Exodus and Exile:

Thoughts on Coalition & Redemption

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The fonts were selected in the hope of using one font that works well in both Hebrew and English.

**Note about Bible, God, and Quotations**

Wherever possible, this work avoids gendered language for God. Most Bible quotations used in this work are from Mechon-Mamre (1917 Jewish Publication Society translation, public domain) or Sefaria (1985 JPS translation, shared as fair use). In a few cases, I adapted the translation to avoid masculine God-language.

Exodus 6, on pages 5 and 6, is central to this whole enterprise. For that, I chose to quote Everett Fox's translation because the sense of the God-Moses exchange is portrayed in a way that matches the commentary being discussed and the use of YHVH for the tetragrammaton highlights the change of name for God. Fox uses a masculine pronoun for God, however, presumably to keep to the rhythm of the Hebrew; I removed that.

For the few verses of Psalm 95 on page 34, I chose Pamela Greenberg's translation for its beautiful rendering of God's frustration with the People and for its un-gendered language. (Greenberg uses second person for God to avoid gender in English and to create a more personally involving, prayable psalms text.) Ironically, I had to add a another translation using masculine God-language so as not to lose the sense of the story from Sanhedrin.

I made no attempt to alter any Bible text that appears within another quotation. And I made no attempt to rewrite gendered language or old-fashioned spellings or wording in most midrashic and other sources.

For the few pieces of Talmud text included, I make use of what is accessible on-line and included here a mix of Soncino and Sefaria -- whichever seemed to make most sense of the content. See also Bibliography.

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By the rivers of Babylon, 
there we sat down, 
yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. 
There, upon the willows, we hung up our harps. 
For there our captors asked of us words of song, 
and our tormentors asked of us mirth: 
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.' 
How shall we sing the YHVH'S song in a foreign land? 
--Ps. 137:1-4, adapted Old JPS translation

The language of "Babylon" has so much to tell us, even -- perhaps especially -- as we prepare to engage the Passover story.

Exile saturates Jewish sacred text, practice, and thought. From the first couple’s banishment from Eden, early in Genesis, to the Babylonian captivity, which closes Second Chronicles, the Hebrew Bible is filled with themes of loss, wandering, and desire for return. Even the Exodus, Judaism’s foundational tale of escape from human oppression and entrance into service of God, carries a strong exilic theme: “Remember you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

And in these times, where Jews in the U.S. all too often find ourselves looking too much like Pharaoh, it is helpful to infuse our approach to Passover with some of the experience of Babylon.

Decades ago, Michael Walzer concluded his *Exodus and Revolution* with this now oft-quoted adage:

  First, wherever you are, it is probably Egypt. 
  Second, that there is a better place, 
  a world more attractive, a promised land; 
  and third, that the way to the land is through the wilderness. 
  There is no way to get from here to there 
  except by joining together and marching.

But does it still work today for us to think of ourselves as a naive people waiting for redemption from Egypt?

A more apt characterization, at this point, might be that we are a conflicted people with a history of marching toward a liberation that never quite materializes the way we (and God?) had hoped, now stuck in a strange, problematic place but unsure about that Promised Land...

...Would it be worth the upheaval?

There is great inspiration and comfort in that image of "joining together and marching" to that "better place." But there are pratfalls in that imagery, too. It is so easy to be lulled into thinking that we are marching toward equality and justice, when we're, in reality, dragging the whole of that mythical Egypt with us. This year, let's see if some new imagery can assist us in making better progress...
An Exodus Crash?
Rabbi Benay Lappe, of SVARA: The Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, teaches that Jews face three options when our "master story" -- like the idea that we’re meant to organize ourselves around Jerusalem Temple worship -- "crashes," that is, is no longer working as it once did:

1) re-entrench, ignore evidence that things are not working (the drift away from Temple service even before 70 CE, e.g., and then the actual destruction), and find ways to stick to the old story;

2) choose a new story (assimilate into Greek or Roman stories, e.g., or adopt Christianity); or

3) transform the old story-- as the Rabbis of the Mishnah did in creating what we now know and practice, in many forms, as "(Rabbinic) Judaism."

Exodus and Exile
As noted above, the Tanakh [Hebrew bible] follows an arc from Creation, with its seeds of exile, through Revelation, toward Redemption; and then back to exile again. This is repeated in practice, over the course of each Shabbat, across the annual festival cycle, and in the schedule of Torah readings.

The Five Books of Moses close with the People on the banks of the Jordan, hopeful but not yet home. We never pass this point in the annual reading cycle (an invention of Jews in exile), instead linking “Never again was there a prophet in Israel like Moses...” immediately to “In the beginning.” Before the very first portion ends, Eve and Adam have already been expelled from Eden.

Babylonian captivity infuses centuries of Torah interpretation and Jewish philosophy: After Babylon, Jews can never un-know that, however close to the promised Land we appear to get, exile is always just beyond the horizon, and holding onto the “Promised Land” will be harder and require a more sustained ethical commitment than we’ve managed so far.

For Jews, Babylon eventually becomes a crazy patchwork of motifs: distant origin, traumatic captivity, and creative center. Christians, Rastas, and others bring additional perspectives. In U.S. politics, Babylon has become a cracked mirror reflecting tyrants, colonizers, oppressors, and idolaters -- all of whom are us, at one time or another.

About the relationship of Exodus and Exile, David W. Stowe writes in Song of Exile:

We can readily see how the Exodus lends itself to popular culture – Hollywood, for example—in ways that the Exile doesn’t. The Exodus has a strong central character, Moses...cut from heroic cloth. By contrast the Exile features a shifting cast of characters, none of whom seem quite heroic....
In place of the more "triumphant" climax of the Exodus story, Stowe continues, "Judeans slowly drift back to Judah after Babylonia is conquered by the Persians, and eventually the Temple is rebuilt." While Exile does not have the characteristics of a Hollywood favorite, he argues, the story is perhaps a better fit for the complex “diasporic sensibility of so many ethnic and racial communities in North America,” some of whom thought of “North America as a Promised Land or New Jerusalem,” while “many others imagined themselves as temporary sojourners, never forgetting the links that bound them to a homeland” (Stowe, p.103).

Taking a few pages from Stowe's book, we can bring some of the less heroic, decidedly messier background of Exile to inform our Passover journey...maybe taking a step toward a view of Exodus that will sustain us and guide in the difficult work ahead for Jews in the United States in pursuing liberation for ourselves and our neighbors.

**One Job: To Learn Something**

We bless and drink four cups of wine, recline and dip and sing. We gather for hours to celebrate, share stories, eat unleavened bread. Does that suffice, though, for us to have "come forth from Egypt"?

One clue is suggested by the four cups of wine at the Passover Seder and the verbs associated with them. In Exodus 6:6-7 God tells Moses what is being promised to the enslaved Children of Israel:

"I will..."

1. **bring you out** [וְהצֵאתִי]...
2. **rescue you** [וְצלְתי]...
3. **redeem you** [וְגָאלְת]..." and
4. **take you** (as a partner/spouse) [לָחְתי]...

We do focus on getting out, being rescued and redeemed, and entering into covenant with God. But it's all too easy to miss the crucial knowledge component framing these promises:

"(by) my name YHWH I was **not known** to them....and you **shall know** that I am YHWH your God, who brings you out from beneath the burdens of Egypt" -- Ex 6:2-7 (see box at right).

According to the text, the People have a history with God, have been sojourning in covenant with God, and are now moaning in servitude.

That's the old situation. And it's about to change.
No requirements on the People's part are delineated. It does seem that their moaning has already been crucial to the happenings here. Beyond, that, however, Moses is only told about God's promised actions and that the whole process is to result in new knowledge for the People: "and you shall know..."

Later in Exodus we'll learn about the Pesach sacrifice and preparations for departure, as well as related commandments, elaborated extensively through the ages. Passover has evolved to include much to do.

But right here, where it starts, the People have one job: to learn something new.

We can start by reviewing what we know about our old situation: "I was seen by Avraham, by Yitzhak, and by Yaakov as God Shaddai... where they had sojourned." That story is inextricably bound to Exile.

**El Shaddai, God of the Hebrews, There and Them**

Previously, "[God] was seen by Avraham, by Yitzhak, and by Yaakov as God [El] Shaddai."

The use of God's "old" name, El Shaddai, at this point in the story is curious. The name, YHVH, was already revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3:6), Moses was told to share it with the children of Israel (Ex 3:15) and the elders (Ex 3:18), and the name has been used in the first audience of Aaron and Moses with Pharaoh: "YHVH, the God of the Hebrews [YHVH elohei ha-ivrim, יְהוָהאֱהֵיהָעבְיים]" (Ex 5:3).

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**El Shaddai**
The name is possibly linked to Akkadian for "mountain" and/or Hebrew for "breast" or "power," the former suggesting a somewhat localized relationship, and the latter focusing on particular attributes, especially fertility. The text tells us that each Patriarch met God Shaddai in his own generation. The relationship of the whole People to God – like the name we don't yet know – is yet to develop....

Notice, that names by which matriarchs met God do not appear in this conversation with Moses. On Hagar’s name for God, see p.29

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So, how is it that God is now saying: "but (by) my name YHWH I was not known to them"? What is it that is still unknown?

Cassuto (Italy, 1883–1951) argues that this "not known to them" stresses the new name's link to future fulfillment of the four promises: bring you out, rescue you, redeem you, and take you. We won't really know God -- "who brings you out from beneath the burdens of Egypt" -- until we collectively experience the Exodus.

**What must we experience together,**
**in our various communities and in the wider society,**
**to know God COLLECTIVELY as Liberator,**
**Fulfiller of Promises, YHVH (I will be who I will be)**
**in addition to the name INDIVIDUALLY known already?**

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Another effect of using the "old" name at this point in the story is to turn our attention back to "there" and "them." Several times in the earlier chapters of Exodus, God uses the identity expression "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." In addition, God tells Moses "I am the God of your father [anochi elohei avicha, אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ]" (Ex 3:6), using the plural, "God of your fathers [elohei avoteichem, אֱלֹהֵי אָבוֹתֶיכֶם]," when Moses is to address all the children of Israel and the elders (Ex 3:15, 16).

Toward our one job, "EXILE," pages 7-14, offers some background around the views of "back home" in the text, and how God was known in the past, what it means to be "ivri," and how the Joseph Cycle leads us into Egypt, before we finally reach for that first cup.
The Torah tells us little about the background of Abraham and Sarah, except that they leave it. We learn, eventually, that their family maintains ties with the folk “back home.” And that on-going relationship has a lot to do, both logistically and thematically, with the larger theme of Israel’s relationship to exile. The narratives of Genesis, meanwhile, are tied up with historical places that carried specific meanings. We will miss those without some background on some ancient places.

Back Home
The places specifically linked to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis are *Ur Kasdim* [[א(כשְדים] and *Haran* [חָ*ן]. Scholars from a variety of fields today identify these biblical locations with the historical cities of Ur, west of the Euphrates River in the southernmost area of Mesopotamia, and Harran, between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in the northern-most section of Mesopotamia. Babylon is also between the rivers, south of Harran and north of Ur. In Jewish discourse, “Babylon” sometimes means the city; sometimes, Babylonia as an empire or the whole region of Mesopotamia.

The map below is offered as an aid to visualizing the various travels described in Genesis. Here, the “*Haran*” of Genesis is understood as “Harran” of history, and "*Ur Kasdim* (Ur of the Chaldees)” is understood as the historical Ur. Other names in Genesis for Abraham’s country, *Padan-Aram* and *Aram Naharaim*, are understood to mean something similar to “Mesopotamia,” i.e., place between the rivers.

This map was created from materials available from the "Maps of the Ancient Near East," a project of the Oriental Institute, the University of Chicago. In addition to their museum, the Oriental Institute ("OI" on the map), founded in 1919, offers a wealth of on-line information in history and archaeology that helps illuminate destination and "back home" for Abraham, Sarah and family.

(Sketching out their biblical travels is not a claim of historicity for Terah &Co.)
Harran was considered important “in its biblical context” and for “study of ancient Near Eastern religion,” when the Oriental Institution planned an expedition to the area in 1983. Scholars had also noted long-term connections between Ur and Harran.

From an Assyriologist (1964):

The foremost astral deities were, of course, Šamaš (Sumerian Utu) and Sin (originally Su’en, Sumerian Nanna), the sun god and the moon god. Each had two major centers in Mesopotamia, Šamaš in Larsa and in Sippar, where his temples were called “White House,” and Sin in Ur and in far-off Harran. Both maintained their popularity throughout the entire history of Mesopotamian civilization.

— A. Leo Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia, p.195

And from a biblical scholar (2003):

In the course of Nabonidus’s reign [6th Century BCE], it became increasingly clear that there was to be a new, more inclusive religious identity uniting the empire: the worship of the moon god Sin, who unlike Marduk was not tied to a single city but was indigenous to both the Babylonian south (Ur) and the Aramean north (Haran).

— Rainer Albertz, Israel in Exile, p.65

Cassuto’s biblical commentary, in particular, makes use of such scholarship to explain the travels of Genesis. This, in turn, sheds light on Exile, Egypt, and Passover.

