

Passover 2020: Of Spring, Rebirth and Hope

(from a sermon delivered on Pesach 2005, with a few contemporary inserts)

(B'tzeit Yisrael...hayam ra'ah va'yanos, ha-yarden yi-sov l'achor...)

“When Israel left the land of Egypt...the sea fled at the sight, the Jordan River turned backwards, mountains leaped and danced like rams and hills like lambs.”

Like this passage from the psalms of Hallel, the liturgy and literature of the Exodus are filled with extraordinary images of nature being turned upside down. Think about the Ten Plagues. The plagues are not only catastrophes inflicted on Pharaoh and the Egyptians - they are catastrophes which specifically defy the laws of nature - waters that turn to blood, hailstones filled with fire, darkness so thick one can touch it, and disease which kills the firstborn of each family. And, of course, the plagues miraculously strike one group of people, and do not affect another, the Israelites, who live in their midst. Nature is upended. Then the climax of the story involves the most dramatic supernatural event of all - the splitting of the Reed Sea.

As the Exodus story brings the people of Israel from slavery to freedom, it emphatically establishes God as the Supreme Being who exerts power *not only* over human destiny but also over nature itself. In this story, God defies what we know as immutable natural law, pointedly reminding us who is in charge.

Rabbinic commentators clearly considered this theme of the Torah narrative essential, and they made sure to highlight it and expand upon it in their analyses of these Torah passages. In Exodus Rabbah, for example, they comment on the passage in which God tells Moshe - “hold out your arm toward the sky,” to bring the Plague of hail. Normally, the rabbis note, the sky is the domain of God and the earth is the domain of humans - as we also recite in Hallel - “ha-shamayim shamayim l’adonai, ...” The heavens belong to God, and the earth God gave to humans. But in extraordinary situations, throughout the story of the Exodus, God breaks the boundaries between the divine and the human, and enables Moshe to exercise power over the heavens.

We recall these examples of God’s absolute power not only on Pesach, but every day, several times a day, in our liturgy. Recalling them is not only about remembering an event from the past. Connecting with the idea of God’s power over nature taps into a deep spiritual need as well. This tale of so many miracles of nature resonates with the yearnings for the impossible that we may feel during times of extraordinary crisis. If we are in a time of serious illness for ourselves or a loved one, for example, we might pray for a disease to reverse itself or to miraculously disappear even if we know that according to the laws of science that particular outcome is not possible. More than anything, we yearn to say, as many of us yearn to say now during this pandemic - it’s over and done! It’s a miracle!

Whenever we fear that the normal natural course of events will not hold any solution, we wish for something beyond the ordinary to happen, for divine intervention to bring relief and turn things around. Again, we yearn to say: it’s a miracle! It is okay to honor that yearning, which expresses a deep part of ourselves in times of trouble, like this one.

And- it is not only when we are in trouble that we imagine nature transcended - when we experience extraordinary events that are joyous, our joy can be so great that we also feel as though the very laws of nature had been turned inside out. At such times we also might say - it’s a miracle! reflecting our intense feelings of amazement and gratitude, not necessarily our rational analysis of events. So when we sing about the splitting of the sea and mountains

dancing and rivers flowing backwards, we are expressing our great exuberance with literary, not necessarily literal, images.

Whenever we read about the Exodus we invoke that whole range of experience - from our deepest yearnings to be saved to our deepest sense of joyous celebration. But those are feelings for extraordinary times and extraordinary circumstances - we do not and cannot have them every day. [although in this extraordinary time, we certainly might experience those extremes of feeling.] So our festivals and our liturgy always bring us back to earth and to our relationship with the natural world. Another name for Pesach is Hag HaAviv – the festival of spring. On our seder plate we have the karpas - the fresh vegetable, as well as an egg, to remind us of spring and the rebirth of living things. We chant Shir Ha-shirim, the Song of Songs, which also invokes images of nature and spring, and the beauty of earthly love. And at the end of Passover, we mark the change of seasons with Tal, the prayer for dew. Beginning now, with Passover, we no longer recite in the Amidah – ‘who makes the wind blow and the rain fall..’ masheev haruach...” The season of rain in the land of Israel is officially at an end; we head into spring and summer, the time of dew, tal.

Making this change in our prayers puts us right back in touch with the predictable and routine life we live with nature. Springtime and the dew that we pray for each day represent a quiet relationship with nature that exists alongside the extraordinary one evoked in the Exodus story. This is the one we experience in our ordinary, day-to-day lives as the seasons renew themselves dependably. God’s role in the seasons is more understated and subtle than God’s role in the spectacular events of the Exodus. But it is an area in which we can feel God’s presence anytime, in the daily living of our lives. The cycles of nature can inspire in us the same sense of wonder and joy that we feel about God’s works which stretch the normal boundaries of nature.

On Pesach we sing about all of it: the splitting of the sea, the earthly love of humans, springtime and the morning dew of every day. We are reminded to notice God’s presence in both our ordinary *and* our extraordinary experiences of the world around us. [I will end with the chanting of selections from Song of Songs, Shir HaShirim, as we traditionally do on Passover.] And with my wishes to all and my prayer that as we live through this time of fear, of struggle, of disruption, we will be granted the strength and the faith to feel the renewal of the natural world and to let spring bring us hope and healing.

Chag Sameach