

VA'ERA - 5780

THE BEING THAT IS BECOMING

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The Exodus Story, which we began last week and continue to read in this week's *parasha*, *Va'era*, and for the next several weeks, is our defining narrative. It provides a Jewish understanding of our place and purpose in the world, and in relationship with the Divine.

We are accustomed to reading this story as a tale of national liberation. “With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with signs and wonders,” the God of the Hebrews defeated the Pharaoh of Egypt: a pretender-god, a sadistic tyrant. Again and again, Moses returns to the hardhearted Pharaoh—first with righteous entreaty, then with threats, then with a barrage of divine plagues. Again and again, Pharaoh refuses to relent, until the devastating tenth plague, the death of the firstborn.

The Exodus narrative resides at the heart of the collective Jewish identity. We declare at the Passover Seder that “in every generation, we must see ourselves as personally having gone forth from Egypt.” We sing, “*Avadim Hayinu... ata B'nei Chorin: We were slaves; now we are free.*”

Jews root the mandate to *Tikkun Olam*, to repair the world, to bring liberation and dignity to the marginalized and subjugated, in our own experience of slavery—as the Torah says, “Do not oppress the stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having been slaves in the Land of Egypt.” We heard powerful echoes of this story in the resistance of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and all the great Moseses and Miriams of yesteryear who marched for Civil Rights.

Tonight, I hope to enhance our conventional interpretation of the story with another layer, a metaphorical roadmap for understanding Exodus not only as a saga of national deliverance but also as a personal, spiritual journey.

For the mystics of the Jewish tradition—for the Kabbalists, the original followers of complex allegorical works like the *Zohar*, which was written in 13th Century Spain, or those influenced

by the 16th Century Rabbi Isaac Luria, who made his home in Tzefat in Northern Israel, and established there a mystical school of thought known as Lurianic Kabbalah, or for the followers of the original Chasidic *Rebbes* or master teachers in Central Europe of the 18th and 19th Centuries—the Torah is itself a spiritual blueprint for how the Jew comes to understand God and one’s own place and purpose in the world.

Read as mystical allegory, the story of the Exodus is not about national liberation from bondage but rather personal liberation from suffering. For the mystic, Exodus describes how we begin as slaves to our own suffering, come into a deep awareness of God, and how we use that awareness of God to liberate ourselves from suffering so that we can serve the world with compassion.

The central insight of Kabbalah (or Jewish mysticism) is formulated in the *Zohar* as follows:
לית אתר פנוי מיני - Aramaic for, “There is nothing devoid of God.”

There are many different ways of expressing the same idea. The Chasidim said, in Yiddish or German, *Alles is Gott*, “Everything is God.”

Philosophers both Eastern and Western say it this way: “There is only one thing and we are all it.”

However formulated, the idea radically alters the traditional way of understanding the relationship between God and the world.

Normally we visualize a transcendent, supernatural being “above” or “outside” or “beyond” Creation, *separate from* the material world.

Kabbalah rejects this *dualism*, this idea that there is God on the one hand, and everything else on the other. Kabbalah is *non-dualistic*. It teaches that any such perception of *separation* between the material and the divine is an *illusion*. For the Kabbalist or Jewish Mystic, the idea that Divinity exists apart from “everything else,” that there *is* an “everything else” other than God, is just a cloak hiding the true reality of the Universe.

Albert Einstein, who was both scientist *and* Jewish mystic, put it this way, in a letter written to a man distraught over the death of his young son to polio:

A human being is a spatially and temporally limited piece of the whole, what we call the “Universe.” He experiences himself and his feelings as separate from the rest, an optical illusion of his consciousness. The quest for liberation from this bondage is the only object of true religion. Not nurturing the illusion but only overcoming it gives us the attainable measure of inner peace.¹

Human beings can, through the mysterious gift of consciousness, become aware of the ultimate reality, that *Adonai Echad*—that God is the great One-ness of all matter and energy. (Einstein, who himself scientifically demonstrated that matter and energy are really just the same thing ($E=mc^2$), would not disagree.)

And so, the journey from bondage to liberation, from suffering to redemption, begins with the awareness of God.

Early in Exodus, Moses speaks to God on the mountain, anxious about how this whole liberation project is going to go down. When Moses tries to convince Pharaoh to let the people go, Pharaoh scoffs and multiplies their burdens, demanding bricks without straw, ratcheting up the cruelty of the taskmasters.