With them/אִתם

Two of the few details we get about Abraham and Sarah involve departures:

- Terah, took his son, Abraham, daughter-in-law, and nephew, and "with them departed from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwell there" (Gen 11:31).

- At Haran, God tells Abraham to go forth; he goes, with Sarah and his family group: “…they departed to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan” (Gen 12:1, 4).

The Torah does not explain why Terah left Ur "with them" or why Abraham is later told to leave Haran. Cassuto explores the language; adds history of "firm and permanent ties" between Ur and Haran, as "centres of the cult of the moon-god Sin" (From Noah to Abraham, p.275); and combines ancient midrash. The result sketches some background for the travels of the "wandering Aramean" and family:

Influenced by Abram and his circle, Terah and other members of the family also felt an inner urge — not yet not sufficiently strong or clear — in the spiritual direction toward which Abram was set with all his heart and soul. But they did not succeed in overcoming completely the attraction of idol worship.
and were unable to abandon the world of paganism; they did, in truth, set out on the journey, but stopped in the middle of the away.

Throughout his life, [Terah] did not find the strength to continue his journey and reach the goal that he originally had in mind under his son’s influence. When he came to another city dedicated to [moon] worship — to Haran — he did not succeed in freeing himself from the spell of idolatry, and stayed there.

-- Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, p.281, 283

The departure of Gen 12:1 — “from your land, from your kindred, and from your father’s house” — is often read as thorough and decisive. Covenantal language, which includes a name change for Abraham and Sarah (from the original Abram and Sarai) and the ritual of circumcision to separate those in- from those outside (Gen 17), suggests that a serious break with the past is intended. Later, however, Abraham sends to his people back home to find a wife for his son Isaac (Gen 24), and Jacob spends two decades in the old country, marrying two women from his grandparents’ kindred (Gen 29ff).

Abraham is old and telling the elder servant of his household to go "to my country, and to my kindred (or: the land of my birth) [אֶל-אֲבָרָםוּ אַל-מַלְדָּת] to get a wife for my son Isaac" (Gen 24:1-2). The servant (later identified as Eliezer) asks what to do, should he find a potential wife who doesn’t consent to return with him: Should he bring Isaac back...

In contrast to Gertrude Stein’s “no there there,” there is a lot of “there”--שָם--here.

Commentators across centuries have explored many “there” details: Did Abraham intend a specific place? Specific kin? Why not encourage marriage with neighbor families? Was the union meant to seal some kind of family reconciliation? One of the most salient answers, for present purposes, stresses basic there-ness:

Abraham was sent away from his country, kindred and father’s house, so that he should have no further contact with them and be a stranger in a foreign clime...Similarly, his son must not marry [a Canaanite]. For this reason he was called Abraham the *Hebrew*, “that all the world was on one side and he on the other” (*ivri* means in Hebrew “a person from the other side” usually taken as a reference to Abraham’s origins in Mesopotamia — on the other side of the river).


Abraham is *ivri*, from there. As in “not from here.” A key experience that his descendants will repeat — in Egypt, in the wilderness, in later exile. At this point in Genesis, Abraham and his family are becoming separate. That separateness will play an important role in the Exodus and, later, Babylonian Captivity. Meanwhile, though, after Rebecca comes "from there" to marry Isaac and raise their sons, the situation will be reversed for the next generation, with Jacob finding his wives and fathering children in the land where, according to Leibowitz and so many others, God intended there should be "no further contact."
Traveling Back
After tricking his brother Esau out of birthright and blessing, Jacob is urged, separately by each parent, to leave Canaan for his uncle's household (Gen 27, 28). Isaac echoes Abraham's earlier words, telling his son to find a wife “from there [משם, misham].”

In their instructions to Jacob, Rebecca calls her old home “Haran,” while Isaac calls the place “Paddan-Aram.” Jacob goes to Paddan-Aram (Gen 28:5), going out from Beer-Sheva toward Haran (Gen 28:10). Where he arrives, however, is “ארץ בני-קדם,” the “land of the Easterners [ארץ בני-קדם]” (Gen 29:1).

Jacob’s grandparents and parents retained a sense of “from there,” while leaving “back home” behind: Sarah and Abraham left there, as did Rebecca. But Jacob’s trajectory is different: He will live decades, work on the land, marry and father children among the people of הקדם. The plain meaning of arriving “ארץ בני-קדם” is reaching the “land of the Easterners.” Nevertheless, Jacob has traveled into his family’s past.

Two Sisters, Two Stories
Jacob arrives in the land of the Easterners, where he sees a well and flocks of sheep and then meets locals who tell him his cousin Rachel is on the way. Rachel, whose name means “ewe,” is intricately woven into this landscape and the household of Laban, where she is seen and heard taking an active role. In contrast, Leah has no active role in the household or relationship to the land; we only learn of her son's mandrakes, perhaps a tenuous link to the land, when Rachel commandeers them.

The sisters jointly declare themselves “as outsiders” [מכנן] in Laban’s household, when Jacob proposes leaving (Gen 31:14-16). The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary adds:

By acknowledging their outsider status in the household, Leah and Rachel prepare themselves to journey to an unknown land. They distinguish themselves from their father, citing the egregious manner in which he married them off and then denied them their due.
— Rachel Havrelock, commentary to the portion Vayetze

But this pans out differently for the sisters:

**Leah.** As noted above, Leah is largely a cipher in her earlier life, and her connections to the land or household do not increase. We learn nothing about the later stage of her life, but we do know that Leah settles with Jacob and the extended family in Canaan; she is buried at Machpelah with Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, and, finally, Jacob (Gen 49:31). We also learn that Dinah, “the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land” (Gen 34:1). Dinah's troubling story links her, like her mother, to the new land.

**Rachel.** As noted above, Rachel is embedded in her native landscape. In addition, in the later part of her story, she has strong relationships to the old land. She steals the terafim (תראפים [idols, household gods]) from her father's house (Gen 31:34). These may be related to clan leadership or inheritance, although there is great variation in how this act is interpreted. However interpreted, with the theft, she exhibits strong opinions about her native culture, her birth family, and her place in it. Rachel does not simply move on from the old land.
A Voice in Ramah
We saw above how the landscape appears prior to Rachel’s gradually coming into view as part of it (Gen 29) when Jacob first meets her. In Jeremiah 31:12, a cry is heard “wailing, bitter weeping,” before we are told that the cry is Rachel’s. She is tied strongly to the land of her birth. She doesn’t leave it easily or have an opportunity to live in the new land. She gives birth to the only child of the family born in the new land but dies in the process and is buried there, on the road to Efrat (Gen 35:19).

The midrash asks: Why did Jacob see fit to bury her there?

Because our father Jacob foresaw that they who were to be exiled would pass by way of Ephrath (Efrat).* Therefore he buried her there, so that she might beseech mercy for them. Referring to this, Scripture says, “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children” (Jer. 31:15). — Sefer Ha-Aggadah 50:87, based on Genesis Rabbah 82:10

*Hebron and the cave of Machpelah, burial site for Leah and the other patriarchs and matriarchs, is south, out of the way of the exiles, while Ramah is north of Jerusalem, in the path of the exiles going northeast to Babylon.

The bookends of Rachel’s life and death link her to
- the “artzah bnei-kedem,” the East Country, or the land of the past -- as well as of future Exile; and
- the new land, in a way that reverberates with Exile ahead.

Rachel’s first-born, Joseph, is powerfully linked to the new land, in which Rachel has no personal future, and to Egypt, the land of a different exile. And her separation from her second child in death is equated midrashically with Israel’s separation from future children in exile.

Rachel, “Arch-Lamenter”
In ”Bodies Performing in Ruins: The Lamenting Mother in Ancient Hebrew Texts,” Galit Hasan-Rokem summarizes one of the proems of Lamentations Rabbah, Petichta (5th Century CE). In it Moses shows the patriarchs death and destruction in the aftermath of the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem. The patriarchs and Moses fail, Hasan-Rokem explains, to "move the heart of the angry father God," and then the following scene unfolds:

At that moment Rachel leapt before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said:

“Lord of the universe, you know that Jacob your servant loved me exceedingly, and toiled for my father on my behalf for seven years. And at the end of seven years, when the time of my marriage arrived, my father advised that my sister should replace me, and I suffered greatly because his counsel became known to me. And I informed my husband and I gave him a sign so that he might distinguish between my sister and me, and my father would be unable to replace me.

“Later, I repented and suppressed my desire, and took pity on my sister so that she would not be shamed. In the evening, they substituted my sister for me with my husband, and I gave my sister all the signs that I had agreed on with my husband, so that he would believe that she was Rachel. More than that, I went under the bed upon which he lay with my sister, and when he spoke to her and she remained silent, I gave all the answers so that he would not recognize my sister’s voice.” (continues)
So far, Rachel’s speech follows the narrative in B. Talmud Baba Batra 123a, explicating the enigmatic line, “in the morning, behold! it was Leah” (Gen 29:25). Now Lam. Rab., Petichta takes a new direction:

(proem cont. from p.11) “I was gracious, I was not jealous, and spared her shame and dishonour. If I, only flesh and blood, dust and ashes, was not jealous of my rival and spared her shame and dishonour, why should you, the everlasting and compassionate King, be jealous of idolatry, which is insubstantial, and exile my children who were slain by the sword, and let their enemies do with them what they wish?”

Forthwith, the mercy of the Holy One, blessed be He, was stirred, and He said: “For your sake, Rachel, I will restore Israel to their place. And so it was written:

Thus said the Lord:/A voice was heard in Ramah
lamentation and bitter weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children,
refusing to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more (Jeremiah 31:14).

And it is written:
Thus says the LORD:/Refrain your voice from weeping,
And your eyes from tears,
For your work shall be rewarded, says the LORD,
And they shall come back from the land of the enemy (Jeremiah 31:15).

And it is written:
There is hope in your future, says the LORD,
That your children shall come back to their own border (Jeremiah 31:16).

-- Lamentations Rabbah, Petichta, translated by Hasan-Rokem; paragraph breaks added for easier reading

**Partner in Redemption**

Rachel argues that, if she, with her limited human resources, managed to behave without jealousy, God should definitely be able to overlook idolatry. Her partnership with God in redemption seems an important model to keep in mind as we approach Passover. And it presents a useful caution, to which we’ll return later, about being careful what we wish for should we ask God to send down wrath on idol worshippers.

Moreover, Hasan-Rokem comments that Rachel is offering as token “not her premature death...but rather her life, the enduring of the burning passion of the added seven years of longing between her and Jacob.” The burning passion is significant, in this context, as an illustration of

the transformation of stored-up erotic energy into the power that can produce a lament so effective it will move even the angry and despotic Divine Majesty....Rachel emerges almost as a weeping goddess, and certainly as a partner to God in the act of redemption.

— “Bodies Performing in Ruins,” p.57

If it's the power of Rachel's stored up longing that moves God, what does that suggest about the stored up tears of all who remain oppressed today? And what lessons might Rachel's speech suggest for people struggling to function with integrity and flexibility in a diverse, often contradictory, world?
EXILE * BABEL* BABYLON * BACK HOME * THERE * EXILE

At the start of our Exodus tale: God tells Moses: "I was seen by Avraham, by Yitzhak, and by Yaakov as God Shaddai...where they had sojourned." God does not mention what name Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and/or Rachel knew. But Rachel's powerful appearance before God in Lam. Rab., Petichta suggests that there's more variety in divine relationships than our Passover re-tellings sometimes present.

What must we experience together, in our various communities and in the wider society, to really know God by the name YHVH? Can reconnecting with the variety of relationships to "back home" expand our Passover experience?

Babylonian Time Travel
As we conclude this background section, a few more thoughts on the ambivalence toward diversity found in- and outside Judaism and often related to the concepts of Babel and Baylon.

Babel/Babylon
In a dvar torah [word of Torah, sermon of sorts] for the Torah portion Noach (Gen 6:9-11:32), Rabba Sara Hurwitz, of Yeshivat Maharat, writes on Babel and diversity:

And God models how to exist in a world of diversity. In verse 7, when God goes down to mete out their punishment, God says: “Come let US go down.”

Rashi, addressing the question of who God is talking to, suggests that God “took counsel with the Angels, with his judicial court.” Surely God knows how to mete out judgment and punishment, as he has already done unilaterally in the Torah without discussing it with the Angels? Perhaps, God turns to them to asses their thoughts on the sin of the people, to hear their opinion, to debate the pros and cons of scattering the people all over the world. By addressing the Angels, God models how to collaborate with others. Diverse ideas, when debated in a respectful manner, can lead to growth, greater productivity, and ultimately harmony.

...The challenge with diversity is to reject the tendency toward segregating, and running away from conflict. For out of conflict, when we are willing to confront one another with healthy debate, tolerance is born...
— Hurwitz, "Harmony, not Conformity"

Hurwitz’s dvar torah is about Babel, not Babylon. She mentions no historical city or empire. Plenty of homilies, in- and outside the Orthodox world, identify Babel with Babylon and incorporate views of the latter; idol-worship, smugness of place, and failure to follow God’s commandments are common themes linking Babel and Babylon. However large a role Babylon plays in any given dvar torah, the overarching point is to help us better understand the Torah, ourselves, and our obligations as Jews — not to tease out insights on life in ancient Babylon.

