

I don't know about you, but when I prepare for Pesach, I spend the bulk of my preparation energy on the beginning, on the seders. After the nights of seder end, I sometimes feel, a "what now?" sort of attitude, similar to the way I feel after many big events that have required a great deal of preparation. But in this case, there are still several more days of holiday, and figuring out my relationship with that is always a little confusing.

What comes after liberation?

There are many ways to answer that question, based both on the psychology of what happens after trauma, and on the narratives of our people's post-redemption wandering. What happens after liberation? Well, disorientation. Wandering. Mistakes. Stumbling. Grieving the lost opportunities, the still-stuck places that will take more than a moment to undo. Hopefully, eventually, healing. And of course, according to our tradition, revelation. From the second night of seder, we count forty nine days, seven weeks of seven, leading us to the day before Shavuot, the commemoration of the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai.

The *Sefer Hahinukh*, literally, the book of education, a medieval commentary on the mitzvot of the Torah, defines the mitzvah of counting of the Omer, counting the days between Pesach and Shavuot, as mitzvah number 306 (out of 613) in the Torah. The author says that we count those days because from the time of the exodus, our souls are longing to receive Torah, that the freedom is not complete until the revelation has been received. We count up, not down from 50, because if we started with such a high number, our souls might get discouraged at how long it would take to get there.

It takes time, after the trauma of slavery, our tradition teaches us, for us to be ready to fully accept the responsibility of serving God. It takes wandering in the wilderness. And as our Torah reading for this intermediate Shabbat reminds us, it takes making some severe mistakes.

On the intermediate Shabbat of Pesach, known as Chol Hamoed Pesach, we break with the usual Torah reading cycle, which has us already well into Leviticus, and return to Exodus Chapters 33 and 34, to an interaction between God and Moses, immediately after the incident of the Golden Calf. After enacting God's punishment against the transgressors, Moses ascends the mountain again. He is terribly shaken by what he has seen: the people's backsliding, God's rage, his own capacity to enact vengeance. Alone on the mountain, Moses begs God for a sign of favor, and of God's enduring presence with him. Moses begs to see God's face, but God will not allow that. At the end of Exodus 33, God tells Moses to station himself by a rock, and promises to place him *b'nikrat hatzur*, in the cleft of the rock, and pass all of God's goodness before Moses. In the subsequent verses in Chapter 34, hidden in the cleft of the rock, Moses receives the announcement of the 13 attributes of mercy of God followed by a repetition of the promise that God will safely deliver the people to the promised land, and reminders of how the three festival should be celebrated once the people are established in the land. To Moses, lonely in the cleft of the rock, and to us, those words must have been profoundly ambitious, a vision of a future in which he and the people could not begin to have faith – and all this when God would not even show God's face!

On Shabbat Chol HaMoed, we also read from Song of Songs, the mysterious love poems in the Hebrew Bible. The great commentator Rabbi Akiva called Songs of

Songs, “The Holy of Holies,” the most important book of the whole Hebrew Bible. In Song of Songs, Chapter 2, verse 14, we read, Yonati b’hagvei haselah, b’seter hamadreigah. . . “Oh my dove, in the cleft of the rocks,” let me see your face, let me hear your voice. For your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

Now, the early Rabbi Eliezer decoded this verse as referring to the whole people Israel, hidden in the cleft of the Red Sea as they crossed to dry land, explaining, “let me hear your voice,” to refer to the song they sang after reaching the other side. This time, according to Rabbi Eliezer’s view, it is God begging to see the face of the people, in contrast to Moses begging to see God’s face.

So much mutual longing for the very simplest visual forms of revelation!

In both the Torah reading and this line from Song of songs, we have not only the longing for revelation, but the image of the cleft of the rock, as the alternative. Moses gets placed in a cleft of the rock, and the lover in song of Songs pleads with the beloved to step out of the cleft of the rock, despite the different Hebrew words used for each. In each, case there is a sense of precariousness, but also a sense of anticipation. The cleft of a rock on top of a mountain is a place, in both images, of longing and expectation, discomfort, and hope for something better.

For me, this image of Moses, and perhaps of all of Israel, as being held precariously in the cleft of the cliff, is a powerful one for this immediate post-Exodus moment. We did not go free from Egypt into a state of comfort or certainty. We crossed the sea and found ourselves in the wilderness, still in a state of incompleteness.

This is where we are, in the first week of counting the Omer. Freed from the Egyptian perhaps, but not yet reoriented to serving God. It is only with the process of the wandering, counting seven weeks of seven, that we get to a point where we are collectively ready for revelation. Until then, we are perhaps precariously positioned, *b'nikrat hatzur*, or *b'hagvei haselah*, in the cleft of the rock – taken out of immediate harm, but terribly uncertain.

And this is where we inhabit most of our reality: not at the peak spiritual moments of either redemption, or revelation. Those only come occasionally, and last for but a flash. More often, we are in the cleft of the rock, longing for some greater connection so hard that we can almost taste it, but with our vision obscured.

And yet, this time and place counts too. It is the wilderness wandering, it is the time of longing in the cleft of the rock that refines our souls, far more than those flashes of revelation. So we count the days of the Omer, because they, too, have intrinsic value. There is so much potential, even in this vulnerable, longing space; as Moses found when the 13 attributes of mercy were called before him. As the beloved finds when the lover calls.

At every moment, we can consider ourselves not only as if we had left Egypt, these readings remind us, but in the moments afterwards, in the cleft of the rock, waiting to hear what the next call will be, doing our best to be receptive to whatever will be revealed. It is how receptive we can be to the call, and how we respond when we hear the call, that will truly determine what the next steps of the journey will, and what revelation we will merit.