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EXODUS IS NOT ENOUGH

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The Book of **Exodus** sets a fire under history. Many of the world's oppressed and excluded, as Michael Walzer has reminded us in **Exodus** and Revolution, have drawn on the **paradigm** of **Exodus** to imagine their liberation. Zionism has long used it as a source of images and rhetoric toward the national liberation of the Jewish people. Recent efforts at a Jewish liberation theology, like most forms of Christian liberation theology, have done so too.

Indeed, for Jews it is not only a matter of the moments in our lives when we are consciously exploring our political liberation. Every prayerbook bears witness on its pages, every welcome to the Sabbath and to holy days bears witness in its chant, that the Jewish people continues to understand itself as the people that experienced the **exodus** from Mitzrayim, the Narrow Place.

The **Exodus paradigm** remains crucial. Yet I also think that in our generation it is not enough--either for our own Jewish version of ourselves, or for anyone's version of liberation and social transformation. This seems to me especially true when we struggle with the issues between Israel and the Palestinian people.

The Genesis Revolution and the Exodus Path

The book of Genesis plays and replays stories of conflict between siblings. All of them are structured by the underlying social expectation that the older sibling is entitled to greater wealth and power than the younger--is entitled to the greater inheritance and a deeper blessing. In each tale, this social expectation is subjected to a divine critique.

The first tale that Genesis tells of life in normal history--life outside the Garden of Delight--is the tale of Cain and Abel, where the older brother asserts his power over the younger. This, the Torah implies, is indeed "normal" history--what we expect to happen. But the result is murder. Death. Exile. God's distress.

Then come a series of stories about struggles between brothers, and one pair of sisters. In these stories, God and human beings seem to be struggling to invent a different path, perhaps to correct the error that underlay Cain's murder of Abel.

- Ishmael, the older brother, tries to assert his power over Isaac by doing mitzacheyk, a kind of laughter that is a version of Isaac's own identity and name. Ishmael, though forced to leave the family, is awarded a blessing of prosperity and continuity, and a prophecy that one day he will live face-to-face with all his brothers. He accepts this semi-defeat and ultimately is reconciled with Isaac. Isaac, when he has come into his inheritance after the death of Abraham, journeys to Ishmael's territory to live with him.
- Esau, the older brother, wavers between asserting and renouncing his power over his younger brother Jacob. Jacob wins the upper hand but flees to seek his own life-path. He returns only after his wrestle with God frees him from guilt and fear and the bonds of inevitability, and opens up the possibility of fraternal reconciliation.
- Leah and Rachel struggle over the meaning of older and younger sister and, through what they too call a "Godwrestle," win some ability to live together in peace.
- Joseph turns the tables on his older brothers who have tried to rule over him; they accept his suzerainty and he forgives their having demeaned him; they build a community together.
- Manasseh and Ephraim receive a simultaneous blessing that in the same instant recognizes and dissolves the tension between the older and the younger. Only when this pair is able to avoid the bitterness of struggle can the book of Genesis come to a peaceful end.

These stories all address the riddle of Cain and Abel: how can two contestants for power and respect avoid death and disaster? And, with variations on the theme, the stories give basically the same answer: the younger is redefined by God and history as the "firstborn," and the older (at first more powerful) must willingly recognize this transformation--must open up greater space for the lesser, the younger. Only then can there be reconciliation. Cain's failure was that he refused to open up this mysterious space--and the only alternative was murder.

The Torah seems to suggest that after Cain slew Abel, God's will became clearer and more definite: justice and, ultimately, peace require that the younger, the lesser, the weaker, be redefined as the "firstborn" and wield a wider authority. The rule of ordinary history, in which the rich get richer and the strong get stronger, must be reversed. Will be reversed, in the teeth of normal expectations.

Yet the weaker must not simply achieve a "revolution" in which the revolving door of history makes them the new insiders. The goal is reconciliation, followed by the dissolution of the conflict itself. Even after the conflict has ended, its memory must be kept alive. Otherwise the tugs of blood, fondness, charisma, power may be too strong; people may regress and restore the firstborn to power.

So Genesis teaches. The story of **Exodus** seems at first glance to be quite different. In the liberation of the People Israel from slavery in Egypt, there is no reconciliation. Only the utter shattering of Pharaoh opens the way to Israel's liberation. Only permanent departure from Egyptian space seals their freedom into a continuing community.

The **Exodus** pattern has impressed itself on the minds of every people that has learned the Torah. It is the model for modern revolutions and liberations, national and social, where the saving remnant hopes to wipe out oppression and corruption, depart physically or politically from their oppressors and corruptors, and remake their society. The **Exodus** pattern has been so powerful that we have paid little attention to the alternative that emerges from Genesis: the war and then the peace of brothers, sisters.