From a non-Jewish academic perspective, Erin Runions analyses Babylon as a complex, often contradictory theme in U.S. culture and politics. She writes about the Tower:

The Tower of Babel appears in political and religious discourse when people want to think about what holds the United States together in the face of its racial and cultural diversity. Because the Babelian creation of diverse languages is typically read as both God’s will and at the same time a punishment, the story lends itself well to representing a range of attitudes about difference. A confusing (continues)
ambivalence about unity and about too much diversity emerges. Via the Babel story, Babylon is sometimes used to promote tolerance toward sexual and ethnic difference, insofar as U.S. Americans see themselves as benevolent toward difference. At other times it is used to stigmatize and attack difference as embodying a problematic unity without moral distinctions.

— The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty, p. 22-23

Runions calls Babylon “a surprisingly multivalent symbol” in U.S. culture and politics and then dedicates 300 pages to unpacking its complexities. There is much to consider.

Talmudic Babylon
Finally, it is instructive to consider how Rabbinic views of “Babylon” evolved over several centuries in telling and retelling a similar teaching:

From the land of Palestine in the First Century CE, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai taught:

Why should Israel have been exiled to Babylon more than to any of the other lands? Because Abraham’s family came from there. By what parable may the matter be explained? By the one of a woman who was [sent by her husband back] to the house of her father.

— Bialik & Ravnitsky, The Book of Legends 149-150:18 [Tosefta Baba Kama 7:3]

Rabbi Yohanan’s teaching merges the Babylon of Captivity, which was roughly 700 years before his time, with the “back home” of Abraham, which the rabbis of the Talmud placed at some 1500 years earlier. Whatever else it says about Babylon, the teaching does seem to confirm the idea of an ongoing relationship between Israel and “back home.”

Two hundred years later, the older teaching is amended in two ways that highlight benefits of Babylon:

R. Hanina said: The Holy One exiled them to Babylonia because the language is akin to the language of the Torah. R. Yohanan said: Because He thus sent Israel back to their mother’s house. As when a man grows angry at his wife, where does he send her? Back to her mother’s house. Ulla said [God sent them to Babylonia] so that they might eat dates and occupy themselves with Torah.

— The Book of Legends 380:25 [B. Pes 87b-88a]

The final comment from Ulla (3rd-4th Century CE), who traveled between the Talmud academies of Palestine and those of Babylonia, adds a third time period to the merged Babylon concept:

• Abraham’s original home,
• place of Captivity, and
• contemporary place where the speaker has witnessed Jews thriving in body and soul.

Rabbi Yohanan’s teaching is still there; at this point, however, it’s book-ended with entirely positive comments about Babylon as the time travel expands.

In addition to merging time periods, both teachings rely on some merging of geographical locations, worth exploring as we re-tell the sojournings of our ancestor, the wandering Aramean.
Knew and Knew Not

Between Exile and Exodus -- between "wandering Arameans" and "great nation, mighty and many" whom the Egyptians oppressed and afflicted -- is the Joseph Cycle. Joseph and his brothers are not part of the litany when Moses learns about ancestors who knew God "as God Shaddai," and their sojournings. But the Joseph story is an important part of our "old situation." And a few moments with "The ABCs of Slavery," the Joseph chapter in Dick Gregory's Bible Tales with Commentary, can help us clarify an important aspect of our seder journey.

Gregory begins his commentary with notes on dreamers and dreaming:

Joseph found out it's dangerous to be a dreamer. Just like Joseph's brothers, society today has three ways of dealing with dreamers. Kill the dreamer. Throw the dreamer in jail (the contemporary "cisterns" in our society). Or sell the dreamer into slavery; purchase the dream with foundation grants or government deals, until the dreamer becomes enslaved to controlling financial or governmental interests. Society tries to buy off the dream and lull the dreamer to sleep. It's called a "lull-a-buy."  

-- Dick Gregory's Bible Tales, p.70

In this 1974 publication, Gregory goes on to say that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "experienced all the ways society tries to deal with dreamers," concluding: "Dreamers can be killed. Dreams live on."

Today, as in 1974, readers of many backgrounds can relate to a system that tries to destroy dreams by attacking dreamers. It is noteworthy in Gregory's presentation here that MLK is introduced without explicit reference to race; in contrast to elsewhere in the same book, where King's Blackness is highlighted, this passage portrays the leader more generally as a dreamer who treaded in dangerous political territory.

Gregory then shifts to a more racially explicit perspective, suggesting that "maybe Joseph was a Black cat." He continues, regarding Joseph's incarceration and interpretation of dreams for fellow inmates (Gen 40):

The butler in the Joseph story symbolizes America's treatment of Black folks. The butler used Joseph's talent as an interpreter of dreams and he promised to tell Pharaoh about Joseph. As soon as the butler got himself comfortably back in Pharaoh's palace, he forgot about his word to Joseph.

America was built on the sweat, toil, and talent of Black folks. But when the work was done and the talent utilized, America quickly forgot its debt to Blacks. Black folks helped lay down the railroad tracks, but they could only work as porters after the trains started running. Black slaves picked the cotton, but the garment industry belonged to white folks.

-- Bible Tales, p.73

Then, as now, readers outside the Black community can relate to the feeling of being ill-used. But here Gregory specifically references the experience of Black people enslaved in the U.S. and their descendants. Those of us for whom this is not direct experience must recognize, however, what we know and don't know.
We might consider the dreamer passage outside-in, bringing outside experience to illuminate sacred text, while the butler passage works inside-out, bringing sacred text to illuminate the outside world. These forms of Torah overlap, and we can all learn from both. It is crucial for all of us to listen to and try to empathize with views not our own. It's an important and useful practice to seek out biblical commentary from a variety of different perspectives.

But these two forms of commentary from Dick Gregory illustrate a crucial Passover reminder:

- Each generation must see ourselves as though we actually left Egypt, but that experience alone does not make us first-hand experts on topics like "America's treatment of Black folks."
- We must carefully distinguish between learning about others' experiences, on the one hand, and mistaking it for our own, on the other.

**We Don't Know What We Don’t Know**

Much of "Exodus and Exile" focuses on opening new pathways along the Passover journey. One component in that journey is the Bible text itself. A useful resource in expanding perspectives on the text is *The Peoples’ Companion to the Bible*. Designed to put “cultural diversity at the very center of reading the Bible," the book is advertised as an "opportunity to encounter the Bible 'again for the first time' ....in the company of women and men who have taken very different paths across its landscapes." In addition to providing a range of perspectives that may be new to many of us, in commentary on the text itself, this book offers a Bible Readers' Self-Inventory, "to assist you in identifying and reflecting on some of the factors at work in the way you read or hear the Bible and to gain a stronger sense of your own voice as an interpreter of the Bible." (*The Peoples’ Companion to the Bible*, p. xxix).

The inventory reminds readers that "none of us comes to the Bible as a 'blank slate,'" and asks us to consider how personal factors -- like family background, race, ethnicity, class, and education -- affect one's reading. It also includes elements of religious background (or lack thereof), like teachers and beliefs about textual authority. Examining these questions explicitly is a useful step toward uncovering some implicit biases and coming to the Bible with some new understandings.

Their inventory, like the entire volume, is organized for Christian readers, primarily students at Christian seminaries. It can be found in the Introduction to *The Peoples’ Companion to the Bible*, available through the Fortress Press website. An adaptation, "Jews Self-Inventory for Bible Readers," is available on "A Song Every Day" blog and at Academia.edu.

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Some self-inventory results, as an example and as a form of full disclosure for this work:

I read as a person of faith (of sorts), a woman who values all gender expressions, egalitarianism, racial justice, and cross-community understanding.

My upbringing includes the snobbery of “regular folks” toward the better-heeled; privileges of the cis-het as well as anger and confusion of a woman in an antifeminist religious world; benefits and challenges of growing up white on Chicago's West Side, with a relatively crime- and violence-free youth, followed by enormous upheaval of the late '60s, “Urban Renewal,” White Flight, and the complete dismantling of my childhood neighborhood.

Bible was largely irrelevant in my early years, neither comfort nor foe. Eventually, I found my way in through female and other marginal characters and through commentaries from the margins.

I try to prioritize sources that affirm my values while also seeking variety in viewpoints.

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First Cup: Under the Millstone

According to midrash (see boxes below), many Hebrew slaves did not leave Egypt, while many Egyptians did not stay. This raises questions about how we might follow in the footsteps of those who did get out:

- Can God **bring us out** "from under the millstone that is Egypt," while we remain unmoved?
- How can God **rescue us**, if we remain chained to old ideas, accepting enslavement as due course?
- Can we be **redeemed** "with an outstretched arm and formidable judgments" without experiencing any disruption to life as usual?
- Can God **take us** as a nation and be for us as a God, if nothing changes in our commitments?

"The millstone that is Egypt" [סבְתמצְ:יִם, sivlot mitzrayim] -- the English expression is a favorite from New American Haggadah; commonly: "yoke," "oppression," or "burdens" -- is associated with the first cup near the start of the seder. We have still not begun to move away from the weight of our old circumstances and assumptions, but we are examining where we are, rethinking our ideas about ourselves and those around us.

No Monolith

It is a mistake to think of the Egyptians or the Israelites in the Exodus story as monolithic, according to Rabbi Gerry Serotta, who has spent decades in interfaith and other boundary-crossing work. Traditional midrash (below) teaches otherwise, and it is good practice to look for the variety of people and perspectives in biblical narrative because “variety is God’s plan.” We see this, he says, in the story of Babel (Genesis Chapter 11) and in many later teachings about the value of galut [exile] and dispersion.

God’s preference for variety may seem contrary to a tale repeating “You are MY people and I am YOUR God” and “Let My people go that they may serve ME.” Variety is found in the Exodus tale, however, and in centuries of Jewish teaching centered around it. Seeking out and naming variety within biblical stories helps us avoid pigeonholing people and stereotyping groups in the text, in history, and in contemporary life. Exploring and amplifying difference-celebrating strands of Jewish teaching, from ancient times to the present, provides a foundation for inter-group understanding and cooperation.

Hebrews: It is taught that only one in five Hebrews left Egypt (see box at right), while 80% -- "unworthy," or those who chose not to leave -- died in the plague of darkness.

In addition, teachers describe quite a variety of possible relationships between Hebrews and Egyptians. See below.

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The Hebrew word "midrash" comes from the root "to search" and encompasses a long, deep, and varied tradition of reading scripture beyond the surface. *Shemot [Exodus] Rabbah* [Big], "Big" collection of Exodus midrash, was compiled about 1000 years ago from older sources.

"Another explanation of חמשים ("hamushim," usually translated "armed") is: only one out of five (חמשים) went forth from Egypt, and four parts of the people died during the three days of darkness because they were unworthy of being delivered." – Rashi (France, 1040-1105) on Ex 13:18
Egyptians:
*Shemot Rabbah* describes three groups of Egyptians:

- those who left with the Israelites, “and also the *erev-rav* [ере́в рав],” often: “mixed multitudes”; Robert Alter translates this as “motley throng” (Ex 12:38);
- those who revolted against Pharaoh and gave provisions (Ex 12:35); and
- Pharaoh, with, perhaps, other unrepentant oppressors.

With only one-fifth of the Hebrews leaving and some portion of the Egyptians joining them, the People who go through the Sea of Reeds might be more of a self-selected group than we often suppose.

Can God bring us out "from under the millstone that is Egypt," while we remain unmoved? In this old and traditional reading, at least, the answer appears to be "no." So, it is crucial to seek out more variety of models, for response and resistance to Pharaoh, in the Exodus story.

**More Models for Response and Resistance**
(Several of the ideas below are from a 2015 Facebook crowd-sourcing.)

**From Privilege, Activism**

Asked how people raised in privilege could hope to be good activists, organizer/educator Marshall Ganz (b.1943) replied: “Wasn’t Moses raised in Pharaoh’s house?” (Joelle Novey)

**Vision and Action**

At least one Hebrew, Yocheved, launches her child into the Nile to evade the death-order for male babies. This evinces some degree of faith in her Egyptian neighbors, trusting that someone will rescue the child that she cannot raise because of the edict. Moreover, at least one Egyptian, Pharaoh’s daughter (named Batya, in midrash), does in fact rescue a child from the Nile, also refusing to dehumanize the other, and recognizing the humanity of the baby and his family.

Perhaps there were more Hebrews launching babies into the river and more Egyptians rescuing them. But even if these two women were unique in their world, their example teaches that some on either side of a class-divide or conflict can see humanity in the other.... and that such vision is necessary for the overturning of oppression. (based loosely on dvar torah at Tifereth Israel in Columbus OH, 2016)

**Refusal to Dehumanize**

The opening of Exodus suggests a network, however small, of women who were not defined by edicts intended to dehumanize the other. The midwives, Shifra and Puah, resist the order to kill babies, thus refusing to participate in Pharaoh’s plan to dehumanize the Hebrews. Moreover, the very existence of Egyptian women who help at Hebrew births would indicate some degree of mixing across class lines.

This mixing, however limited, could have promoted among Egyptians views of Hebrews as individuals suffering enslavement rather than a faceless "slave" class; suggested to Hebrews that Egyptians were not all a faceless "oppressor" class; and offered both Egyptians and Hebrews views of the other contrary to palace propaganda. (Based on learning through "Kol Isha,” a Temple Micah (DC) group, no longer meeting, that for many years focused on spirituality from a woman’s perspective)
Is This Resistance?

