

How to Cross the Red Sea Without a Miracle

April 13, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Reflections before the Celebration begins

"How is freedom measured, in individuals as well as nations? By the resistance which has to be overcome, by the effort it costs to stay aloft."

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1889

"You realize the futility of worry. You know your limitations and proceed to eliminate them; your abilities, and proceed to develop them. You are free."

Alice Foote MacDougall 1928

Gathering, Welcoming

Today's flowers, especially the purple pansies, are a remembrance in part on the anniversary of Pat Larson's mother's death, as well as a sign of the garden of life we grow together.

Centering *River Lullaby from Prince of Egypt*
by Stephen Schwartz

Nathan Hamm, piano

Kindling, Opening

We are here
with a bright new roof over our heads
and the green beauties of spring uplifting us
to worship, to be vulnerable to wisdom
both from our rich and ancient living tradition
and from reflecting on our own lives.

And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Praising #151 I Wish I Knew How v. 1 and 4

Ingathering Moshe and the People

So this is an old, old story. It's been told in one form or another for at least 2500 years, every single spring.

It's about a group of people who lived in a country where the majority of people didn't like their language, didn't like their way of dress, didn't like their food, and didn't like them. The majority of people. What does that mean? It's like this picture. A lot of dots are in this circle. Only a few dots are in this circle. The big circle is the majority. The small circles are the minorities. The majority said "We own the minorities in our country because there are more of us than there are of them. We can make them do what we want. We can make them iron our clothes, paint our buildings, build our houses, and we don't have to pay them anything. We can even make them go to our own house of faith, not theirs. We can just give them shacks to live in, some cereal to eat, and they can't do anything about it. Ha Ha Ha.

So the story says that one guy didn't think this was right. Well, to tell the truth, many people didn't think this was right, but they didn't speak up. This guy, the guy who spoke up...his name was Moshe.

He himself was part of the majority. But because of something he did, the majority got angry and sent him away; and he left the country, and went somewhere else. And there he discovered what it was like to be free, to be able to build your own house, paint it the color you wanted, eat the food you want, and get money for the work you did, and go to worship in the way that makes sense to you. And he thought that this freedom should be for everyone, not just the majority.

So, excited by his discovery of the idea of freedom for everyone, he came back to his own country and started talking about what "freedom" felt like. And pretty soon other people, the minority people, said "YEAH!"

So, encouraged by their "yeah!", Moshe went to the leader of the country, sitting there in his big house and said, "We don't want to be the minority anymore. We want to join the majority, and have the freedoms everyone of you do." But the leader of the country got angry and said, "NO NO NO! You belong to us, and that is final. Nothing is going to change that. So get out of here right now!"

But one day, not long after that, when a lot of spring storms made the muddy rivers overflow, bringing fish and frogs everywhere, and when lightning and hail made the majority hide indoors, the minority said, "Who cares about the bad weather? Freedom is more important than being uncomfortable and wet. We are out of here!" And so they left, having packed up everything they owned, which was not much. They traveled far. They went as fast as they could. They even crossed a big lake on a sandbar, knowing that the spring storms would erase their footprints, and that the leader of the majority would never be able to find them. And when they got to the other side, everyone shouted..."We're free! We're free!" But then Moshe told them they had to keep on going. And they looked around, and they looked ahead of them, and they saw nothing. No houses. No paint. No work. No stores. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

And they said to Moshe, "We don't think we want to do this any more. We are not sure we want to be free. Maybe it wasn't so bad back there. Look at what's up ahead. Nothing. N O T H I N G. Nothing. Just a cloud with no rain, and a few half-dead bushes. At least we had cereal back where we came from. Now we have nothing at all. (Show picture of nothing.)

Moshe said: "Oh, you are just afraid because you don't know where you are going, exactly. I understand. It is not what you know and recognize. But Freedom means that. It means moving away

from what you know, and being open to what you will discover. Let me tell you what I mean. You see those little bushes over there? They are not supermarkets, but look underneath them." The people did. They found little sticky pieces of sweet bread, the sap from the bush that had dried in the sun. They tasted it. It was different from the cereal they were used to, but it was sweet and delicious. They asked in their language (after all, our language, English, wouldn't be invented for a couple of thousand years), "Man hu? What is this stuff?"

