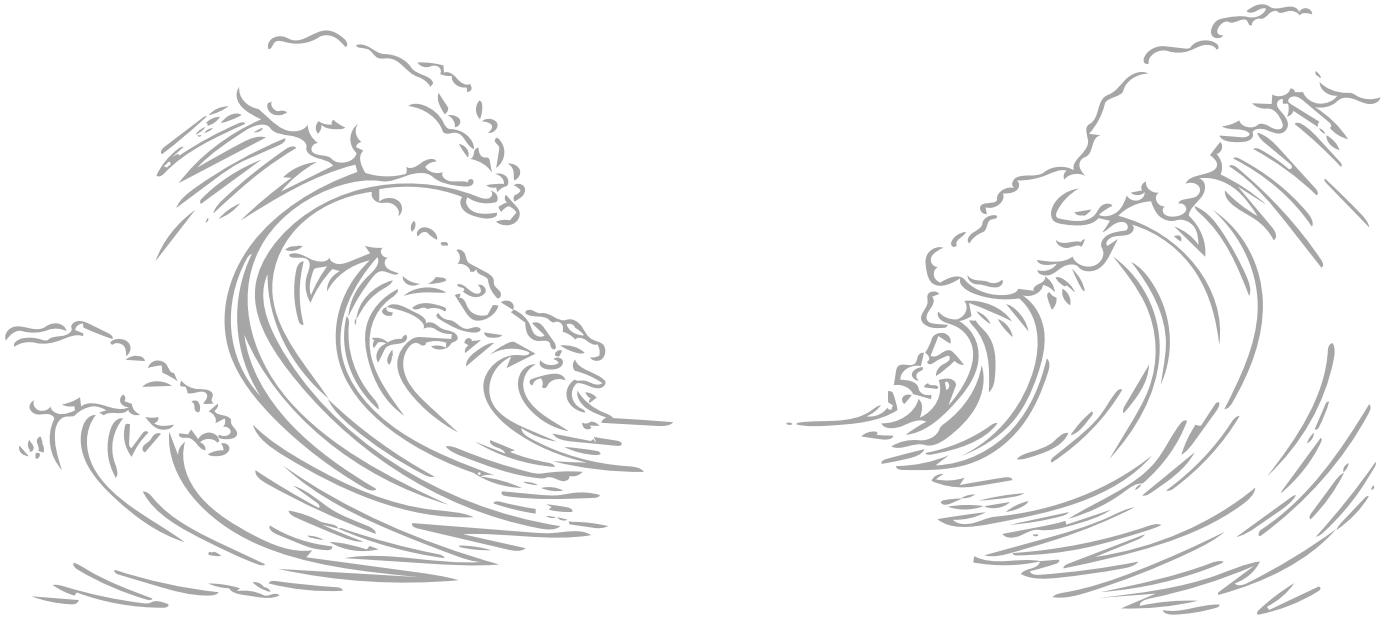
The Sefat Emet does not offer any criteria to help us understand when we are deserving or lacking merit. He is clear, though, about the collective nature of this merit, specifically pluralizing "כשזוכין" (when *we* are meritorious). To ask, as my students did, whether it is possible to recite Hallel this year perhaps points us clearly to our collective location on the spectrum of merit: this is a year in which אין זוכין (we do not merit) to bring forth sparks of *kedusha* through our joyous song. Instead, the *ge'ulah* we reenact and experience during the Seder must be through crying and supplication.

This Pesach may we find in Hallel the sacredness of song as a tool to help us hear the unheard voices around us, to help us move toward *tikkun* and healing, and to help us bring *ge'ulah* for all. And, when we cannot sing, may redemption come through our tears.

This year we recite Hallel with crying and supplication, next year may we merit to reveal the holy sparks through joyous song.

—

Laynie Soloman is a teacher and Torah-lover who seeks to uplift the piously irreverent, queer, and subversive spirit of rabbinic text and theology. They serve on the faculty of SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, where they co-founded the Trans Halakha Project.



Miraculous Food and Those Who Withhold It

by Max Buchdahl

Describing the Great Hallel that is said after the meal on Seder night, the Gemara in Pesachim brings the following tradition about the difficulty God faces in providing food to human beings.[1]

פסחים קי״ח א

אָמַר רַב שֵׁיזְבִי מִשְּׁמֵיהּ דְּרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה: קָשִׁין מְזוֹנוֹתָיו שֶׁל אָדָם כִּקְרִיעַת יַם סוּף, דִּכְתִיב: ״נוֹתֵן לֶחֶם לְכָל בָּשָׂר״, וּסְמִיךְ לֵיהּ: ״לְגוֹזֵר יַם סוּף לְגֻזָרִים״.

“Says Rav Sheizvi in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya: Providing a person’s food is as difficult as the splitting of the Red Sea, as it is written: “[God] gives food to all flesh,” and juxtaposed it to “To the One who divided the Red Sea into sunder.”

— Pesachim 118a

The comparison between the difficulty of providing food and that of splitting the Red Sea is a strange one, because, on the surface, there is little in common between the nature-defying miracle that liberated the Israelites and the quotidian experience of eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But the upshot of the interpretation is clear: However miraculous you think the splitting of the Red Sea was, that is how miraculous it is to have food on one’s table. The process of God making that food available and the transformation it undergoes between the field and your plate is one of life’s great miracles.

Yet, later in the same *sugya*, the Gemara tells a different story about the availability and scarcity of food in the world. A tradition brought in the name of the *tanna* Rabbi Yose reports that the great city of Rome contained 365 markets, each of which had 365 palaces, and each of those palaces had 365 levels, each of which in turn had enough food to feed the entire world.[2]

In this telling, the existence of food seems anything but miraculous. Here, hidden in the palaces of imperial Rome, there were provisions of food to serve the world several hundred times over. Part of the force of this tradition is that it undercuts the Gemara’s assertion about the miraculous nature of food. If Rome could only find a way to distribute the food they had, the presence of food might seem much less miraculous.

In the latter version, the problem isn’t the existence of food but its distribution to those who need it. In this story, the essential characteristic of Rome is that of an empire where food is available but is prevented from reaching those who need it.