In contrast to the many small acts of women who appear early in Exodus (and then largely disappear), Moses' first act as an adult, a big dramatic one, did nothing -- to all appearances in the text and commentary -- to overturn oppression in the long run and possibly illustrates one danger of dehumanizing of oppressors.

Over the centuries, many explanations have been offered for Moses' killing of the Egyptian, most seeking to justify him (many by imputing cruel capital offenses to the Egyptian), some calling him out for anger or immaturity, and others identifying this action as the reason Moses later dies without entering the Land.

Leaving commentary aside for now, let's look at the action and the language of the text itself:

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors [בְּסֵבֶֽלָ֑ם, b'selotam, בְּסֵבֶלָ֑ם]. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?" He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh....

-- Exodus 2:11-15

- Moses "had grown up" (in the palace) and now meets his kinsfolk/kinsmen (Hebrew: "brother");
- Moses' very first act in the world of his "brothers," is a violent one;
- Moses' attempt to mediate between or judge his own people is rebuffed;
- "Then the matter is known!" is sometimes interpreted to mean the Hebrews were informants;
- Whatever the reasons for his behavior, the result for Moses is his own mini-exile.

A stranger to one's brothers, now estranged from one's upbringing, immersed in confusing and dangerous politics with no one to help navigate. How common is this circumstance! And what might Moses' experience tell us about leadership, community, and strategic action?

Is THIS Resistance?

Just two verses after the above drama, Moses a complete stranger to Midian, helps unknown sisters water their flocks amid harassment:

- Is this a model of standing up for justice no matter what?
- Or is it an interloper instantly intervening, for better or worse, in a local power struggle, possibly destabilizing the neighborhood?

One lesson to take away from the young adulthood of Moses might simply be how pervasive and complex is the effect of that millstone and how difficult it is to act with any efficacy within an oppressive system.... especially on one's own....

School for Departure

Passover can be approached as a sort of "fire drill" to keep us always “ready for lifesaving actions.” Moreover, experiencing the ability and power to change anything -- beginning with the switch from fermented products to Passover's unleavened diet -- can inspire us. (Amy Brookman).

In a similar vein, the Highlander Folk School, founded in 1932, has helped incubate grassroots organizing, from de-segregation in the labor movement, through the Montgomery bus boycott, to prison justice in Central Appalachian today. The school brings together participants often separated in the outside world,
due to legal or de facto segregation, and offers inter-generational opportunities to refine thinking, hone skills, and develop a community similarly committed to the essential, perhaps dangerous, work ahead. In these ways, Highlander serves as a model "school for departure" to inspire useful Passover approaches.

Perhaps Moses' Midian stay was also a "school for departure," under the guidance of his new family: his wife Zipporah, who is apparently able to face down God to save her family (see the weird incident at the lodging, Ex 4:24-26), and his father-in-law Jethro, who later helps turn chaos into a system of community justice.

Crossers-Over
As mentioned above, Shifra and Puah -- as m'yalleldot [midwives] ha-ivriyot [Hebrew] -- could be "Hebrews who are midwives" or "midwives to the Hebrews" (possibly non-Hebrew, that is, presumably Egyptian). Both possibilities have been followed in centuries of midrashic threads. Judy Klitsner, author and teacher at Pardes Institute, argues that there is an important lesson here, however the phrase is parsed. The word “ivrit,” Klitsner notes, probably comes from the root for “crossing over,” and the midwives, whatever their background, live up to that name:

…it might be said that no matter their origins, they were in their essence Ivriyot. These courageous women were at odds with their surroundings much as Abraham and other Ivrim in the Bible were at odds with theirs. As we have seen, the prevailing culture in Egypt imposes its conformity among oppressors and oppressed alike. The oppressed are cowed into a state of silent suffering, and the oppressors become gradually inured to the degradation and ultimately to the murder of unwanted foreigners. The midwives stand as Ivriyot, steadfastly resisting the corrupt conventions that have taken hold of their society.
-- Klitsner, Subversive Sequels, p. 58

Farewell Gifts
Benno Jacob (Germany, 1862-1945) argues that God wanted the Egyptia Israelites and Egyptians to part on good terms and used the opportunity for "farewell gifts" (more below) toward this end:

The Egyptians’ gifts to the Israelites were a clear public protest against the policies of the royal tyrant. They demonstrated a renewal of public conscience...a moral change; the receptive heart of the Egyptian people was now contrasted to the hard heart of Pharaoh.

We should especially note that a friendly farewell was commanded by God....

...[Israelites] might now feel triumphant and reject the farewell of their former Egyptian neighbors. God wished to win the Israelites to a more generous point of view....

Moses, as shown in [Ex 11:2], simultaneously threatened Pharaoh and searched for peace between the two peoples. These peaceful relations were God’s principal concern during Israel’s last hours in Egypt. This was the true meaning of the farewell gifts which the Israelites sought and the Egyptians willingly gave.
— Jacob, The Second Book of the Bible, p. 343, 344 (emphasis in original)
Jacob devotes pages to discussing the verb "sha-al, to ask," the narrative chronology of the requests, and the specific items of provision in support of his argument. Along the way, he describes a very positive view of the general relationship, prior to the effects of "hate propaganda," between Egyptians and Israelites:

The details of our story suggest that they [the Israelites] were scattered throughout Egypt, which must have led to many personal friendships; only a systematically encouraged hate propaganda was able to change this.
— Jacob, The Second Book of the Bible p.343

-----More on Gifts/Provisions-----

As the battle between God and Pharaoh comes to a close, there is an exchange of treasure between the Egyptians and the Israelites:

The Israelites had done Moses’ bidding and asked from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, and clothing. And YHVH had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus they [וַֽיְנַצְל֖, va-y’natzlu] the Egyptians.
-- Exodus 12:35-36 (1985 JPS adapted)

The verb used for this exchange, [וַֽיְנַצְל֖, va-y’natzlu], is variously translated as "strip away, plunder" or "rescue, deliver," and there are many ways of explaining what happened and why.

Some Rabbinic interpretations link these riches back to Genesis and forward through history into the four exiles -- Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome -- in addition to Egypt. One Talmudic discussion (B. Pes 119a) begins by noting how Joseph amassed riches for a different pharaoh during a famine: gathering funds from around the world and “all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan” (Gen 41 and 47). This discussion then goes beyond Torah to list the treasure’s later history, ending — as is common with the exile/powers trope* — in Rome:

The treasure remained [in the Land of Israel] until the time of Rehoboam, son of Solomon (1 Kings 14:26)...Next Jehosaphat came and took the treasure back from the Ammonites (2 Chron 20). It remained in the Land until the time of Ahaz, when Sennecherib came and took it from Ahaz. Then came Hezekiah, who took it from Sennacherib, and it remained in the Land until Zedekiah, when the Chaldeans [Babylonians] came and took it from Zedekiah. Then came the Persians, who took it from the Chaldeans; the Greeks, who took it from the Persians; the Romans, who took it from the Greeks. And the treasure is still in Rome.*
— Sefer Ha-Aggadah 70:70, from B. Pes 119a

*In the Talmudic trope referencing the four exiles, loss of power to Rome is current. In much later commentary, exile in “Rome” (Holy Roman Empire or Christian Europe more widely) is still experienced as on-going.

Elsewhere (B. San 91a) pursues a different direction in attempting to explain the Exodus exchange:

Another occasion the Egyptians came in a lawsuit against the Jews before Alexander of Macedon. They pleaded thus: ‘Is it not written, And the Lord gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, and they lent them [gold, precious stones, etc. (Ex 12:35)] Then return us the gold and silver which ye took!’

As the lawsuit continues, the Temple doorkeeper, Gebiha b. Pesisa, asked permission of the Sages to answer the charge and responded as follows:

‘Whence do ye adduce your proof?’ asked he, ‘From the Torah,’ they replied. ‘Then I too,’ said he, ‘will bring you proof only from the Torah, for it is written, Now the sojourning of the children’ (continues)
Centuries of treasure-related commentary also link Joseph’s actions at the close of Genesis with enslavement in Exodus, raising some questions worth considering in the context of coalition and redemption:

- Joseph helped Pharaoh take advantage of famine conditions, amassing wealth from around the world and even taking land and means of livelihood from the people in exchange for food (Gen 47). Whose, in that light, is that treasure?
- What lessons might be drawn for the need for Reparations for people descended from enslaved populations in the United States?

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**A Gift Too Far?**

In a contemporary commentary, Rabbi Shai Held, of Mechon Hadar, confesses skepticism as to whether Jacob’s analysis jives with the plain sense of the text but adds:

One senses in Jacob’s words the insights of a brilliant exegete but also the pain of a rabbi and teacher in a Germany consumed by hate*... In a world suffused with bigotry and hostility, a world in which people of faith often marshal sacred texts to legitimate acts of cruelty and to extol hatred as a virtue, there is great power in reading Jacob’s words and being reminded: At the heart of the religious enterprise is the attempt to soften, and open, one’s heart, to God and to one-another. If even the Egyptians and the Israelites can be (successfully!) called to love one-another, then perhaps, even in the darkest of times, slim glimmers of hope are available to us.

*Held includes a footnote citing personal communication with R. Walter Jacob (Benno’s son) to confirm that his father was working on the Exodus commentary between 1934 and 1939, while still in Germany.

As crucial as it is to avoid joining those who "marshal sacred texts to legitimate acts of cruelty and to extol hatred as a virtue," we must also beware of falling into the "we're all in this together" trap:

- the liberation of Egyptians and Hebrews -- like that of so many groups today -- is bound together;
- that does not mean that their experiences -- pre-, midst-, or post-liberation -- are equivalent.
  For more on this, see "One Millstone, Different Weights: That Selma Image" (pages 24ff)

On the other hand, we have a tradition teaching that God is, in some sense "in this together" with the People and so in need of rescue, too. That does not make divine and human experiences equivalent either, but it does suggest that the millstone weighs on all concerned.

**Rescue Yourself and Us!** One stunning example is the prayer, Ani Va-ho, from the holiday of Sukkot. It begins with a call sometimes translated as “Yourself and us!” or “Rescue me and the divine name!” — followed by verses describing God accompanying the People out of Egypt and other exiles:

"I and He: Save us, please"
"As You saved nation and God together, [the people] called for God's Salvation -- save us, please"
"As You saved those submerged between slices of the deep, and brought Your own glory through it with them - save us please" -- Koren/Sacks translation
Prayers begging for rescue and mercy often take the format, “You helped them; help us.” This unusual prayer, attributed to Eleazar Kallir (c.570–c.640 CE), implies that God needs saving, too. It is not unusual, however, for Jewish tradition to remind us: "when there is suffering in the world, God is not to be found on the side of the oppressors" (Rabbinical Assembly, Or Hadash festival supplement).

"Jazz. Here in Germany it become something worse than a virus. We was all of us damn fleas, us Negroes and Jews and low-life hoodlums, set on playing that vulgar racket, seducing sweet blond kids into corruption and sex. It wasn't music, it wasn't a fad. It was a plague sent out by the dread black hordes, engineered by the Jews. Us Negroes, see, we was only half to blame – we just can't help it. Savages just got a natural feel for filthy rhythms, no self-control to speak of. But the Jews, brother, now they cooked up this jungle music on purpose. All part of their master plan to weaken Aryan youth, corrupt its janes, dilute its bloodlines.

"...we was officially degenerate.

"...And poor damn Jews, clubbed to a pulp in the streets, their shopfronts smashed up, their axes ripped from their hands. Hell. When that old ivory-tickler Volker Schramm denounced his manager Martin Miller as a false Aryan, we know Berlin wasn't Berlin no more. It had been a damn savage decade."

--Esi Edyugan, Half-Blood Blues: A Novel, p.78-79

The Other Other Hand: It is often too easy to let “God is with the oppressed” console the comfortable while leaving the afflicted with their travails. If we are going to come out of this Exodus experience knowing something new, we have to begin by understanding where we are.

Jewish history presents abundant examples of our communities mistrusting and fearing State forces: from ancient Rome, through Medieval Europe, the Pale of Settlement, pogroms, ghettos -- there were reasons for the Golem -- to the mid-20th Century.

Today many U.S. Jewish communities view our safety as State-protected, although we know such protection is not universal. Some of us are so inured -- assuming that equal protection cannot be expected by those who are transgender, queer, home-less, mentally ill, black, brown, "foreign," among others -- that we barely register the inequity.

Part of examining this millstone that is Egypt involves looking carefully at any place where oppression thrives and asking, “however unintentionally, how we are complicit?” If we believe that "God is not to be found on the side of the oppressors," we had better consider where we are standing ourselves.

Maybe We’re All Riff Raff

The “mixed multitude” ("riff raff" or “erav rav”) who leave with the Israelites offer another model: Were the Egyptians in this group “former oppressors” or fellow oppressed folk seizing this opportunity for escape? Among the few people identified in midrash as part of this group is Pharaoh’s daughter Batya, who obviously comes from privilege but chose to throw in her lot with the former slaves.