"I'm not sure exactly. But it's good isn't it? See, you can find things that feed you even if they are not what you are used to." So the people called the stuff under the bushes "Stuff," which in their language was *man-na*.

And even though they knew it would be difficult, and that everything would be new, they finally decided it was good to be free, and to be able to be in charge of your own life. For they knew that there was only one real majority in the world, even if some people didn't recognize that. They knew that the only *majority* there is, is the whole Human Race that everyone is part of.

*after which children and teachers leave for their activities, while Nathan plays
Simcha Raba, a traditional Passover Seder song.*

Greeting, news of the congregation

Conversation from the Heart
Stewardship

Chris Collins and Katie Collins
Susan Roscigno

Devotion: <i>Welcoming Memory and Hope</i>
--

please rise for unison affirmation and song

Affirming: "it's me," I say.
 "it's us" rocks echo.

Oracle Francisco Alarcon 1992

Singing #209
 O Come You Longing, Thirsty Souls

(text: Yisayahu/Isaiah 55)

Communing the Sequence,

(preface) Each year on the Sunday before Easter, I lift up either the taproot of our liberal Christian tradition, or the taproot of our liberal Jewish tradition which was so interwoven with our Christian tradition. These are the two traditions which have shaped us the most. Since I am doing the Judaic tradition today, and celebrating Passover later this week, I am offering the questions of Jesus (removed from their context), as a harbinger of the communion ceremony I will celebrate Thursday evening in the style of our Eastern European ancestors. I once heard a therapist recite these evocative questions before giving a lecture on spiritual health, and they moved me deeply.

If you only greet those who already know you,
what's so special about that?
Can any of you, by worrying, add a single minute to your life?
Why are you so anxious?
Why are you so terrified?
Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles?
Who *is* my mother? Who *is* my family?
Do you still not *understand*?
Why are you asking *me* about what is good?
What do you want me to *do* for you?
Why do people of our era always look for "*signs*"?
What are you *thinking*?
How do *you* interpret the Law?
Who is greater? The one seated at the table,
or the one who serves at that table?
What is it that you are searching for?
Do you *want* to be well?
Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?
If even the smallest things are not under your control
why are you so anxious all the time?
What is your name?

The Great Silence

More questions from my own heart: whom do I love? Who loves me? When has love been lost?
Whom do I miss? How does grief live within me? Answering these questions with the names
that come to mind when I ask them, we offer now a time to say those names within or aloud, to
make our own stories part of the larger story of this community.

The Naming

Why is it that music has the effect that it does? How does it tutor our hearts, lead us deeper into
life, transform us with its beauty? Here is the answer:

9:15 *Nigun Bialik* (wordless Chassidic song)
arranged by A.W. Binder
Chalice, Choir, Brandon Moss, Director

11:00 *The Drinking Gourd*, traditional,
arr. Andre J. Thomas
Spirit of Life Choir, Karen Madden, Director

Presentation: <i>Opening to the World</i>

Reading 1. Estelle Frankel The Secret Meaning of Passover SF Gate Interview 2009.

She is both a therapist and has been a pastoral/therapeutic rabbi in Berkeley at Chochmah ha Lev, a vital Jewish congregation there. I offer three sections from the interview.

As a therapist, I use the symbols and the allegories of the Exodus as a map of the process of transformation -- how people develop and evolve their identity over time. Every single symbol in the story corresponds to stages in this process. For example, it shows both our desire for change and our resistance to it; it also shows how life *forces* us to change, and how if we don't continually change and grow, we die.