When Moses returns to God at the top of this week’s portion, he feels skeptical, defeated. “How will Pharaoh listen to me if my own people will not?” he asks.

Enigmatically, God answers by expatiating at some length on the Divine name, spelled *Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey*, sometimes vocalized *Yahweh* but almost always in religious settings pronounced

¹ This version of Einstein’s famous letter to Robert S. Marcus, Dated 12 February 1950, is a new translation rendered from Einstein’s original German hand-written note, as provided by Bryce Hammond, author, “Einstein’s Misquote on the Illusion of Feeling Separate from the Whole,” as cited on <https://www.thymindoman.com/einsteins-misquote-on-the-illusion-of-feeling-separate-from-the-whole/>.

Adonai, meaning “Lord,” in keeping with the Jewish custom not to pronounce the personal name of God.

Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey. Four letters that scholars call the “tetragrammaton,” which means, “thing with four letters.” But not just any letters. Four letters that can’t be pronounced without a vowel, letters that make no sound on their own. *Yyyyy*, *Hhhhhh*, *Vav* (which is usually silent and takes the sound of its vowel) and another *Hhhhhh*. The name is best described as the sound of breath, or what Simon and Garfunkel called The Sound of Silence. The life-force of the universe.

When, in last week’s reading, Moses asks God to clarify exactly who is speaking, God replies, again, enigmatically, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, playing off of the same letters, a name usually translated as *I AM THAT I AM* but which likely means something more like, “BEING THAT IS BECOMING.” *Ehyeh* - from the same root as *Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey*, which itself is a conjugation of the verb “to be.” Being. Being that is Becoming. That’s God’s name. Whenever you say, “Baruch ata Adonai,” you’re really saying, “Blessed are you, BEING,” et cetera.

This is how God prepares Moses for the mission, quells his anxiety, readies him for the great liberation to come. It begins with *Ehyeh*, the awareness of the one, ever-evolving, eternal, invisible, silently breathing, Being-that-is-Becoming.

Our own liberation from suffering begins with the awareness of God’s presence in every moment, every place, every thing, every person, every breath.

We begin to liberate ourselves when we develop the ability to stop—if only for a moment—worshipping the Pharaohs of Doing and begin to serve the true God of Being that is Becoming. As my friend, Father Ralph Peterson, retired Episcopal priest, likes to remind us, “We are human *beings*, not human *doings*.”

If I can still myself, even momentarily; if I can just stop and breathe, I may begin to observe the common thread binding me to the other, binding me to my surroundings: an inkling that we are all connected, that we are all made of the same stardust.

Judaism gives us tools to develop this awareness. The study of Kabbalah is replete with pathways to deeper awareness; but it is also esoteric. Jewish tradition even discourages studying Kabbalah before the age of 40.

Fortunately there are other ways to arrive at the same destination. Shabbat is the most familiar. We stop *doing* and enter a state of *being*, one day, every seven days. We cultivate deeper awareness—of all the causes for gratitude in our life, of our relationships, of our sources of love and wellbeing; we share meals; we pray and sing and give thanks. We remind ourselves that our work will still be there, waiting for us next week. And then we'll need Shabbat again.

There are other tools. Many have found that changes in diet, exercise, sleep, or adopting practices like yoga can enhance one's own clarity, calm and connectedness.

When, three years ago, Kelly took up twice-daily meditation, and soon after encouraged me to give it a try, I will admit that I was skeptical. Over time, with practice and commitment, I've come to understand its benefits: a deeper awareness of my own thoughts, a more gentle and contemplative approach to daily life, an enhanced perspective, and a kind of waking mindfulness that accompanies me when I'm not meditating.

Contrary to common misperception, meditation is *not* about “stopping thought,” or “emptying the mind,” or “getting somewhere.” It *is* about “being with,” “being present to,” “being able to be with the *what is*.” If you'd like to know more about adopting a meditation practice of your own, I'm happy to talk to you about it.

We are all on this Exodus journey together—a journey out of separation toward unity, a journey out of suffering toward redemption, a journey out of punishing loneliness toward connection. When we realize that there is only one thing, and we are all it, we have made extraordinary step on the long road from bondage to liberation.

And as we journey together, I invite us to meditate on this poem by David Wagoner called “Lost”:

*Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.*

Shabbat Shalom.