Another example: Ammonites and Moabites were banned from joining the Israelites, based on bible stories of ill-treatment, but later accepted by a declaration that we could no longer know with certainty who might belong to these groups. Therefore, “at least over time, the fixity of group identities of ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ need not be a permanent barrier...” (Rebecca Boggs)

A truly mixed multitude, steadfast resisters of corrupt conventions, activists learning from privilege, individuals who know or trust in humanity among the others, and people crossing over boundaries of many kinds all rehearse for a new reality long before the moment of departure finally arrives.
One Millstone, Different Weights: That Selma Image

"The iconic image of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma symbolized the highest ideals of an interracial, interfaith movement that testified to the essential similarities between blacks and Jews. This filiopietistic* read on Jewish liberal activism encouraged the construction of a false narrative that congratulated Jews for their social justice passion and criticized Black Power for undoing the good work of early civil rights workers." -- Marc Dollinger, Black Power, Jewish Politics

* "of or relating to an often excessive veneration of ancestors or tradition" (Merriam-Webster on-line)

Photo History and Quote
In the iconic image, MLK and Heschel, with Ralph Bunche between them --- at the head of a crowd dressed in white leis -- step out in the first of many lines of demonstrators, to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge for the Selma-to-Montgomery March on Sunday, March 21, 1965.

The leis were a gift, sent as a symbol of Asian support for the Civil Rights march, by Rev. Abraham Akaka of Hawaii. See, e.g., "Leis And Civil Rights: The Untold Story of Why MLK Wore a Hawaiian Lei at Selma," by Tim Mak. Daily Beast, 3/6/15

The scene is the third attempt to cross. On the first attempt, two weeks before, leaders John Lewis of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and Hosea Williams, of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), were badly beaten when local and state police attacked the 600 marchers. King led a second attempt, on March 9, paused to assess the tense situation, knelt in prayer, then led the marchers off the bridge and back to church.

Also March 9, Heschel joined with SNCC and CORE (Congress for Racial Equity) activists, leading a New York City crowd of 800 to FBI Headquarters, protesting treatment of the earlier Selma demonstrators and calling for arrest of those who'd participated in the police riot. This incident landed Heschel on the FBI watch list.

On March 19, King telegraphed, inviting Heschel to join a third march attempt. Susanna Heschel, a child at the time, wrote later of being worried that she might never see her father again. But this time, protected by nearly 2000 officers under federal control, 3200 marchers, with a front line including King and Heschel, made it across the bridge toward Montgomery.

Heschel later wrote:

For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.

Background sometimes overlooked in photo-quote use:
1) Heschel was describing a fraught, uncertain experience, one requiring participants to stick to nonviolent organizing principles in the face of harassment and possible violence; he was NOT describing a march in which participants expect to be protected, if not escorted, by police.

2) Heschel's praying legs were not substituting civic activity for his usual observance of Shabbat.

3) King and Heschel had known one another for several years, Heschel had already been prominently active in the movement, and Heschel's participation in Selma was in response to an invitation.

4) Despite the horrors that were part of the Jewish story and his own life at this point, by 1965 Heschel resided in the northern U.S., where his relatively prestigious teaching job and his white skin provided a measure of protection and respect that King and many others in that march would never know.
**Really Remembering that Selma Photo**

In the days of Heschel's activism, non-Black people faced risk for agitating for Civil Rights. Often the threat was to reputation and livelihood; sometimes, physical. But, then as now, White people had an option of backing off from the fight in order to feel safe(r), simply not an option for Black people facing harassment, often physical, from the very powers White people often rely upon to keep them safe in day-to-day life.

Backing off won't necessarily stop the FBI from watching someone already in their sights, and some prominent White activists face(d) harassment by law enforcement. But White people are not profiled and targeted, from before puberty, because their skin color makes them suspect when they are just trying to live. White people are killed by police, incarcerated, and otherwise menaced by the State, but not nearly as often, statistically, as Native and brown and black people.

**We may know, but often fail to notice:**

We live in an extremely violent society. Some of us can ignore that fact much of the time because the forces around us are not directing fire arms, or flexing their muscles, in our direction. As long as Jews believe that the police and private security industry are on our side, there appears to be little incentive to rock the boat.

In the 1960s Civil Rights movement, Black and Jewish communities felt united, momentarily at least, in opposition to local and state police. That’s one of the ways the King-Heschel Selma photo works: by showing White and Black people united in vulnerable hope for protection by federal forces. But the situation was temporary: then, as White people, including many Jews, headed off toward very different realities vis a vis police; 50+ years after the Selma photo, as Black people still cannot count on completing a political action and returning home, confident that they and loved ones can walk, drive, or reach for a wallet without fear.

Political actions, including civil disobedience, that many Jews use and applaud continue to work as they do because of law enforcement's constrained behavior toward many predominantly White demonstrations.

Many of us know this. Or think we do. We know that white skin protects many Jews in many situations. And yet we are willing to add armed security and rely on police to protect our Jewish spaces, without even noting the consequences.

And yet few Jewish groups -- even those with an expressed interest in racial justice -- seem to examine assumptions that police will protect, not harass or harm, their communities and/or neighbors.

And yet many Jewish groups unquestioningly accept security advice, from organizations like the Anti-Defamation League, including no assessment of threat to Jews of Color, visitors, and/or black and brown neighbors; in fact, never mentioning them.

And yet we rarely notice the irony in one committee that supports refugees while another works comfortably with forces that collude with ICE in deportation, detention, and death.

And yet we complain when we feel targeted or unsafe, and demand Black leaders address our discomfort, seldom acknowledging the regularity with which non-White people are unsafe and targeted.

And yet we excoriate the Movement for Black Lives and others expressing anti-militarization, anti-police stances often ignoring the regular, deadly cost of militarized police in Black neighborhoods.

**See endnotes for more on these topics.**

**Recognizing Variant Weights:**

Anti-Jewish sentiments and antisemitism -- related, but not identical phenomena -- are real problems. But these are not trump cards (no presidential pun intended) to change what is happening in any play.
There were plenty of conversations in the 1960s, behind the scenes and out front, about whom to support and how to collaborate. We can and should have those in the 21st Century, too. We can, as part of this work, address antisemitism and anti-Jewish feeling. But we cannot expect antisemitism and anti-Jewish feeling to take precedence over the many other isms, anti-feelings, policies and practices that threaten so many.

Jewish leaders and organizations cannot keep coming for Black organizations and leaders today, as though the friendship and collaboration between King and Heschel gives them license. (It might also be useful to search for evidence that Rabbi Heschel ever took it upon himself to tell Black communities whom to respect or how to be. That could be instructive.) Jews cannot keep demanding that Black coalition partners all measure up to an imaginary 1965 version of Martin Luther King Jr....even MLK wasn't that MLK.

More generally, Jews must also re-examine how we use our visions -- maybe fuzzy, probably confused -- of past approaches to racial justice. We need to start acknowledging that our various communities do not approach even shared causes from the same starting point. And that real equity will require some real changes... on the part of White people, in- and outside of Jewish communities.

If we are to "get from here to there" by marching together, we must first understand that not all of us on this journey start from the same point and that very different experiences bring us together in that march. Many of us may have been under that one millstone, for decades now, at least, but the experience weighed very differently on us, depending on our communities and backgrounds.

Perhaps, if we stop expecting that the journey begins with all marchers on equal footing, with equal experiences and expectations, we can enhance our understanding of the Exodus and the experience of Passover in ways that promote side-by-side collaboration in the future.

In addition, heading toward the second cup:

A new formulation of black-Jewish consensus, understood through the lens of Jews of Color, would undermine the whole notion of reaching across a racial divide.

When black Jews are acknowledged, it forces scholars to reinterpret historical causation at its most basic level. When viewed through the lens of a Jew of Color, how much of Jewish support for civil rights in the 1950s proved a reflection of Jews as whites? How much did Jewish affinity for Black Power demonstrate an affirmation of African American political culture more than a Jewish ethnic revival? How can a new intersectional understanding of Jews of Color inspire scholars to rethink an alliance typically understood as interracial?

-- Dollinger, epilogue, p.190-191

The "Filiopietistic Reading"

One view of the filiopietistic reading Dollinger mentions: Heschel stands in for the entire Jewish community today, and a sanitized version of King becomes the model for any potential partner in protest or collaboration:

This has the effect of erasing history and confusing real life today with fantasy-land of yore.

It takes Jews, who may or may not be involved in current liberation movements, and puts them, with misplaced chutzpah, into Heschel’s shoes; then, seeing Heschel centered in the photo, Jews today get the confused notion that they are somehow at the center of the story.

It demands that today’s Black leaders, no matter how deeply involved in current liberation work, step into MLK’s 50-year-old shoes, walking gratefully with anyone willing to aim for integration, while pretending not to know that even King worried about integrating a burning house.

It freezes both King and Heschel into a single moment that led to legislative triumph, and so it blurs the struggle, crops out unmet goals, and celebrates revolution -- but only of the foregone conclusion, non-threatening variety.
Second Cup: Tasting Change

We complete the story-telling and focus on the Passover table. The "rescue" or "deliverance" [הצלחת] of this cup is linked to the symbolic foods on the table and to the gathering around it. We partake of foods re-enacting ancient Temple ritual, fulfilling even older rites, all the while telling one another, "This is what God did for me, when I came out of Egypt" (Ex 13:8). Our challenge, in the midst of so much that is old and repeated, is to notice the taste of change.

The seder plate teaches that change is not a completely foreign substance but born of familiar elements.

Thick and Tart
Charoset is prominent on the seder plate and in the ritual meal, but it is not one of the three items that must be explained for a valid seder, according to Rabban Gamliel, nor is it explained elsewhere in traditional haggadah text. As such, it is – like so much on this journey – an element we cannot abandon but struggle to understand.

Mortar
The Hebrew "cheres" means "earthenware" or "potsherd." The Talmud links charoset with mortar or clay; particular spices, like cinnamon, are meant to resemble straw used in making bricks. Based on this, charoset simultaneously plays two roles:

• a reminder of forced building labor; and
• a functional substance, serving as sweet contrast of liberation with the bitter of enslavement, and holding the bitter maror to the matzah for the Hillel sandwich.

Apple Tree
Why is [charoset] a religious requirement? R. Levi said: In memory of the apple-tree. -- B. Pes 116a

[What apple tree? B. Sotah 11b describes enslaved Hebrew women seducing their husbands. Then...]

After the women had conceived they returned to their homes; and when the time of childbirth arrived, they went and were delivered in the field beneath the apple-tree [to keep the births secret from the Egyptians] as it is said: Under the apple-tree I caused thee to come forth...

"Therefore, to fulfill both opinions, one must prepare it tart and one must prepare it thick. One must prepare it tart in remembrance of the apple, and one must prepare it thick in remembrance of the mortar."
-- B. Pes. 116a (from Sefaria: bold, literal translation/regular font, explanatory. Above translations, from Soncino)

In this way, charoset embodies the Rabbinic mortar that binds two opinions into one action, blends storytelling and moral-making. Further, charoset is a prime example of historic adaptation, now substituting for the pesach [lamb sacrifice] in the "Hillel sandwich," itself a commemoration of a remembrance of a rite.

Based on the Talmudic discussion (Pesachim 116a, above), one charoset bite recalls both the sweeping national story, in which individuals recede in the epic Pharaoh-God battle, and the intimate survival story, in which
individuals triumph, even snatch some joy, in the face of tyrannical decrees. One swallow encompasses enslavement and the humanity of the enslaved, oppression and the seeds of resistance.

If we read a few lines further in the Sotah 11b discussion, where we learn how the apple tree is involved at all, it seems that the apple in the charoset is also linked with several separate pathways to new knowledge of God... and, based on that conversation with Moses which began this journey, new knowledge of God, as YHVH, is the whole point of this trip.

Knowing, Knowing, and Knowing

Sotah 11b continues: “The Holy One, blessed be He, sent down someone from the high heavens who washed...” God cares for the imperiled babies out in the fields, with “honey from the rock” (Deut 32:13) and underground protection when Egyptian soldiers near. Once grown, the children join their families. Then --

At the time the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself by the Red Sea, they recognized Him first, as it is said: This is my God and I will praise Him.

Soncino footnotes:
washed. Ezek 16:4 ["As for your birth, when you were born your navel cord was not cut, and you were not bathed in water to smooth you; you were not rubbed with salt, nor were you swaddled...in the open field"] There was no midwife present to cut the navel-string, nor was ordinary water used.
this. Ex. 15:2. The word ‘this’ implies that He had been previously seen; therefore it must have been the former babes.

The concept of eating charoset "in memory of the apple-tree," found in Tractate Pesachim, is tied to the midrash in Sotah 11b (above and left): a surreal tale of babies conceived and born under apple trees and then protected by God and the Egyptian landscape, until, much later, they are the first to recognize God at the parting of the sea.

The Open Door summary is G-rated: "The fruits and nuts serve as a reminder of the trees under which Israelite women gave birth in an attempt to keep secret the arrival of their imperiled infants" (p.xvi).

A Different Night is more PG-13: "It reminds us of the apple orchards...the Jewish women were heroines in the battle against Pharaoh's attempt to stop the Jews from having children...took the initiative to arouse their husbands to procreate," adding that the Rabbis alluded to "heroic love-making in the woman's open invitations to her lover..." in the Song of Songs.