1 A *baraita* mentions the need to say the “Great Hallel.” The rabbis debate what this means, and the settled halacha is that it is a reference to Psalm 136, which forms the basis of the following interpretation.

2 Pesachim 118b

Rabbi Yose's description of food in Rome comes in the context of a story about Rome's desire to bring a gift to the Messiah upon its arrival.[3] After telling the Messiah to accept gifts from Egypt and Kush, God instructs the Messiah to reject Rome's offering. It's here that we can make a connection between the refusal to accept the Roman offering and its storehouses of food: what makes Rome so evil is its deliberate refusal to provide food, its unwillingness to make the miraculous into the mundane despite its ability to do so.

The refusal to provide food to those in need, when one has it available, is not limited to the Roman Empire.

According to a recent statement put out by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, half of the people in Gaza are at risk of imminent famine,[4] and no one in Gaza is food-secure.[5] A report from Human Rights Watch describes children, as well as pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, suffering from severe malnutrition and dehydration.[6] As of April 1, Gaza's Health Ministry had recorded the deaths of 32 people, including 28 children, due to severe malnutrition.[7]

This horror was avoidable. The Israeli blockade of Gaza, which has prevented necessary aid from reaching millions of starving people, is deliberate starvation. An arbitrary inspection process has severely limited the number of aid trucks that have crossed into Gaza.[8] Earlier this year, an American shipment of flour that could've fed 1.5 million people for five months was held up by Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich before he caved to American pressure.[9] In early March, the World Food Programme reported that enough food to feed the entire Gazan population was waiting and available just outside the Strip.[10]

The increase in aid entering Gaza in recent days,[11] seemingly under mounting pressure following the murder of seven aid workers from World Central Kitchen, is proof in and of itself that Israel could have been doing more earlier. The severe famine that is still ongoing and the deaths that have resulted from it were not necessary; rather, they were deliberate policy.

The images of emaciated children will serve as eternal proof of this policy of starvation. For those starving in Gaza, the current aid is a reprieve, but it may be too late to reverse the long-term effects of starvation, which will long outlast the current violence.[12]

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3 The word "Rome" is not present in some Talmudic manuscripts at this point in the sugya, suggesting the work of a censor who was uncomfortable with the association of an evil kingdom with Rome, often linked in rabbinic tradition to Christianity.

4 "Statement by the Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Mr. Jamie McGoldrick," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), April 6, 2024

5 Alyssa Fowers, Leslie Shapiro, Cate Brown and Hajar Harb, "What would have happened to friends and family if Gaza was home?" *Washington Post*, March 25, 2024

6 "Gaza: Israel's Imposed Starvation Deadly for Children," Human Rights Watch, April 9, 2024

7 "Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel - reported impact | Day 160," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), March 15, 2024

8 Isaac Chotiner, "How Israel's Inspection Process is Obstructing Aid Delivery," *The New Yorker*, January 12, 2024

9 Jacob Magid, "Israel agrees to finally release American flour shipment for Gaza, says US official," *Times of Israel*, February 23, 2024

10 Riley Hoffman and Will Gretsky, "Enough food 'to feed entire population' sitting outside Gaza as malnutrition death toll reaches at least 20: WFP," *ABC News*, March 7, 2024

11 "COGAT: 419 trucks of aid entered Gaza today, highest number since start of war," *Times of Israel* Liveblog, April 8, 2024

12 Ruby Mellen, Artur Galocha, Lauren Weber, David Ovalle and Hajar Harb, "Gaza is going hungry. Its children could face a lifetime of harm." *Washington Post*, April 4, 2024

This leads us back to our *sugya* in Pesachim. We can appreciate the glory and miraculous nature of food production but must simultaneously recognize the limitations of that miracle. When that food is withheld, stored up in the markets and the palaces, it is a reminder of the behavior of Rome, an empire that stood wickedly in God's way and prevented the miracle of food from reaching people.

This year, as we sit around our tables with matzah and maror and think about the redeemed world with which the Passover story demands we reckon, we should have in mind that just as we celebrate the miracle of the parted sea, we must also remember the miracle of the very food we are eating and the cruelty it takes to prevent that miracle from being realized elsewhere.[13]

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Max Buchdahl lives in Washington Heights and is completing an MA in Talmud & Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

13 I'm very grateful for my teacher, Dr. Jeremy Tabick, without whose support and guidance my understanding of this sugya would not have been the same.

Chad Gadya and the Futility of Restoring Justice

by Mikhael Manekin

As a kid, Chad Gadya[1] fascinated me. What is this song even about? Once, I decided to read it backward; perhaps I would find a hidden lesson. We know God is good, and the angel of death is terrible. If we read the story backward, I thought, we could learn something about justice and retribution for the unjust. The unjust attack the just, so God retributes. I got stuck quickly. I understood that the Jewish butcher was good. But what did the cow do wrong? Drink water? Does that make water just for putting out fires? All the fire did was burn a stick. And if the stick is justice, that makes the dog injustice. If the dog is unjust, that makes the cat just. And if the cat is just, he's right to bite the goat. But didn't the goat come first? So much for restoring justice!

I would then read the story forward again, and things would get worse. If the goat did no wrong, in this thesis and antithesis story of justice, the angel of death is well within the line of rational thinking on justice. Then what does that make God?

As I grew older, I read more interpretations that see this song as allegoric or symbolic—some about Jewish relations to non-Jews, others about internal Jewish self-development. The 18th-century halakhic decisor and Torah commentator the Hatam Sofer, for example, reads Chad Gadya as a metaphorical representation of the stages of the Seder as it was conducted in the Temple. It feels like a stretch. Do we think of a cat as a symbol for singing around the Seder table and a dog as the strike of midnight?[2] Others understand the song as an allegory for the people of Israel. The challenge remains that the allegory remains unintuitive: we don't instinctively think of cats as representatives of slavery in Egypt or dogs as symbolic of the envy of Joseph's brothers.

