

At this point in the holiday, I think the liberation many of us are focused on is the liberation to let bread back into our lives.

I acknowledge that some of us keep seven days of chag and some of us keep eight. If you keep seven, then this service might be what is standing between you and some really delicious yeasted products at home. Please bear with me, however, and try to suspend disbelief, as I'm operating within a framework in which we still have one more day of this holiday!

We will be reading tomorrow from the Book of Deuteronomy, since the Torah reading for the 8th day, when it falls on Shabbat, is Deuteronomy 14:22-16:17. This extraordinary reading deals almost entirely with the obligations of the community to the poor, beginning with the commandment to make sure that every third year the tenth of the produce is given to the stranger, the needy, the widow, orphan and the levite. That tithe is not sent elsewhere, to anonymous strangers, but brought to the gates of the town, so that the needy "within your gates," - those poor that you might otherwise overlook, but whose faces are familiar - may eat.

The reading continues, discussing the obligation to provide loans to anyone who is needy, even if we fear they cannot repay. Later in chapter 15, we read that when freeing a Hebrew slave, or what we might call an indentured servant, there is an obligation to pay a bonus of produce, meat and wine. And finally, we see the commandment to observe the holiday of Pesach, in the season in which we came out of Egypt, in the place of God's choosing.

So on the last day of the holiday, I love that we get this strong mandate: our Exodus from Egypt is not just be recollected. Our Exodus from Egypt requires us to feed the hungry, to tend our agricultural land mindfully, to share our abundance.

But when I read this verses, I also feel achingly sad. . . about our exile. These commandments were written with an assumption that people who were following them would be living their own, indigenous lifestyle, in a land in which they had deep roots. These laws were written with the assumption that abundance comes from the very particular spot where each of us live and work, and so cannot be taken for granted. The law instructing us to loan to someone in need, even when they cannot repay, is indicative of a society that holds the awareness that if one small family farm goes bankrupt, the whole community will be less prosperous.

As Jews went into exile, we lost some of that intuitive understanding of what these laws were about. It became harder to remember that Pesach was not just about a story, but about a joyful celebration of the barley harvest. It became harder to remember that the Omer was not just numbers, but actually sheaves of wheat, hauled by pilgrims marching to a holy place.

And in recent centuries, we have participated in an even larger, more global exile. Many of us are no longer connected to a sense of rootedness in any land, in any sense of the connection between the soil under our feet (or under the pavement) and the possibility of survival - for ourselves and others.

So as we move along from the visceral, Matzah-induced experience of Pesach, I have been thinking about what Exodus means this year. Because every year, each of us is commanded to view ourselves as if we were redeemed from Egypt.

As Rabbi Michael Walzer wrote over 30 years ago in his book, "Exodus and Redemption," the essence of reading ourselves into the Pesach narrative boils down to three assumptions:

- First, that wherever you live, 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.

The timeliness of this message is breathtaking. We live in a society of commodity agriculture and industry, out of sight, out of mind, dependent on slaves or near slaves to keep it functioning, poisoning our world. Our economy is literally killing us. It's killing the poor and the racially underprivileged first, but it's making all of us less healthy and more vulnerable. Egypt indeed.

We know that a better way of living is possible. Our very anger and grief at the state of the world indicates that we are not as selfish and cruel as the mainstream cultural narrative would have us believe. We are capable of astounding generosity, and of commitment to justice. We are capable of relating to land as something we love and depend on, rather than something to extract what we need from and then move on.

The only way is by joining together and marching.

Thank God, the struggle is very clear. And thank God, we live here in Blockadia, in a region of the world that is at the center of efforts of resistance to the dominant narrative of the world.

Since I arrived in Eugene, I have gotten involved with the local chapter of 350.org. 350 is an environmental justice organization whose name comes from the scientific consensus that 350 parts per million is the highest safe concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to prevent catastrophic global warming. (The current concentration is now at about 405 ppm).

This organization is deeply committed to part 3 of Rabbi Walzer's equation: joining together and marching. 350 is part of a large coalition of indigenous rights groups, environmentalists, labor advocates, and homeowners, who have been planning mass actions to stop extractive industries, such as coal, oil and gas companies from initiating and completing devastating extractive projects that would tear up the land, pollute the environment, and slow efforts to transition to clean energies and economies around the world.

In two weeks, there will be an action in Anacortes, WA, targeting the largest oil refinery in the Pacific Northwest. I have an obligation to be here, leading services, but I'm inviting Oriana, who will be attending the action, to share a few thoughts about how you can help.

<Oriana speaks>

Thanks Oriana.

Remember the three assumptions:

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- 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.

As we count the Omer towards revelation, tonight and for the next 6 weeks, let's focus our efforts towards getting there.