Four Stages of Liberation – Passover of Awakening

Recently someone told me that he was angry at someone. And, not only was he angry, but he *likes being angry;* he had no desire to “let go” or “get over it.” Then, a few days later, another person told me almost the same thing about someone else, but with the addition: “I will never forgive.”

There’s an idea that the festivals contain certain transformational potentials, and that as we enter their seasons, the barriers that we need to transcend start coming to the surface. And certainly, anger and non-forgiveness are ways that we can get stuck in *Mitzrayim,* in narrow identification with feelings of woundedness, of being a victim.

But getting free doesn’t have to mean a denial or pushing away of our true feelings; rather, it is precisely our true feelings that are the means to liberation. They are the gravity of unconsciousness that forces us to either wake up or get pulled in. Without them, there can be no liberation; that’s the sacred role of Egypt and Pharaoh.

According to the structure of the Passover seder, this process of liberation has four basic stages, corresponding to the four cups of wine. The Jerusalem Talmud (10a) asks, *“Why do we have four cups of wine? Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Benayah, this refers to the four stages of redemption.”*

לָכֵ֞ן אֱמֹ֥ר לִבְנֵֽי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֘ל אֲנִ֣י יְהוָה֒ וְ**הוֹצֵאתִ֣י** אֶתְכֶ֗ם מִתַּ֙חַת֙ סִבְלֹ֣ת מִצְרַ֔יִם וְ**הִצַּלְתִּ֥י** אֶתְכֶ֖ם מֵעֲבֹדָתָ֑ם וְ**גָאַלְתִּ֤י** אֶתְכֶם֙ בִּזְר֣וֹעַ נְטוּיָ֔ה וּבִשְׁפָטִ֖ים גְּדֹלִֽים׃ וְ**לָקַחְתִּ֨י** אֶתְכֶ֥ם לִי֙ לְעָ֔ם וְהָיִ֥יתִי לָכֶ֖ם לֵֽאלֹהִ֑ים וִֽידַעְתֶּ֗ם כִּ֣י אֲנִ֤י יְהוָה֙ אֱלֹ֣הֵיכֶ֔ם הַמּוֹצִ֣יא אֶתְכֶ֔ם מִתַּ֖חַת סִבְל֥וֹת מִצְרָֽיִם׃

*Therefore, say to the children of Israel: “I am Reality.****I will bring you out****from under the burdens of Egypt, and****I will rescue you****from their work.****I will redeem you****with an outstretched arm and through great judgments.****I will take you****to Me as a people, and I will be for you as a God. And you shall know that it is I, Existence Itself, your own Divinity, Who brought you out from under the burdens of Egypt…”*(Exodus 6:6 – 7)

*Hotzeiti – I will bring you out:*There is a difference between the *experience* of liberation and the *reality* of liberation. Experience is always in motion; the degree to which we experience freedom changes from moment to moment. The reality of our freedom, on the other hand, is absolute; it is our task to recognize it and live it, regardless of our experience in the moment. The experience we’re having right now arises *within* our field of awareness; awareness is not trapped or compelled by it in any way. *I am Reality – I will bring you out.*The simple recognition of our own being as the vast and formless field of awareness within which this present experience is now unfolding brings us out from the illusion of being stuck, into the reality of our inherent freedom.

*Hitzalti – I will rescue you:*Once we recognize our freedom in the present, there is always the possibility that we will forget and again get drawn back into the dream of bondage. After all,  the illusion is so formidable! The Egyptian army is behind us, the sea is in front of us – what shall we do? Our recognition must become commitment; we must remember to return ourselves to this recognition again and again in the face of the seductive and encroaching tides of experience.

*Ga’alti – I will redeem you:* When we come to the recognition of and commitment to our absolute freedom in the present, there can be a tendency to deny our past, which only creates a more subtle form of bondage. But when we embrace our past, when we recognize that ALL of our past experience, no matter how discordant or even evil, has brought us to this present moment of wakefulness, there can be *redemption.* There is no doubt – slavery and oppression are wrong. They are to be opposed. But, they are part of our sacred history, and through the telling, they have a sacred role. *Gam zeh l’tovah – this too is for the good.*This is not to whitewash or deny our pain; it is to embrace the supreme potential given to us by that pain.

*Lakakhti – I will take you:* It is true, there is nothing more vital for our own wellbeing then liberation. Anger and resentment can be sweet in a strange way, but they are nothing compared to freedom. And yet, it may take many years of bondage and many plagues to convince us that freedom is preferable. We cling to our bondage as if our life depended on it! And in a way, it does, because the price of freedom is our very identity; freedom changes who we think we are. At this stage, we give up fascination with our own story, with our own process, and meet the Divine at Sinai to answer Its call. Freedom is not merely for ourselves; it is the liberation of Reality Itself, waking up to Itself…

*More on Passover...*

**Kadesh, Karpas**
3/27/2018

It is told about Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk that when he chanted the *​Kiddush,*he would repeatedly look at his watch in order to keep himself connected to the world of time, otherwise he might dissolve into the Eternal completely.

