Recounting and Redemption: The Power of Story-Telling

A Second Nurture Resource for Passover

Dear Friends,

As we remain in our homes, our seders perhaps smaller than we had hoped, we hold tight to our stories—and the Passover recounting has come not a moment too soon!

Min hametzar, karati yah, anani b'meirchav yah
From the narrow strait I call to God, from the expanse, God responds.

How does story-telling help move us from confinement to liberation, from a fragmented self, to greater wholeness?

These texts and questions are deeply felt by so many of us today, as we feel a new kind of fear, powerlessness and alienation. Perhaps this is also an opportunity to better empathize with those who live, always, with such distress, namely children in the foster care system.

These texts can be a basis for discussion in a Zoom group, at the seder table, or on your own. However you engage with them, we at Second Nurture hope they bring you, personally, toward greater wholeness and redemption—and strengthen you in your endeavors to bring greater wholeness and redemption to others.

With blessings to you and yours for health and well-being,

Susan Silverman and the Second Nurture Team

PART ONE:

Telling and re-telling our stories is worthy—in fact, commanded—for reasons beyond gaining and sharing knowledge. What is the transformative power of recounting and sharing our common stories—and our personal ones?

Core Text:

עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים, ויוציאנו ה'
אלהינו משם ביד חזקה ובזרע נטויה. ואלו לא הוציא הקדוש ברוך הוא את אבותינו ממצרים, הרי אנו ובנינו ובני בנינו משעבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים. ואפילו כלנו חכמים כלנו נבונים כלנו זקנים כלנו יודעים את התורה מצוה עלינו לספר ביציאת מצרים. וכל המרבה לספר ביציאת מצרים הרי זה משבח.

We were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. And the Lord, our God, took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched forearm. And if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not taken our ancestors from Egypt, behold we and our children and our children's children would [all] be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. **And even if we were all sages, all discerning, all elders, all knowledgeable about the Torah, it would be a commandment upon us to tell the story of the exodus from Egypt. And anyone who adds [and spends extra time] in telling the story of the exodus from Egypt, behold he is praiseworthy.**

We recount our liberation from Egypt and experience redemption—not only vicariously, imagining ourselves going forth from Egypt, but first hand, through the act of telling our story .

Shaping Our Own Story is an Act of Freedom

Pesachim 116a

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח: מאי בגנות רב אמר מתחלה עובדי עבודת גלולים היו אבותינו [ושמואל] אמר עבדים היינו

It was taught in the mishna that the father **begins** his answer **with disgrace and concludes with glory.** The Gemara asks: **What** is the meaning of the term: **With disgrace? Rav said** that one should begin by saying: **At first our forefathers were idol worshippers,** before concluding with words of glory. **And Shmuel said:** The disgrace with which one should begin his answer is: **We were slaves.**

- The haggadah begins the telling of our story "from degradation to redemption" with our enslavement in Egypt. In the Talmudic text above, Rav Shmuel agrees with that starting point. But Rav says that we should frame the story's start much earlier with our ancestors' worshiping idols.
    - How does the story shift in meaning
        - If our disgrace is a moral failure on our part idol worship)?
        - If our disgrace is external circumstances (enslavement)?
            - What impact does each one have on how we frame a story?
- Can you think of a story in your own life in which you were in disgrace and then overcame—achieved redemption?
    - Start that story in each of these ways
        - How did each version:
            - Impact your sense of self and mastery of your own life?
            - Ring true?
        - How might a child adopted from foster care frame their story in each of these ways?
        - How might their new parent/s help them frame their narrative?