In the world today, there is more and more reason to pursue the path of Genesis whenever we can. For there is no way to "depart" from the powerful, seldom any way to shatter them without shattering ourselves as well. Women cannot "depart" from men; African-Americans cannot depart from white America; Jews cannot really depart from Western or Arab civilization; the world is too small, the ties too close.

Instead of destroying the oppressor and separating into a new society, what we will more and more be seeking is liberation-with-reconciliation. Not a flabby "making-nice" where there has been no struggle and no creation of a new and free identity. Neither the gruesome grin of the powerless commanded to love their taskmasters, nor the gracious smile of the powerful who are pleased to love their serfs. But the free laughter of wrestlers, for whom the grapple of liberation and the clasp of love are intertwined.

Does that mean that **Exodus** has become irrelevant? Sadly, no. For with a deeper look, we see that the stories interlock. **Exodus** is what happens if the powerful refuse to respond to Genesis.

For the story of **Exodus** is also the story of two struggling siblings, a first-and second-born whose relationship God insists on reversing. God calls Israel "My firstborn," and warns that the firstborn of Pharaoh and of all Egyptians will die if Pharaoh refuses to "let My firstborn go."

What does this mean? Israel is obviously not the firstborn of the peoples. Egypt, Babylonia, perhaps others as well, are older, richer, more powerful, more cultured. God is making Israel a firstborn. The rejected and despised, the slaves, the poor, the desperate, must come into their own. To anyone who knows the tales of Genesis, it is clear that if Pharaoh steps back to permit this to happen, the struggle will end in reconciliation.

But he refuses. And this time God is not willing to let Cain murder Abel. This time the tables must be turned so that history can be turned around. It is from this moment that the Jewish people takes its sense of being a "vanguard" people: the first community to model the will of God and history that the band of runaway slaves become God's firstborn. A model for all peoples.

Exodus may be the last resort in every struggle. But for the powerful as well as the poor and powerless, it is crucial to pursue the possibility of Genesis: a Godwrestle that ends in reconciliation. It is crucial to examine whether the "vanguard" path now lies in a partly new direction.

The Holiness of Limits

For the Jewish people, it is not easy to learn from these stories in a new way--for we have shaped our identity by learning from them in the old way, the way in which we were only and always the late-born remade into a firstborn. We were and are Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, the "firstborn" of God who come into our own from being those despised.

During the past two thousand years, Jews have rarely had the kind of political-military power that we control through the State of Israel. As David Biale points out in *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, even though Diaspora Jews have on a number of occasions exercised considerable political power, Jewish tradition, historiography, and popular ethos have not treated Jews as powerful, and therefore have not concentrated on how to create self-control over such power.

Instead, we have concentrated on how to deal with being powerless: how, for instance, to express our rage at oppressors without bringing down even more oppression on our heads. (See the fantasies of revenge in the last few chapters of the Scroll of Esther, and the prayers of "Shfoch Chamatcha" ["Pour Out Your Wrath"] in the traditional Pesach Haggadah.)

But in an era when Jews do hold explicit political power, to use the models of the powerless poses the danger of lurching back and forth from abject fear to triumphalist aggression. If there is no conscious effort to develop Jewish models and symbols for self-control, the ingrained habit of seeing ourselves as powerless will connect with the political interests of those who benefit from our lurching from fear to triumph; and the Jewish symbols will be used in the service of uncontrolled power. This, I think, is what is going on when some Jews see the Palestinians only as Amalek (who attacked the poor and defenseless) or Arafat as Hitler, and use these perceptions to justify expanding the sphere of Jewish or Israeli power.

If Jewish symbols are used in that way only, and the responses of those Jews who wish to put self-limitations on Jewish or Israeli power is to use only the modernist language of liberalism, I think there will be two unfortunate results.

- Within the Jewish people, the emotional power of a resurgent Jewish identity will reside with those who use the language of Jewish symbols--and that emotional power will be used only in the service of expansionism. "Cool" language is, in a time of crisis, unlikely to win political victories over "hot" language. If hot language can express truthful and holy approaches to the world, it is wise, especially in times of crisis, to use it.
- Outside the Jewish people, Jewish symbols will also come to be perceived as expansionist. There could emerge a new twist on the notion of the "Old Testament" as "law" versus the New Testament as "love": Torah as fanaticism and blood-and-conquest, versus modernity (and possibly other religious traditions) as peaceable. If a *chillul hashem* ("hollowing out" or profaning the Name of God) is the use by Jews of words or actions that bring the Jewish people, Torah, and God into contempt in the eyes of other peoples, then leaving Torah in the hands of conquerors would be a *chillul hashem*.

In my view, fight-wing Israelis often use Torah language in such a way as to deplete the "spiritual capital" of Torah in the world. Unless it is replaced and enriched, that spiritual capital will no longer meet our own and the world's needs to draw upon it. One task of those who shape Jewish culture is to replenish the spiritual capital of Torah by showing that it speaks in a deeper, richer way.

