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A Long Time After That

Have you ever endured something hard and unpleasant that seemed to last a lifetime, and then, just when you thought that your suffering and hardship would end, it turned out that it was not over? Sound familiar?

The first chapter of Sefer Shemot tells a story of a wise closing around our ancestors in Egypt. A new king arises who does not know Yoseph, or who pretends not to know Yoseph. He entertains paranoid delusions about his Israelite subjects and conjures various schemes to constrain our population. He enslaved us, he conspired to have our children murdered, and he ultimately set in place a regime of terror that consigned every baby boy to a watery grave.

And then, in the second chapter, redemption begins. **וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת-בַּת-לֵוִי:** A Levite man and a Levite woman marry, or perhaps, as is hinted by the Torah, they remarry each other, and decide to bring another child into the world despite Pharaoh's decree. Their courage always reminds me of my grandparents, who brought two Jewish boys into the world in Nazi Germany. Moshe survives infancy, due to the commitment of his parents to bring new Jewish life into a dark world, due to the boldness of his older sister Miriam, and due to the unexpected compassion of Pharaoh's own daughter.

The next stage of redemption is introduced by the Torah with an announcement that time has passed: **וַיְהִי י וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה** and in those days Moshe grew up. Now he is an adult, empowered, (according to Rashi), with responsibility and authority. Without any explanation, Moshe turns his back on Pharaoh's palace and casts his fate with his enslaved brothers and sisters. He flees to Midian, marries, and builds a family.

And then the Torah introduces another scene change and jump in time:

וַיְהִי בְּיָמֵי הָרָבִים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן-הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעַקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים מִן-הָעֲבֹדָה:

And a long time later the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God.

Why did the Israelites cry when Pharaoh died? Shouldn't they have rejoiced? And why were those cries uniquely effective?

When Pharaoh died, they thought that their suffering was over. The cruel Egyptian king who was responsible for so much fear and death was finally gone. Surely, they believed, better days would come and those better days would come soon. When that did not occur, their desperation was palpable. The intensity of their pain was magnified by the unfulfilled hopes that their oppression would come to an end with the death of Pharaoh. When they realized that they had not reached the end of their suffering, and another Pharaoh stood ready to continue the policies of the old, their desperation and suffering was palpable and it was audible.

The Ohr HaChayim writes that they did not cry out for salvation, they cried out in pain. They were not yearning for freedom anymore. Any hopes for freedom had been crushed long ago. They cried in pain from the work that they did.

The siddur contains many fancy words and sophisticated concepts: redemption, salvation, sanctity. And one benefit of our fixed liturgy is that it provides each one of us with a script for speaking to God. If you use a siddur, you are guaranteed eloquent and grammatical language with which to address God. And, the siddur will guarantee that the topics that you raise in your conversation with God will be the very most important topics that any Jewish human being should have on an agenda with the Creator. But, from the deepest despair and broken hopes, our ancestors found the ability to cry out in their pain. And those cries were heard.

There were stages of redemption before God noticed and remembered and intervened. A Jewish couple decided to bring another Jewish baby into the world. A family organized to protect his life, when everyone around wanted him dead. A prince turned his back on the palace and stood in solidarity with a slave. A suffering people, upon discovering that their subjugation would live even as their oppressor died, gave voice to their pain and God heard, saw, knew them, and intervened.

I think many of us are feeling a piece of that frustration and despondency that our ancestors experienced when the king of Egypt died and we were still enslaved in Egypt. Those feelings are normal. Those feelings are common. And those feelings, the deepest pain itself, can be redemptive when it is given voice through prayer.

As hard and disappointing as the past week has been for so many of us; we are actually fortunate in so many ways. There are life saving vaccines and medical interventions that did not exist two years ago. We know so much more about ways to safely gather to support each other and to inspire each other. And, as Jews, we have a living memory of the ways that our ancestors suffered and all the hardships that they endured, which are also living memories of the ways that they persevered and survived and triumphed.