



Parashat Bo

Come Out Come Out Wherever You Are

by Amy Soule on Friday January 22, 2010

Shevat 7, 5770

Exodus 10:1 - 13:16

Milk may have been designed as a secular movie but if you recall one of its (in)famous lines, you might also be reminded of G-d's commandment to the Children of Israel before the final plague was visited on the Egyptians: "Come out, come out wherever you are."

Exodus 12:21-23 gives our ancestors their first collective mitzvah. They are asked to slaughter a sheep and smear its blood on the lintels of their home to ensure their homes will be protected when the Angel of Death appears.

They are, in effect, asked to "come out" as Jews – to demonstrate to their neighbors a visible sign of their Jewishness – in order to save their lives and gain their freedom.

According to the parasha, all of them followed God's ordinance. I have to assume it's because the Torah can hardly fathom anyone making a different choice (since so many places implore us to "choose life"). However, I have to wonder if they were all obedient. What if someone didn't want to perform the slaughter and mark their lintel because they objected to God's bloody course of action? What if someone refused to visibly separate themselves from the Egyptians because they were born in Egypt and felt that they belonged equally to the Jewish people and to the Egyptians? What about fear of reprisal once the bloody deed was done? What if someone objected because G-d was asking the Children of Israel to accept far too much on the strength of an untested trust in an invisible entity?

If you're not able to come out even to yourself, coming out to God, or anyone else for that matter, seems daunting. If we read Exodus 12 as a collective "coming out" of the Hebrew people in Egypt, we may also understand "coming out" as a mitzvah and an act of faith. This act of coming out seems to be between God and the Hebrews, but sometimes even facing oneself with such a truth is hard. How many of our unknown ancestors had questions like this: "Why do it? Can God honestly care? Why were we created like this if we are simply to be judged and mistreated for being different? Why do we deserve freedom right now? Why was 400 the magic number? Maybe we're simply being tested?"



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In the present day, when LGBT rights seem to be facing severe challenges, it can also be hard to envision coming out as an act of faith. Oftentimes, once we realize we're different, we avoid anything religious at all until we've come to terms with being different socially and politically. Sometimes people around us tell us we're undeserving of anything good that life has to offer, and others are fascinated if we have any religious inclinations.

Jewish life can also fixate on difference. Around our Seder tables each spring, someone asks why this evening is different from every other night. Parashat Bo tells us why the last plague sent by God is different from all other plagues. Through the other nine, God had an unspoken accord with our people: they were left alone without having to do anything. When it came to the last plague God asked them to do something very scary that could help them. Our collective action to slaughter an animal and drip its blood on the lintels of our homes forged us in difference from our Egyptian neighbors.

Coming out is never easy; sometimes it seems riskier than remaining closeted. If we can remember that living as we were created to live is a mitzvah, perhaps it will be easier if we're new to it. Now and again, such honest actions can help inspire others to make steps toward admitting their own truths aloud in public. I learned this lesson just before my school's winter break.

When I came home from Montréal Pride in 2006 I started to wear jewelry I had purchased at the event: a simple cord emblazoned with _fierté_ (Pride). Since then plenty of people have asked me why I wear it. If it's someone I realize I won't ever see again, I generally tell them it's because I'm LGBT (they can guess if they want). Sometimes, if I'm talking to someone I've known for a while (and trust me, some of my very good friends don't even get it) I tell them it's a religious obligation. Just before Winter break this year, someone in my class noticed my jewelry and came out to me as transgender. Ze told me something ze had never voiced to anyone. I could hardly believe ze trusted me enough to share this self-awareness; I pray that ze will be able to continue living as God created hir and to continually affirm that ze is one of God's children.

We can come out any way we want, whatever next step in the unending process of coming out is ours to take; whether we're flying a Pride flag at home, making people clear about why we're using certain words to discuss things, wearing clothes or jewelry to be visible or even simply wrestling with God alone and fighting to come to terms with our difference. In each of these coming-out statements we are involved in something sacred.

Coming out is an act of faith and a mitzvah. It doesn't mean it's easy but that's the reality suggested by Exodus 12. God understands it's a large step. If it wasn't so large it wouldn't be our very first mitzvah right?



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On some level, perhaps our early sages realized this too. According to a Talmudic discussion, some, including Rashi, stated that the Torah, if it was to be purely recognized as a legal code, could start with Parashat Bo, since it contains our initial mitzvah as a people. Other sages argued that starting our calendar in the month of Av was our first mitzvah, but since this command doesn't appear to be issued as an imperative (it is stated in future tense instead), the jury is still out on that mitzvah. Perhaps, in the long run, it doesn't matter whether the mitzvah of coming out is first or second; all that matters is that we realize something core to our self-understanding is viewed by our scripture and God as holy.



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