Author Michael Walzer, wrote in his book *Exodus and Revolution*, that there are three ways to really think about wandering, whether in the wilderness, literally, or wherever our journeys take us in life. “First, wherever you live, it is probably Egypt; second, that there is a better place, a more attractive promised land; and third, that the way to the land is through the wilderness. And there is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.” So, if wandering is a perpetual trek through the wilderness of life, why bother in the first place? For me, the power of the wandering lies in the possibility of redemption.

As we open Parashat Vaera we read a series powerful statements whereby God provides the Jewish people with a light at the end of the tunnel. It is if you will, a pledge that leaving Egypt will yield the ultimate reward of redemption. God says to Moshe¹,

---

¹ Shmot 6:5-7
“I have now heard the moanings of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary judgements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians.

The Torah continues:

“I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the Lord.”

Rabbi Yochanan in the Jerusalem Talmud suggests that these four verbs of redemption, correspond to the four cups of wine that we drink at the seder table on Passover. “Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Benaiah: [They] correspond to the four [acts] of redemptions: I will free you (V’ho-tzayti)…I will save you (V’he-tzalti)…I will redeem you (V’ga-alti)…And I will take you (V’lakachi) to be My people, and I will be your God.” As for the fifth verb, v’hayveiti, and I will bring you, refers to the ultimate act of redemption, the coming of the Messianic era, symbolized by the fifth cup for Elijah the prophet.
Symbolism aside, however, why is it necessary for the Torah to use four or five different words to describe an act that can simply be referred to quite simply as God redeeming the Israelites from bondage in Egypt? I think it goes back to Walzer’s idea of the journey through the wilderness and the idea that to really get to the promised land, to experience and tasted the redemption of milk and honey, you need to take several steps before you can get there.

To some extent, this is not at all surprising. The United States didn’t become a country that embodied freedom and redemption for all overnight any more than Israel becoming the Jewish homeland. And even once we create the ideal promised land, even after we arrive there, there is still more work to be done, more wandering and searching, creating and fixing that needs to be done to get rid of the crime, the violence, the hatred, the hunger and poverty, and other impediments that arise that attempt to get in the way of that notion of a redeemed society. In just one week, we’re reminded of the continued work that needs to be done to stop senseless gun violence, to respond to the growing Syrian refugee crisis, and to somehow convince our presidential candidates to stop bullying one another and start leading our people through the wilderness and back toward that redeemed promised land. The verses of our portion, each of the steps, freeing, saving, redeeming and taking us to the promised land is an unending struggle: personally, communally and globally.
Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a prominent Jewish philosopher during the 20th century, tried to help us better understand what redemption means. Heschel writes\(^2\),

> “The meaning of redemption is to reveal the holy that is concealed, to disclose the divine that is suppressed. Every person is called upon to be a redeemer, and redemption takes place every moment, every day…”

Heschel suggests that each and every person has the ability to be a redeemer, and that more profoundly, redemption can happen at any moment. We are all put on this world to do holy work and leave the world better than the way we found it. Heschel continues, “The world is in need of redemption, but the redemption must not be expected to happen as an act of sheer grace. A person’s task is to make the world worthy of redemption. Our faith and our works are preparations for the ultimate redemption.”

For Heschel, the only way for redemption to happen is if we are all dedicated to making it happen. We can’t simply wait and hope that the time of a Messiah like figure will just come. We have to be a part of creating the answer. But what will it take to actually bring our redemption, to use the Exodus from Egypt narrative to  

\(^2\) *God in Search of Man* by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
bring freedom to the oppressed and vulnerable in the world? Can we ever be fully redeemed?

When thinking deeper about redemption, I find it to be even more complexing than before. Redemption is a process. The words of redemption that we read about in the Torah are all a process. When finally reach where we are going, we can always end up back where we came from. It isn’t so much about what we do once we are redeemed. Rather, it is essential for us to do something along the way. To experience true redemption is about striving to get closer to it while in a perpetual state of doing, rather than getting to the final redemption itself.

My Rabbinic hero, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, writes extensively on the idea of redemption. In his 2001 book, The Dignity of Difference, Rabbi Sacks provides us with his thought on how redemption works within the model of communal Judaism. Rabbi Sacks writes³, “God cannot redeem the world without human participation; humanity cannot redeem the world without recognition of the divine.” Sacks, like Walzer believes that we are all in the fight together. There is so much we can all do.

³ The Dignity of Difference by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2001
Rabbi Sacks has made me think about how I, along with my community, can participate in the process of redemption. Rabbi Sacks has inspired me, in this new year and in this new adventure in my life. How can we, a Jewish community, a Har Shalom family get involved. In the year ahead, We Must Act! In just a few short weeks, we commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a day dedicated to service and community. Let us join together to help our community. As Dr. King once said, “Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?’” Now is our chance to help bring ourselves closer to our community and our world. Join Har Shalom in becoming an inclusive and welcoming community for the LGBTQ community with Keshet. Stay educated on on world Jewry issues. Join a black lives matter campaign. Join the Umttr team in help those who suffer from mental illness. No matter what you do, every little bit counts.

I think that one of the reasons why God introduced the four verbs of redemption to was teach the newly free Israelite people that freedom and redemption is an amazing blessing, one that requires a tremendous amount of work to maintain. Yes, it’s true that sometimes, as Michael Walzer said, it feels like we are in a modern day Egypt, wondering what it would be like in a better place than where we are currently, asking “what if” certain things hadn’t happened. Yet, it’s the obstacles, the tragedies, the change of heart, the deaths and the simchas that remind us to keep wandering, to keep marching like Dr King alongside Heschel. **We as Jews must stand together in**
the efforts of individual, communal and global redemption. It is a process; one that requires unity. As Walzer teaches, the only way we are going to redeem and heal our fractured world is to join together and march toward something better.

In this year ahead, we must help redeem each other and in doing so, redeem our world. We must work as a community to help allow all who walk this earth the ability to do so freely. We all must be united. We must deliver to all who are in need. Opening our eyes to our surroundings will enable the bettering of the world. Redemption comes as we all work together to help make the world a better place. As Rabbi Sacks said, God cannot redeem the world without human participation. We must be one team. Take the initiative to do better and help others do better. If we free, deliver, redeem, take in this year to come, we will all be brought one step closer to the ultimate redemption: a place of pure holiness and happiness; a brighter future for all who walk this earth. As Bob Marley\(^4\) once sang proudly, “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, None but ourselves can free our mind.”

ברוך אתה ה’, גאל ישראל.

Praised are you God, who redeems Israel!

Shabbat Shalom

\(^4\) Redemption Song by Bob Marley