More modern interpretations tend toward the historical. The story is that the song exists in other cultures, perhaps traveling into the Jewish community. Indeed, this is a possibility. But I'm no historian, and I'm more interested in why I am doing something now than in understanding its historical roots.

While preparing for Pesach this year, I started seeing Chad Gadya in a new light. Since October, many have been focused on trying to understand the root causes of violence. Unsurprisingly, each "side" in this conflict sees themselves as the victim. Violence is therefore either justified or inevitable. To restore justice, one needs to go back to the origin. There lies pure good, they suggest.

1 The traditional ballad sung in many Jewish traditions at the end of the Seder.

2 According to the Torah (Exodus 12:29), the plague of the firstborn began around midnight.

There are many problems with this notion. One that particularly bothers me is how it erases or minimizes the pain of the other. Our side's pain is never-ending. Their side is "contextualized." In our hyper-ideological modern world, this outlook is present on all sides of the political map.

Chad Gadya points to the futility of this exercise. Sure, God is good, and the Angel of Death is evil. But sometimes, a stick is just a stick, and a cat is just a cat. They are all part of a tug-of-war that, more often than not, has no coherent explanation and doesn't make sense. Sometimes, there is no original sin, and no grand narrative — just violence which is an inherent feature of the world we live in.

Of course, the song is lighthearted. I'm usually pretty drunk and sleepy when I sing it. But like many popular, silly tunes, it points to a truth we sometimes don't see, one that is especially worth paying attention to in the context of in our right-vs.-wrong-oriented Haggadah: the ability to restore justice doesn't always exist, and our ability to determine justice objectively is severely limited. Perhaps the song shouldn't be read backwards or forwards, but rather with a focus on its end—God putting a stop to the vicious cycle of violence. And our role as God's people is not to be bogged down in restoring justice, but rather to stop futile suffering wherever we see it.

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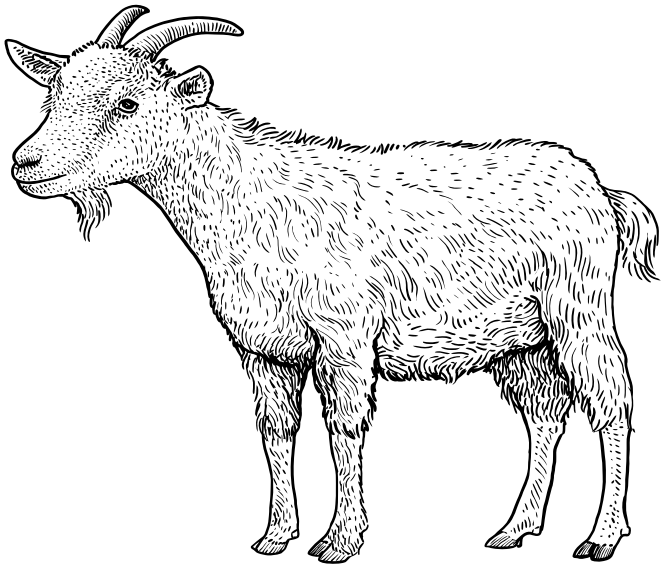
Mikhael Manekin is an Israel anti–occupation activist and part of the leadership of the Faithful Left.



The Groans Beneath Our Feet

by Allen Lipson

This year more than ever, reading the Exodus demands a sort of double vision from the upper-middle-class, college-educated American Jewish communities I'm a part of. By double vision, I mean a painful insistence on seeing ourselves not only as slaves but as beneficiaries of injustice. Antisemitism is real, but no less real than the wrongs we have become a party to here and abroad. Within living memory we were indeed slaves in Egypt, butchered without quarter. In response, we have made the most understandable and tragic mistake imaginable: We have tried to become Egyptians.

This is not the place to make the case that Jews like me play a complex role in systems of oppression; others can and have done that far more capably.[1] What Torah can offer us, however, is a spiritual and psychological vocabulary for such a project. Within the Hasidic interpretive tradition in particular, the core of the Exodus is a drama of *self-alienation*, a separation from that which is deepest and truest in both slaves and their oppressors.

Commenting on Moses' pretext that he cannot liberate his people because "I have never been a man of words, not now and not in the past" (Exodus 4:10), the Zohar cryptically remarks that "In Egypt, speech was in exile" (II:25b). In psychological terms, slavery robs the slaves not only of their freedom of movement, but their articulacy– the conceptual tools to express their predicament. As Elaine Scarry eloquently argues in her book *The Body in Pain*, physical and emotional subjugation corrode the foundations of language, rendering meaning-making impossible: "Pain does not merely resist language but actively destroys it" (4). The Netivot Shalom, R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky, who lost his family in the Shoah and created a Hasidic community anew in Jerusalem, imagines the oppressed Israelites as literally speechless:

> Since the ability to speak was taken from the Israelites [...] the exile became so much harder [...] In all the years that passed until then, their situation was so humiliating and their mouths so closed shut that they couldn't even let out a single groan. It was only after many years, when 'the king of Egypt died' and redemption began, that 'the Israelites groaned out from the labor,' (Exodus 2:2) because God helped them to groan (II:249).

The words that redeem us, in this telling, begin with a primal, pre-vocal expression of agonizing pain.

But the Zohar doesn't simply say that the Israelites couldn't speak: it employs a word for speech in the abstract, *dibur*, most precisely captured by the Greek *logos*, "structure" or "logic." It would seem that the Egyptian oppression silences not only the Israelites, but the entire land; the discourse itself becomes muted. By the Israelites' departure, their inarticulacy has cloaked

1 To begin with: Matthew Desmond's recent Poverty, by America offers an incisive and well-researched starting point on how the white upper-middle class benefits from structural inequalities. Hillel Levine and Matthew Harman's Death of an American Jewish Community is a highly readable exploration of these dynamics in the context of the Jewish scene.

all of Egypt: a "loud cry," a wordless lament attributable to no one in particular, follows the death of the firstborn.