Most segments of the Jewish community agree that reawakening the archetype of Pharaoh-and-plague enriches Torah--when the archetype is seen outside us. To echo the tale of Pharaoh by calling out, "Let our people go!" to the Soviet government when it was oppressing Jews seemed quite appropriate to the Jewish community-even though the Soviets were not, like the Pharaoh of the Torah, ordering the murder of Jewish baby boys.

Yet to see the story as an inward warning--a warning to ourselves that we might come to act like Pharaoh, and suffer for it--is painful. The whole task of limiting the use of one's own power is painful--since one of the main efforts of our "self" is to maximize our power in a world in which it is all too easy to be, and feel, powerless. To see the story as an inward warning runs against our urge toward naked self-advancement--the yetzer.

So even those who steel themselves to look into this mirror are likely to feel pain if they see there even the faintest lineaments of an emerging pharaoh--especially in the generation after the Jewish people suffered from one of the most terrible pharaohs of its history. All the more, those who cannot bear even to look into the mirror are likely to respond with bitterness and anger to any such effort at self-examination. And those with power within the Jewish people--power great or small--will certainly not want to have their uses of power questioned by such a look in the mirror.

Some may believe that the Jewish people is incapable of behaving in a pharaonic way--that Torah does in fact mean, and that the facts of history do affirm, that the Jewish people bears a relationship to history so special this is not a danger. But there is a passage in Deuteronomy (17: 14-20) called perek hamelekh ("chapter of the king") that suggests an Israelite government will not be immune to the temptations of power but must control itself in order to turn away from such temptations.

And in the rest of Jewish tradition, from the prophets to the modern theology of Mordecai Kaplan, it seems clear that, like all others, the Jewish people experiences the temptations of power. It is not a "chosen people" in the sense of being exempt from those temptations--and its own history, both of dominion and of being dominated, is intended to serve as a warning against those temptations.

Why are these temptations dangerous? Not only because they are bad ethics toward others--as we should know, having experienced what it meant to be slaves in Egypt. But also because it is dangerous for ourselves to behave like Pharaoh when we hold power--as we should also know, having witnessed what happened to Pharaoh when he refused to exert self-control in his use of power.

Indeed, the Torah teaches that there is not nearly so great a distinction as we usually think between behavior that is ethically dangerous toward others and behavior that is self-destructively dangerous toward ourselves. "V' ahavta reyekha kamokha--"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself"--is not only an ethical command. It is also a description of reality. In fact, you will "love" your neighbor as you do yourself. Demean yourself, you will demean your neighbor. Oppress your neighbors--try to drown them, as did Pharaoh--and you yourself will be lost in the mighty waters.

What kind of day-to-day practice does the Torah have in mind as a way of preventing our governments from "making the people return to Mitzrayim"? One may be Deuteronomy's command that the king rewrite and reread in public the very Torah-Constitution that restricts him. Are there others?

There are ways in which the tradition tries to prevent individuals from maximizing their power. The coming of Shabbat puts a halt to a person's or a community's amassing power or wealth. In space as well as in time, there are Torah commandments that restrict one's own power: for example, the commands of peah--leaving the harvest of the corners of the field for the poor and helpless of the community to gather--and of tzitzit--letting the corners of one's clothing fade away into a fringe, part cloth and part communal air.

For a nation-state, perhaps, the territorial analogue to these shared corners would be demilitarized zones. Here I am still sovereign, but into this space I will not bring machine-guns. Here I could forcibly resettle my citizens in the midst of another people, through forced or fraudulent sales or expropriations, without consulting them; but I will not do so.

These are ways of affirming that I will not exercise all the power I have to the limits of my physical ability. Indeed, I will instead recognize that in the long run my power to exercise self-control within my own territory depends on allowing my power to fade away at the edges into the terrain of the wider community. The holiness of my field, the holiness of my own body, depend on my accepting limits: knowing that I am not wholly in control.

For this to work I must still have a garment I can call my own, still have a field that I can call my own. But at the corners, I must know that it is not wholly my own. If I try to control it all, I will lose it all.

So we should end by recognizing that one of the deepest teachings of spiritual traditions is indeed the importance of putting limits to one's own power. It is perhaps one of the most important distinctions between most "spiritual" and most "secular" paths. Distorted, the teaching can lead to self-flagellation among individuals and self-victimization among communities and peoples. But heard in all its richness, it offers space and time to develop a path of self-determination for every culture, every nation, every community, every person.

If the Jewish people and the Palestinian people reject this ancient teaching that self-affirmation is confirmed through self-control, the Land between the Jordan and the Sea will be made into a desert of

despair. If they uphold this teaching, the Land can become in reality what both have hoped for: a land of promise.

To the traditional Seder, Arthur Waskow has added questions that transmute into communal prayer the reflections offered in "**Exodus** Is Not Enough." Those who share the Passover meal --Christians as well as Jews--may wish to incorporate "Four More Questions" into their own celebration.

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