

We are on a journey now. It begins with freedom.

You could tell it differently. You could say it begins with trauma. One of our guests at Seder last week read an amazing poem describing how terrifying and traumatic the exodus must have actually been – witnessing the plagues, walking through the mud and the wind and blowing sand of the Red Sea, witnessing the horror of drowning Egyptians and horses. How those freed slaves might have missed the safety, the relative peace and predictability of life in Egypt.

And so now we are cast out into the desert, to learn what it means to serve God instead of Pharaoh – a God about whom we have heard stories, but who was silent for 400 years of slavery. Silent until now.

We tell this story every year. We tell this story every week, every day if we pray the daily liturgy, as if it is the only story of our people – and it is. Moving from the despair and relative predictability that is servitude in Egypt, through the trauma and the wilderness, to the responsibility and interdependence that is service of the Divine. Counting the omer, the 49 days designed to take us from traumatized survivors to empowered recipients of revelation. How is that even possible?

No part of this is supposed to be easy.

I thought about this as I considered tomorrow's Torah reading, the reading for the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Pesach, spanning Chapters 14 through 16 of Deuteronomy. The end of that reading describes the festival observances, but Chapter 15, before talks about poverty. It has what some consider to be a puzzling juxtaposition of commandments, starting at verse 4:

There shall be no needy among you—since Hashem your God will bless you in the land that Hashem your God is giving you as a hereditary portion— if only you heed Hashem your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. For Hashem your God will bless you as she has promised you: you will extend loans to many nations, but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you.

If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that Hashem your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. Beware lest you harbor the base thought, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching,” so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give her nothing. She will cry out to Hashem against you, and you will incur guilt. Give to her readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the LORD your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings.

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.

Consider the mix of aspiration and realism; how the text begins with “There shall be no needy among you,” shifts to, “If, however, there is a needy person among you,” and concludes, “For there will never cease to be needy in the land.”

Is this just aspiration giving way to realism, then to despair?

I think this is a great text about uncertainty – about what hope means in the real world. I’ve been reading Rebecca Solnit’s *Hope in the Dark*, in preparation for Sunday’s “Read with the Rabbi,” and she writes about the nuclear freeze movement of the 1980s, “The freeze movement was full of people who believed they’d realize their goal in a few years and go back to private life. They were motivated by a storyline in which the world would be made safe, safe for, among other things, going home from activism.”

She goes on to describe the gains of the movement, and how those gains have atrophied, concluding, “It’s always too soon to go home.”

As I read Deuteronomy 15 through the lens of Rebecca Solnit, I realize that this what Torah is teaching us: Hold the aspiration that there shall be no needy, and fight for it. As long as you fight for it, that aspiration is possible. But don’t think it’s a fait accompli. Because there shall always be needy. It is always too soon to go home.

And I think this text is here, on the final day of Pesach, because it’s the inverse message of dayeinu, the litany during the seder that asserts verse by verse that each and every step towards liberation would have been enough. Of course it wouldn’t have been enough. Each verse of the song is lying. But that’s not to say that the dayeinu song as whole is *wrong*: if we were to reject each step because we were waiting for the whole liberation, we wouldn’t have gotten anywhere. So each not enough step is the very best we can do.

This is not hypothetical. In one day in the office this week, I received the following emails:

- A request to participate as a co-facilitator in an anti-racism training
- A request to join and speak out in support of a local labor-organizing effort
- A call to speak out against the Israeli military shootings against demonstrators in Gaza
- A request to take time to plan an anti-semitism training
- A request to speak at a local interfaith bridge-building event

That all came in on Wednesday.

It is, to be sure, too much. Even if I could do all that was being asked of me, it would still not be enough, because I am just one person in Eugene, Oregon. I am sure you have similar experiences of your own inadequacies, your own consistent lack of capacity to show up, your own despair that even if you could show up in all the ways that were asked, it would never be enough.

And yet, I say yes to what I can. I say – I can't stay til the end of the event, but I can speak at the beginning. I say, I don't think I could be much help, but I'll put you in touch with someone who can.

I say yes what I can, and I am sure you do too, because the alternative is despair, which is to say, going back to the state of slavery in Egypt – assuming we have no agency and nothing can every get better. . . Saying yes to what we can is how we face the reality that there shall always be needy, and live into the hope that there shall be no needy. I say yes to what I can and I'm sure you do too because doing so is what makes the song dayeinu true, even if each verse is a lie. It's how we take each step through the trauma, through the wilderness of too many demands and too much brokenness and our own inadequacy to fix it all – and find ourselves at the base of Mount Sinai. Day by day, step by step. Little yes, by little yes. Each not enough step on a journey that will never end has to add up to something that's enough.

Ken yehi ratzon.