There is a tension between the part of us that wants to just stay in the known, stay in the old, even if it's uncomfortable, even if there is no room to move or grow, and the part of us that wants to change. But there are a number of forces that can cause us to break free. One is pain itself. Feeling the discomfort is a great impetus to change. Another is believing that change is possible, finding hope. I can't tell you how many people come in to therapy and really don't believe that they can change; they think that how they have been is how they will always be.

There are 27 million slaves on the planet today. As we are speaking, people are being sold into servitude, into forced labor. When you take in the reality of human suffering in the world, you either have to harden your heart, like Pharaoh, or you have to become an activist, like Moses. For me, recently, becoming aware of clothing made in sweatshops around the world has made me more conscious as a consumer: Where do I buy clothes? And can I bear to wear something that was made by a child slave somewhere in Bangladesh? You want to make sure that the workers around the world who live in dire poverty are being treated at least with a fair wage. So every year, on Passover, we read the story and hopefully make it relevant to the world today, and we think about where on the planet are people still not free, and what can we do about it?

2. The Second reading comes from the Torah, from the scroll of Shemoth, which is most often called by the Greek title Exodus in English. It was edited and woven from four distinct sources, spanning different eras hundreds of years apart, around 500 B.C.E. (possibly by someone named Ezra, but about that we cannot be sure). Please note that some passages from one tradition use the word Elohim for God (which technically is plural, namely "the gods"). Another strand in the tradition uses the word YHWH, which is usually never pronounced, so following Jewish practice, I will use the word Adonai as the substitute. These are selections from chapters 13, 14, 15.

1. Elohim led the Israelites on the wilderness road, looping around to the Sea of Reeds. They moved on out from the ridge that protected them.

2. Then Adonai spoke to Moshe, "Tell the Israelites to turn around and make camp between Towerville and the sea. The Pharaoh will think, "They are confused, and lost, because now they are out in the open."

3. As the Pharaoh and his troops approached, everyone was afraid. Totally. Terrorized, they cried out to Moshe, "What? Weren't the cemeteries in Egypt good enough for you? Now we will die here in the wilderness. We *told* you so! We told you so back in Egypt! We were better off living as slaves...that's a lot better than being corpses in the wilderness." Moshe replied, "Just be still. Stand firm and watch what Adonai will do to protect you. You will never see an Egyptian again after today. Adonai is fighting for you. You just be quiet now."

4. Elohim's presence, which had been guiding their way as a tall cloudy tower, moved to their rear. Everything got dark. The Egyptians and the Israelite camps were separated all night.

5. Then Moshe raised his hand over the sea, and Adonai sent a strong wind which blew all night long, pushing the waves of the sea backward. Where there had been water, there was now visible earth. The sea waters were divided.

And finally, 6: I am singing my heart out to Adonai, the victor, who *tossed* horse and rider into the sea. Adonai is my strength, my song, the one who keeps me safe. This is the kind of Elohim I want to portray to the world. A warrior. Pure Adonai through and through. Pharaoh's chariots he just *hurled* into the sea.

Interlude: *We're Leaving (Pesach Song)*
by Steve McConnell

Preaching: How to Cross the Red Sea Without a Miracle *M. Belletini*

So it's Spring, finally. And with this season comes the major holidays, Passover and Easter, associated with our taproot traditions, here in the West.

Now, as you know, these holidays mean different things to different people. Some folks simply ignore the holidays, considering themselves totally secular, or, at best, they hold a festive supper with friends without stated religious significance. Others prefer what may be called *secularized* celebrations of the ancient holidays...for example, those who celebrate Easter might only go so far as eggs, and chocolate, and a big family dinner on Easter Sunday; for those who celebrate Passover, there may be a VERY non-traditional Passover *seder* deeply influenced by gender, political or secular issues – like a radical feminist or gay *seder*, or pro-Palestinian *seder*, or completely humanistic and non-theistic *seder*.

In any case, *both* holidays are joined at the hip with ancient stories embedded in the Western scriptures.