In spiritual awakening there is a kind of balance that must be struck between the "world of time" – a.k.a the thinking mind, and the "Eternal World" – a.k.a. the space of awareness within which the thinking mind functions. While all the holy days and Shabbat are designed to help you dip more deeply into the Eternal World, the ritual of *kiddush* – the sanctification of the holy day with wine – points most strongly to this Eternal dimension of experience.

As it says in the Friday night Kiddush as well as all the festivals, *"Zekher L'tziyat Mitzrayim – Remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt."* It is a "remembrance" because the condition for freedom is already fulfilled; you just have to remember it. You are already free as Presence, as the open space of awareness within which experience arises.

And yet, even though you always already are freedom as awareness, embodying this truth in life is challenging; it requires constant effort. The Ishbitzer Rebbe pointed out that this is symbolized by the *Karpas,* the ritual vegetable eaten at the seder, because vegetables have to be planted again and again year after year. Whatever state was achieved yesterday, it is over today; we must constantly apply our awareness to overcome the forces of bondage within, day after day.

Which brings us to *Urkhatz,* the washing of hands that happens between *Kadesh* and *Karpas.* Wash yourself of yesterday's conditioning; today we must start again...

**Re-Membering for Passover**
​4/3/2017

What is spiritual bondage?

When the Torah describes the beginning of the Israelite’s bondage in Egypt, is says, “Vaya’avidu Mitzrayim et b’nai Yisrael b’farekh- Egypt enslaved the children of Israel with farekh- with crushing servitude.”

Now within this verse are three hints about the nature of spiritual bondage.

The first hint is in the word farekh, which means crushing labor. Now the root of farekh means to break apart or fracture, hence its usage to describe “crushing” labor. The obvious hint here is that spiritual bondage is unpleasant- it involves suffering. But on a deeper level, it hints that there is some kind of breaking or fracturing happening, and that’s the fracturing of Reality Itself as it appears in your consciousness.

Consider- in this moment, everything is as it is, and your consciousness is meeting whatever is appearing- your sensations, your feelings, your perception of what’s around you, whatever thoughts arise, and so on. As long as consciousness simply meets what is, there’s a wholeness to Everything. But when something unpleasant arises, whether external or internal it doesn’t matter, because all experience arises within the one space of consciousness, there’s a tendency for consciousness to contract into resistance, in the form of thoughts, feelings, or even words and actions- “dang farnet- what the??”- that’s resistance- that’s the farekh- the tearing apart of Reality, because now there’s me over here, resisting that over there, even if the “over there” is on my own mind.

This move from Wholeness to an opposing position implies a kind of contraction, because now rather than simply being the space of awareness within which all experience happens, you become a finite entity, resisting something within your experience. This brings us to the second hint in this verse, the word Mitzrayim. Mitzrayin means Egypt, but it comes from the root tzar which means “narrow,” probably because Egypt was built along the Nile. But metaphorically, it hints that to be in mitzrayim is to be in a narrow state; the native and full spaciousness of your consciousness gets contracted into a fixed point of view- the narrow “me” called “ego.”

And what’s the basic activity of ego? Ego tries to control things. That’s because ego feels disconnected from the fullness of its experience. That’s the basic hallmark of ego- that feeling of incompleteness, and with it, the need to change things in order to be okay. That egoic feeling of incompleteness comes from the contraction into a mitzrayim state that happens spontaneously in reaction to farekh- suffering that breaks apart the wholeness of your experience.

And this brings us to the third hint in the verse, vaya’avidu, which means “enslaved.” The arising of suffering, represented by farekh, which causes the contraction into the ego, represented by Mitzrayim is obviously not something we consciously choose; it seems to just happen to us. Vaya’avidu Mitzrayim et b’nai Yisrael- that contraction just seems to grab you and enslave you against your will.

And yet, on a deeper level, ya’avidu is related to the word Avodah, which means work or service not in the negative sense of slavery, but in the positive sense of prayer, or spiritual practice- which is an act of love and devotion. The hint here is that the experience of suffering and the spiritual bondage that comes from it has a purpose, and that is to be transformed into avodah, into a path of liberation. Because it’s only from experiencing and getting caught in all kinds of spiritual bondage, and then finding your way out of bondage, that you can really mature and evolve. A baby in the womb is already whole and one with all being, but it’s not liberated, because there’s no appreciation of the Wholeness. In order to know liberation, you have to first taste bondage.

The danger, of course, is that the experience of bondage, however that manifests for you, seduces you into a negative attitude and you become resigned to your stuck-ness. That’s why the Torah says, “l’maan tizkor et yom tzeitkha me’eretz mitzrayim kol y’mei khayiekha- that you remember your going out from Egypt all the days of your life.”

This verse, which also appears near the beginning of the seder, urges us to constantly remember that our basic nature is freedom, reminding ourselves every day, and even every night as the words of the seder say, “Kol y’mei khayiekha, l’havi haleilot- all the days of your life means, the nights also.”

