

Who here is ready for liberation?

Come on, let me hear you yell!

I am serious.

Well, okay, I'm being kind of silly, but kind of serious. As I reflect on where we are in book our journey through Leviticus and the approach of Pesach, I am struck by the necessity of that yell.'

In the preparing for Passover class I led this past Sunday, we got into a discussion about the necessary steps towards liberation. It doesn't begin at the Red Sea, or with the first plague, or even with Moses at the burning bush. It begins way back in Exodus Chapter 2, verse 23: "The Israelites were groaning under their bondage, and they cried out. Their cry for help from bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." The cry for help is the first step towards liberation.

In fact, it sounds quite similar to a different first step from another liberation practice: "We admitted that we were powerless - that our lives had become unmanageable." That's a very close paraphrase of the first step in the 12 steps. As I was checking on 12step.org to make sure I had the steps correct, I saw this line: "Step 1 is the first step to freedom. I admit to myself that something is seriously wrong in my life."

Saying, “there is a big problem here” is what begins the unfolding of the Israelites’ liberation from Egypt, and the unfolding of many addicts’ journeys to recovery.

There is a story of the Baal Shem Tov, the miraculous founder of Chasidism, that I’ve heard a few times. I’ll paraphrase it very, very briefly. The Baal Shem Tov and his followers go visit the home of a very righteous, but very poverty stricken family. The followers watch, appalled, as the Baal Shem Tov eats up all of the food place before him and demands more. He literally eats all of the food in their house. He then starts to pray- and remember, the Baal Shem Tov has a reputation as a miracle worker - and while he is praying, one of the children of the house falls deathly sick. The followers are watching, incredulous, Why is the Baal Shem Tov allowing this to happen?

Things keep going wrong until the parents break down in tears, crying for God’s help. At that point, the Baal Shem Tov takes his leave. When his followers demand an explanation for his behavior, he tells them - “This family is so righteous that Heaven would grant them any wish, if they only would ask for it. But they have been too humble to ask. We pushed them so that they would cry out and receive their reward.”

To be honest, I've never liked that story. Maybe because as a communal spiritual leader, I can't imagine having that kind of audacity. I mean, okay, it works to behave like that if you're completely sure that your prophetic vision of how things will turn out is correct, but it doesn't leave the rest of us with much. And of course, in most of our lives, the cry is only the first step on what is a long, difficult, and for some, never ending journey. The first step is only the first step, and it doesn't all get easier as soon as we cry out.

I do, however, appreciate the point, which is of course the same point I've been making about the importance of the cry. The *necessity* of that initial cry.

And what does parashat Metzora have to do with this? Well, a *metsora* is "one who is stricken with *tsara'at*" - the biblical disease involving the whitening of the skin that is often mistranslated as leprosy. This parasha deals with the purification and reintegration of someone who has experienced *tsara'at*. In last week's parasha, Tazria, we read that someone so diagnosed had to rend their clothes and cry out "tamei, tamei" - "impure, impure," as they went into quarantine.

I read a beautiful commentary published by the American Jewish World Service years ago that suggested that the *metsora* cries out "Tamei, tamei" not to warn others away, but to awaken compassion and solidarity. It is a cry not of shame, but a cry for help. Though the *metsora* needs to go into quarantine, she does not go quietly. She demands - and receives attention. And as we will see later, in the book of Numbers, when Miriam is stricken with *tsara'at* - the whole community waits until the *metsora* is ready to rejoin.

The ritual described in this week's parasha welcomes the *metsora* back into the community, and concludes by having a priest anoint the metsora with oil. The priest's own fingers touch the ear, the thumb, the toe and the head of the metsora, showing that the metsora can indeed be touched, that there is no more separation.

The healing is not complete when the symptoms cease. The healing can only be complete after the metsora is touched by the priest, when there is no fear of stigma, when the metsora can be touched.

So we see maybe a trajectory that can be mapped back onto our liberation journey. We begin with a cry. We continue with an embrace, with connection - whether that connection is the faith in God that the Pesach story encourages, the 12 step movement's "higher power," the hands of another human being touching the metsora.

And our haftarah confirms this - the last chapter of the book of Malachi, always read on the Shabbat before Pesach, promises the coming of the prophet Elijah before the "awesome, fearful day of God." Again, lest we think that once we cry out, we're in for an easy ride, the day of redemption is described as a "fearful," awesome day." no one is promising that the journey through the wilderness will be fun. And yet the last verse says, "Elijah shall turn the hearts of the parents toward the children and the hearts of the children toward their parents, so that there will not be destruction.

Intergenerational embrace - the coming together across chasms - is what turns makes a fearful journey a journey of liberation.

We cannot make this journey silently, and we cannot make it alone. Speaking out, faith and solidarity are the keys to liberation, whether we are talking about ancient Egypt, or our external and internal liberation struggles today.

I want to note before I close that there are several ways to plug into that collective cry as we engage with the Pesach Holiday. This Sunday, we're having a facilitated viewing of the documentary, *This Changes Everything*, which explores the growing international justice movement that is united to respond to climate change. It will be a great opportunity to express the cry for liberation, as will my "Read with the Rabbi" discussion next Sunday, the 24th, of Ta Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. And of course, you may still register for our community seder, and work towards internal liberation next Saturday evening.

May we find our voices together.

Shabbat shalom.