Reflecting on white America in his essay "White Racism or World Community," James Baldwin writes[2]: "When a person, with a people, are able to persuade themselves that another group or breed of men are less than men, they themselves become less than men, and have made it almost impossible for themselves to confront reality and to change it." One must wonder: In the gilded corridors of the Egyptian throne, in the midst of their splendor, was speech in exile there too? Would the courtiers' lilied speeches ever catch in their throats? Would laughs at jesters' jokes gradually turn to dull silence? Would the bureaucratic taskmasters commute wordlessly, eyes downturned, through endless imperial passageways?

Words first failed me when I was twenty years old, a diligent student at Columbia University. Suffering from constant and worsening chronic pain, I suddenly found that the ivory tower of words I lived in, the universe of academic and professional striving, had become a sort of prison. For an entire year, I never spoke of my illness to my closest friends. I told myself that I needed to tough it out, to push through to the other side. Only after a horrible week of staring at a screen for hours on end, mentally squeezing my brain like a sponge for every last drop of words to fit into a barely started essay, did I first cry. I didn't know what I was looking for—words like "radical listening" and "solidarity" meant nothing to me—but I knew quite well that the intellectual culture I had once relished was missing *something*.

The Beit Yaakov, a nineteenth-century Hasidic commentator, asks how the Egyptians managed to reverse the progress of the upwardly mobile Israelites. He vividly portrays Egyptian public relations men convincing the Israelites what an honor it was to work as bricklayers for Pharaoh, repackaging servitude as prestige:

> [The Israelites] ceased to feel at all their bitterness and their subjugation, and entirely forgot their roots. They became acclimated to servitude, and it appeared to them as though this was what they were born for [...] This is the essence of bitterness: that a person cannot feel their suffering [...] and that it is absorbed and hidden from them (on Exodus 20).

Many of my dearest Jewish friends and I are putative winners of the game of meritocracy: we've gone to the right schools, taken the right jobs, moved into the right neighborhoods. And yet we are slowly but surely being sucked dry to the marrow. I saw this as I graduated college and entered a prestigious finance consulting job where my colleagues and I worked sixty, seventy, eighty hours a week, driving ourselves to mental and physical exhaustion for the privilege of lovely apartments we barely lived in. Who were we doing this for? If we could design a life for ourselves from scratch, would we choose these conditions?

My organizing mentors William Dickerson and Janine Carrero teach a parable of empire as a house. The house sits on the cornerstones of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism and imperial Christianity. Its beams are made up of the institutions—school, work, family, government—where we live our lives. Reigning ideologies shape thoughts and desires to shelter the house from critique, convincing its occupants that the world cannot be other than it is. Under the house a steady stream of poison seethes upwards. For years, the directly impacted communities living in the basement have cried out a warning: "We can't breathe!" while the victors blithely party in the penthouse. But poison rises, and now even those of us a few floors

2 "White Racism or World Community?" by James Baldwin, 1968

up can smell something off. Our elite have brought our political system and our planet to the brink of collapse. Jewish millennials and Gen-Z'ers can't even afford to buy the American dream homes our parents were promised. But because we haven't fully been listening, we lack the vocabulary to make sense of our predicament; and even more importantly, we lack the clarity to realize that *we need to build a new house*.

What is to be done, then, for privileged Jews like me on the house's upper floors, Jews haunted by the half-conscious suspicion that we are, at least in part, Egyptians in this year's *haggadah*? At minimum, we must name the exquisitely uncomfortable fact of our alienation from ourselves and each other. The poet Audre Lorde put it this way in "The Transformation of Silence Into Action," a speech delivered shortly after a life-threatening cancer surgery: "We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us." Perhaps the single most demoralizing lie I hear again and again in my organizing is that we're not enough—not successful enough, beautiful enough, smart enough, normal enough—and that we therefore don't deserve to be loved. To confront that lie, to speak and listen out of our truest selves, is to lay foundations for our deliverance. In the language of the Exodus, we need to know what the slaves for a time forgot about themselves: that we are *banim la'shem*, dazzling, flawed children of God.

The Netivot Shalom notes a strange phrase in the Haggadah: "Had the Holy Blessed One not brought our ancestors out of Egypt, we, and our children, and our children's children would still be subjugated to Pharaoh in Egypt." Why should we rejoice, he asks, that our oppressors are the Persians or the Romans rather than the Egyptians? He writes:

> The essence of the Egyptian exile is that we were subjugated [*meshubadim*], that is, completely subjugated in our entire being, without any selfhood even in thought. That is why Egypt is called "the house of enslavement"—the place where people are turned into slaves, an existence without any independent agency [...] until even how and what to think was determined for them [...] But a subjugation like this will never be any more, because the Exodus was an eternal exodus into unlimited freedom (II:268).

We will be redeemed only when we break through the wordless alienation poisoning the waking moments of Israelite and Egyptian alike; only when we free ourselves from the thoughts manufactured for us in the house of bondage; only when we can bring ourselves to groan.

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Allen Lipson is a faith-based organizer at the Essex County Community Organization studying for rabbinical ordination at Hebrew College and the Yashrut Institute.

"Burn in the Fire": Returning To Redemption

by Aron Wander

"Through faith that each generation will have its own Exodus, that Exodus is revealed,"[1] wrote the Sefat Emet, R' Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Gur. For him, this was the hidden meaning behind the juxtaposition of the instructions in the Haggadah to see oneself as having left Egypt and to recite "And He brought us out from there [Egypt]" (Deuteronomy 6:23). Only when we imagine ourselves leaving whatever broken, exiled world we find ourselves in does God bring us out of it.

In other words, our very belief in the possibility of redemption — a radical restructuring of political, spiritual, and social conditions — is part of what makes redemption possible. But it is not just our belief that brings such redemption into being. As R' Avraham Chein insisted, "Redemption is sown with the thirst for redemption"[2]: our yearning for a different world is also necessary.

But a great portion of the Jewish people — a people who for so long bore on their backs, in the stitches of their sackcloths, and above all in the black fire of their scrolls, an unquenchable thirst for the Messianic age — no longer truly imagine redemption, let alone desire it. It is easy to overlook the phenomenon, because these Jews still use words charged with redemptive fervor, but the words have been severed from their source. If Gershom Scholem once worried that the apocalyptic explosiveness inherent in Hebrew might someday burst forth from the modern language's apparent secularization,[3] today we must fear that the Hebrew liturgy's apparent apocalypticism masks a habituation to and satisfaction with the status quo. These Jews mumble, "Make your servant David's seed sprout speedily";[4] they mumble, "A redeemer will come to Zion";[5] they mumble, "God will be King of the earth"[6] – but what do they really *want*?

