



Parashat Be'Ha'alotecha

'Am' (Yisrael) Comin' Out! I want the World To Know, Got to Let it Show

by Karen Perolman on Friday June 13, 2008

10 Sivan 5768

Numbers 8:1 - 12:16

Coming-out (of the closet): To be “in the closet” means to hide one’s sexual and or gender identity. Many GBLT people are “out” in some situations and “closeted” in others. -from *Kulanu: All of Us*, URJ Press 2007

As first among our days of sacred days, it recalls the coming-out (Exodus) from Egypt. –from *Erev Shabbat Kiddush*.

Although the entire story of the Exodus from Egypt can be read as the Israelites’ coming-out story, the exact moment of coming-out occurs when the Israelites finally open the door to the closet and step out into what is literally new land, land that was newly exposed, and formerly under cover of water. In Exodus 14:21, God splits the Red Sea through the hand of Moses and the people walk on dry land toward redemption.

At this moment of coming-out the minds of the Israelites were filled with the possibility of their forthcoming freedom and “...they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves” (Ex 12:39). After they walked free through the sand floor of the sea, they rejoiced and danced and sang praises to God for the miracle of their deliverance from slavery, their exit from the closet that had held power over them for 400 years.

The Israelites may have come out, as we who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender may have come out, but the closet holds an unexpected and strange power over us, even after we pass through its boundaries. We tend to think of the closet as a space only of discomfort, where we long to be free but can’t muster the strength to free ourselves. But for many people, the closet is a place of safety, where one can be one’s true self: alone, but free of the fear of public truth-telling. The closet can be a place in which there are no uncomfortable conversations, awkward meetings between parents and new boyfriends or girlfriends, and no corrections when another person uses the wrong pronoun to refer to you or your partner.



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It is in coming out of the closet that life can unexpectedly become more complicated. Instead of an immediate and complete sense of freedom, there are suddenly decisions to weigh, issues to debate, questions to answer. Like the Israelites, when we finally extricate ourselves from the closet, it can be easy to look back in and wonder what life would have been like if we had never left those walls of safety.

In this week's *parsha*, *Beha'alotekha*, we again see the Israelites struggle with their coming out experience. Although the Israelites had previously complained to Moses and God about the manna and bitter water in the desert, it is in this chapter that the Israelites make their strongest statement: "Oh why did we ever leave Egypt?" (Num 11:20). Only after leaving the closet do the Israelites remember that sometimes, being in the closet can feel comfortable and secure.

In Numbers 10:4-6 we read: "The Israelites wept and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this *manna* to look forward to!'" The Israelites take a look over their shoulders into their past closet and nostalgically remember what their life once was like. Like a parent who reminisces to their children, "when I was your age..." the Israelites remember a fictional world of the past where, through their rose-colored retrospection, life was better.

God's solution to the Israelites' bitter complaining is to rain meat from the sky: "A wind from God started up, swept quail from the sea and strewed them over the camp, about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on that side, all around the camp." After the Israelites have their protein fix, God punishes those who eat. Instead of treating the Israelites with compassion, God is judgmental and embarrasses them. Perhaps we should consider not modeling our behavior after the God of Our Fathers in similar instances. On those occasions in our lives when we encounter our friends' decision to remain closeted, either at all times, or only on certain occasions, we might instead offer encouragement and support as we navigate the tricky and often confusing space within and beyond the closet.

The closet, like the past, has a strange pull. It's no shame to look back and wonder what might have been. At the same time, we can't ignore our current *midbar*, the wilderness of reality, and the never-ending task of coming-out, transitioning, and transforming. It is through these ongoing, present-tense journeys that we will be able to say our own prayer of thanks to God: *Nivarekh et Ein haHaim, asher natnah li ha'atzma l'tzeit (min haMitzarim)* or (*min haMitzrayim*), "Let us bless the source of life for giving me the courage to come out (from the narrow places) or (from Egypt)." This coming out blessing, composed by Rebecca Alpert, plays on the similarities between the Hebrew words for "Egypt" and "narrow spaces." When we thank God for giving us the courage to come out of the narrow space of the closet, we are also thanking God for giving the Israelites' the courage to come out of the narrowness of Egypt.



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Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav is often quoted as saying, “the whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important part is not to be afraid.” As we move from the narrow space of the closet and come out on the other side, may we too be full of courage and unafraid.



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