

The Bread of Uncertainty: Parashat Bo

Bina Tallitman, an orphaned refugee of Nazi Germany, describes arriving at Kibbutz Kedma in Israel after having spent many long, hungry months in Europe during the war. Spread before her in the chadar ochel – the kibbutz dining hall – were tables laden with food of every kind: plump fruits and vegetables, savory cheeses, crusty breads, rich, oily nuts. The children were encouraged to fill their plates, taking as much as they wanted! Tallitman recalls how in her early days, even when faced with such abundance, she still could not quite shake the feeling that it would soon be gone, and she filled her pockets each meal with half a loaf of bread just in case, sneaking it carefully back to her bunk. Every year on seder night as she breaks the middle matzah, she thinks of this. Feeling secure in what's to come is, perhaps, one of the most profound signs of freedom.

This morning we read Parashat Bo, a continuation of the well-known story of our ancestors' exodus from Egypt that we began just a few weeks ago. In fact, in this week's parasha we finally arrive at the dramatic climax of our narrative with Pharaoh's hardened-heart ultimately yielding in response to the last, and most devastating, of plagues as first-born children throughout the land, including the ruler's own eldest son, perish leaving behind a nation devastated. In fear and desperation, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night and surrenders to their demands, displaying a posture of deep anguish and humility. "Uverachtem gam oti – Bring blessing upon me too," he cries out (Exodus 12:32)! Anything to stop the terrible litany of suffering his people have endured!

Yes, the tale is so familiar, and yet when I read it this year, something feels a bit different. We, of course, know how the story ends which robs the narrative a bit of its suspense and dramatic tension. But let's pretend for a minute that this were not so: what must it have been like for the Israelites – and the Egyptians, too, for that matter – living through the events described by Torah without having any certainty about how it would all come out? What must it have felt like to experience the fear and disruption of a terrible plague, the subsequent receding into normalcy, and then the recurrence of an even worse assault just a short while later – not one, not two, but ten full times? Indeed, perhaps we

read the story of the Exodus this year better equipped than ever before to identify with B'nai Yisrael (Children of Israel), accustomed as we've become to surges, waves, and variants that upend our lives just as we finally feel like we're settling into a new routine. Perhaps, too, there are lessons to take from this story that can help us to live with the cycles of chaos and uncertainty that plague us so severely still today.

One of the best-known details of the Passover story is the matzah, the unleavened bread that didn't have time to rise given the haste with which our ancestors left Egypt, as it says in Exodus 12:39: "For it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves." But commentators point out that while the final release from slavery came about rather quickly, it was a few weeks from the first plague to the last which should have given the Israelites ample time to collect food for the journey. The great commentator Rashi sees the lack of preparedness on B'nai Yisrael's part to their credit, indicating that it was a sign of their great faith that God would provide for them during the escape from Egypt that was soon to come. Others are more skeptical, wondering if this lack of advance planning indicated a decided lack of confidence on the part of the Israelite people in God and God's deliverance.

This year, I find myself wondering if something else entirely was going on for the Israelites, seemingly caught unaware of the redemption that would soon be theirs and forced to prepare hastily for the journey. I wonder if having just lived through nine other plagues, false alarms, as it were, that had their hearts pumping and adrenaline racing and bodies tensed in fight-or-flight mode, they're simply tired of preparing provisions for a journey that keeps getting delayed. Perhaps they had collected food – and baby blankets and family photos and all the other things that they'd need during escape – and carefully packed them away, just to see them being tripped over and gathering dust and lying at the bottom of a full rucksack precisely at the moment they were most needed after a long, hard day of manual labor. Perhaps they were exhausted and depleted and figured that they'd just throw provisions together at the last minute, when the moment should finally occur. Perhaps they were just

being practical and realistic, trying to shield themselves and their families from future disappointment as freedom seemed so slow to arrive.

One might call all that I've just described a lack of gratitude or faith on the part of the Israelites, but I'd rather call it something else: the residual effects of living through trauma. When Bina Tallitman hoarded food in her pockets, it wasn't because she didn't trust the kind-hearted kibbutzniks who took her in with love – it was because her life experience had led her to understand that nothing is certain and it's better to be prepared for the worst. The Israelites have learned an almost opposite lesson from their encounters with uncertainty – why bother preparing, when it all comes to naught? In difficult times, it can be hard to be trusting and optimistic and primed to expect and plan for the good. Our perspective changes from thriving to simply surviving.

