

Dreaming of the Promised Land

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Last Wednesday marked the end of Passover, when Jews around the world commemorated the escape of the ancient Hebrews from captivity in Egypt. The story is familiar to most of us: Moses and Aaron beseeching the Pharaoh to let their people go, the plagues that God sent to force Pharaoh's hand, the Angel of Death taking the first born Egyptian children but *passing over* the homes of the Jews, and the escape in the night without time for the bread to rise. The story is retold every year during the course of the seder, a ritual meal in which bitter herbs recall the harshness of slavery, matzoh is broken to recall the unleavened bread of emergency exit, and the dream of the Promised Land is lifted up once again.

I am not Jewish, but I have attended many Passover seders over the years: as a guest in the homes of Jewish friends, at interfaith community gatherings, at UU RE events, and on one memorable occasion. . . in jail.

I was being held in a converted gym on a military base with about 100 other women who had been arrested protesting nuclear weapons testing. Our group was diverse in many ways, though not all. We were disproportionately though not exclusively white; we included young and old, lesbian and straight, Quaker and Catholic and Buddhist and Pagan, UU and Jewish. It was Passover, and the Jewish women among us sent a message to the facility chaplain requesting matzoh, and some creative substitutes for the other symbolic foods, so that they could celebrate a seder. All of us were invited, and all came to the circle. We sat cross-legged on the floor, ringing the gym. There was no Haggadah, the text that provides a script for the seder. Instead, the leaders of the ritual spoke from the heart about what Passover meant to them as Jewish women, as feminists and peace activists, and invited us to go round the circle so that each woman could share a liberation story from her own heritage or tradition, or a liberation story that inspired her, or a story from her own life. It was amazing. Women told stories about ancestors escaping plantations, and grandparents escaping Nazis. Women told stories of leaving dead-end relationships and dead-end jobs, abusive marriages and fundamentalist sects. There were stories about coming out, and about getting sober. Women spoke to honor Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, their mothers, the teachers and coaches who had encouraged them as girls to break free from society's expectations. Each story expanded our collective vision of Freedom.

It was the most moving seder I have ever experienced.

The Passover story has always resonated powerfully for me. I love the fact that there is a religious holiday — not a national patriotic holiday but a *religious* holiday — that specifically celebrates freedom from bondage. Freedom, that tells me, is holy.

Freedom is Holy. Freedom from oppression and violence, freedom from hunger and poverty, is holy. Freedom from repression and social constraints, freedom from unreasonable expectations and ill-fitting roles, is holy. Freedom is a necessary condition for the Beloved Community that we seek, a defining feature of the Promised Land of which we sing and dream. But freedom — real freedom, whether we are talking about social conditions or an individual's inner life — is much more than the absence of bondage. And it's not something God reaches down to part the Red Sea and give to us. We have to make it for ourselves, and for our neighbors.

No one steps directly from captivity into freedom. That's certainly true of freedom from structural oppression. The abolition of slavery in this country, for example, gave rise to systemic racist terrorism and Jim Crow laws that maintained white supremacy and kept Black people from being actually free. It's also true on an individual level, though for very different reasons. Prison inmates who return to their communities struggle to adjust to life on the outside. After leaving a toxic marriage, even the most privileged and seemingly well-adjusted of us can take years to break free of the psychological tangles in which we are ensnared.

When the Hebrews fled Egypt, they did not go straight to the Promised Land. Instead, we are told in the ancient scriptures, they spent 40 years wandering in the desert.

Forty years! It takes a long time to walk from Egypt to Canaan, but it does not take 40 years. And in those days, 40 years was a lifetime, literally. Which means that few if any of the individuals who fled Egypt ever made it to the Promised Land. What were the Israelites doing for 40 years, and why did the God of the story think that was necessary?

In the Jewish context, the answer has to do with becoming a People, God's Chosen People. It was in the wilderness where Moses received the Ten Commandments, where the people lost their faith in the leader who had promised them freedom and then recommitted to follow God's laws. In the desert

wilderness, the Israelites had to depend on God utterly, and God provided for them — manna from heaven. In the wilderness, the People learned to trust, and they learned it the hard way. In my experience, the hard way is the only way to really learn trust. Wandering in the desert, keeping the Dream of the Promised Land alive, they got to experience their interdependence with each other and with the Holy in the most literal way possible.

More broadly, the metaphor of wandering in the desert resonates for anyone who has experienced the place in between leaving and arriving. That means all of us.

Desert times, wilderness times, are inevitable. Inevitable for every heart, and for every community. Some kinds of transitional periods are necessary for healing or transformation, as after a personal loss. Other transitional periods are the product of forces beyond our immediate control, such as those following social or political upheaval — but even when those transitions are *not* necessary or positive, but imposed upon us, we can nonetheless use them for our own transformative purposes. Whether your most current or vivid desert experience is about the state of the nation, or a personal loss, or a transition you can't yet see the other side of, the ancient story of the Exodus has wisdom to offer you.

The poet Alla Renee Bozarth has expressed this better than I ever could. I want to share with you her poem *Passover Remembered*. It's long, so settle in and pay attention. You don't want to miss a single stanza!

Passover Remembered, by Alla Renee Bozarth

Pack Nothing.
Bring only your determination to serve
and your willingness to be free.

Don't wait for the bread to rise.
Take nourishment for the journey,
but eat standing, be ready
to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave

your old ways behind—
fear, silence, submission.

Only surrender to the need
of the time— to love
justice and walk humbly
with your God.

Do not take time to explain to the neighbors.
Tell only a few trusted friends and family members.

Then begin quickly,
before you have time to sink back
into the old slavery.

Set out in the dark.
I will send fire to warm and encourage you.
I will be with you in the fire
and I will be with you in the cloud.