Some years back, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, of The Shalom Center, published "Passover's R-Rated Condiment," discussing the challenge of the family seder and "nibbling on the spicy raisins of the woman whose breasts were like twin fawns in beds of flowers, the man whose ivory belly held bright gems of sweet delight."

None of these remarks, however explicit, focus on the "former babes" who were first to recognize God at the Sea of Reeds. But is their special knowledge not also part of the "remembrance of the apple-tree"?

Generations Aleph-Hey

At this point, the People have all experienced the battle between God and Pharaoh, with associated plagues; they've witnessed Passover night's sacrifice and death, parting of the sea and drowning of Pharaoh's remaining forces. However -- within the world of Sotah 11b, and endeavoring to notice variety in the Exodus tale -- individuals in this crowd came to, and through, those experiences from a range of different places.

Sketched here (p.29) are some of the differences in background, depending on age....
Hebrews and Egyptians who reached adulthood in the enslavement era but before the specific attempts to control the slave population that open the Exodus story;

Hebrews whose early adulthood was in the separation era, when couples met under those apple trees, but baby boys were not yet directly threatened, and their Egyptian age-mates;

Hebrews, slightly older than Moses, whose upbringing involved an unusual out-in-a-field infancy, and their Egyptian age-mates;

Hebrews of age in the days overshadowed by the decrees against the baby boys, and their Egyptians neighbors;

Hebrews, of Moses' age and younger, born after the decree, and Egyptians of their time.

Only the Hebrews of Generation ג, those "former babes," have experiences that led them to the particular, early insight: "This is my God..." Therefore, when Rabbi Levi argues that charoset should be a religious requirement, "in memory of the apple-tree," is the idea to

- acknowledge one group's unusual path, through the Exodus story, to knowledge of God?
- recall the Exile's knowledge of God, linked here through Ezekiel's prophecy? or
- turn our attention to the very variation in how God was recognized, even among people who had just experienced the same events?

The Song of Songs, linked earlier to the apple tree and Rabbi Levi's understanding of charoset, is also linked to more variation in how we know God. Rabbi Waskow has been teaching for more than 40 years:

Shir HaShirim is a criticism, a gentle one but clear, of the whole "male" mode of guarding: of the focus on calendars and clocks, on regularity and structure, that in-forms most of Jewish tradition. Do not stir up love until it please [Song of Songs 3:5]. We say the words "floating," "flowing," again and again....

"...be free and flowing with the Springtime, and you reach God; be free and flowing with each other and you reach God."

"...There's no reaching God here. God is in the process. The book doesn't name God....Seems to me that Shir HaShirim says if you're free and flowing with each other and with the springtime, you are with God already."

-- God Wrestling, p.53, 54

Generation Now

Maybe the charoset is a family recipe, older than anyone at the table. Maybe it's a concoction new to the gathering, based on another family's tradition or chef's experimentation. However prepared, though, with or without apples, we notice the taste of change, the very specific taste that comes from recognizing how many different paths brought us to the table.

Rabbi Waskow once suggested that charoset might be a "warning that slavery may come to taste sweet, and this is itself a deeper kind of slavery." For the purposes of "Four 'Fragments' for Your Passover Seder" (2016), he rejected that interpretation. It's a useful concept, however, as we explore the taste of change. Change tastes of the past, but it demands that we try something new -- or recognize ingredients that we've never much noticed.
Urgency and Pause

The seder meal reminds us that we’ve been trying to get out from under the millstone that is Egypt for a long, long time; that each of us is crucial to the group rescue; and that none of us gets out alone. We hold the weight of oppression and absorb the urgency to flee. We are ready to break from enslavement to old ideas and prepared to move on toward liberation....

...and then,

There are dangers in pausing too long, succumbing to distractions, or accepting the lure of the comfortable.

There are dangers, too, in rushing forward, headlong, believing we're moving toward something new, when, in the end, we're just dragging the same old ideas along with us. The pause inherent in regaining and distributing the Afikomen might serve as an opportunity to reexamine some assumptions, consider how completing the ritual meal relies on something which had been invisible to us a substantial portion of the evening.
"Bernie Sanders Looks Like Everyone's Jewish Grandpa"

A July 2016 article in the *Jewish Daily Forward* with this headline began "[He] doesn't try to be your cute Jewish grandpa, he just is." But odds are that some of these Jews (photos below), who bear little physical resemblance to Bernie Sanders, are grandpas, too. (photo credits in bibliography)

The piece was intended as light-hearted fluff, of course. But there is nothing light about the regular use of language implying that all Jews and their grandfathers look one way. We fail to name what we don't recognize and vice versa.

Bigging up all people who are a little miffed 'cuz someone tells you you don't look like or act like your people. Impossible. Because you are your people. You just tell them they don't look. period. -- from Vanessa Hidary, "The Hebrew Mamita"

Some 11% of U.S. Jews are non-White (see American Jewish Population Project, e.g.). Still, those who don't look Eastern European -- many of those without "Jewish names" or Sander's looks, particularly Jews of Color -- are regularly mistaken for non-Jews or staff, often assumed to be converts, remain invisible to our communities in many ways and are disproportionately affected by added security.

Trouble to See

Based on Talmudic tales of how Moses responded at the burning bush, Avivah Zornberg describes "trouble to see" as an essential part of the Exodus story:

God chooses to reveal Himself to Moses, because he has "gone to trouble to see." ...it is his capacity to "twist his neck," to turn his face in wonder and questioning, that brings him the voice of God.

The neck in torsion—an image for desire, a counter image to the stiff-necked intransigence of those who set themselves against the new. Within Moses himself, within his people, within the Egyptians, even within the representations of God in the narratives of redemption, the tensions of Exodus will seek resolution, the momentary equilibrium that again and again is to be lost and reclaimed.

— Avivah Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture*, p.79-80

The Passover story is filled with what Zornberg calls "the stiff-necked intransigence of those who set themselves against the new" as well as Moses' "trouble to see." Moses had to really twist, according to the midrash above, to see something he might have otherwise missed... new or not. Twisting can be harsh on a body, especially one not accustomed to such an action. But we still have to emulate Moses here in this tension between the urgent need to escape and the pauses built into the seder nudging us to look around.

• Have we “gone to trouble to see” things we did not perceive, or perceive as clearly, before this Passover journey began?
• How are we helping one another to notice and appreciate the variety already in our Jewish and wider communities?
• How are we working in- and outside Jewish communities for more and deeper inclusion -- across ability, gender expression, sexual orientation, class, color, differences of background and belief?
• Regardless of who sits around our own tables on any given Passover night, how are we working to expand perspectives shared there?
"Many of us fight tirelessly for social justice against institutionalized discrimination in this country, yet operate as vehicles perpetuating those same systems of marginalization upon the Jews that don't look like us in our own pews. Or aren't married the way we are. Or don't believe precisely as we believe....

"We tout the Jewish value of every human being created in the same reflection of the Divine Image, but we label other Jews as not being "really" Jewish because they aren't what we see when we look in the mirror."
-- speech of title character, MaNishtana's *Ariel Samson: Freelance Rabbi*

(See related notes from Eli Talk, p.29)

**Pause and Urgency**
The *Torah Queeries* Passover essay includes this statement on liberation from a transgender member of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST):

Liberation from society's expectations and assumptions, and liberation to become who you are. It's definitely a journey. And you don't quite know where you're going to end up, even if you know that you have to move/change. It's about having trust that if you follow that internal voice, you will be led to a better place, where you don't have to think about killing yourself quite so often.
--Michael Waldman, quoted in "Liberation and Transgender Jews" in *Torah Queeries*

Ayelet Cohen (then CBST associate rabbi) compares the Exodus journey to that of a transgender person:

[It] involves leaving everything known for the promise of something completely unknown. Their lives depend on their leaving. Leaving is terrifying, even if what is being left, the place that is known, is *mitzrayim* [the "narrow place" that is Egypt]....

Still even when they are ready, they still must contend with Pharaoh, who does not want to let them go: The Pharaoh of the progressive world that is still deeply attached to binary notions of gender....

Jews...are commanded to eat matzah so that they will remember the day they departed from Egypt and experience that feeling of *chipazon*, the haste and fear that comes with leaving. They are commanded to eat matzah so that they will remember that although they have already experienced liberation, there are others who are still enslaved. -- Cohen, *Torah Queeries*, p.305

Cohen also stresses that we should "not make the mistake of confusing their haste for a lack of readiness. To say they did not prepare is to deny the extreme readiness of the Israelites for freedom. To say they did not prepare is to deny the generations of enslavement in Egypt" (p.304).

If we are to experience any kind of joint rescue, we have a lot of work to do to ensure that we notice and include everyone who needs to get out. And we have a much better chance of getting out and successfully reaching a better place if we better collaborate with all who are willing to make the trip. We must use our pauses well, and we must sense the urgency here: lives depend on it.
This is what travelers discover:
that when you sever the links of normality and its claims,
when you break off from the quotidian,
it is the teapots that truly shock.
Nothing is so awesomely unfamiliar
as the familiar that discloses itself at the end of a journey.
-- from Cynthia Osick, "The Shock of Teapots" [line breaks added]

Third Cup: Disruption and Redemption

The third cup recalls God's promise to "redeem you [גאלה] with an outstretched arm and formidable judgments." It sits at a precarious moment: We've told the story, we've experienced the ritual meal, enjoyed the table's company and food, and now conclude the post-meal blessing. We're at that point Michael Waldman described above: "You don't quite know where you're going to end up, even if you know that you have to move/change."

We've learned that back "there" is rarely well and truly behind us. If the journey so far has done its job, however, it is no longer possible for us to return to life as usual. But we're heading toward the seder's conclusion and returning to the life beyond, usual or not.

The haggadah tells us to pour the fourth cup for ourselves as soon as we've raised and drunk the third one. Instructions as old as the Mishnah (Pesachim 10:7) permit drinking between the first three cups but not between the third and fourth. For a long stretch of Jewish history, the praises of Hallel [Exodus-focused psalms] and Nishmat ["The Soul of Every Living Thing"] were all that stood between this third cup and the fourth, concluding one.

For the last thousand years or so, however, this is not only the moment for pouring our own final glass but for filling Elijah's cup, opening the door, and, at some tables, pouring out of wrath.

Knowing Again

It is noteworthy that the wrath-filled verses mention

- nations "that do not know You [אני לא-דעון]" and
- kingdoms that "do not invoke Your name [אני לא קרא]" (Ps 79:6-7).

At the outset of this journey (p.5), Moses is told that the People do not yet know God by the name, YHVH. The whole Exodus process is meant to result in knowledge of God, YHVH, who fulfills promises. Perhaps there will always be some unable, at least temporarily, to grasp God's name. But it's worth considering --

- How often are we among them? and
- What can we do to expand the peoples who do know and invoke God's name?

33
"Today, if you listen"

Once, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi met the prophet Elijah and asked about the messiah. Per Elijah's instructions, R. Joshua ben Levi sought out the messiah among lepers at the city gate and asked him, "When will you come?"

"Today," answered the messiah.

But Rabbi Joshua ben Levi met Elijah again later and reported: "He lied."

Elijah responded: "This is what he said to you, 'Today, if you will hear his voice.'" -- based on B. Sanhedrin 98a

Elijah's final remark quotes Ps. 95:7:

כָּאִם בְּקִלָּלְתָּךְ: 
Today, if you will hear his voice.

It seems clear from the psalm that "kolo [voice, with masculine possessive ending]" is God's voice. For the purposes of the story, though, "he" might be the messiah (male in the Talmud tale) or God. In either case, the chastisement -- "redemption won't come until you listen" -- comes through loudly enough.

Greenberg uses "you" for God to create a more personal, prayable text and in an attempt at un-gendered translation (right). But "your" wouldn't work quite the same way in the Talmud tale.

"Do not know My ways"

The psalmist then relates God musing on the generation of the desert, calling them "a senseless people" (1985 JPS) -- or "people of a wandering heart" (Greenberg) -- who "do/would not know My ways."

In closing, God swore in anger: "They shall never come to My resting-place!" Greenberg's "If only..." might be read as more hopeful or more deeply despairing. In either translation, we see that God's wrath is again related to not knowing: this time our failure to know God's ways, even after having seen God's deeds....

...Reminding us that, even among folks who'd just witnessed the parting of the Sea, it was only a small group -- those "former babes" -- who immediately said: "This is my God...."

...Adding perspective to the challenge of emerging from Passover with new knowledge of God, God's names, and God's ways.

...Raising questions, at the very least, about the wisdom of begging God's wrath against those struggling to grasp God's name....
Some Jews have for centuries, others more recently, replaced the wrath-filled lines with an alternative request at the moment of opening the door. The *Open Door* haggadah, for example, seeks the day when, in the words of Ps. 85:11, "compassion and truth meet; justice and peace kiss."

As we try this Passover to learn something new about God's work in the world -- which we were told, back at the start, was our one job -- opening the door for Elijah might be an opportunity to consider the interaction of wrath, redemption, and coalition building.

**The Chief Cornerstone**

As we move toward that fourth cup and the end of the journey -- for now -- Psalm 118 reminds us "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." So a few moments to consider some past rejections and future building seem in order.