Those Jews in Israel and the diaspora who have embraced Zionism have been forced, implicitly or explicitly, to redefine their understanding of what constitutes a desirable "redemption." On the most basic level, Zionism today means support for a Jewish nation-state. But this necessarily means opposing a world beyond the nation-state, for in such a world, what would become of Zionism? In a world without borders, how would one know if Israel had a Jewish majority within its (still undefined) confines?

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1 Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, Sefat Emet, Pesach 5631.

2 Avraham Chein, *Be-Malkhut Ha-Yehadut* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1964, pp. 81.

3 See Gershom Scholem, "On Our Language: A Confession," trans. Ora Wiskind, History and Memory 2, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 97-99.

4 Weekday Amidah.

5 Weekday Shacharit, "U-va Le-Tzion."

6 Weekday Shacharit, "Aleinu."

It is a tragic irony that a number of Zionism's founders saw it as a decidedly utopian movement — a liberal vanguard, the beginning of a global socialist revolution, or the forerunner of a mystical reconfiguration of reality — when it is the very ideology that makes it impossible for many Jews today to imagine or desire such utopias. In embracing the nation-state, Jews are certainly not unique; peoples across the world, from once-colonial powers to decolonized nations of the Global South, have come to see the nation-state as the ultimate expression of freedom, security, and cultural expression. It does mean, though, that we (or at least the significant portion of us who have tied our fate to that of the nation-state) are directly invested in the world as it is currently constituted, and can only see the desire for a radically different, post-nationalist one as a threat.

It is not merely Zionism's theoretical underpinnings that have shrunk the redemptive horizons of many Jews, though, but also its historical practice. The goal that the early Zionist movement settled on — a sustainable Jewish-majority state in some portion of Palestine — was only ever possible by making a separate peace with an unredeemed world: forging alliances with the powers *du jour* and embracing the law of the sword. In 1929, the once-Zionist Hans Kohn resigned from the Zionist Organization, exclaiming:

> *We have been relying exclusively upon Great Britain's military might. … [J]ust like the powers in the [First] World War, we have declared that we would gladly make peace if only we were strong enough. That means that we are seeking a victorious peace just as they were – a peace whereby the opponent does what we want.*[7]

And, most honestly, the Revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky admitted in 1923:

> *Zionist colonisation must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population. Which means that it can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population – behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach.*[8]

The two drew vastly different conclusions: Kohn decided that he could no longer support Zionism, while Jabotinsky insisted that Zionism should do away with its liberal pretensions. What they shared, though, was an understanding that Zionism's liberal adherents can no longer admit: that a Jewish-majority state in Palestine could only be achieved by brute force — ours and the West's — and that brute force is the only thing that can maintain it.

Their words ring all too true today. Certainly, Israel's supporters speak of vague hopes for "peace," but such dreams are a far-cry from redemption. The peace they seek is one in which *kol de'alim g'var*, "he who is stronger overcomes":[9] a "victorious peace" in whose most "liberal" articulation (a two-state solution) the spoils of the Nakba are retained at the "cost" of offering Palestinians limited sovereignty on a fraction of Palestine, while Palestinians within Israel are cursed to remain a "demographic threat." The less liberal vision of such a peace, of course, is one in which Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza submit to permanent domination

7 Hans Kohn, "Zionism Is Not Judaism" in Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 99. I first found this essay in Samuel Haim Brody's *Martin Buber's Theopolitics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), pp. 229. I have quoted an overlapping section.

8 Vladimir Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall".

9 See b. Bava Batra 34b.

by their conquerors or are finally driven off their land by (US-made) Apache helicopters, bulldozers, and F-16s. Neither of these proposals could contrast more strongly with the idea of a true, egalitarian peace in which both Palestinians and Israelis live in freedom and dignity and *teshuvah* is done for the injustices of the Nakba and the occupation.

Both Kohn and Jabotinsky understood, too, the consequences of such choices: the pursuit of "a victorious peace" would also inevitably lead to horrific, violent resistance. In his letter, Kohn bemoaned:

> *We have set ourselves goals which by their very nature had to lead to conflict with the Arabs. We ought to have recognized that these goals would be the cause, the just cause of a national uprising against us.*[10]

Similarly, Jabotinsky famously declared, "Every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonised."[11] Here, too, the two men drew opposite conclusions – Kohn believed that Zionism must cease its colonization, while Jabotinsky was adamant that it should forge ahead – but they once more evinced a shared analysis. Though neither man endorsed violent attacks on civilians (and neither should we), they both recognized that the goals the Zionist movement had set for itself would almost certainly provoke a violent reaction.

All of these dynamics — Zionism's relationship with the West, its reliance on force, and the resistance Kohn and Jabotinsky predicted — have been laid even more terribly bare these past six months. Creeping annexation in the West Bank and Israel's stranglehold on Gaza exploded with Hamas' unconscionable, brutal massacre on October 7th. Israel's cruel, destructive response in Gaza has caused untold devastation — the country appears to be operating under the fantasy that if it kills and maims enough people, destroys enough buildings, and demonstrates the full "glory and majesty" of its air force, Palestinians will finally submit to living under indefinite occupation and Israelis will finally be "safe." But Israel cannot bomb its way to safety. The most obvious victims of Israel's assault have been Palestinians: more than 32,000 have been killed, the vast majority of them civilians; tens of thousands more are wounded; nearly 2 million are displaced; and untold masses are on the verge of starvation. But Israelis, too, will suffer the consequences of the war in Gaza. Already, Israeli hostages have been killed, and more will die the longer the fighting goes on. Israel is also sowing the gusts of a whirlwind it is bound to reap. How many Gazan children have seen their parents blown to pieces by airstrikes? How many parents have seen their children split in half? How many villages in the West Bank have seen soldiers and settlers abuse and attack civilians with impunity? What desperation will they be pushed to? How many Israelis will die? How many Palestinians will die in the inevitable Israeli reprisals?

