



Parashat Vaera

Into Life

by Jay Michaelson on Saturday January 20, 2007

1 Sh'vat 5767

Exodus 6:2 - 9:35, Shabbat

The exodus from Egypt has symbolized the movement from servitude to freedom for generations. Whether 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.

There is another aspect to *yetziat mitzraim* (the Exodus from Egypt), though, beyond the move from bondage to freedom. After all, as many Jewish scholars have noted, freedom is the beginning of the Israelite quest, not the end of it. The parting of the Red Sea is a cinematic moment, but it is not the climactic one: the real point of the story comes at Mount Sinai. Egypt is the womb, and the Red Sea is the birth canal—but it is at Sinai where our people comes of age and begins its forty-year adolescence. (Only upon entering the land of Israel can it be said to have attained adulthood.)

So if freedom is only the beginning, what is it that comes next?

The traditional Jewish answer usually has something to do with responsibility, covenant, and the monotheistic imperative to ethical and religious life. These are, of course, borne out by the content of the Torah's texts, which soon will shift attention from history to law. But Egypt, too, had its laws. The Egyptians also had a sense of responsibility to, and covenant with, their Creators, and, though quite different from ours, a code of ethics and ritual behavior. They even had their own *toevot*—their own taboos—some of which are recorded in the Torah.

What differentiates ancient Egypt from ancient Israel is the way those responsibilities and taboos relate to the value of life. Egypt was a death-obsessed culture; its lasting monuments are not palaces but tombs. As all of us who have visited the Valley of the Dead, or even the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, know, Egypt created beautiful, lavish coffins; mummified their dead pharaohs and nobles; and regarded this life as merely an entryway to the next one (to use a Talmudic image). Especially in light of their use of slavery, I think it is fair to characterize ancient Egyptian culture as at least equally weighting the life of this world and the next one—if not privileging the latter outright.



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Not so the incipient Israelite faith. Today, what happens after we die is one of the basic questions that many people assume religion is supposed to answer. When I used to teach high school students—and even now, as I teach adults—it’s always a bit embarrassing to reveal that Judaism doesn’t have clear answers about what happens after we die. Some texts say there is a heaven and a hell, some texts seem to deny it; some rabbis think there is transmigration of souls, some think there isn’t. It’s just not that important a subject—because Judaism is a religion of life, not death.

This is especially true in the Torah, which says absolutely nothing about the afterlife. True, the Torah is concerned with tombs as a marker of ancestry and land; it records in detail Abraham’s bargaining for the Cave of Machpelah, and describes how Moses went out of his way to bring Joseph’s bones out of Egypt. But it never mentions an afterlife, or whether there is reward and punishment in the “next world,” or how we should govern our lives in anticipation of what comes afterward. Nothing.

Whereas the Torah goes into great detail about tort law, the minutiae of tabernacle design, the performance of ritual sacrifice, and a myriad of other details about the life of this world. The Israelites are told to “choose life.” They are promised a long and fruitful life if they abide by God’s commandments. And it is assumed that the normative life (with only marginal exceptions, such as the *nazirites*—Jews who took ascetic vows) is lived in the world, with family, economic activity, and the sorts of daily intercourse with humanity that, in renunciatory or monastic traditions, is a sign of perdition, not salvation.

In other words, the exodus from Egypt is one from death into life—from a culture that denies this world to one that embraces it.

Today, the way this dynamic plays out has shifted completely. Today, it is Western religious fundamentalists who denigrate the life of this world in favor of the next one—including, in their way, Jewish fundamentalists.

If we look closely at it, perhaps the central religious significance of liberated sexuality is its core value of life, as opposed to death. Expression over repression, love over fear, the flowering of human potential over the trampling of it in the name of something else. Obviously, this is not an unmitigated hedonism; the acceptance of one’s sexuality does not imply the indulgence in all of one’s passing lusts, or whims. But it is a fundamental affirmation of the goodness of human life, and a rejection of the claim that the basic human impetus to love, and to express that love in an embodied way, is to be subjugated to other norms.

After all, it is *possible* for a lesbian or gay man to live a heterosexual lifestyle; our ancestors have done it for generations. It just requires repression, deception, double-lives, and unethical sexual behavior done “on the side” or “on the sly.” A religious fundamentalist would say that



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this is exactly what God demands—though of course they would phrase it differently: perhaps as “wrestling with my own private demon” or “struggling to serve God” or “making sacrifices in the name of holiness.”

This is the rhetoric of death. It is the way of expressing the belief that there is something unworthy about the fundamental structure of this-worldly existence. The heart is wrong. Sexuality is unreliable, or evil. And there are more important values than living out one’s fundamental truth. In other words, it is the rhetoric of Egypt—transformed and translated, but Egypt nonetheless.

For religious people, liberated sexuality does indeed pose a challenge; we in the gay rights community are deluding ourselves if we think it’s really no big deal. At the very least, it says that two thousand years of thinking about a subject has been so clouded by ignorance that it deserves to be set aside. But in order to say that, it has to say something deeper: that the heart knows the truth. It knows when it is thriving and when it is being trampled, and it knows, as does contemporary science, that sexual orientation is a trait that cannot be changed—but is to be celebrated. And since the heart knows this, the question cannot be whether it is better to express or repress the gifts that God has given. Rather, it can only be whether it is better to express or repress life itself. And then the theological question changes too, as we ask whether a God who loves life would ask God’s GLBT children to throw it away. These postulates come from experience, not revelation—and that is a challenge to authority-based revealed religion. And because they give birth to the core basis of all the sexual liberation movements (for women, for gays, for gender minorities) —that human life is to be lived—liberation does issue a challenge to tradition. But it is not an unanswerable one. Because in our own tradition, liberation is celebrated also, beginning in the Exodus narrative, with an overwhelming chorus of voices saying that life, not death, is the way of God. And that it is not possible to conceive of a God who loves life who would also tell a gay man to repress his sexuality.

These postulates come from experience, not revelation—and that is a challenge to authority-based revealed religion. There is no denying the fundamental premise of sexual liberation movements (for women, for gays, for gender minorities): that human life is to be lived. However, we can find in our tradition, beginning in the Exodus narrative, an overwhelming chorus of voices that say it is life, not death, that is the path of God. Yes, there are contrary voices as well: ascetic ones that demand more repression than expression, and rabbinic ones that describe this world as precisely an antechamber to the next one. But if we look at the deep structure of the Exodus narrative, as well as in the thousands of years of law and exposition that follow it, it is obvious that the Torah is a guidebook to life, not death.

Once again, it is a guidebook, not a blank check—the Torah has plenty of rules and restrictions, which it says are necessary for a holy and ethical existence. But in leaving the tombs of Egypt to plant the Tree of Life in Israel, the sweep of the Israelite narrative is unmistakable. Out of the



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abstract, and into the concrete; out of afterlife, and into reality; out of death, and, as Franz Rosenzweig ended his philosophical masterpiece, *The Star of Redemption: Into Life*.



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