

Incubating a Kingdom of Priests

The Passover seder reminds of us of four promises of redemption, one for each of the four cups of wine. God declares in the Torah:

*I am the Eternal. I will **free** you from the labors of the Egyptians and **deliver** you from their bondage. I will **redeem** you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will **take** you to be My people, and I will be your God (Exodus 6:6-7).*

וַהֲצִאֵתִי אֶתְכֶם.
וַהֲצִלֵּתִי אֶתְכֶם.
וַיִּאֱלֹתֵתִי אֶתְכֶם.
וַיַּקְהִלֵּתִי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעַם.

I will free you.
I will deliver you.
I will redeem you.
I will take you to be My people.

But we know that this story of redemption is not one-and-done, not a tale of deeds of the past, retold to remind us of what's gone before. The haggadah urges us to see ourselves as if we are departing slavery, as if deliverance is meant for us in our own age. As spiritual heirs to this story of freedom and deliverance, we take on its promises and also its responsibilities.

For *why* did the Eternal bring the Hebrews out of Egypt? As God tells them at Mount Sinai:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. ... Now you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4, 6)

To be a Kingdom of Priests is to accept the responsibilities of divine service, to walk in God's ways to bring freedom and peace to all corners of God's world. In other words, Passover is not about us *getting free* but about become *agents of freedom* for the world.

Now, becoming a priest doesn't just happen overnight, as this week's Torah reading reminds us. In *Parashat Tzav*, Moses undertakes a complicated series of rituals to anoint his brother, Aaron, and Aaron's sons as priests. And then Moses instructs

them: "You shall not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting for seven days, until the day that your period of ordination is completed. For your ordination will require seven days" (Leviticus 8:33). This weeklong incubation was a period of stillness and seclusion, and we can imagine Aaron and his sons reflecting day after day on the sacred position they were about to undertake.

The seven days of Passover can serve as a similar period of transition for ourselves as we don the symbolic mantle of sacred service. Too often we think of Passover as a time to recite the ways *other* people need to work to bring freedom. We decry the social and political conditions our values reject, and we recount the "modern-day plagues" that we imagine ourselves having no part in creating. "Alas for this world of slavery! Would that someone would redeem us!"

But that someone is us. This is the time of stillness and reflection, the tremendous gift we have been given to consider how we can better live up to our calling as a Kingdom of Priests. It's easy to point fingers and to blame others while assuring ourselves that had *we* as much power as *they* do, the world would be a better place. That may be true, but it's not very helpful. Instead, our holiday challenges us to take a look at our own lives and the areas in which we do have real influence and to prepare ourselves for the year's other 51 weeks of sacred, freedom-making service.

To be a Kingdom of Priests is to see that we have power, and we must direct our hands and our hearts toward using that power for good. Pointing out the failures of the world is only a starting place; if our work ends there, we might as well stay in Egypt forever.

In line with this message of the inner work required to bring freedom, I wish to share tonight the poem "Passover Remembered" by the Episcopal priest Alla Renee Bozarth. It's a long one, about half-a-sermon in length, and I save it for special occasions like tonight.

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.

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May this be a Sabbath of preparation for a Passover of remembrance, and may we allow ourselves the time and the space needed for spiritual transformation. May this Festival of Freedom bring us not only inner peace but also inner resolve as we find our

way through the wilderness, hand in hand with one another, co-creators of this ever-renewing people dedicated to divine service.