This is the "redemption" that Zionism has offered Jews in Israel: to live by the Iron Dome and the Merkava tank, the drone strike and the watchtower. It has crucified them – and those of us diaspora Jews tied to the state by familial, ideological, spiritual, and material bonds – to a dying, imperialist West without whose support apartheid in Israel/Palestine could not grind on. More than 100 years ago, Gershom Scholem declared that Zionism would either "be swept away with the waters of imperialism or burn in the fire of the revolution of the

10 Kohn, op cit.
11 Jabotinsky, op. cit.

awakening East."[12] Zionism, he argued, could continue to side with the West and risk being destroyed along with it by the global revolt against colonialism, or it could join the latter and risk being defeated by the Western counter-revolution. He was doubtful as to whether the Zionist movement could still switch its allegiances, but better to try than "remain crumbling and false, to die with the forces of reaction."[13] Even if Zionism did successfully join the revolt of the oppressed, the latter carried no guarantee of success, Scholem warned. "But even if we do not win this time," he avowed, "better that we be among those standing on the right side of the barricades."[14]

Scholem was pessimistic about Zionism changing allegiances before the state was founded and before he himself abandoned his earlier bi-nationalist vision; the grounds for pessimism are even clearer and more decisive today. Yet Scholem's conclusion remains as true now as it was then: the old world is dying, and we must ask which side of the barricades we will be on. So long as Israel continues to indefinitely dominate Palestinians, enforcing a system of ethnic hierarchy and occupation, it will stand with and rely upon the forces of reaction. In exchange for Western backing, it will continue to function as "the weaponized wing of Western imperialism in the Arab world"[15]— a position destined to endanger Jews in Israel and the diaspora alike.[16] The alternative is to peacefully dismantle the colonialist and ethnocentric structures of the state, allowing Palestinians and Israelis to build a just, egalitarian future together and untethering Zionist Jews (and non-Zionist Jews associated with Israel by way of its claim to be a Jewish state) from Western imperialism.

The latter possibility may seem bizarrely naive and utopian, particularly in this moment. What hope is there for a peaceful dismantling of colonial privilege that ensures the dignity and security of Palestinians and Israelis when Israel's treatment of Palestinians has always relied on force, and when resistance to Israeli domination has taken on an increasingly violent and brutal form? How exactly would Palestinians and Israelis live together — in a shared liberal democracy, a bi-nationalist federation, or an iteration of a two-state solution that somehow avoided the pitfalls of ethnonationalism (both Israeli and Palestinian) and made recompense for the Nakba?[17] These are critical questions, and there are no obvious answers.

But when the alternative to utopia is blood and steel, utopia may be the most realistic option. Decades ago, the idiosyncratic R' Yehuda Ashlag argued that the only path to world peace was via a Kabbalah-infused Communism. As idealistic as it might seem, he warned, the only alternative is "the path of suffering. That is to say, we will have wars with atomic and hydrogen

12 Gershom Scholem, "Be-Mai Ka-Miflagei" in Od Davar, ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1989), pp. 82. I first encountered this essay on Amnon Raz-Krokotzkin's "'On the Right Side of the Barricades': Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and Zionism," *Comparative Literature* 65, No. 3 (Summer 2013): 363-381. The translation here is mine.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us,* trans. Rachel Valinsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 55. While I disagree with some of Bouteldja's analysis about the structure of antisemitism, her discussion of how Israel is positioned vis-à-vis the Middle East and Western imperialism is useful.

16 See the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights' study, "Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism" (2018), which suggests that surges in violence in Israel/Palestine can lead to antisemitic backlash in Europe. This certainly does not mean Jews are to blame for antisemitism, but it does indicate that the structure of the Israeli state, which is guaranteed to generate violence, does not make diaspora Jews safer, and may often make them less so.

17 See Bashir Bashir and Rachel Busbridge, "The Politics of Decolonisation and Bi-Nationalism in Israel/Palestine," *Political Studies* (2019).

bombs, and then all nations of the world will seek advice about how to prevent wars."[18] In other words, the world could either independently choose to take a risky, unpredictable, seemingly fanciful path towards peace now, or it could wait until unimaginable horrors and violence forced it to do so eventually. The choice before us is similar: will we choose to imagine, yearn, and struggle for a true redemption in Israel/Palestine, or will we continue on this doomed, corpse-strewn path until an apocalypse makes the choice for us?

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Aron Wander is a rabbinical student, activist, and writer living in Jerusalem.

18 Yehuda Ashlag, "Torato shel Moshiach" in *Kol Ha-Tor*.

"Leaping Over the End": On the Impossible Possibility of Redemption

by Netanel Zellis-Paley

"והוצאתי אתכם מתחת סבלת מצרים..."

"And I will take you out from underneath the burdens of Egypt..."

—Exodus 6:6

"I would say first of all that duration is only a thing of the mind. What persists is what we stop at. It is a moment we do not manage to classify, whose consequences we do not manage to exhaust and whose effects we do not manage to neutralize."

— Edmond Jabès, "Cut of Time"

The image of the Israelites hurrying feverishly to join the massing throngs in the dead of the Egyptian night—minutes after hearing screams of terror from the home next door; weeks after burying and grieving for the thousands, maybe millions of their friends and relatives stricken in the darkness of the month of Adar; with matzah and lettuce and lambchop still between their teeth—is not one that fits comfortably into our modern idea of redemption. One might picture some of our ancestors distraught that they did not have time to gather all of their recently plundered Egyptian luxuries—Nubian gold, jewelry encrusted in faience and carnelian and turquoise from Sinai, tunics of the finest linen anywhere along the Nile—others traumatized by the uncertainty and the wreckage of the previous twelve months of Divine intervention, and still others, perhaps the largest group of them all, in utter bewilderment. *"Did this really happen?"* the unrooted impulse of modernity, the anchorless mind cloven from its own beating heart asks now, as if that was not precisely the selfsame question occupying the entire bodies of its ascendants in the moment it happened.

