

LEAVING EGYPT AGAIN: Aging with Awareness by Sheila Peltz Weinberg

SPW is moved by the **Hassidic notion that the Exodus is the story of the liberation of awareness (*da'at*)**. The story of Passover is related as guidance to raise awareness of common constricting mind-states referred to in Buddhist meditation as “the five hindrances.” We might read Ecclesiastes, as inspiration for ageing, but the epic of Exodus and the Passover seder offer antidotes for the hindrances, that address ageing as constriction.

You shall speak of the going out of Egypt all the days of your life. - The Passover Haggadah

SPW: One of the early mindfulness teachings (SPW) encountered was the Buddhist “**five hindrances.**” It made sense when the teachers categorized a series of **mind states** in this way. I know these five intimately, both in meditation and in ordinary life. I see them so often, on and off the meditation cushion, that their existence is undeniable. What I do not always remember is that these five “friends” are an essential part of both practice and of life. These five energies keep awareness (*da'at*) in exile, in a contracted and limited state. Yet, the worst thing to do is to repress them, fight them, hate them, pretend they are not there. Cultivating the capacity to meet each one again and again with wisdom and love actually ends up expanding and freeing that very awareness. In other words, without the descent into Egypt, the narrow place, liberation does not occur.

The Five Hindrances:

Sloth and Torpor, Aversion, Doubt, Desire/Wanting, Restlessness/Boredom

Question: How is getting old a constriction?

SLOTH AND TORPOR

Moses speaks about the possibility of liberation to the children of Israel but “they do not hear because of shortness of breath from hard labor” (Exod. 6:9). The slaves are suffering from sloth and torpor. They are worn out. They are not used to hearing anything other than the calls of their taskmasters and the groans of their own weary muscles. This very inability to hear anything beyond the very personal and immediate constricted quality of their state keeps them enslaved, impervious to the possibility of an expansion of their awareness and their lives.

Question: How does Sloth and Torpor manifest in your life now?

ANTIDOTE for sloth and torpor = matzah

At most basic level; simple food can be both nourishing and interesting, and points to delight available in each very moment. Matzah is crisp, flat and basic. It keeps my puffy sense of self in check, spares me delusions of grandeur, reminds me of my purpose (and the purpose of food being eat to live, not the reverse), and helps me pay attention and to keep focused.

AVERSION

Examples: blame, shame, anger, hatred, fear, worry, negative judgement, or any other constricting and conflict-inducing energy.

AVERSION

I am sitting in meditation and I start to get unpleasant sensations in a spot in the middle of my back. I am upset. I don't like this and I don't want it. I know that I am not supposed to move around until the bell rings. I move a little anyway but the pain does not get better. I am now really mad. I am also worried. 'What is this gets worse and worse and I am in need of major therapy or even surgery and I don't have any time to schedule that in my busy life?' the aversion is a constriction. It constricts the pain in the back, which is already a constriction.

My mind is getting smaller and smaller. I am also feeling judgement toward myself as a poor meditator who should be in a state of calm and ease, even "bliss," by now. Now I am getting annoyed at the whole enterprise. Maybe this retreat was a bad idea. Maybe I should have gone to a spa where I would have had a massage and an aromatherapy sauna. Maybe these are the wrong teachers or the wrong practice or the wrong group of people. My mind is racing and creating diversion from the possibility of bringing calm, alert, and non-judging awareness to this moment. This is aversion.

When we meet the Israelites in flight from Egypt they are in a similar predicament. The Egyptians are pursuing them. For real. **Their response is one of fear, a core aversive reaction, but then it moves quite quickly into blame, hatred, and hyperbolic delusion and ultimately doubt of the entire enterprise.**

They say to Moses: "because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians for it is better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness'" Exod 14:11

Question: How does the Blame Game play out for you?

ANTIDOTE to aversion: sweet *charoset*

When I chew the bitter herb it is mixed with delicious paste of apples, nuts, honey. In working with my own mind in meditation and in life, thoughts and words of gratitude, blessing, prayers, and chant can soften the edges of painful moments, dark moods, bitterness. I find ways to sweeten the mind so that doubts, and other habitual aversions, have less room to proliferate. This reminds me to not get caught up in the futile battle of fighting the bitter with the bitter.

DOUBT

READING: DOUBT

When things do not go according to plan, or there is an experience of frustration, unpleasantness, or threat, there is a strong tendency for the mind to construct an elaborate

narrative that negates our intention. “You thought you wanted to get free. Nonsense.” “You were on a spiritual path? Get over it!” “You want to reduce your own suffering and the suffering of others? How naive can you be? This aversion to reality can lead to severe doubt, even a kind of depression – another form of contracted awareness.

READING:

What is true in this moment? In meditation, every mind state is passing through. When it is named, it dissolves. It does not need to congeal into a state of doubt.

I want to believe this can be a way of dealing with aging. I want to trust that God’s deliverance (*yeshuat YHVH* - the saving power of the Universe as blessing and benevolence) will be available this very day. I want to believe that it can be accessed when I soften the clutching of certainty and rest in the arms of Life that is so much vaster than any aversion or doubt. I want to believe that I will have practiced letting go of small discontents and resentments so skillfully that I will be able to handle the bigger ones.

