

Shemot  
Exodus 1:1-6:1  
January 21, 2017

***In Parshat Shemot, the Israelites find themselves reduced to slavery by a new Pharaoh “who did not remember Joseph.” Not only are they enslaved, Pharaoh issues the order to kill every Israelite baby boy and only let the girls live. Two midwives, Shifra and Puah, defy the order and are rewarded by God. Moses is born at home and hidden in the reeds where he is discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter who at first, sends him to his mother to feed him and then has him brought to the palace.***

***Moses goes out “to see his people” and is enraged by the sight of an old man being beaten. He strikes down the taskmaster and ends up running away for his life. He finds shepherdesses at a well and draws water for them and eventually marries Tzipora, the eldest of a desert clan. He works as a shepherd himself until he finds himself in front of a manifestation of God, a burning bush, out of which comes a Divine voice. God calls upon him to go to Egypt and bring the Israelites out of bondage. Moses refuses, but relents after God insists and designates his brother Aaron as his spokesperson.***

## **Niggun Introduction**

This is the first portion of Exodus. It contains the moment of the first stirring, the awakening to our own enslavement.

The exile and redemption in Exodus is a model “for an event that recurs again and again throughout our history—exile followed by redemption followed by exile again...”

Steinsaltz, p. 108

It is the continuous metamorphosis of the Jewish people. It is also personal. It is our own life cycle. It is the daily cycle, the changes from one minute to the next. “It forms the basis of our lives.”

Steinsaltz, p. 109

Awareness of exile begins in a moment. There is a sense that the problem is not just a problem of degree. It is an overall problem of disharmony, internally, or within a larger context. When there is awareness of exile, the problem is no longer how to make small adjustments, but how to get out of this place entirely.

Paraphrased, Steinsaltz, p. 112

“These two states—exile and redemption—go together; they are interconnected. It is precisely a person’s awareness that he or she is in exile that creates the opening. We may emerge from that exile and attain redemption by going through that opening, even though it might be painful.

Paraphrased, Steinsaltz, pp. 112-13

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This is the first portion of Exodus. There is a call for us to our own exile from ourselves, and from God.

We can come to know our enslavement. We move from ignorance to awareness.

Waking up is necessary to learn the promise of redemption.

This is contemplation in three parts, so we can take this story and hold it, and turn it, so it becomes a continuous vehicle for our practice.

Listen and hear what serves you well, and possibly a new and useful understanding will emerge, if only for an instant.

## **niggun**

### **Part 1**

All of this is present in us:

(Sefat Emet pp. 81-2)

We are ignorant and impoverished--we don't know our own pain.

We are in exile from ourselves and from God.

We are trapped by the illusion of a fixed universe without choice, without help, without volition,

endlessly repeating patterns we take to be who we are in essence, in a finite and limited world.

We are the ignorant poor and we don't even know.

We are the midwives--

We know awe,

We know of mystery, of the thin veil between life and death.

We live in the houses God provides, holding the stature of priests and kings.

We can provide a link between holy mystery and the embodied.

We midwives know the difference between wholesome and cruel.

We can simply take the right action without fear of Pharaoh. Pharaoh is not our King.  
We are not enslaved. We bring new life into the world.

(Ex 1:17-21)

The righteous midwife lives within us.

(midwives, Shifrah and Puah, first documented act of civil disobedience)

We are Moses--

Moses is neither caught as a slave, nor really a son of Pharaoh.

His view is our view, one of an outsider who can witness events.

We can see the behavior, the roles, the cruelty of both the Egyptians and the petty arguments of the Jews.

We are reactive. We quickly anger at injustice and petty stupidity and blindness.

We need to learn skillfulness.

(Ex 2:11)

Moses lives with in us.

Freedom is present, even if it is hidden.

The midwives and Moses will help deliver us from exile.

After Moses sees the pain of the Jews, the Jews groan. His witnessing stirred the movement of the pain into consciousness. We come to know our own poverty, our enslavement, our exile from our self and from God. We wake up out of our ignorance and discover we are enslaved.

We are the prisoners--

We know that place of the rising groan within us.

It is painful and we endure feeling our own alienation.

We feel what we lack.

We feel our deficiencies, our limitations our vulnerability, our own suffering.

This is the first step of redemption.

Zornberg and E. Fishbane

The groan rises up and God hears it as a prayer.

(Ex 2:23)

We have a beginning understanding. We are prisoners in exile.

We need the humble righteous, the midwives and Moses to help deliver us. God will see us in our groaning and take us as His people.

And God moves toward us. "I will bring you out."

(Ex 6:6)

**Chant: Chaneyni Yah ki umlal ani ( help me God because I am disconnected)**

**Silence**

## **Part II**

We are promised by God--

I shall release you.

I shall save you.

I shall redeem you.

I shall take you as my people.

(Exodus 6:6-7)

Can we let this happen?

Can I put myself within a bigger context, bigger than my own small, familiar self-centered view?

Can the midwife help me connect to mystery, to awe?

Can my groan open up my heart and make me receptive?

God says God hears us

God remembers us

God sees us

God knows us

(Exodus 2:24-5, 3:7)

God sees the pain we cannot even articulate, hears the rising up of the barest moan of consciousness.

God sees the affliction, sees us, the beloved, sees the best and worst of us

God knows we will receive Torah at Mt. Sinai and we will create the Golden Calf

This sense of being seen is the pure experience of redemptive love

Zornberg pp. 46-7

God will take us as His people.

Can I begin to let myself be known?

## **Chant: L'cha amar libi bakshu fanai**

*To You my heart says, "Seek my face." (Psalm 27:8)*

### **silence**

### **Part III**

God calls to Moses at the burning bush.

Moses says "here I am."

Moses is given his task, and asks, who shall I say has sent me?

He is told:

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, I am who I am.

In all time.

Exodus 3:2-15

"I shall be with you in your present distress, and I shall be with you in future exiles and persecutions."

Rashi

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, I am who I am.

This name transcends even Holiness.

It pervades every existences even as it transcends it. It relates equally to them all, holy and mundane alike.

This name is not set apart, but dwells within all.

This name says:

I am not in some distant heaven, holy and removed from your pain and pleasure.

I am here with you, suffering with you, praying for redemption together with you.

The indwelling presence is here, now.

We ask "who" is God, and the answer is "This."

Now.

If you cannot see Me, hear Me, know me, it is not because of my mystery; it is because I am so real.

Based on teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

The glory of God's Kingdom is in every place and time

"I am asleep but my heart wakes. The sound of my beloved knocking. Open for me."

Song of Songs 5:2

The sound of Torah pounds in Israel's heart.

Sefat Emet, p. 86

The pounding of my own heart,  
the sound of Torah,  
the voice of my Beloved--  
Help me to learn again that they are all one voice."

Sefat Emet, p. 86

**Chant: Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh**

Silence

**Niggun**

Rhonda Karlton Rosen, text

David Goldstein, chant

Source material:

Sefat Emet, translated and edited by Art Green

The Particulars of Rapture, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

Rashi

Eitan Fishbane, Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, Talks on the Parsha