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Parashat Metzora / Shabbat HaGadol 5784

April 19, 2024

How to prepare to be free

1.

How do you prepare to make yourself free?

I mean anyone can point backwards, in retrospect, and comment on what a person *should* have done

But if you are in a difficult place, and you've never been to a better place

In fact, you are not even sure a better place exists

How do you begin to get there?

How do you prepare to make yourself free?

It is a live question in our world

One that is rapidly descending into deeper cycles of mistrust and violence,

Increasingly polarized rhetoric and tribalism

How do you prepare to make yourself free?

It is a live question in our world

And in our Torah, on our calendar

Remember this shabbat is Shabbat HaGadol

The shabbat before Pesach

The shabbat when – in the Pesach story – God asked us to take a lamb

The Egyptian god

Keep that lamb in our homes for a few days

So that, at the key moment, we would slaughter it, and put its blood on our doorposts as a signal we were ready to be free.

And you thought it was bold to put some controversial statement on social media

Ours is a demanding tradition, I never claimed otherwise, get to know me

Regardless, we kill the Egyptian God and put the blood on the doorposts

–

And Rashi says, through the Mekhilta that God was on the fence about us until then

You see, we hadn't done anything to promote or further our freedom thus far

In fact, all we'd done was complain

Throwing things at Moses when he suggested God was on our side

Blaming him when Pharaoh increased our workload

See victimhood in Torah doesn't hold today's currency and while God heard our cries

Without our own participation in our own evolution

God was, shall we say, still on the divine fence

But when we responded to that command to take the lamb –

Something risky to show we were not slaves anymore

When we defied our old masters

When we readied ourselves to be someone else through our actions

Chizkuni said it was like we became adults that day, a bar mitzvah of sorts¹

Not that I recommend this specific lamb slaughtering ritual for your child's simcha

I have enough trouble fundraising right now

But you get Chizkuni's point

We grew up, we grew ourselves up

¹ Chizkuni, p. 498

And God said, paraphrasing Rashi, "Now you're my people."²

And, perhaps, it says in the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, the sign was not for God at all

It was for us

See in order to be free we had to do something to show *ourselves* we were no longer slaves

And in fact, says Rabbi Yishmael, that lamb's blood was not on the outside of the doorposts at all

It was on the inside of the doors³

No one could see it but the people who put it up

Like changing your status on a social media page, only just for yourself

What we used to call in the old days, "a journal entry"

Or, let's be honest, it was a kind of prayer

An irrefutable private message between each of us and God

We put the sign on the doorpost because we were creating an internal door, says Sfat Emet

A doorway God could enter⁴ to help us be free

It was a beginning, the beginning of our being free

2.

But the problem is, see

It is really easy to get excited about demonstrable moments of newly freed people

Because see, once we're in lamb blood on the doorpost territory

Once we've burned all the bridges to the ground

While we might have problems along the way

² See Rashi / Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael to Ex. 12:13, with thanks to my teacher Avivah Zornberg

³ (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:13:1)

⁴ Sfat Emet p. 96

Wandering in the desert might come with some hazards
Still, we'll never go back to being slaves, because we can't

But the problem is, see, on this shabbat HaGadol
We haven't even reached the lamb / doorpost situation yet

We're still just slaves in Egypt, always have been
No lambs have been taken anywhere yet
We've just been *invited* to do some things that are supposed to make us
free

So I am back to my original question: How do we accept that invitation?
How do we prepare to try to be free?

3.

There's a clue in Torah that would be very easy to miss
A few verses before any divine commands are issued,
before any lambs are in the picture
Before any doors are opened or closed

God says:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רִאשׁוֹן חֹדְשֵׁי
רִאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְמִדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה:

Let this month (Nissan) be the beginning of months for you
For you, it will be the first of the months of the year.

Now first off, it is strange to have, in the middle of the story and the
plagues and the action
What seems like a calendar reminder?

Who cares what month it is?

But this verse, you see, the rabbis say it does nothing less than change the entire world

You see, say the rabbis, it is as if God is saying

"You thought the beginning of the year was in the fall, in Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah

"But I am telling you, the beginning of the year, from now on, is right now, it is the spring, this moment as you go from being slaves to being free."

This is where we start the year from now on, from here.

This is the beginning."

How does God help us prepare to take the risks we need to take in order to be free?

By instructing us that the very idea of a beginning is not when we thought it was –

The beginning is not all those years we spent captive to Pharaoh

The beginning is not all those times we were degraded as slaves

The beginning is now! Says God

We are beginning the beginning now and going forward!

How do you prepare to be free? By accepting that everything that happened before does not determine the future, rather it is only a precursor to the freedom that is about to take place.