**Exodus without Liberation**

Elided in our earlier telling, consider Hagar, Egyptian servant to Sarah and concubine to Abraham (Gen 16ff), a kind of reverse precursor to the Passover story. In the pioneering 1984 work, *Texts of Terror*, Christian feminist theologian Phyllis Trible wrote:

As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in here. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother and child....

...Hagar is a pivotal figure in biblical theology. She is the first person in scripture whom a divine messenger visits and the only person who dares to name the deity. Within the historical memories of Israel [i.e., post-Flood], she is the first woman to bear a child....the first woman to hear an annunciation, the only one to receive a divine promise of descendants, and the first to weep for her dying child. Truly, Hagar the Egyptian is the prototype of not only special but all mothers in Israel.

...she experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, and unmerited exile without return.

...All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar’s story. To neglect the theological challenge she presents is to falsify faith. -- Trible, p.28

"Exodus without liberation...unmerited exile without return." This story has always been part of the wandering Aramean's tale, as has Exodus, in which so many people are left behind. Meanwhile, Ishmael's descendants and Isaac's become increasingly distant cousins with each un-reconciled generation.

And hidden in that distant past, from which Terah & Co. depart, are cousins even more deeply estranged than descendants of Ishmael and Isaac:

The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth—Ham being the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole world branched out. (Gen 9:18-19)
The Lines of Shem, Ham, and Japheth

The line of Shem includes Terah, Abraham, Sarah, and the rest. The line of Japheth are the "maritime nations" (Gen 10:5) about whom we learn very little. The line of Ham includes some familiar names, like Babylon and Nineveh as well as all the Canaanites (Gen 10:6ff). And this is this line with the "curse."

The "curse of Ham" — with related ideas about slavery and race, unsupported by the Bible text itself — emerged over the centuries from the biblical story of Noah. Regardless of our particular faith community’s approach to this curse concept, there is no denying the damage done by what one author calls “the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years” (Goldenberg, The Curse of Ham).

Most scholars -- of history, literature, religion, and other fields -- seem to agree that what we know as "race" and associated "racism" were not present in the ancient world. Beyond that, there is much debate and confusion about which tradition -- be it Judaism, Christianity, or Islam -- first hatched the link between "the curse" and racist ideas.

Leaving this argument to academics, we -- who are interested in coalition and redemption NOW -- might begin instead by acknowledging that, however wrongly founded, racism and oppression have become inextricably linked with the Noah story. This moment in U.S. history seems to demand that we acknowledge the damaging legacy of our collective textual heritage.

Canaan and Ham

Various explanations have been suggested for Canaan being cursed rather than Ham. Genesis Rabbah, e.g., says that Noah couldn’t curse Ham, because God had already blessed him (Gen 9:1). Another possibility put forth was that Canaan was really the instigator. While the text speaks of individuals and not whole communities, many commentators over the centuries focused on moral factors which they believed might result in one people being subjugated to another. Moreover, although only Canaan is mentioned, the curse is often understood to apply to generations of descendants of all four of Ham’s children.

And, while there is no biblical reference to skin color at all, the curse of slavery became associated with black skin:

…it is not clear when to date the fateful conjunction of slavery and race in the Western readings of Noah’s prophecy….the application of the curse to racial slavery was the product of centuries of development in ethnic and racial stereotyping, biblical interpretation, and the history of servitude.

Nevertheless, by the early colonial period, a racialized version of Noah’s curse had arrived in America.
— Stephen R. Haynes. Noah’s Curse, pp.7-8

"It appealed to racial slavery because Ham acted like you expected a black man to act...Slavery was necessary in the white Southern mind to control the ungovernable black. Slavery is the response to Ham's rebellious behavior," Haynes told the New York Times in 2003 (Lee, "From Noah's Curse to Slavery's Rationale")
Rainbow's Mutual Obligation
Just prior to the episode which ends in the curse, God offers the rainbow as a token of the Noahide covenant: The rainbow symbolizes God's promise not to destroy the world by Flood again; it is also a reminder of our obligation to some basic decency in keeping the Noahide laws.

Three of the key Noahide laws, which are said to apply to all humanity, are

- prohibition on murder, with the reminder that every human is created in God's image;
- prohibition on stealing, understood broadly to include kidnapping and other forms of theft; and
- establishment of courts and a system of law.

Maybe the rainbow should remind us to consider our collective record on murder, stealing, and courts -- particularly with reference to the sad legacy of racism associated with this bible story.

And as we move from past rejections toward future building, we must look at what kind of coalitions we're building within Judaism as well as across communities.

We Have the Blueprint
In a 2017 Eli Talk, MaNishtana (pen name of Rabbi Shais Rishon) tells the story of Rabbi Yehuda ben Bathyra uncovering a Temple-related fraud: A certain non-Jew would boast every year about going into Jerusalem at Passover and tricking Jews into giving him part of the sacrifice he knew was forbidden to him; one year R. Yehuda tricked the man into revealing his deception (Pesachim 3b). The intricacies of the Temple's sacrificial system are not the point of MaNishtana's talk, and they're way beside the point for our purposes. Instead, he asks us to consider: How was the trickster able to he get away with this at first?

Well maybe because when he entered Jewish space for ostensibly a Jewish reason, probably dressed like a Jew, everyone assumed, "oh, you must be a Jew"...

Now, you might think: "See this is exactly why we need to ask...people we don't recognize...."And that would seem to make sense, except that it's absolutely wrong. Because this episode is the source of a halakhic ruling that when someone says they are Jewish, we do not investigate them. Because true Judaism has always been about openness when it comes to people....

-- "What Makes This Jew Different Than All Other Jews? Race, Difference, and Safety in Jewish Spaces"

The Eli Talk continues with a discussion of biblical "cities of refuge," places where people were asked to account for themselves when entering, that is, explain what crime had brought them. It concludes:

In our post-Holocaust ideology, we treat Judaism as a "city of refuge" -- someplace that we stop people at the gates and ask them who they are, how did they get there, why are they there....

There are too many Jews being stopped at the gates. They're not being left alone to be their Jewish in Jewish spaces: Jews of different observance levels, LGBTQI Jews, Jews by Choice, and in my life experience, Jews of Color.

We're creating this negative Judaism that is obsessed with keeping people out and not so much focused on welcoming them in. But it's not too late to change that. We know how to do it. We have a blueprint of millenia of Jewish tradition....

-- "What Makes This Jew Different"
We have the blueprint. And we have the object lessons:

- Jewish man, carrying a sefer Torah for an upcoming service, swarmed by a mob of Jewish men who cannot get their minds around his being Black and also being a Jew ("Black Jew Swarmed by Hasidic Mob...," Forward, 11/16/18)

- Jewish woman, new to town, trying to #ShowUpForShabbat after the Tree of Life shooting, leaves new synagogue in tears because local "greeters" cannot get their minds around the conjunction of her appearance and her being a Jew ("We Have Met the Enemy, and..." Song Every Day, 11/5/18)

- So many more experiences of so many Jews, as noted above: "Jews of different observance levels, LGBTQI Jews, Jews by Choice, and...Jews of Color."

**Redemption and Disruption**

As Trible mentions briefly above, Hagar is unique in the bible in that she names God. On the run from ill-treatment at Sarah’s hands, Hagar meets a messenger of God in the wilderness who asks her the question above. At the conclusion of their encounter, we read (Gen 16:13-14, JPS translation):

> וַתִּקְרָא שֶם-יְהוָה-חֲבֵרָב-אֵלַי, יָהֹבָא לְךָ אָלֶיהָ אֵל-אֵלִּ֑י, אֲחָ֖מ וַתִּשְּׁמַ֣עַה יִשָּׁמְּאֵֽהַ נוֹֽמָר
> יְהוָה דֹֽבֵ'אֵלֶיהָ אֵל-אֵל-אֵלִ֝י
> וַתִּשְּׁמַ֣ע אִכֵּי-אָמְרִ֑י הֲגם הֲ֝ם אֵל הֲעִֽי

And she called YHVH who spoke to her, “You Are El-roi,” by which she meant, “Have I not gone on seeing after God saw me!”

Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered.—

“El-roi” is translated in a number of ways and sometimes, as above, left un-translated. But all the renderings revolve around perception: God of vision, God of my seeing, God who sees me.

Later (Gen 25:7ff) Isaac and Ishmael join together to bury their father, and “Isaac goes to live at the wellspring that is Ishmael's home,” that is, Beer-lahoi-roi. We might remember that Isaac and Ishmael each have their own traumatic pasts. The fact that the brothers settle, together, in a place with a history so closely tied to seeing and being seen bodes well for their individual futures and for common reconciliation. Rabbi Waskow, in fact, adds this passage to Yom Kippur readings to "remind us as individuals that it is always possible for us to turn away from anger and toward reconciliation."

Jewish communities and non-Jewish neighbors, like Isaac and Ishmael, have our own traumas and our own experiences of oppression. Figuring out how to live in such a way that we see one another and are seen is one major step toward a redemption that includes all of us: Hagar, the people who didn't make it out of Egypt, the folks left "back home" and the ones who chose to move there.

...we are still in bondage, and we wait and wait, as the Jews in Egypt waited and waited, for the day when freedom will be spread all over the world like frosting on a well-made cake, rather than dabbed on here and there as if the baker were selfishly eating most of the frosting directly from the bowl. The story of Passover is a journey, and like most journeys, it is taking much longer than it ought to take, no matter how many times we stop and ask for directions.

– Lemony Snicket ("Playground") commentary, New American Haggadah, p. 79
If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together.

- Lilla Watson, Murri artist and community leader, co-founder of (Australia's) BlackCard Party

**Fourth Cup: New Commitments**

The fourth cup recalls God's promise to "take you (as a partner/spouse) [לָחְתִי]..." It is time to get to work with greater awareness of how so many people’s liberation is tied up together.

The Passover journey is launched in “not knowing” — as when a new Pharaoh arises who does not know Joseph (Exodus 1:8) or God (Exodus 5:2) — even before we reach the point where God tells Moses that the People don't yet know The Name. And it aims for knowing: “...You shall know that I am YHVH, your God...” (Exodus 6:7). David Silber, in his “Rereading the Plagues,” calls this “not knowing” a form of “moral deficiency.”

The Exodus experiences and our travels in the wilderness are meant to increase our knowledge of the divine so that we can better serve God. Starting with the second night of Passover, we begin the journey of the Omer, linking Passover to Shavuot, the festival of Revelation. A key element in that journey from liberation to revelation is understanding the workings of oppression, and our part in them. We cannot work effectively to stop what we do not comprehend.

One crucial aspect of this work is increasing our understanding how race, gender, color, birthplace, ability and disability, wealth, and so many other elements of identity interact with Jewishness. To that end, another section of the slightly dated, but no less relevant, "The Hebrew Mamita," previously quoted above:

...To many we are seen as part of the white majority
From the standpoint of a white racist
we’re considered part of that other party...
Don’t get twisted because you might think of New York City
where you can buy knishes at stands for $1.50
We only make up 2.2% of the population. You see,
many other parts of the country are not feeling me.
I'm not trying to compete in a contest of oppression
just feel the need to mention the miserable tension i feel in my heart
when people say things like, "the blacks and the jews, they just don't get along."
just feel the need to say i can't be the only exception to the rule
just the one right now using my poetry as a tool
to maybe change just one heart tonight
One Job: Recap
At the start of this journey, Cassuto's commentary on Ex 6:1-7 suggested that God presents the Exodus experience as a way for the Israelites to learn something new, for the People to come to know God as Fulfiller of Promises. If we ever harbored hopes that learning something new from Passover would be a simple matter, those have vanished.

Looking ahead to the period beyond Passover, perhaps we can recommit to learning, especially during the period when we count up toward Revelation at Sinai. For example:

- some pursuit of real U.S. history, not what most of us were taught in school;
- some examination of how biblical text and religious beliefs have worked in our history;
- some learning about how racism and antisemitism work;
- some exploration of steps we might take to begin to address bias and oppression, as well as systemic racism and White Supremacy, in our world

In addition, the seven weeks of "counting the Omer" are also a time for praying for captives. So this might be a good time to explore issues like incarceration and bail, as well as the many other ways that our society keeps some of us captive.

Please visit songeveryday.org to learn more, and subscribe to "Make the Omer Count" this year.

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Make the Omer count.

Oppression: not knowing
Pharaoh doesn't know Joseph (his past); Israel and God have yet to have a honeymoon

Passover: Taste of Liberation
a journey from oppression begins

The Omer: Toward Knowledge
learning how oppression works

Shavuot: Revelation
Reach Sinai more able to hear divine values, serve God's liberation work

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Get a move on
it says
every year,
...get back to work
you don’t have forever
...the wounded world
is still in your hands

the drone repeats get on with it
gather grief like straw
spin it into something like gold
-- from "Drone," Alicia Suskin Ostriker
Endnotes

PLEASE NOTE: This section is a late amendment here, attempting to flesh out some parts of the text that might seem unclear and/or most problematic. This is notes, quotes, and not polished argument. Apologies for any sloppiness of presentation, especially of others' views.

p. 4 Crash Talk.

