

## Redemption is a Small Act of Collective Courage

Dear Yale Jewish community,

I hope my message finds each of you, and those you care about, healthy and safe. Some of are locked in an urgent, immediate battle with COVID-19 - for ourselves or for our loved ones. All of us bide our time, looking for flashes of hope and connection in the midst of vast isolation.

We are approaching the hinge in time when an act of temporal alchemy promises to transform our undifferentiated days of coronavirus sheltering into the sacred time of Passover. Disempowered stasis can, we are told, give way to the drama of liberation and agency. But can it really? And if so - how?

Our Rabbis of blessed memory answer these questions in their characteristically surprising and courageous fashion. It is not in God's humiliation of Pharaoh that the Israelites find their dignity, nor in the decimation of the Egyptian army under the crushing weight of the sea that Israel finds its freedom. The Israelites do not gain their freedom through *any* act of God's, because one cannot and does not become free through the acts of others: freedom is a state, our Rabbis believe, created (or not) by people acting with and for one another, a state that cannot be conferred by an external agent.

In the Rabbis' retelling, Israel achieves its freedom on the 10th day of the month of Nisan, five full days before the night of the Exodus, *while they are still in Egypt*. This is the date on which each Israelite household is instructed to acquire a lamb for the upcoming Paschal sacrifice - and which, since it originally fell on Shabbat, is remembered as *Shabbat ha-Gadol*, the Shabbat that annually precedes Passover - which will, this year, begin in a few hours.

The account given by the great Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (Toledo, 14th century; Orah Hayyim 230) focuses on an imagined confrontation with Egyptian neighbors, who challenged the Israelites' right to sacrifice a lamb. In Rabbi Jacob's account, the name of this special Shabbat is rendered as "the great Shabbat", for "on it, a great miracle occurred." This was not a miracle of God's or anything supernatural - it was something greater: the miracle of hundreds of thousands of Israelites standing up to the very Egyptians who had intimidated and

dehumanized them for generations - and refusing to yield. It is in this act of defiance carried out on innumerable street-corners and front-yards that the Israelites became free, even while still in Egypt.

Another account goes deeper yet. Rabbi Jacob's slightly younger contemporary in Seville, Rabbi David Abudirham recognizes that Shabbat ha-Gadol was the first time that common Israelites were - individually and collectively - enjoined to perform a mitzvah. In Jewish tradition the obligation in mitzvot is what differentiates an adult, or *gadol*, from a minor, or *katan*. In other words, the Shabbat before leaving Egypt was the moment in which countless Jewish individuals assumed the full responsibility of adult Jewish life - a mass bat and bar mitzvah, if you will. And in recognition of their collective attainment of adulthood, the moment is always remembered as *Shabbat ha-Gadol*.

Emergence into Jewish adulthood is not only, and not centrally, the assumption of a set of rules to follow. Rather, Jewish citizenship is the assumption of the full rights and responsibilities due a member of a community. Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a moment of joining with others, a moment of joining in a shared identity with a community stretching across time and space. In this sense, Rabbi Jacob's and Rabbi David's accounts move in opposite (though not irreconcilable) directions: Rabbi Jacob celebrates the Israelites' ability to stand apart from and against the Egyptians; Rabbi David their ability to stand with and for one another.

This description of obligation in mitzvot as centrally about standing with others, rather than an individual's relationship to God or a set of rules, is not the standard one. But it is the correct one, and one we urgently need at this moment. The dominant Rabbinic metaphor for the commandments is a yoke: *ol ha-mitzvot*. A yoke not only connects an animal to its driver - it also joins oxen to one another as a team, allowing them to transform the earth in ways they could not on their own. For our Rabbis, commandedness is not a straight line between us and our Creator, but a triangle linking us to God and to one another in equal measure.

The normative vocabulary of the English language shares this sense. Obligations are "binding" not because they tie us up, but because they establish lasting bonds with others. Yet more tellingly, the words I used a few paragraphs above to gloss mitzvah - 'enjoined' and 'obligation' - are deeply related to 'joint' and 'ligament' respectively. The image is that in sharing obligations with others, we join with

them in an organic whole larger than ourselves, becoming part of a being that transcends the limits of our individual selves.

Is there anything we need more desperately now than to be united in purpose and agency with others? Can we help our neighbors - and can they help us? When those of us whose bodies will wage a pitched battle against coronavirus be able to rely on the support and strength of others? Our ability to connect - and therefore to help one another - is so diminished by our isolation. And, paradoxically, isolating is for many of us, our greatest agency: we hope that our sacrifices will be met by others, and we are right to feel betrayed by those who could engage in social distancing and refuse to join in its yoke. This year, the Shabbat preceding the Exodus holds out the hope, and the challenge, of joining one another and rising up together in purpose - and thus in freedom.

Our current precarity and interdependence - of needing one another in the most profound and basic ways - is the very picture of the human condition given by Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Paquda in the 22nd metaphor of the eight section of his *Duties of the Heart*. He describes humanity as

*like a tiny band of travelers who have set out for a distant land on a tortuous path. They travel with many pack animals, each loaded with a heavy burden - and must stop again and again to rest, each time unloading and reloading her animal's load. If the travelers help one another, their work will be easy and successful. But if their hearts are divided, such that they are unable to agree on a single course, and each person works only for her own benefit - most will perish. And just like this parable, my brother: the world weighs heavily on its inhabitants. The work is often many times what we are capable of - because so many of us concern ourselves only with what we ourselves have, and try to get more than our due... And not only are we indifferent to one another and don't come to each other's aid - but many people actively undermine others, weakening them and preventing them from what they want and need. So, my brother, strive to acquire faithful friends and dear loved-ones, people who will support you in your life and your studies, people with whom you can be wholehearted and share everything. Love them as you do yourself.*

We are again a tiny band of travelers - formerly the people Israel in the desert searching for the promised land, now humanity at large charting our course

through pandemic. The world weighs heavy on us. Our work may never be 'easy', but it is many times what any of us, even our most courageous and skilled doctors, are capable of on our own.

May each of us rise above the temptations to selfishness and undermining others, and resist the influence of leaders who would set us against one another. May we be blessed with the smallest, and most vital, of traveling bands - friends and family whom we love, and who love us - with bonds that are reinforced by sacrifice for one another in this difficult chapter.

Our Rabbis were right: at this moment our humanity, and our very lives, cannot be secured from the outside - not by acts of God and not by the miracles of doctors or the edicts of politicians. We need all of them for sure, just as Israel needed God in Egypt. But external deliverance is not and can never be sufficient. We desperately need one another - and this Shabbat, the Jewish tradition reminds us that even in the darkness and terror of Egypt, our mothers and fathers together nurtured the most fragile ember of hope and of courage. May we find our own ways, small and large, to join their legacy in joining our purposes to one another.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if I or this community can be a source of support or comfort in these trying times.

With my deepest wishes for your health and wellbeing, Shabbat shalom,  
Jason

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