This stupor, this fugue state between enslavement and freedom, between redemption and not-yet-redemption, seems to envelop anyone who tries to glimpse it; the Midrash[1], for its part, appears confused. The Torah (Exodus 12:34) relates that the "people took their dough (*b'tzeiko*) before it was leavened, their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders." And yet the Midrash insists it was their leftover matzah and marror, unfinished amid the upheaval of this night of scheduled chaos. Which one was it? If dough, it could not have been the matzah eaten with the *korban Pesach*, the Passover sacrifice; matzah must be baked to stop the leavening process. If matzah, why would the Torah call it dough?

The Torah itself seems to predict this question, even as it responds to it with an answer that raises more questions, an answer that is uncertain if it is an answer or question or both or

1 *Mekhilta de-Rabi Shimon bar Yochai* 12:34, et al.

neither. “And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves” (Exodus 12:39). The verse is peculiarly placed *after* verses describing the Israelites’ first travels as a nascent collective entity (12:36-38), like an infant taking its first steps. Did they bake their unleavened dough in the homes of their oppressors, who “urged them to leave?” (12:33) Did they leave it to scorch in the young springtime sun? Even the verse’s own internal logic seems adrift: “…for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay…” Had they not been already commanded to eat *matzah* the night before and for the next seven days, for the sole reason that God willed it so? There is a certain recursivity here, a re/disordering of reason and time that seems borne of the unorderable liminality of the Exodus narrative, of this space between constriction and expansiveness—a space the Israelites themselves and the matzah-dough they consume seem coterminous with. The Midrash says as much:

> וְכֵן אַתְּ מוֹצֵא לֶעָתִיד לָבֹא, מַה הוּא אוֹמֵר? (הושע ז ד-ה) יִשְׁבּוֹת מֵעִיר מִלּוּשׁ בָּצֵק עַד חֻמְצָתוֹ
>
> *And thus do you find in the time to come, viz. “[They commit adultery, all of them / Like an oven fired by a baker] / Who desists from stoking only / From the kneading of the dough to its leavening”* (Hosea 7:4-5)[2]

To knead dough is to prepare it for and hasten the leavening process; matzah needs only to be formed into dough and rolled flat to be baked. It is the urge to become something else, to actualize what is not yet there, to mature prematurely, that summons the very opposite of the desire for wholeness, for satisfaction, for redemption; according to Targum Yonatan on this verse, for this sin “they will be exiled speedily from their cities.” Redemption—the time that comes after the time-to-come, the time when the fullness of presence itself fills the very lack that demands to situate itself within the orderly limitation of time—can come only when the dough can bear its own state of incompletion, a state that sometimes requires it to become matzah so that it does not overripen:

> כִּי מַצָּה זֶה בְּחִינַת דַּעַת, בְּחִינַת מֹחִין דְּגַדְלוּת, בְּחִינַת הַשְׂגָּחָה שֶׁזֶּה עִקַּר הַדַּעַת…
> נִמְצָא, שֶׁמַּצָּה הוּא בְּחִינַת דַּעַת שֶׁל אֱמוּנַת הַהַשְׂגָּחָה, שֶׁזֶּה עִקַּר גְּדוּלַּת דַּעַת כְּשֶׁזּוֹכִין לְהִתְגַּלּוּת אֱלֹקוּת לִרְאוֹת וְלֵידַע שֶׁהַכֹּל בְּהַשְׂגָּחָתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ לְבַד וְזֶה בְּחִינַת חִפָּזוֹן, כִּי חִפָּזוֹן זֶה בְּחִינַת לְמַעְלָה מֵהַזְּמַן שֶׁדִּלֵּג עַל הַקֵּץ וְהוֹצִיאָם בְּחִפָּזוֹן גָּדוֹל בְּלִי שׁוּם זְמַן רַק בְּרֶגַע אַחַת
>
> *Matzah is the aspect of* Da’as*/embodied awareness, the aspect of the greatness of the mental faculties, the aspect of divine providence, which is the essence of da’as…*
>
> *Matzah is the knowledge of the faith of divine providence, which is the essence of the Greater knowledge, whereby a person merits the revelation of Godliness, to see and know that everything is (by) the divine providence of Hashem alone. This is the aspect of ‘haste’, for ‘haste’ is the aspect of ‘higher than time’, which leaps over the end, and took them out with great haste, without any time except for a moment.*

2 *Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael*, Tractate Pischa 13:28

(R. Nosson Sternhartz of Nemirov, [chief student of R. Nachman of Bratslav], Likutei Halachos, Laws of Morning Hand Washing 2:6)

For R. Nosson, writing on behalf of his deceased master R. Nachman, the haste with which the Israelites escaped Egypt is not merely a description of the material circumstances of the Exodus nor of its phenomenological quality as it was lived in the moment. It is a subversion of time itself, a leaping not toward or until (עד) the end—which would suggest the necessity of remaining within the orderly sequentiality and causality of time—but *over* (על) it, into a plane of being in which the very concept of chronological time is not necessary (בלי שום זמן). And yet, R. Nosson does not situate this plane beyond any relation to temporality, but instead imagines it as a place where time is distilled to its most essential substance, what Elliot R. Wolfson calls a "radical deepening, an eradication of time by rooting oneself more firmly in the ground of time."[3] *Rak b'rega achas—rak*, only, implying differentiation via subtraction—in a *rega achas*, a single moment, or perhaps, a moment of singularity, of an equalizing unity that flattens all the artificial distinctions of human narrativity. The 20th-century German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, in his classic work *Der Stern der Erlösung* (The Star of Redemption), calls this *gleichzeitigkeit,* referring to the simultaneity of past, present, and future within God; his contemporary Walter Benjamin, working with a very different set of assumptions, called it *jetztzeit*, or "now-time". Was it this that our forebears partook of when they bit into their matzah, that shape-shifting stuff of destiny?