Scriptures. Written stories and proverbs and rules. From long ago. Modern folks in the States have all sorts of ways of responding to the scriptures of our Western heritage. Some ignore them completely, and sincerely wish the books would just mold on a shelf someplace, unopened. Others go to the other extreme, and insist that scripture is the final authority for the whole human race, that some literal, concrete meaning can still be found within them in this post-Darwin, post Moon-landing era.

People like me, in the middle between the two extremes, often don't quite know what to say. The whole idea of supernatural miracles makes me uneasy, but I am completely convinced that attempts to throw away the stories completely are doomed to failure.

I'm in good company here, I think, in this Unitarian Universalist congregation. Interpreting written texts from different points of view is one of the things we're all about. Our religious ancestors, when they claimed freedom as a central theological value, and embraced both the methods of science and scholarship as reliable pathways to understanding, did not say, "Let's throw the baby out with the bath water" and be free of everything Christian and Jewish. No. They continued to meet on one day of the week in community. That is very Jewish and very Christian. Many religions don't feature regular weekly communities like that. And, our ancestors continued to use words like minister and worship. They continued even to read things during worship, which I personally would call scripture, although some may not. No, our ancestors freed themselves from the constrictions of binding creed and arbitrary authority. They stopped saying "The Bible says..." is one way of putting it. They could then read the Bible, or anything else for that matter, through the lens of personal experience, scholarship, and engaged conversation with others. Truth for authority, they used to say, not authority for truth. I think that's right on.

Unlike Jewish and Christian congregations, we do not read from the Western scriptures every week; some of our congregations rarely use them, but I am not afraid to use them, personally, since I think our free tradition, much like that of the Jews especially, provides an excellent way to use the best parts of our scriptural heritage in the service of love, justice, compassion and peace.

So this morning, you heard some passages from the Torah, which consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or Tanak. You heard seasonal passages, words that have to do with Passover, which begins this Tuesday. You heard words about Moshe/Moses and the sea. The Reed Sea (a swamp, basically), the passage says, not the Red Sea (as Luther knew 500 years ago, incorporating that understanding in his German translation). The English Bible goes for drama rather than honesty, and insists that it's the Red Sea, a much bigger body of water than a swamp, to be sure.

But, no matter what the translation, as far as I can tell, most folks in the United States have never really *read* the Bible. Even the Bible thumpers, I say. Even those of us who grew up in congregations, Jewish or Christian, which encouraged such reading.

Now listen carefully to what I mean. I understand that reading means *more* than the eyes, brain and a book all meeting together. The author may have imagined some image, but the image I see when I read may be so far off that I cannot even read words in front of my face. What I mean is that it's almost impossible to read what it actually says, even if we're wonderfully literate, because our lenses have already been clouded by pre-existing interpretive images. I bring this up every Christmas. If I ask someone, believer or non-believer, makes no difference, where scripture says Jesus was born, they will always respond "in a stable." But, if you look at the story, it no where says that. But the Christmas card you got in the mail shows that, so that is what the text says, whether you read it or hear it, even though it's not true. And of course, specifically,

this morning, I'm thinking of the indelible images crafted by Cecil B. DeMille, in his famous film *The Ten Commandments*. Images from that film lodge permanently in the brains of both the religious and the non-religious, the faithful and the skeptical, and clearly proclaim the story a miracle story. Great big walls of water, hundreds of feet high, miraculously, and all at once, opening across the Gulf of Suez in the Red Sea, with people crossing to safety, as the fish presumably look on through the watery walls.

Nowhere does the text say that of course. Nowhere.

There are *two* stories about the sea incident in the book of Exodus...one says that a wind blew all night long, between eight to ten hours, and only in the morning did a visible path of dry land appear, the water "heaped" to the sides under a full moon tide. This story describes a wonder, yes, like Old Faithful geyser is a wonder, or a glacier with blue ice in Alaska is a wonder. But it doesn't describe "a miracle" in the modern sense of the term, a suspension of the laws of nature in the snap of a finger. (The other sense of the term, namely, EVERYTHING IS A MIRACLE, a wonder, an astonishment, I have no problems with.) The Exodus stories, with their images of dark cloud towers (or *pillars of cloud* in the conventional if awkward King James translation) probably reflect embedded memories and legends about the *two* great volcanic eruptions which happened in the years when Asiatics (what the Israelites were called before they were called Israelites) were living in Egypt, and who were sent away in the days of Dudimose, King of Egypt. Specifically, I am talking about the catastrophic eruptions of Santorini and Yali, for those who are interested in geology.

