

God & Liberation: A Reconstructionist Approach *Pesach 5770*

The question: How do we understand God's role in our master narrative of liberation, the Exodus story? In the traditional haggadah, there is no mention of Moses – the emphasis is on God's miraculous redemptive power. In both the Reconstructionist and many other non-traditional haggadot, we have the opposite: Moses, Miriam, the midwives, and the Israelites are placed front and center as the agents of freedom. So what happens to God's role?

And if we move away from a classical notion of God as a supernatural Being, intervening in the laws of nature and in human affairs, what does it mean to say that "God redeemed us" from Egypt? Can we say that at all?

I'd like to begin with Mordecai Kaplan's take on the Passover holiday, as the opportunity to reflect on, and experience, God not as a Supernatural Redeemer, but as—in Kaplan's words-- "The Power that Makes for Freedom." For Kaplan, the deeper meaning of the Passover story is "the connotation that to help the oppressed is an essential attribute of godhood." That is, we learn something important about this ultimate Power that we call "God" in the Exodus. And what does it mean to "help the oppressed," according to the Kaplan? To state that God is the Power that redeems the oppressed means that "freedom is at the very root of humanity's spiritual life, and is the prime condition of our self-fulfillment, or salvation." (*Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, pp. 270-71, adapted).

Kaplan goes on to say that "the ideal of freedom assumes that, potentially, human beings and human groups have something unique to contribute to the totality of life. That ideal further assumes that God is...the Power that makes for the discovery and realization of that potential uniqueness in individuals and groups." This is Kaplan's notion of "salvation," of what the Israelites were freed for—the realization of the full potential of every human being.

But how does God as the Power that Makes for Freedom operate? Can we reconcile the Torah's story of the Exodus from *Mitzrayim*, the story that we tell around our seder tables, with Kaplan's notion of a non-supernatural God that still somehow functions in our lives and in the world?

To help think about this, I'd like to draw on the insights of process theology, a school of thought that shares much of Kaplan's approach to thinking about God. Process theology challenges most of the classical assumptions about what we call God—assumptions that, interestingly, we don't find in the Torah, but that entered into both Jewish and Christian via Greek philosophy. One of these basic assumptions is that God is perfect, and that perfection means unchanging. Because if God needed to change, then this would imply that there was some lack, something missing or incorrect, in God's being. In contrast, process theology—in line with our understanding of physical reality as something that is not static, that is constantly in process, in motion, in flux-- asserts that God, as the Ultimate Reality, is also in process. Not only is God not static, not unchanging—on the contrary, God is the ultimate Source of creativity, of potentiality, evolution, and growth. One process thinker calls God "a maximum of potentiality, of unactualized power to be."

We are introduced to this notion of God in the Exodus story, in the famous scene where Moses encounters God at the burning bush. Moses receives a message that he is to go back to Egypt and help liberate his people, the Israelites, from slavery. Moses asks God, “who should I say sent me? What is your name?” The answer comes in these three words: *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, best translated as, “I will be that I will be.” I can’t imagine a less static, less unchanging name for God than this! This power, that announces the redemption from Egypt to Moshe, is all about potential, and the power of transformation. It is also called Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay—an unpronounceable name that Rabbi Arthur Green calls “an impossible construction of the verb ‘to be.’” It contains past, present, and future, and it also captures the sense of God as Becoming, as the ultimate creative power—a power that makes for freedom, for possibility, chance, and choice.

The other important critique made by process theology is how we think about God’s power. In classical theology, God is characterized as omnipotent—as all-powerful. And this power is usually depicted as coercive power—that is, the power to do what it is that God wants, to control everything and anyone. If God were truly omnipotent, then God would have all the power, and nothing and no one else, in either the natural or human realms, could exert meaningful power, or retain any real freedom.

But course, such power does not exist. Freedom is real, as we know both from our own lives—the ability of human beings to make choices, for good or for bad—and as we also see in the Torah, where God appears fairly helpless when it comes to humans doing what they want, beginning with the first human choice, to eat the fruit in the Garden of Eden. Divine power exists in relationship to all the rest of Creation, and has to share with it.

Coercive power is not Godly—quite the opposite. And it is in the Passover story, in the confrontation between Pharaoh and YHVH, that we see the Torah’s most direct critique of coercive, tyrannical power. Pharaoh is the archetype of the kind of power that admits of no mistake and that refuses to change, that refuses to grow and adapt to new circumstances. Each time that Pharaoh temporarily relents and agrees to let the Israelites go, his stubborn nature reasserts itself, his ‘heart hardens,’ and he and his people suffer under a new plague.

Opposed to this tyrannical power that imagines itself to be a god is the truly Godly power of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. And what is most important to understand about this Godly Power of freedom and potentiality is that It cannot act alone. It needs Moses and It needs the Israelites to take an active role in achieving their own freedom.

At the burning bush, Moses at first mightily resists God’s call to free the Israelites. Moses doubts himself, he doubts the Israelites, perhaps he just doesn’t want to be bothered. But YHVH continues to urge him on, to answer his doubts, to remind him that the Godly power of *Ehyeh* will be with him.

In this scene, I see the Torah giving us a metaphorical story of God exercising what process theologians call persuasive, not coercive, power. God does not airlift the Israelites out of Egypt, but makes it clear that both Moses and the slaves themselves must participate in their own

liberation. Through Moses, God makes clear to Pharaoh that there will be consequences if oppression continues. Godly power as persuasive power encourages us to do what is good and what is just, and it offers direction, support and guidance if we learn how to follow it. But It cannot make us act for the good; people can always choose to do evil.

The ten plagues that strike the Pharaoh and the Egyptian people can be understood, then, not as heavenly punishment from a coercive divinity, but as the inevitable destructive consequences of resisting and denying what the Creative Power of the universe seeks from us.

In this understanding, God was very much present in the Exodus, but not as a puppet-master pulling the strings, not as a coercive force moving chess pieces around according to Its whim. What is revealed in our story of liberation is the Power that makes for freedom, a power that operates within us and within the universe around us. A Power that cannot make us free, but that can call us to an awareness of our own oppression and the oppression of others. A Power that urges us to act on that awareness, and that brings consequences upon the world, upon humanity and the whole of creation, when we resist Its demands. This is the Power that we tell about, sing about, that we re-live during the Pesach holiday. May we be open to its call and to its demands, to the lessons that our story holds for us, on this holiday.

Chag sameach!