

PASSOVER YIZKOR – New Songs (sermon delivered on Pesach 2019)

Arise my darling, my fair one, come away! For now the winter is past ... the blossoms have appeared in the land, the song of the turtledove is heard in our land. Arise my darling, my fair one, come away!

We have just chanted from the gorgeous, lush love poetry of the Song of Songs. We chant this Biblical book on Pesach, of course, because this holiday comes at spring, the season of new blossoms. We also associate spring with young lovers like those in the song, lovers who are full of hope, full of life and possibility.

Our yearnings for hope, life and possibility come alive on this holiday as we recall our liberation from slavery and look towards redemption. On Pesach, we connect with our longing to free ourselves and our world from oppression, from the narrow straits of Mitzrayim. At the seder, while a part of us is half-amused at the myths we create around Elijah's Cup, a *serious* part of us yearns for the healing and repair that this cup represents. A part of us feels- if only Elijah would in fact really appear, announcing the arrival of a world of beauty and peace, as gorgeous as the world of the Song of Songs...

Pesach delivers a message of hope. It reassures us that spring will return to the land. It suggests to us that, like our ancestors, we can walk through our own sea of troubles and emerge on the other side. On this holiday we imagine our ancestors in the Torah, exhausted, beaten down slaves, standing on the shores of the Red Sea, fearing for their lives as the waters rise and Pharaoh's soldiers pursue them. We imagine how in the face of their utter terror, the Children of Israel walked on dry land in the midst of the sea". And *then*, how, safely on the other side – what did they do? They sang and danced. They were free, safe, relieved beyond measure, beyond anything most of us could understand! They sang and danced! That was *their* story of crossing the sea. Dayeinu.

But stories take on new lives and meaning as they are told – as they speak to our needs and teach us; and from a very early time, many centuries ago, in our people's telling of this story, something is added. The Psalms and our core prayers relate that the Israelites at the sea sang 'a *new* song.' A new song. Through the generations, in countless poems and prayers - this watershed moment in our people's story is always described as a moment of something new - sheerah chadashah, or sometimes shir hadash. This was a song never sung before. They were transformed. For me, this is one of the most compelling and beautiful images in all of our sacred literature, this idea of a *new* song.

The way *we tell* this story suggests that true redemption is about even more than the lack of oppression, although certainly that is worthy of a song. True redemption yields a totally *new* song – at the sea, something completely new was introduced– that is the essence of how our tradition understands this story. It tells us to look deeper into what it means to be saved, to be free. As they emerged from the sea, the children of Israel learned how it felt to be saved and free; they also learned what it means to be loved. They learned what it means to face the worst that life has to offer and be able to survive it. And in our lives as individuals and as a people, anytime we learn those lessons – of freedom, of survival, of being loved, their song becomes a '*new* song.' It is always changing, never static, always '*new*.'

On this holiday, we are meant to sing a '*new* song' even as we tell an ancient story. Every year, as we celebrate Pesach, the world is different; every year, *we* are different. And so

it is a mitzvah (*harei zeh meshubach*) to expand on our ancient story, to enrich it and to learn from it in new ways. Telling our *old* story in a *new* way each year is meant to wake us up – just as the natural world is waking up around us – to wake us up to take steps to create the world we dream of when we welcome Elijah to our seders. The story of Pesach continues to be created and will continue to be created as long as there are people to tell it.

The same holds true for the life story of a person. We know that a person's biography has a beginning, a middle and an end. But the people who have been part of our lives do not live only in the past; they continue on with us. Every time we remember them, we are different. Each time we remember a person and the events of their life, our understanding may shift, and we may see that person through different lenses. We can discover new dimensions which in effect, can actually change their story.

Our relationships with the people we remember continue to evolve. One of the gifts of memory, one of the gifts of being alive, is that *we* can still engage with those who have left this world. We can still feel nurtured or inspired by a loving parent or friend; we might even feel nurtured and inspired in *new* ways, ways we never experienced before. We can reconcile - forgive a departed spouse, sibling or parent, repairing the relationship even now. We might become more accepting, maybe let go of a hurt or anger; give him another chance – appreciate her more than ever. That new perspective could move us to action – we might reconnect with a living family member or friend, for example. Or we might honor the dead in a new way, through an act of tzedakah which reflects the life of the person we recall, a mitzvah that we highlight in the yizkor prayer.

The life stories we remember, like our people's Exodus story, are eternal and constant. At the same time, these stories contain infinite possibilities as they unfold throughout time. Today, at the yizkor of Passover, as we turn our thoughts to those who have departed from us, we might use the time to consider what has changed - mah nishtanah, what is different when I tell the story of the person I am recalling? What do I better understand – what has become more whole and more resolved, or – what has emerged that needs more work?

Separation and loss are a part of every life. In the Song of Songs, the lovers are mostly apart, painfully longing for one another. And yet, the book is suffused with joy and energy, it is a portrait of hope and faith. It ends with a powerful message as one lover declares to the other:

Set me as a seal upon your heart...
 For love is strong as death.
 Many waters cannot extinguish love
 Rivers will not wash it away... [8:6-7]

So we sing. We sing because love is as strong as death, because many waters cannot extinguish love, and no river of tears can wash it away. In spite of pain, in spite of unrequited yearning, in spite of loss and separation, there is love. Love is as strong as death because it remains with us forever, because forever it invites us to sing a new song. We have the freedom to add new melodies, new harmonies, new embellishments, and new connections. We sing to imagine a world that is a lush, green, peaceful garden. We sing to imagine, someday, a world of love.