***Mitzrayim* is the Exile of Speech; Redemption is the Union of our Heart's Truth with Speech**

Rabbi Yitzchak Luria	Zohar Sulam Commentary on Vayera 68
On Liberation Being the Ability to Speak, To Tell One's Unique Story The word "Pesach" can be read as two words, Peh Sach, "the mouth speaks." On this night, the heart and the mouth come together, and Pharaoh's grip is loosed from our throats. Coming out of exile means the fulfillment of one's potential. And there is no greater fulfillment than when one touches the root of one's soul, and gives expression to it in ways that are uniquely one's own.	תָּא חֲזֵי, כָּל זְמַנָּא דְּדִבּוּר הֲוָה בְּגָלוּתָא, קָלָא אִסְתְּלַק מִגַּוֵּיהּ, וּמִלָּה הֲוָה אָטִים בְּלֹא קוֹל, כַּד אָתָא מֹשֶׁה, אָתָא קוֹל. וּמֹשֶׁה הֲוָה קוֹל בְּלֹא מִלָּה, בְּגִין דַּהֲוָה בְּגָלוּתָא, וְכָל זְמַנָּא דְּדִבּוּר הֲוָה בְּגָלוּתָא, מֹשֶׁה אָזִיל קָלָא בְּלָא דִּבּוּר, וְהָכִי אָזִיל עַד דְּקָרִיבוּ לְטוּרָא דְּסִינַי, וְאִתְיְהִיבַת אוֹרַיְיתָא, וּבַהֲהוּא זְמַנָּא, אִתְחַבָּר קָלָא בְּדִבּוּר, וּכְדֵין מִלָּה מַלִּיל, הה"ד, וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה. וּכְדֵין, מֹשֶׁה אִשְׁתְּכַח שְׁלִים בְּמִלָּה כַּדְקָא יָאוֹת, קוֹל וְדִבּוּר כַּחֲדָא בְּשְׁלִימוּ. Come and see, as long as speech was in exile, voice was gone from speech, and speech was voiceless…Moses was voice without speech because speech was in exile. And Moses went while speech was in exile to Mount Sinai and the Torah was given. At that time, voice joined with speech and then he spoke words.

- Speech—telling our own stories is, itself, redemption.
    - *Kol*—our inner voice—is Truth that pours forth without contour. D*ibur* is speech, shaping the *Kol* into words so that our true selves can be shared to create relationships with each other and God. When *dibur* is in exile, our inner truth has no vessel for expression—and so we are also in exile. When *kol* and *dibbur* align, we have a channel for expression and growth.
        - What is *kol* (voice) without *dibur (*speech) and vice-versa?
            - Can you recall experiencing an internal Truth for which you lacked the speech with which to formulate your experience to others?
                - What did that feel like?
                - What might have helped you?
            - Can you recall using speech that was disconnected from your inner Truth?
                - What did that feel like?
                - What helped you reunite speech with truth?
                - How might that union help you find a place in a larger, meaningful context ?
                - How might that union help to become master of own life?
        - Why might children in foster care experience *dibbur*-in-exile?
            - How might their new parents help them to unite the flow of their inner experience with the vessel of speech?

PART TWO: *THIS* HAS SUSTAINED US

What has sustained the Jewish People throughout our painful exiles—and what does that teach about what sustains each of us in our existential exiles?

Pesach Haggadah, Maggid, In the Beginning our Fathers were Idol Worshipers

מתחלה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו, ועכשיו קרבנו המקום לעבדתו...**וְהִיא** שֶׁעָמְדָה לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ. שֶׁלֹּא אֶחָד בִּלְבָד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, אֶלָּא שֶׁבְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַצִּילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם

From the beginning, our ancestors were idol worshipers. And now, HaMakom (lit: The Place, meaning God) has brought us close to His worship…And it is **this** that has sustained our ancestors and us (despite the people and nations in every generation that have sought to destroy us).

It is unclear what the word היא, "this", refers to in the above text. What is "**this"** that has sustained us"? Here are some traditional interpretations from throughout the centuries.

"This" is: The Story of the Exodus itself—as a reminder of our faith in God

- Rabbi Benjamin David Rabinowitz of Warsaw, in his 1872 "Ephod Bad", a commentary on the Haggadah, understands "this" to mean the Story of the Exodus itself as a renewal of faith. Because we have repeatedly faced destruction, we might forget our faith in God. But by recalling the redemption from Egypt, we experience anew God's miracles and their redemptive power.
  - What gives you faith?
  - What has threatened to destroy your faith?
  - What has restored your faith?
    - What story helps you experience redemption?
      - Are there big, paradigmatic stories?
      - Are there very small stories—interactions, comments, moments of connection?
- Can you imagine a story that a child in foster care, without a meaningful context for their life such as relationships, culture, community, sense of history and purpose, might hold onto to maintain faith in God or in possibility?
  - What kind of paradigmatic story might that be?
  - What kind of personal story?
- How might parents who adopt from foster care help their child develop a story that helps them (re)connect to God or possibility?

