

**The Road to Freedom,  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis  
4/14/2019**

Have you ever wondered what it feels like to pack for forever? As a military kid, I was something of an expert on packing and moving. We'd get our orders, pack and move onto the next unknown place to meet new people and see new things. Sometimes it was exciting, most times it was kind of scary and a little sad until we got there and got settled in a new place. Even today, I'm...let's go with "particular" about my packing. It doesn't feel like I'm ready for a trip until I've made a list of what I'm going to wear each day, checking the weather forecast and building in a few contingencies. When my daughter was born, I added a whole new level to the process, realizing that tiny baby clothes were likely to migrate in the suitcase, so I started packing each day's worth of her clothes in a bag, which had the added benefit of preparation for the inevitable baby messes, which anyone who has ever seen some of those newborn photography fails can appreciate! So to say I like to be prepared for trips is, perhaps, an understatement. In

fact, my family knows that not only do I stress about being prepared, it usually takes me a good half a day of our first day of vacation to get out of the head space of worry and actually enjoy where we are.

So this is the way I've always approached the Hebrew story of the Exodus. The Jewish observance of Peh-sahk (Pesach) will begin this Friday, April 19<sup>th</sup> at sundown. Peh-sahk (Pesach), or Passover, celebrates the escape of the Israelites from Egypt and the beginning of their 40-year trek toward freedom. And that's the part that always stood out to me—the 40-year trek. I mean, yes, it's great that they escaped from captivity, from slavery. Of course that's great. And then they got stuck wandering around in the desert for 40 years. Running out of water, running out of food. Not really a pleasure jaunt. And then most of them died before they even got there! As a child, it was the pain of leaving that stood out to me in the Exodus story. As an adult, it has been the slog of the journey. I suspect I'm not the only one who gets tripped up in the messy middle. Who has ever felt bogged down in a journey that lasts forever, in perception or in reality.

Freedom doesn't always feel free when you have to deal with bugs and heat and hunger.

And then a dear colleague of mine introduced me to Rabbi Brad Artson. He suggests that in coming to the study of sacred texts, "The holiness that shimmers in our text is occluded by the assumptions we bring to them." He proposes a new way of looking at the text, in this case *Torah*, bringing to it a new way of looking at the assumptions we make. So I'd like us to try that together, starting by acknowledging that this sermon, this service, has a lot more explicit uses of the word "God" than y'all are used to hearing from me. That is intentional. We talk sometimes about translation, and while I most often choose to use words that translate easily, like *Mystery*, today I wanted us to wrestle together with a term that may really resonate with some of you, and not at all with others. Judaism offers multiple concepts of God. God can be understood as the sovereign deity with which you may be most familiar conceptually. God in Judaism can also be understood from a more pantheistic lens, as a natural force in the universe, as a process of moving toward being, or the holiness that is

created in relationship with each other. With that understanding and our focus today on our Jewish sources, I welcome you to apply some of Rabbi Artson's suggestions to your relationship with the word God in this service as well, whether this word is an old comforter or an old challenger.

Rabbi Artson also invites us into a new way of looking at God in the Exodus story, as "a story of a God who has to find a human being who is willing to see the world differently." Not as a being removed from all concerns felt by people, but as one who struggles in relationship with us to bring about a more just world, with Moses as someone who is uniquely positioned with the "ability of someone who can see from the inside, but who is also known as an outsider." The liminal space of the threshold, the in-between, can be hard, because you may not fully fit in one place or the other, or feel accepted in one place or the other. In many ways, this is where we exist, in the in-between, when it comes to being on our own road to freedom. It can feel like liberation, like wholeness, is a mirage that recedes before us with every step we take, and that the journey itself taxes both our own capacity and our relationships.

Which brings me back to the question I asked at the beginning: how do you pack for forever? Not for a specific destination, and not with a lot of preparation, as we heard in the reading. But hurriedly throwing things in a bag to head out into maybe. We have an example before us in the Exodus story. What did they bring? I presume they packed some of the usual, but my colleague pointed out one fact that had escaped me and completely changed the way I look at the story, and by extension look at our own relationship with liberation and wholeness.

At the end of the Egyptian escape, after the Hebrews escaped from their Egyptian pursuers, Miriam—one of the three leaders of this expedition—leads the women of the company in playing on timbrels and offering a song and dance of thankfulness and celebration. Here's the question that changed my perspective: where did the timbrels come from? In the midst of the stress and rush of packing for this journey into the unknown, trying to take all of the necessities of surviving in the wilderness, getting ready to run from slavery for their very lives...Miriam thought to bring the instruments they would need to celebrate. She offers us the

example of a new way of looking at freedom, looking at liberation. I have sometimes seen the story of the Exodus as something bittersweet at best--freedom, but at the cost of wandering alone. And yes, there are sad moments in the Exodus, and moments that are joy tinged with sorrow. In the midrash, God does not chide the Israelites for celebrating their deliverance from the Egyptians, but does remind the angels that the Egyptians should be mourned even as the people celebrate. The costs of freedom can be high, and no mistake.

And yet, taken on a whole, the story of the Exodus is one that celebrates the process of preparing for joy. How are we inhabiting the celebration of our liberation. How are we calling it done, and packing our timbrels? The work that we do in relationship, for the liberation of ourselves and our planet, as we approach Earth Day, will not be done if it feels like drudgery, if all we can expect is more drudgery. If we let ourselves get stuck in the slog, we are robbing ourselves of both joy and relationship. If, instead, we bring the joy of freedom into present proximity with us, we

make it real. We make it not only felt by ourselves, but call it into being together.

I used to think the end of Moses' life was the greatest tragedy. Here is someone who grew up in wealth, who entered exile and returned into slavery, and who has stepped outside of his comfort zone to lead his people through the wilderness for 40 years, and then *just* in sight of the promised land, the destination he has been trying to reach all along, he doesn't get to make it. I don't see it as the greatest tragedy anymore, but rather the most meaningful example we have of the power of the joy of freedom. Rabbi Artson says that "When we make a different decision, we alter our relationship to the dynamics that led us into this place." That is what Moses did and that is what we can do--what we must do--as well. It did not matter for him that he would not live to see the work completed. We will not either. But the fact that the fullness of liberation is not yet here does not take away from the celebration we can already have that it is coming.

We know the Battle Hymn of the Republic as a song that reminds us of the terrible war that turned kin against kin and split our country with

wounds that still bleed today. But think about how the song starts: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” And truly, the truth of liberation does march on. This, then, can be freedom. This is wholeness. Not the hard days of the journey, but the ways that we save each other not just in working for a better future, but also in preparing for the celebration because we **know** we’ll get there.

In the iconic scene in Braveheart, Mel Gibson’s character asks his assembled kin in arms “would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for one chance, just one chance to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they’ll never take our freedom!!!” So as I close, I ask you something of the same. Will you set aside in your mind all the days that it will take to get where we’re going for the chance to claim the true freedom of rejoicing in the liberation that is, in faith, already here? Will you, too, knowing that the way may at times be hard, and scary, and the outcome may feel uncertain--will you still pack your timbrels, and carry your rejoicing with you so that even when we stand in the wilderness, we may dance together?