From the website of SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva -- http://www.svara.org/crash/ --

This lecture is both an overview of the ultimate goals of the Jewish enterprise, as well as a crash course in halachic (Jewish legal) jurisprudence. Beyond its application to Judaism, the CRASH Theory is a simple but elegant model of how all change happens—whether societal, religious, organizational, or personal. Originally conceived to explain the history of disruptive innovation within Judaism, it has proven helpful to many in understanding and navigating moments of disruptive change in their own lives.

p. 25 The Anti-Defamation League

"...many Jewish groups unquestioningly accept security advisories and advice -- from organizations like the Anti-Defamation League -- that say nothing about assessing threat to Jews of Color, visitors, and/or black and brown neighbors..." above p.25. Elaborating here, as requested by an early reader.


This 118-page document includes no mention at all of race or color, no mention of possible threat from increased security to neighbors, visitors, or members of a Jewish institution who are Black...or brown or queer or otherwise regularly identified as "other," even "suspect," by security systems and "greeters."

In fact, instead, we read:

Failure to exclude someone who should be excluded is considerably more dangerous than failure to include someone who should be included. The former is a life and safety issue, the latter a constituent relations issue.

-- "Protecting Your Jewish Institution," p.81

"Neighbor" is used only in the following contexts:

At every stage, work to build relationships with your local emergency services as well as your neighbors. Get to know local law enforcement and get them to know you before there is a problem. Invite local police officers to use your gym, to join you for an oneg shabbat or just to visit your building and get to know it."

It is unwise to alienate neighbors who may serve as part of a neighborhood watch and provide additional "eyes and ears" as part of your overall security program.

Working on your relationships with neighbors — they will be in a good position to notice and report suspicious activity.

-- "Protecting Your Jewish Institution," p. 9, p. 22, p.57

The one exception to the focus on what a neighbor might do for the institution is a note saying that any added lighting should not be "overly intrusive to neighbors." p.22

Statement on Charlottesville Anniversary, August 11-12, 2018, issued 8/6/18

ADL and the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of Great Washington issued a joint "Community Advisory," speaking of “the current rise in bigotry, racism, and anti-Semitism” and saying “we must stand together and draw strength from our diversity in order to fight against it.” The advisory never mentions the diverse coalition that had been working for months to engage together in the very fight they say must be waged; March for Racial Justice organizers confirm (personal communication) that there was no contact. The advisory, in fact, mentions no contact at all with non-Jewish individuals or organizations, except for the police. The ADL/JCRC, situated in a multicultural city, filled with non-Jewish populations threatened by the “Unite the Right” rally and all it represents, chose to issue an advisory that references no other vulnerable population.
ADL Continued

On-line Materials, like "18 Best Practices for Institutional Security," are similarly devoid of mention of security's possible affect on Black and brown, queer, or otherwise vulnerable member and neighbors.

Leadership Seminar in Israel: Downplayed in DC and other community relations, ADL funds a program taking police from the U.S. to Israel for training as well as "regional" programs in the U.S. The exact impact on our increasingly militarized police is not clear. Here is a snippet from the ADL website: "Since its inception in 2003, nearly 200 different federal, state and local agencies across the U.S. have had leaders participate in the seminar to better serve their constituents back home and ensure safety and security for all."

ADL's lesson on Black Lives Matter from their website and downloadable lesson plan: The ADL offers a nine-page lesson-plan, from Aug 2015 and then updated with the note to teachers on Aug 2016, on Black Lives Matter.

- It begins with asking students: "Have you ever seen this expression? What does it mean? What do you know about it? How do you feel about it?" Thus, launching the lesson by centering the experience and feelings of students, who may or may not be Black, instead of centering the experiences of Black people -- in- or outside of BLM -- with police;
- The lesson goes on to ask students to view a six-minute NYT video that is about the use of Twitter and includes three activists from OUTSIDE of Ferguson. It does not even include, let alone center, anyone who lived through the invasion of their neighborhood and/or years of racist policing;
- The lesson does not mention the U.S. Attorney General’s report (March 2015), noting a long history of unjustified arrests and excessive force, as well as instances of bigoted emails, in Ferguson.
- In closing, one of the questions asked of students is "What do you think the Black Lives Matter movement should do next?" Thus re-centering the opinions of people from outside BLM -- or outside any Black community.
- The vocabulary taught to students does not include "self-determination" or "community control."

In this way, students never learn anything about the history of racist policing in Ferguson, or anywhere else in the U.S. They don't learn the main points of Black Lives Matter and are asked, instead, to treat BLM as a sort of cultural phenomenon devoid of context. And have an opinion on it....Then there's the added "Note to Teachers."

...which leads us to...

p. 25 Movement for Black Lives

As noted above, the ADL offers a "lesson" on the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) without actually incorporating views from the movement or highlighting the experiences of those most affected. They even encourage students to highlight their own feelings and opinions without first looking at the history out of which M4BL grows.

Having consistently focused on the experiences of people OUTSIDE the M4BL, the ADL then completely centers the needs and opinions of Jews and Israel with its statement about the M4BL platform in August 2016: See the "Note to Teachers" (Aug 2016, still posted on the website as of March 2019). Also see "Eyes on the Prize: In Pursuit of Racial Justice, Stick to the Facts and Avoid the Fiction," by Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO and National Director of the Anti-Defamation League (also Aug 2016, still up in March 2019).

The ADL is not the only Jewish organization to do this, of course, but they are the ones offering their teaching materials to schools and other community settings and speaking as an expert on issues around policing and safety for Jewish institutions. Meanwhile, the ADL and many others in the Jewish community keep talking about wanting to be "in coalition" with others but seem to consistently resist actually hearing their potential coalition partners or respecting their viewpoints. Instead, issues of antisemitism and anti-Israel or pro-Palestinian policies are used to re-focus discussions about dismantling racist systems in the U.S., including U.S. support for racist systems in other parts of the world.
It is not surprising that many Jewish organizations consistently put Jewish and Israel-focused needs at the foreground of their work, or that they have concerns about real antisemitism, anti-Jewish and anti-Israel feeling. What is distressing, though, is the repeated surprise on the part of such Jewish groups when potential coalition partners in Black organizations are aghast at the constant reframing to focus on Jewish needs.

Two additional thoughts on a related topic:

"Repudiating Farrakhan: The Delusional Notion Of White Supremacy That Black People Are The Ones Who Need To Denounce Bigotry"

The clear and concise message to Black people from the Jewish community, white liberals and gaslighting white supremacy supporting conservatives: Condemn Minister Louis Farrakhan or we will ruin you.

While they have tolerated, supported or remained silent about anti-Black and non-white bigotry, systemic racism and the extra judicial murders of unarmed Black people for eons, they have the unmitigated gall to muster up outrage at Black people who refuse to capitulate to their mandates on who we are allowed to have as leaders and who we need to unequivocally repudiate to prove to them, the perpetrators, supporters, passive participants and apathetic onlookers of our oppression, that we’re not the racists. How’s that for some serious cognitive dissonance?... ...

While some of the remarks Farrakhan has made about Jews have no doubt been offensive and hurtful, not understanding the reluctance of Black people to kowtow to the expectation of white people that we repudiate the minister on their demand reveals how deep the racial divide in this nation truly is. The unwillingness to explore why Black people continue to respect Minister Farrakhan while expecting them to understand why white people embrace policies that are detrimental to Black communities is disingenuous at best and at worst, downright hypocritical.

Here’s the reality: America continuously makes demands on Black leaders to denounce and repudiate hate and bigotry to the satisfaction of white folks, who embrace those who practice it daily.

-- Bishop Talbert Swan, pastor, author, pastor. (Blavity.com 2019)

"Farrakhan is Not the Problem: Arrogance and Absurdity of America's Racial Litmus Test"

But the simple truth is, Louis Farrakhan is not the problem when it comes to racism, sexism or heterosexism in this country; nor is he any real threat to Jews as Jews, or whites as whites, contrary to popular mythology.

But can we get real for a moment? What ability does Farrakhan have to do me any harm, or any Jew for that matter? When was the last time those of us who are Jewish had to worry about whether or not our Farrakhan-following employer was going to discriminate against us? Or whether our Fruit of Islam loan officer was going to turn us down for a mortgage? Or whether our Black Muslim landlord was going to screw us out of a rent deposit because of some anti-Jewish feelings, conjured up by reading the Nation’s screed on Jewish involvement in the slave trade? The answer, of course, is never. If anything, members of the Nation, or black folks in general, have a much greater likelihood of being the victims of discrimination at our hands—the hands of a Jewish employer, banker or landlord, and certainly a white one, Jewish or not—than we’ll ever have at theirs. White and/or Jewish bias against Nation members, either as blacks or Muslims or both, is more likely to restrict their opportunities than even the most advanced black bigotry is capable of doing to us. That’s because bias alone is never sufficient to do much harm. Without some kind of institutional power to back up that bias, even the most unhinged black racism or anti-Jewish bigotry is pretty impotent.

-- Tim Wise, antiracist writer, on his blog. 5/24/08
Thanks and Next Steps

Thanks: Thanks to Rabbi Gerry Serotta, director of the Interfaith Council of Greater Washington, for much support and teaching over the years and, in particular, for encouragement and ideas that helped shape this project. Thanks to Norman Shore, independent teacher of Torah in the DC area, for his support and teaching over many years and, in particular, for encouragement and corrections as my thinking evolved on the blog, "A Song Every Day." Thanks to Rabbi Hannah Spiro, of Hill Havurah, for her enthusiasm and detailed comments on an earlier version.

Thanks to Barbara Green, Bob Rovinsky, Norman Shore, and others who have supported "A Song Every Day" financially. And thanks to readers of earlier versions for comments and corrections and to those who contributed thoughts over the years, on the blog and via Facebook or other platform, on related topics.

I am also deeply appreciative of the work of every author quoted here, living or not. I am in particular dept to Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Phyllis Trible, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Rabbi Shais Rishon (MaNishtana), and Marc Dollinger. I am also grateful to DC's Cross-River (Black-Jewish) Dialogue for helping hone my thinking.

Apologies to anyone I'm forgetting to include here.

All political views, mistakes of interpretation, fact, spelling, or any kind are mine alone, however.

Next Steps: This is still a BETA-version of this document, and comments toward future efforts are encouraged. Please considering subscribing to songeveryday.org for further work on this and to join a new (5779) "Making the Omer Count" project on understanding toward dismantling racial oppression.

Financial contributions: Please consider contributing to the cost of this publication. $6.00 will cover printing and other hard costs of one copy. Additional contributions to support the author's time and future projects are most welcome. Please visit songeveryday.org and click on "support." Thanks for considering!

Biography:

Virginia Avniel Spatz (she/her/hers), a native of Chicago, has been living and writing in DC for more than 30 years. Frequent topics include bridge building across communities, Jewish teaching over the ages and its application to social justice today, and issues like gun violence and racial inequity which plague both her original and long-time hometowns.

Jewish writings appear on "A Song Every Day" blog, in Living Text, a publication of the (sadly now defunct) Institute for Contemporary Midrash, and other national publications. She regularly reported for Capital Community News for years and still contributes occasionally; currently maintains "Say This Name" site, which helps congregations and others mark DC homicides and provides related resources; served as feature reporter on We Act Radio's "Education Town Hall" program, still manages their website, and now volunteers with Charnice Milton Community Bookstore (#WeLuvBooks) in Historic Anacostia, DC.

Spatz and her husband, Cary O'Brien (he/him/his), have made homes in New Brunswick, NJ, and Boston as well as Chicago and DC. They raised two children, now adults, homeschooling until they each entered a different DC Public high school. Passover in their home now depends on O'Brien preparations and cooking -- like Shabbat and every other holiday involving food -- and Spatz kashering and haggadah hopping.
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Graphics (in order of appearance):
Map on page 9, created by V. Spatz from Maps of the Ancient Near East, a project of the Oriental Institute, the University of Chicago. Found on Oriental Institute's website.


Grandpas? -- from left to right:
photo: Wayne Lawrence; from youdontlookjewish.com;
from "Ethiopian Jews," Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, March 30, 2012 (correspondent Fred de Sam Lazaro; videographer not listed);
from JewishinAllHues Facebook page

Omer graphic from "A Song Every Day" Omer Counting for Racial Justice, of 2015.

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(there's an otherwise blank page, and we all think we know this "melting pot" imagery but maybe really don't)

The first use of the expression “melting pot” in American English is dated to 1887 by Merriam-Webster Dictionary. The term came to describe the peculiar struggles in the U.S. around immigration and assimilation. This usage was popularized by Israel Zangwill's play, *The Melting Pot*, which was first performed — and reportedly applauded by President Theodore Roosevelt — in 1908.

One speech from *The Melting Pot*:

America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming!...A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.

— David Quixano to Verendal, *The Melting Pot*

Closing lines of *The Melting Pot*:

DAVID: There she lies, the great Melting Pot—listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth [He points east]—the harbour where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to pour in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian,—black and yellow—

VERA: Jew and Gentile—

DAVID: Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross—how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame! Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. Ah, Vera, what is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labour and look forward!

NOTE: This play, and historical notes, are available via Project Guttenberg (public domain). If you have not read it, or read it recently, check it out!

Wishing all a liberating Passover.