Egyptian records of that time record many earthquakes, tsunamis and windstorms, as well as actual names of Asiatics (or Israelites, as they were called anachronistically) in Egyptian records, according to scholar Barbara Sivertsen. (cf *The Parting of the Sea*, Princeton University Press 2009) The stories as we have them now were written much later, edited, conflated, doctored polemically, and placed out of time in the era of King Rameses the Great, hundreds of years after Dudimose.

But as I said, there are *two* stories in the book of Exodus about the Egyptians and the sea which were linked by a later editor. You can tell because they use totally different words for God for one. The first version I mentioned doesn't sound like a special miracle, at least as I see it. The second, however, talks about something that sounds a lot more like a miracle in the modern sense. It talks about the Egyptian forces simply being *picked up* and *tossed* into the water. It doesn't say how, but the words in Hebrew are clear...*ramah* tossed, as in picking up a horseshoe and tossing it. *Yarah*, hurl, as in taking a frisbee and flinging it as far as you can. This second version seems more like a poetic exaggeration more than anything else; Sivertsen suggests it is even referring to a story without Moses in it. But the first idea, of a Reed Sea crossing without a miraculous origin, doesn't trouble my skeptical mind one whit.

Because, you don't even need volcanoes and windstorms to create wonders that amaze.

On the cover of your orders of celebration is a photo of lots of people crossing on dry land over the sea. This is obviously not a photo from the 13th dynasty in ancient Egypt when King Dudimose and the historical Moses were arguing with each other about freedom. (And yes,

despite the biblical minimalists, I personally *do* think there was an historical Moses, however distorted his story is!) But the photo on the cover IS a photo, taken in South Korea, of an event in the Jindo Sea. Each year, usually around this time in spring, and because of a rather amazing set of annual tidal dynamics too complicated to explain here, the sea parts, and a path appears across the middle of the sea. And people can walk across the sea 2.8 kilometers (almost two miles) to the third largest island in Korea on foot, over a relatively dry, if muddy, pathway. There is a huge festival, with food stalls and singing, and thousands cross to the island and back. No one imagines that either Elohim *or* Adonai are working miracles here. But even those who don't believe in either Elohim or Adonai can't deny that people are crossing the sea on dry land, pretty much as it's described in the book of Shemoth, the book of Exodus.

You don't need a miracle, in other words, to go where you need to go.

But another Jewish teacher, Estelle Frankel, looks at these same biblical passages as the historian Barbara Sivertsen does, and finds something that has little to do with whether ancient Asiatics actually, historically and honest-to-G-d, escaped from chattel slavery at the hands of the Egyptians.

First, she completely collapses the time from the 13th dynasty in Egypt to modern-day times, and points out that slavery...chattel slavery.. is still going on around the world. It's not just ancient history or biblical mythology. 27,000,000 is the number of slaves she offers according to her research. A tad more than the 600,000 slaves mentioned in Exodus. Children and women in sweatshops in Bangladesh, making our clothes for nothing, is one example she gives. Yes, slavery. No overseers in Egyptian headdresses. No whips. But slavery nonetheless. "When you take in the reality of human suffering in the world," says Rabbi Frankel, "you either have to harden your heart, like Pharaoh, or you have to become an activist, like Moses." Indeed.

But second, she also talks about the other journeys that people make toward freedom. Freedom from difficult violent pasts in their own families. Freedom from the deforming wounds of the heart. The journeys people take when they undergo therapy or personal growth.