And what’s the every day and night practice for remembering the going out of Egypt? It’s the chanting of the Sh’ma, because the Sh’ma reminds us, Hashem Eloheinu- Hashem- All existence- meaning everything that arises in your experience- is Eloheinu- your own inner divinity, meaning your awareness. Then it says, Hashem Ekhad- Existence, or Reality is One. Again and again you may get pulled into farekh- that involuntary suffering in which we contract into the egoic mitzrayim state, but if you remember ekhad- the oneness of Being, you can find your way back into harmony with what is through the verse that follows: ve’ahavtah et Hashem Elohekha- Love Hashem your Divinity, that’s the Hesed- the lovingkindness of offering your awareness as a gift to this moment just as it is, even if it feels like suffering, that’s the first part of meditation, b’khol l’vavkha uvkhol nafshekha uv’khol me’odekha- with all your heart and soul and might- that’s the Gevurah, the strength, of grounding and sustaining your awareness in your body- that’s the second part of meditation, and of course, Sh’ma Yisrael- Listen, be aware, and know yourself as the awareness- spacious, free and borderless- that’s the third part of meditation.

 [**The Perfect Passover**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-perfect-passover)
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One Passover, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev led the first night seder so perfectly, that every word and every ritual glowed with all the holiness of its mystical significance. In the dawn, after the celebration, Levi Yitzhak sat in his room, joyful and proud that he had performed such an perfect seder.

But all of a sudden, a Voice from above spoke to him: “More pleasing to me than your seder is that of Hayim the water-carrier.”

“Hayim the water-carrier?” wondered Levi Yitzhak, “Who’s that?”

He summoned all his disciples together, and asked if anyone had heard of Hayim the water-carrier. Nobody had. So, at the tzaddik’s bidding, some of the disciples set off in search of him.

They asked around for many hours before they were led to a poor neighborhood outside the city. There, they were shown a little house that was falling apart.

They knocked on the door. A woman came out and asked what they wanted. When they told her, she was amazed.

“Yes,” she said, “Hayim the water carrier is my husband, but he can’t go with you, because he drank a lot yesterday and he’s sleeping it off now. If you wake him, you’ll see he won’t even be able to move.”

“It’s the rabbi’s orders!” answered the disciples.

They barged in and shook him from his sleep. He only blinked at them and couldn’t understand what they wanted. Then he rolled over and tried to go on sleeping.

So they grabbed him, dragged him from his bed, and carried him on their shoulders to the tzaddik'shouse. There they sat him down, bewildered, before Levi Yitzhak. The rabbi leaned toward him and said-

“Reb Hayim, dear heart, what kavanah, what mystic intention was in your mind when you gathered the hameitz- the leavened foods- to burn in preparation for the seder?”

The water carrier looked at him dully, shook his head and replied, “Master, I just looked into every corner and gathered it together.”

The astonished tzaddik continued questioning him-

“And what yihudim- what holy unifications did you contemplate when you burned it?”

The man pondered, looked distressed, and said hesitatingly, “Master, I forgot to burn it, and now I remember- it’s all still lying on the shelf.”

When Rabbi Levi Yitzhak heard this, he grew more and more uncertain, but he continued asking- “And tell me Reb Hayim, how did you celebrate the seder?”

Then something seemed to quicken in his eyes and limbs, and he replied in humble tones-

“Rabbi, I shall tell you the truth. You see, I had always heard that it’s forbidden to drink brandy on all eight days of the festival, and so yesterday morning I drank enough to last me eight days. Then I got tired and fell asleep.

“When my wife woke me in the evening, she said, ‘why don’t you celebrate the seder like all the other Jews?’

“I said, ‘What do you want from me? I’m an ignorant man and my father was an ignorant man. I don’t know how to read, and I don’t know what to do, or what not to do.’

“My wife answered, ‘You must know some little song or something!’

“I thought for a moment, and then a melody and words came to me that I had heard as a child. I sang-

“Mah nishtana halaila hazeh mikol haleilot- Why is this night different from all other nights?

“I thought, 'why is this night different?'

“Then, something strange happened. It was as if I awoke from a dream, and everything was suddenly more real, more present. It was as if the night itself woke up all around me…

“Then I looked and saw the table before me, and the cloth gleamed like the sun, and on it were platters of matzot, eggs, and other dishes, with bottles of red wine. So we ate of the matzot and eggs and drank of the wine.

“I was overcome with joy. I lifted my cup to the heavens and said, 'Oh Hashem- I drink to you!'

“Then we sang and rejoiced in the nishtana- the specialness- of that moment… then I got tired and fell asleep.”

So my friends- before you fall asleep! Why is this moment different?

On this Shabbat Pesakh, the Sabbath of Passing, may we awaken to know that everything is passing, savoring the unique specialness of this moment. Let the unfolding of Reality become what it will, letting go of whatever it was, and breathing the intention of peace and love and awareness into every thought, every word, every act. Let’s go forth, again, out of  mitzrayim- out of constriction- and into the mystery of the Presence as the present. This moment is truly different from all other moments, and always is…