In fact, in the Talmud, Rabbi Yehoshua goes so far to say

Not only did God say our year now starts at the beginning of Nissan

But the whole world, the whole creation of the whole world

That, too, now starts with the beginning of Nissan⁵

The whole world was created in Nissan

In other words, the things God was about to ask us to do

⁵ via Rashbam: 'בארץ מצרים לאמר החדש הזה וגו' according to the view of Rabbi Yehoshua in Rosh Hashanah 11a:1 who holds that the earth was created in the month of Nissan,

Rested on our ability to believe that we were remaking the entire world
That our lives and our actions in leaving slavery
Would redefine history and time and creation
That there would be a new way of counting time going forward and it
would begin with the end of our enslavement

4.

Not only that
The rabbis suggest that in that moment when God was setting Nissan as
the new beginning
God also gave us the moon

Let me clarify – the rabbis are not saying God created the moon right
then

Rather, until that day we had marked time like everyone around us in
Egypt, by the sun
But now, we would count our time, our festivals by the moon
We would live on a different calendar, a calendar that connected us to
this new story⁶
One we still live by today

This moon idea is beautiful
And I do want us to start kedusha levana – the prayer we say when you
see the moon in a month
But the rabbis point out that when God is instructing Moses about this
whole new way of keeping time and the new start to the world
When God is telling Moses about this new month

It would be dark out, evening, nightfall
And while God is supposedly showing Moses the moon to illustrate
God's new calendrical plan

⁶ Shemot Rabbah 15:22, p. 193

Problem is that – at the very beginning of the month – the moon cannot yet be seen!

Rashi says, “Moshe, Moses our teacher, he had difficulty...” he couldn’t see the moon⁷

In other words, God had to point something out to Moses that Moses could not yet see

And if all of freedom, our whole story of leaving Egypt rests on our ability to see a new kind of beginning to our story – and if Moses cannot see this moon which is the symbol of this new beginning (!) there will be no beginning!

Now to be fair, the moon is so early in its cycle it cannot be seen, it is not visible (!)

God had to point out something to Moses that Moses *could not see*

Would not see for days (!)

God, not visible, asks Moses to look at something else invisible

To set Moses’ whole life by it, and ours

To have faith without a shred of proof

In a world, the world of slavery, that lives only by proof

What I’m saying is that if Moses cannot see this invisible moon of God then no one will ever be free and that is where we find ourselves this shabbat

And God is pointing and Moses is squinting, trying to overcome the fact he cannot see

And it is getting darker, and darker still

5.

People have been confiding in me in recent weeks that they are afraid to have Passover seder

⁷ Rashi to Ex. 12:2

They are afraid of destroying friendships and family over the arguments
see

Because in recent years we have all taken on a polarized, untrusting
mentality

We've become afraid to say what we think lest we are cancelled by our
own friends

This is truly where we are

And this mentality is hard to break

Maybe, they tell me, better to not have seder this year

The war is so painful and the opinions here – both those informed and
those quite uninformed – are unrelenting, severe

Who knew this story – which not that long ago seemed, if anything, a little
moralistic, obvious – Who knew this story would feel almost untouchable
in 5784?

The war is so painful and the opinion so severe

How dare we talk about freedom, our freedom, when there are literal
Israeli casualties, deaths and hostages?

How dare we talk about freedom, our freedom, when there is so much
civilian death and suffering in Gaza, at the hands of Israel?

How dare we talk about freedom when freedom of any kind feels so
remote, impossible?

Maybe we should not try to have a seder, they say to me

We can't see a way out – maybe we should skip this year

And in those moments, I imagine us sitting alone in the dark

6.

The Kedushat Levi, chasidic teacher says that the reason Moses was
struggling, even with God's help, to see the moon
was because Moses did not tie his life to something that would wax
and wane

He could not bear for the moon to be diminished, he could not stand
anticipating its disappearance

Moses wanted, and who can blame him, full redemption in his lifetime

He wanted to know it would all be okay

And so, says Kedushat Levi, Moses did not let himself see the moon⁸
I imagine Moses waving God's hand away, preferring to sit alone in the dark
Rather than participate in God's world, with freedom so unpredictable

But Moses idea of a world forever fixed was not the kind of redemption God had in mind then or now

And so, I imagine, with some coaxing from God, begrudgingly, Moses squints
The entire free world rests on his ability – and ours – to see what is not there yet
And I imagine Moses exhales, looks into the night sky and sees

7.

Maybe the seder
Where we dare to talk about our freedom, and welcoming the stranger,
Plagues and midwives and miracles like the splitting of seas
Maybe the seder
Yes, even now –
Where we insist that our actions commit God to us
Where we insist our actions commit us to each other
Where we insist our sitting and telling the story, this story
Maybe our remembering this story
That god brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, with signs and wonders
Whether we think of it for ourselves or for welcoming the stranger–
Maybe this story
Is not superfluous nor a distraction nor, god forbid, destructive

But rather, is our beginning, our DNA,

⁸ Kedushat Levi p. 185 via Rashi Speaking Torah

Maybe our telling these stories is the equivalent of our looking for the new moon in the night sky and willing ourselves to see

I believe our freedom depends on it