But if redemption can emerge from the polyvalent ether between subjugation and liberation, between the "faith of divine providence" that matzah substantiates and the hubristic self-reliance of chametz, so can its opposite. Written in the posttraumatic delirium of the years immediately following the Holocaust and World War II, the French-Jewish author Maurice Blanchot's novel *Le-Très Haut* ("The Most High") conjures a world in which the state has reached the pinnacle of its own actualization and absoluteness, to the extent that all distinctions between freedom and unfreedom have been collapsed by the state's own mortal grip on language. The protagonist Henri Sorge, a public servant who himself represents "the very *raison d'etre* of a society that is perfect, beyond history, and is at the same time caught in the grips of an all too historical entropy that is all the more entropic for its inability to be fully historical,"[4] becomes a parable for this dystopic polity through his own entrapment in the totalizing bureaucracy that employs him, all while languishing from an illness that later becomes an epidemic.

Scholars have almost unanimously interpreted the work as a commentary on peri- and post-war France, and Europe more generally; many note that Blanchot, still working as a journalist at the time, was present at Vichy when the French legislating bodies transferred full powers to autocrat and Nazi collaborator Philippe Pétain.[5] But one cannot help but wonder if his simultaneous experience of the war as Frenchman and Jew—and especially his near-execution by a Nazi firing squad in 1944—found its way into the deeply unsettling text-world he created. Towards the end of the book, one of the victims of the plague, a Jew named Abran, says to Sorge:

… tu regrettes, dis-tu, la liberté du cloporte qui peut s'aplatir entre deux

3 Wolfson, Elliot R. "Rosenzweig on Human Redemption: Neither Nothing nor Everything, but Only Something". *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 29.1 (2021): 121-150. Web.

4 Blanchot, Maurice. *Le-Très Haut*, trans. Allan Stoekl, University of Nebraska Press, 2001. Translator's introduction, p. x

5 Hill, Leslie. 'Death, Writing, Neutrality', Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit (Oxford, 2001; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2010)

planches. Mais, du moment que tu gémis et que tu te cabres, c'est qu'à côté de la sensation d'étouffement t'est donné le sentiment d'une vie allégée et heureuse au nom de laquelle tu protestes, et tes récriminations se changent finalement en actions de grâces. La promesse ne se réalise pas, mais elle ne disparaît jamais non plus. Elle brille quand tout s'éteint. Elle est là quand tout a disparu.

You say that you miss the freedom of the woodlouse who can squeeze between two planks of wood. But as soon as you groan and complain, as well as feeling stifled, you are given the sense of a life less burdened and more fortunate, in whose name you can protest, and your recriminations change finally into words of grace. The promise is never realized, but does not disappear either. It glimmers when everything is dark. It is there when everything has disappeared.

(Blanchot, Le Très-Haut, 186, trans. Leslie Hill)

The Jew's name is Abran, perhaps a corruption or amelioration of the original name of Abraham (Abram), the first Jew and also the first person in the Bible to pray, to doubt, to silence (his son Isaac at the Akeidah) and to be silenced (by God at Sedom). He speaks, most immediately, of the impossibility of saying just one thing; every word of speech or of writing is always already inscribed on the surface of that which it effaces, a shadow visible only by the light it obscures. To speak of one's own imprisonment is to reveal one's yearning to be free; to retell one's own tale of woe is to disclose a hope that, in the very act of retelling, one will escape from the arbitrary narrativity of the tale itself. But there appears to be something else at work here, a mythos that animates the otherwise inconsequential character of Abran such that he is not just a Jew, but *the* Jew, the very embodiment of a Jewish way of being in the world. For us, especially at this time of year, perhaps it is Elijah, the prophet so enraged by this world that he asks God to take his life, and yet at once so enamored with this world that he cannot leave it. For Blanchot, it was Kafka, whom he compared to Abraham himself:

> *He already belongs to the other shore, and his wandering does not consist in nearing Canaan, but in nearing the desert, the truth of the desert—in going always further in that direction even when, finding no favor in that other world either, and tempted again by the joys of the real world…he tries to persuade himself that perhaps he still keeps in Canaan.*[6]

Kafka's inner torment as described by Blanchot—both the torment that defines his oeuvre, encapsulated by his fixation on entrapment in *Metamorphosis* and *The Castle,* and the torment that defined his private life—stemmed from the very fact that he was torn between these two realms, simultaneously inhabiting both but a full citizen of neither. And yet it is precisely this wandering, this oscillation between the two worlds that gave rise to a new world literature had never known before: "It is as if, cast out of this world, into the error of infinite migration, he had to struggle ceaselessly to make of this outside another world and of this error the principle, the origin of a new freedom."[7]

It is a curious fact that of all the major Biblical characters, only the names of prophets, chief among them Abraham and Elijah, are linked with demonyms, or secondary names that mark their geographic origins. Abraham is known as *Avram ha-Ivri* (Abram from the Other

6 Blanchot, Maurice. "Kafka and the Work's Demand," *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 71

7 Ibid., p. 70

Side) and Elijah as *Eliyahu ha-Tishbi* (Elijah from Toshav), almost as if our tradition felt the need to somehow situate these peripatetic figures in the world as we know it because we would have mistaken them for sojourners from some other one. Yet neither keeps this name forever; Avram ha-Ivri becomes Avraham Avinu (Abraham our forefather), Eliyahu ha-Tishbi becomes Eliyahu ha-Navi (Elijah the prophet). Between these two names, however—each perhaps representing the two worlds between which they flitted—remain their original names, unattached, the names of two men who were most at home not in the nether-regions where they wandered, but in their homelessness itself. Is it any wonder, then, that we begin (“*From the beginning our forebears were idolaters…”)* and end the Seder with them?

—

Netanel Zellis-Paley is a Ph.D. student, organizer, and aspiring naturalist based in Philadelphia.

About the movements

Halachic Left is a pluralistic grassroots movement of halachically-observant Jews advocating for our communities to oppose Jewish supremacy, support ending the Israeli military control and occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and work for a just and equitable future for Israelis and Palestinians.
https://halachicleft.org/

All That's Left is a collective unequivocally opposed to the Occupation and committed to building the Diaspora angle of resistance.
https://allthatsleftcollective.com/

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