"This" is: The Sense of Hope held out by God's interest in, and promise to, us

- Yaakov Lorberbaum, in his early 19th century commentary on the Haggadah, *Maaseh Nissim,* teaches that the "this" that sustained us through the generations is the hope which we derived from God's promise to Abraham that He would redeem the Israelites from Egypt. The hope that this promise engendered not only sustained the generations in Egypt, but continues to sustain us as well.
    - Even when we are exiled and oppressed, and even when God is in exile from us, reunification—the redemption born of relationship—still exists in the world. We hold onto the sense that God is there and will not forsake us. That this, right now, is not forever.
        - In the Passover story, exile hides God's interest in us.
            - What in our own lives shows us God's interest in us?
            - What, in our own lives, hides God's interest in us?
            - What gives us hope for God's re-engagement with us?
                - What are some barriers to hope?
    - How might foster children experience God as in exile from them?
        - How might a new family help a child regain hope?
    - How might parents, themselves, regain lost hope?

"This" is Shekhina, the Divine Presence, Who was with us in exile

- Yedidiah Tiah Weil in his 18th century commentary on the haggadah, *Marbeh Lesaper,* says that Shekhina was with us in our most unredeemed, humiliating and even sinful moments. She was with us in exile throughout the generations and, with us, was subjected to the forces of impurity.
    - Shekhina meant that we were companioned, had a presence with us even at our lowest—and that gives us endurance.
    - Do you recall a time—even a moment—when you were joined in your suffering, amazed by that connection?
        - Does this moment of relationship sustain you even when you are "in the wilderness"?
            - If so, how?
    - Was there a moment when you were present for someone else in their suffering?
        - What are the barriers to, or what facilitates, being a loving presence for someone?
            - How might this be different as a parent?
                - As a parent to a child who has lived in the foster system?

- What might it be to envision Shechina as, simply, with us. Not in control, not changing things, just being with us?
    - What are the barriers to, or what facilitates, accepting the loving presence of another person? Of God?
    - How might this be different as a parent?
    - As a parent to a child who has lived in the foster system?

"This" is **Teshuvah, "turning"** or **"repentance"** brings forth redemption

- Yedidiah Tiah Weil in his 18th century commentary on the haggadah, *Marbeh Lesaper,* says that it is also repentance that has sustained us. Repentance brings redemption closer to fruition. When Israel cries out in repentance to God, then the Holy One saves them from their enemies.
    - Whatever befalls us, whether it was an external circumstance or of our own doing, through it we can grow in relationship with God and each other.
        - What does it take for an experience of suffering to become growthful?
            - What is needed for "turning" or "repentance"
                - What kind of self-awareness do we need?
                - What kind of relationship/s do we need?
            - If something is not our fault, can we still be complicit?
                - What kind of character must we have to imagine our own complicity?
                - How might that kind of self-examination be fruitful?
                - How might it be detrimental?
            - Can you give an example from real life about how personal growth emerged from hardship?
                - Why did it take hardship to instigate that growth?
                - What do you carry with you from that experience?
            - Can you remember a time you were the one to provide a relationship to someone in a difficult situation?
                - What was your role?
                - What happened in the relationship to progress the sufferer's "turning"?
        - What might *teshuva* mean for a child who has lived in foster care?

        - What might they need to learn in order to grow toward a more whole sense of self?
            - What might be the barriers?
            - How might their new parents support them?

"This" is **Shekhina's testimony** to our purity in exile

- Rabbi Naftali ben Shimon Hertz Ginzburg, in his 17th Century commentary on the Haggadah, written in Poland, *Naftali Seva Ratzon*, explains that in each exile, *Shechinah*, the divine presence, was exiled with the people of Israel. Therefore, She was able to testify to Israel's purity even amidst hardship
    - Even in life's exiles—self created or circumstantial— when we are mired in spiritual filth, God can testify to our inner goodness.
        - What enables us to witness human inner goodness?
            - For ourselves?
            - For others?
        - Has someone witnessed that for you?
        - Has God?
            - What might it take to experience/imagine God's witnessing one's own inner goodness?
            - Someone else's?
        - Why might it be hard for a kid in foster care to witness human inner goodness ?
            - For themselves?
            - For others?
        - What if no one has witnessed their inner goodness?
        - Might a child in foster care sense that God witnesses their inner goodness?
            - What might it take for them to experience/imagine that God's is witnessing their own inner goodness?
            - Someone else's?
            - How might a new parent to that child build a child's capacity to feel that their inner goodness is seen by others and by God.