It would, of course, be hyperbolic to compare the many sorrows and deprivations of the pandemic to life under Nazi rule or the experience of Egyptian slavery. Yet we, too, are coping with the residual effects of living through uncertainty and trauma, and each additional wave that we hit in this pandemic only feels more dispiriting and bleak. "Ayn bayit asher ayn sham met," the Torah writes in describing the pervasiveness of the tenth plague, "There was no house where there was not someone dead" (Exodus 12:30). While thankfully, mortality is not quite so widespread in our community, too many in this congregation and others have lost loved ones to Covid and it does, indeed, feel like the walls are closing in such that it's hard to find a family where illness has not yet landed. We can relate all too easily to the tzaaka gedola – the great cry welling up from Egypt, awash with so much anxiety and grief.

At the Passover seder we break the middle matzah, the same one that caused Bina Tallitman to think of her experiences on the kibbutz long ago, and divide it in half. The other two matzot that we have on the table seder night represent the lechem mishne – the two regular loaves that we enjoy each Shabbat and holiday symbolizing the double portion of manna that fell in the desert on Friday. This

middle matzah represents the lechem oni – the bread of affliction (or I might say, uncertainty!) – that is unique to Passover.

We remember, of course, that it is the larger half of this matzah which ultimately becomes the afikomen – secreted away until it is found and then used to conclude the Pesach meal on a note of sweetness and optimism. Our journey from slavery to freedom left us broken, cleft in two, showing the cracks of our residual trauma. And yet, while it can feel hidden and inaccessible, our journey from slavery to freedom also affirmed for us a sense of hope – that the greater part of our experience would be the redemption, not the pain, uncovered for us in part by the next generation – the children. In the words of Rabbi Helen Plotkin, “Whom must we trust to bring the other half? The children. In the end, the most important piece, the point of it all, the future, our own redemption, is in the hands of the younger generation. We have no choice but to trust them to bring it to the table.”¹

Of course, at present, one of the things that makes this moment so very hard is precisely the children. While there are plenty of things that we, as adults, worry about for ourselves – particularly as this disease tends to affect older individuals more severely than younger ones – so much of our concern is for the next generation losing precious years – educationally, socially, emotionally - that are impossible to get back. Is this the new normal, we wonder, cycles of advance and retreat that leave us ever anxious about when the next spike is going to emerge? What will this new wave mean in terms of learning losses, in terms of the mental health crisis already overwhelming our teenagers, in terms of the relentless stream of cancellations and disappointments both large and small that our young people have had to contend with over the last two years? And then, of course, for children (as for adults) - the fear, no matter how unlikely, of severe illness. How do we balance keeping our young people physically safe with also keeping them emotionally and spiritually well?

¹ <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/holidays/articles/meaning-of-the-afikoman>

Before the tenth plague's devastating spate of deaths was the ninth plague of choshech – darkness – a black so intense that the Torah says “it could be touched” (Exodus 10:21). The dark was so pervasive that “lo ra’u ish et achiv v’lo kamu ish mitachtav shloshet yamim – people could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was” (Exodus 10:23). Unlike with the other plagues, we can imagine that even given deep, terrible darkness there should have been a remedy – the Egyptians should have been able to light candles in order to pierce the black. For this reason, some commentators understand choshech as profound depression rather than as physical darkness. Either way, it seems that one of the hallmarks of this plague was isolation – individuals not being able to see or be near one another. The Egyptians were so demoralized by the previous nine assaults that they could no longer find light or the comfort of human relationship.

We are living, once again, through a time of choshech (darkness) these days – social connection, once again, encumbered and a sense of anxiety, dread, and fatigue penetrating to our bones. And so, perhaps, there are, indeed, lessons to be gained from the experiences of our ancestors that we hear again this Shabbat – those early pioneers of plague, uncertainty, and dark. From the provisions that weren't sufficiently prepared for the journey, we might remember that prolonged stress inhibits our ability to function properly and that things will be just fine even if we lower previously high expectations. From the Egyptians sitting in the dark, we might be inspired to look for the resources at our disposal even when all seems lost and to remember the sacred power of human connection. And from the cracked matzah forming the afikoman, we might just possibly glimpse the promise of repair, inspiring us to find amidst all the painful brokenness small pockets of hope and joy.

During this period of so much uncertainty, may we perhaps be like Bina Tallitman – preparing for the worst. But may the story of our people help us, at the same time, to retain hope for the best!

Shabbat Shalom,

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