You will learn to eat new food
and find refuge in new places.
I will give you dreams in the desert
to guide you safely home to that place
you have not yet seen.

The stories you tell one another around your fires
in the dark will make you strong and wise.

Outsiders will attack you,
and some who follow you,
and at times you will weary
and turn on each other
from fear and fatigue and
blind forgetfulness.

You have been preparing for this for hundreds of years.
I am sending you into the wilderness to make a way
and to learn my ways more deeply.

Those who fight you will teach you.
Those who fear you will strengthen you.
Those who follow you may forget you.
Only be faithful. This alone matters.

Some of you will die in the desert,
for the way is longer than anyone imagined.
Some of you will give birth.

Some will join other tribes along the way,
and some will simply stop and create
new families in a welcoming oasis.

Some of you will be so changed
by weathers and wanderings
that even your closest friends
will have to learn your features
as though for the first time.
Some of you will not change at all.

Some will be abandoned
by your dearest loves
and misunderstood by those
who have known you since birth
and feel abandoned by you.

Some will find new friendship
in unlikely faces, and old friends
as faithful and true as the pillar of God's flame.

Wear protection.
Your flesh will be torn
as you make a path
with your bodies
through sharp tangles.
Wear protection.

Others who follow may deride
or forget the fools who first bled
where thorns once were, carrying them

away in their own flesh.

Such urgency as you now bear
may embarrass your children
who will know little of these times.

Sing songs as you go,
and hold close together.
You may at times grow
confused and lose your way.

Continue to call each other
by the names I've given you,
to help remember who you are.
You will get where you are going
by remembering who you are.

Touch each other
and keep telling the stories
of old bondage and of how
I delivered you.

Tell your children lest they forget
and fall into danger— remind them
even they were not born in freedom
but under a bondage they no longer
remember, which is still with them, if unseen.

Or they were born in the open desert
where no signposts are.

Make maps as you go,
remembering the way back
from before you were born.

So long ago you fell
into slavery, slipped
into it unawares,
out of hunger and need.

You left your famished country
for freedom and food in a new land,
but you fell unconscious and passive,
and slavery overtook you as you fell
asleep in the ease of your life.

You no longer told stories of home
to remember who you were.

Do not let your children sleep
through the journey's hardship.
Keep them awake and walking
on their own feet so that you both
remain strong and on course.

So you will be only
the first of many waves
of deliverance on these
desert seas.

It is the first of many
beginnings— your Paschaltide.
Remain true to this mystery.

Pass on the whole story.
I spared you all
by calling you forth
from your chains.

Do not go back.
I am with you now
and I am waiting for you.

In the poem, God warns us that the bonds we have escaped —whether literal or metaphorical — can overtake us again if we fall unconscious or passive. The God of the poem urges us to use our wandering time to tell the stories of what has happened, to remember where we came from and what we dream of, to teach our children where we came from and what we dream of, so that we don't

become lulled into wandering in circles. I've done that — gotten myself out of a bad situation only to ... forget, because really, who wants to remember demoralization, or failure, or abuse? I've escaped and then lost focus, only to fall back into old patterns, not even realizing I'm walking in circles, in the same old ruts. Communities and movements can do that too, when we become overwhelmed or dispirited, and the much-needed self-care breaks morph without anyone noticing into an ongoing state of resignation. No one gets out of the wilderness that way.

The poet tells us: "You will get where you are going when you remember who you are." And as a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that *who I am*, as an individual, is inextricable from who we are as a community, and as a community, we are inextricable from the larger human community and the community of Earth. So I say: "We will get where we are going when we remember how we are connected."

The poem concludes: "I am with you now, and I am waiting for you." Remember, that's God speaking. Meaning: the Holy is with us now, in our wilderness, and waiting for us over Jordan, in the Promised Land.

And where or what is that Promised Land, of which we dream? I think it's well described in this email sent to the interfaith community last week by Dr. Metwali Amer of the SALAM Islamic Center. It reads in full:

[To our brothers and sisters in the Christian and Jewish Faiths](#)

[From your brothers and sisters in the Islamic Faith](#)

[On these holy occasions of Easter and Passover, we Muslims in the Greater Sacramento Area wish to share with you your religious services and holidays. Being members of the same community and brothers and sisters of the bigger Interfaith Family, we wish to share with you the great lessons of both holy occasions. May God bless you all and accept your services and guide us to unify our efforts to live together in harmony, kindness, and love in order to make our city a shining and caring place to live in as one peaceful and sharing family. Amen](#)

Wow. A place where kindred of all faiths, from all corners of the earth, live together as one peaceful and sharing family. *That's* the Promised Land. And we get there only by re-creating ourselves as the People of that Land *as we journey*.

As the Rev. Virginia Safford has written: “In the springtime we remember: the promised land is not a destination—it is a way of going. The land beyond the Jordan, that country of freedom and dignity and laughter—you carry it inside you all the while. It is planted in your mind and heart already, before you ever start out, before it even occurs to you that in order to leave that life in Egypt, the intolerable bondage of that life, what you need to do is stand up and walk forward.”

So here’s my challenge to you: Look deeply at yourself, at your life, and see what shackles you, what keeps you from walking forward. Is it fear? Hopelessness? The illusion of separateness? Break free. You can do it. Look up at the banner there on the wall of our sanctuary, representing freedom, showing two hands breaking the shackles that bind them. Imagine that those are *your* hands. *Your* shackles breaking and falling away. Then come join us in the wilderness. It may seem like a desert right now, but it is far from barren. And by journeying together, sharing our stories and songs, and by joining with others who wander and seek refuge, we can be the People Who Choose the Promised Land, the people who create it by living it into Being, together.

Blessed Be.