READING: HESCHEL ON AGING

Heschel: “The aged thinks of himself as belonging to the past. But it is precisely the openness to the present that he must strive for.” The “openness to the present” is what dissolves the hindrances. The “openness to the present” is what brings awareness (*da’at*) out of exile. The “openness to the present” is the path of practice and the path of the Exodus. I remind myself again and again, it is here, in this moment only, that I am safe, that I am at peace, that I am part of all that vibrates through eternity.

ANTIDOTE for doubt - wine

At Seder: 4 cups wine in the context of gathering with dear friends. We let the mind relax and with it we soften and open the heart. Critical doubt surely serves me in my life, but sometimes doubt is resistance, reluctance, [inertia], or my own willfulness masquerading as intellect. That is when a heart releasing agent, like wine or friendship, is the reassurance, the medicine I need.

Question: How do you loosen the rigidity of doubt that builds cement walls in your mind?

DESIRE/LUST

“If a little is good, more is better”, money, things, leads to greater dissatisfaction, never enough! ie chocolate, money, flowers, sex, hats, jewelry, friends, comfort, adoration

READING: DESIRE/LUST

The Israelites are great models acting out the hindrance of lust. Who can fault them? They were slaves with no experience exercising independent judgement. Their sense of self-esteem and intrinsic worth was systematically negated by the system. So it is not surprising that they lust and kvetch and are easily deluded. Right after crossing the sea (Exod 15:23), they complain to Moses: “What shall we drink?” It is not just that they ask for a drink; they complain. Yes, the waters were bitter but how bitter were they really if all Moses did was throw a tree into the

waters and they became sweet? Even after their thirst is slaked, they imagine how wonderful things are back in Egypt, recalling it in a totally idealized way (Exod 16:3). When manna arrives they want to save it until the next day, against Moses' instructions, and of course it rots. Desire for "what is not" makes it so hard to accept manna, "that which is," the great teacher of trust, patience, gratitude, and limits (Exod 16:20).

Awareness is trapped or concealed in the wanting to do and have more, wanting what is not present or possible, wanting what ultimately will not satisfy. This persists and may intensify as we age.

Excessive wanting obscures awareness, much like the other hindrances. One could say, it obscures the connection to God's presence. It keeps me dissatisfied and held hostage to my sense of being separate, other, and alone. It obscures joy and connection and reduces my ability to enjoy life AS IT IS, which is not my creation, but a fleeting and precious gift.

Question: What habits do you have that seem out of balance/excessive? What are your vulnerabilities or addictions? How does FOMO feed into your decisions about your so-called "bucket list"?

Antidote to Wanting: Maror

A reminder that the end of sweet is the bitter. I know this when I pursue "too much of a good thing." *Maror* teaches how greed, lust, and clinging can transform a most pleasant experience into the constriction of suffering. It teaches impermanence of pleasure, and pain.

RESTLESSNESS

Shpilkes – too much undirected energy

Examples: Worrying about the future, calamity thinking, what-if thinking, planning mind, anxiety mind – rehearsing or rewinding over the same thing over again, impatience, lack of faith

READING RESTLESSNESS/BOREDOM

The classic story of restlessness in the Exodus narrative is the story of the golden calf. "And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him: 'Up, make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moses... we know not what became of him'" (Exod 21:1) Despite the immediacy of the deliverance, the experience at Sinai, Moses' dedicated leadership and his steadfast relation with God, the people lose interest, lose faith, and get restless. They need something more immediate to keep them engaged. They have a limited capacity for abstraction. They need an activity, a symbol and a concrete object to engage their deficient attention span.

**In the realm of "having, doing, knowing" there is never enough.
In the realm of "being" there is always enough.**

Question: How is restlessness manifesting as you age?

ANTIDOTE to restlessness : reclining position

At the Passover seder, we are invited to lay back on super comfortable chairs or just “lounges”. Reclining as free people counters restlessness. We place the body in a position of repose, in a place of faith and trust. This posture opens a door to relaxing the fretting brow and the urge to pace the floor. When I am relaxed in my body, my mind is relaxed as well. I have the chance to ponder relationships, causes and consequences. I have the opportunity to live purposefully at whatever stage of life.

OPENING TO WISDOM

The *seder* symbols suggest antidotes that help release hindrances to liberate our awareness.

1. *Matzah* – flatbread baked in haste, may be the antidote to sloth and torpor. Its intentional preparation forces us to attend and reminds us of our purpose.
2. *Charoset* – sweet and delicious, is the healer of aversion.
3. *Maror* – bitter herb, balances lust and desire
4. Wine – 4 cups of it, grounds us from the wobbling mind, filled with doubt
5. Reclining – counters restlessness.

READING: THE PASSOVER SEDER AND OUR OWN LIBERATION

Ultimately the SEDER reminds us to liberate ourselves from our own, sometimes unreasonable, expectations of ourselves, our own constricted places.

Limnot yamienu ken hoda v'navi levav chochma / “Teach us to treasure each day so we may open our hearts to wisdom” (Ps 90:12)

Hassidism teaches that each of us is, after all, the greatest taskmaster of our own lives. As Heschel says, “Wisdom is the substance upon which the inner security of the old will forever depend. But the attainment of wisdom is the work of a lifetime.”