



Parashat Bo

FINAL CUT: Circumcising Egypt

by Amichai Lau-Lavie on Saturday January 27, 2007

8 Sh'vat 5767

Exodus 10:1 - 13:16

This week's Torah episode is called "Bo", otherwise known as "Showdown in Egypt." "Bo" is Hebrew for "come"—alluding to the divine command for Moses to come into the presence and the mindset of his oppressor—in order to release the enslaved Hebrews and let them go and "come out." Interestingly, the gist of this story is precisely about the thin line between who and what is "In" or "Out," and how identities and boundaries are sharply marked—cutting like a circumcision knife.

Whether read as Jewish memory or human mythology, holy history or imagined fantasy—the Exodus has become a key symbol in the canon of Western theology, psychology, art and socio-political discourse. Jay Michaelson wrote in his Torah Queeries essay on [Parashat Vaera](#), "for African-American slaves or for our own gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender elders, the story resonates far beyond its Israelite particularity to any struggle for liberation."

Jay and I are friends, and last week we happened to meet at a downtown New York shvitz (a "sauna" or "steambath" for those unfamiliar with the Yiddishism)—that age old institution where deep conversations flow like sweat. Naturally, being the Jew-geeks that we are, our conversation turned to the weekly Torah portion, and, while scantily clad men paraded around us, we discussed Jay's reading of the Exodus as a metaphoric sexual awakening. So, while my exploration of this Torah portion may not be a uniquely GLBT critical reading, it WAS inspired by a fairly homo-erotic ambiance, and it focuses, in particular, on the strange, painful, and lesser known role that the human penis, and especially the foreskin, plays in the paradigm for change known as Passover. The surprisingly symbolic link between circumcision and the Exodus hints at the challenges of particularistic separatism as a by-product of struggles for liberation—then and now.

Before I explain, here's a quick "Bo" recap: Chapters 10-13 in the Book of Exodus give a blow by blow of the final stages of the Exodus—the last three of the ten plagues on Egypt, climaxing with the slaughter of the firstborn and Pharaoh's final defeat. Somewhere between midnight



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and dawn, lit by the full moon of spring, over a million Hebrew slaves flee Egypt, matzos in hand, ending 430 years of tumultuous immigration.

And the next thing that happens, right after they flee, is the transmission of the first of the new laws for post-Egypt conduct, directly from God via Moses: Only Hebrews are to eat the Passover meat offering. Male slaves are to be circumcised in order to partake, as are the converts, but the uncircumcised are not welcome to share. (Ex.12:43-49)

Clearly, in order to become a new, distinct nation (or individual), separations must exist and distinctions must be made between “in” and “out”, “brother” and “other.” After years of repression, the Hebrews (like the LGBT community) are thrilled to celebrate a proud, segregated existence—not because they are forced to, but because they finally can. But at the same time, the new law, supposedly going into effect immediately upon departure from the old world, draws clear boundaries and hierarchies within single households—defining who may or may not partake of the sacred meal. We are only at our first historical step into freedom and already not everybody is welcome at the table? Ouch. Though circumcision is instructed here as a necessary tool for differentiating racial/national identity, it also shows up here as a startling symbol, a final cut with life in Egypt and a first step towards Hebrew identity.

There is, in fact, one more surprising text linking the moment of coming out to the moment of circumcision. In the early medieval Midrash known as *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer*, the blood that was painted on the doorposts is not just that of slaughtered lambs: *The Hebrews were forbidden by the Pharaoh from circumcising their sons, and so, on the day they left Egypt, all men were circumcised, both young and old. They took the blood of the Passover blood, and mixed it with the blood of circumcision and painted their doorposts, so that the destroyer will pass over their homes.* (PDRE 29)

Ouch again! Whether one reads this text as a metaphor for “Coming Out” as Jewish, gay or black, or just a more fiercely free human being, the Midrashic circumcision motif adds more than just a few drops of blood and tears into the mix. This new-found focus on the circumcision/Exodus narratives makes me wonder how high are the emotional and psychological tolls that we, as a nation, continue to pay for this act of severing the links to our former selves—foreskin removal as symbolic for a cutting of the umbilical cord. In this view, circumcision, painful as it is, can be understood as the brutal and defining moment of the Exodus.

Like many “Coming Out” stories, including my own, the collective Exodus includes the bitter and the sweet—both the wide smiles of release and the narrow streaks of tears. Egypt becomes the narrow places, the place we long to leave, as we storm our way away into our versions of a promised land.



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But is this the story we want to keep on telling ourselves about our struggles for liberation? Do we need or want to keep the celebration of separatism as an integral part of our path towards unique and individual identity? As a queer Jewish man living in a city where “officially” no mandatory ghettos exist, but unofficial boundaries are more prevalent than bouncers outside nightclubs—these questions worry me. While I enjoy hanging out with just the guys at a gay bar, or having the intimacy of a Shabbat table with only close family, not needing to translate and explain the rituals—I do feel that my respective communities could rise to the challenge of celebrating diversity and multiple identities without compromising the unique sense of self. Integration—without the fear of assimilation, may be one of the key factors towards a healthy survival of a people defined by distinguished characteristics, be they based on gender, sexual orientation, religion, or cultural choices. In an age of “niche markets” and so many custom made choices—this is a hefty challenge.

Back at the shvitz, Jay elaborated on the act of circumcision as one that actually “reveals” the male sexual organ, accentuating its role in the sacred process of procreation and birth. Following the emphasis on the role of women as procreation agents at the beginning of Exodus, the circumcision on the day of the Exodus can be read as the last step in this prolonged birthing process of a people, and as the first step towards Revelation at Sinai. And then, towel wrapped tightly, he “exodused” out of the steam room, and I lingered, hoping to remember all that we talked about, pondering how these ancient biblical blueprints have shaped our identities, echoing our human triumphs and weakness, and at times magnifying our fears and old patterns of survival in and out of narrow places and states of mind. Egyptian or Hebrew, cut or not, straight or gay, I hope that boldly re-viewing and re-telling this tale, whether it be on this coming Saturday or at the next Passover Seder, will offer new possibilities, relevant revelations, and bold paradigms for celebrating our “coming out” of our narrow history, and coming into our own.



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