And, Rabbi Frankel says, when she is doing therapy, folks come to her convinced that they cannot make this journey toward freedom. They tell her they are used to their suffering, used to their way of coping, and can't imagine really being free. They make excuses as to why they can't continue going on the journey. They resist. They push back. Exactly as in the mythic story of the exodus that I retold to the children this morning. "I can't do it. I am afraid. Maybe it wasn't so bad back there. Maybe freedom is just too scary. I'd rather know something sad for sure than deal with all that uncertainty."

But, she pushes, and insists that the pain is real. It cannot be denied. And the pain in itself, it is a call to freedom. It *was* bad back there. And yes, freedom *is* scary. And yes, you may not have a Moses always handy who can point out the nourishing manna in the frightful wilderness right before your panicked eyes. But you have to start with the first step anyway...right now.

I have been there myself. I have had to journey away from difficult stories in my life, patterns of pain in my life that I truly learned to get used to. But I would not be here today had I not chosen

to admit that the pain hurt a lot, and that I really did want to leave its deforming power behind me for good.

And like Estelle Frankel, I now find myself often using the Exodus story when people come to me to tell me about changes they need to make in order to be free...a journey away from slavery to substance abuse, a journey through the wilderness of a terrible unloving past. A journey to a future they can't quite yet imagine. A scary journey with obstacles as wide as both the Reed Sea and Red Sea combined.

But I find myself saying to folks: "I think you have to go through the Red Sea. I don't think you can walk around it," I say. "You *can* go forward. You have to face the issues in front of you, not deny them, name the pain and then start moving past it. Start healing from it. Step by step. Storms may churn the water on either side of you, but it's your desire to be free which is the real miracle, not the parting of the waters. Get going."

Even people who have never read the Bible, or ever seen DeMille's cheesy movie, usually get what I mean when I say that. Even people who never intend to crack the cover of the Bible ever again. Even those who are overwhelmed about the suffering of others in the world, and are not sure what can be done about anyone else, let alone themselves. Even those who are terrified. For miracles, you see, are simply not needed. They never have been needed, and they never will be needed.

Wonders, yes.

Special miracles and signs. No.

Or to quote a great Jewish thinker I quoted earlier: *Why do people of our era constantly look for "signs"?*

Integration: <i>Recommitting to Our Mission</i>

Offering *An opportunity to reinforce what is important to us, and invest in the ideals and principles we share. Your generous contribution allows our congregation to transform lives and impact the world around us.*

For all that is our lives, we give our thanks and praise, for all life is a gift which we are bound to use to build the common good, and make our own days glad. With these words by poet Bruce Findlow, we offer the opportunity of the watering can of our morning offering, that we might grow our blossoming garden together!

Through Heaven's Eyes from Prince of Egypt
by Stephen Schwartz

Returning: The History of So Called Civilization in 2 Minutes Flat: A Prayer for the Season

Oh Love, help me to remain aware in this world, where what we call civilization has been built so much on the backs of the marginalized, the minorities, the mavericks, the minors. But not all of civilization is built on the backs of others. I want to name that too. I want to lift up warriors of peace, like Gandhi or King or Mandela, and turn away from warriors of sadism like Pol Pot or Adolf Hitler. I would prefer the ethical teachings of Jesus to the slave-economy of Caesar, the simplicity of Francis of Assisi of Europe, or Abraham Joshua Heschel of Poland and America, or of Ashoka and Mirabai of India, to the power politics of prelates, mercenaries and kings, or present day oligarchs and corporations who have crowned themselves almighty right before our eyes with the approval of high and mighty judges.

I've read the story of broken people leaving their oppressors. I want something more, O Love...I want the oppressors to get out of me. I've read about the water opening so people can escape. I want something more. *I* want to open. I've read about grand events. I just want to wade into the water, make a small splash, and get going. I am afraid, sure, nothing wrong with that. But it's time to leave what is narrow, and journey without corrupted maps toward something welcoming, broad, and embracing, a freedom for everyone, not just me, a freedom for us, as the rocks echo back, "all of us."

Singing #210 Wade In the Water

(African American Spiritual, Slavery Era)

Blessing