

Pesach D'var
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Most years for Pesach, I drive down to Northern California to spend the first seder with my mom. Normally, I try to get there a few days in advance so together we can make all the things we love. While my mom and I do not agree on any number of things, we are great together in a kitchen. I chop onions, mom sautés them. She opens cupboards, I gently close them over her head. She creates chaos, I tidy as we go. Its good choreography; we manage to share a small space with ease, never colliding, and always getting the delicious work done, with little conversation on strategy or a need to plan.

The Torah differs on this. We read of the astonishing detailed instructions that Moses gave the children of Israel for the night prior to the departure from Egypt. The instructions included what to sacrifice, how to roast it, when to eat it and when to put on their sandals to be ready. The directive further admonished that strict adherence to these rules were essential. I find this vastly reassuring. I can only imagine the people, mostly convinced to leave the world they had known for over 400 years, trying to prepare for a journey into the unknown. This very principle both challenges and stirs human imagination. In general, we prefer the familiar. Many of us like knowing where we will awake. We like the comforting sound of the heat cycling on or the refrigerator cycling off. Some of us lay out our clothes the night before so that getting dressed is easy in the morning. We often eat the same things for breakfast and make or buy our coffee in familiar ways. Or we used to do this. This last year of Covid-19 has upset many habits and created new ones. I joke with my cousin in the morning, “ Well, I better get started. Traffic can be murder these weekdays!”, as I pick up my coffee cup to walk up the 13 steps to my study to start my Zoom day. One morning, I actually got upstairs to discover I had my car keys in my hand. Even in a time of change and adaptation, we tend to cling to what we have known.

I think the specificity of the instructions that Moses delivered to the people were meant to calm their fears. I believe that they were meant as a kindness. If people concentrated on getting the rules right, they slaughtered the sheep exactly right, roasted the animal correctly and ate it at the right hour, as everyone else was presumably doing, they have little time to freak about the fact that they and all their neighbors were about to embark on a huge human experiment. They were on the verge of following a self-proclaimed prophet into the wilderness for an unspecified length of time and a distant promise of a better life. In Egypt, at least, they had homes and jobs and a way of life to which they had grown accustomed. The wilderness? Hunger, thirst, instability, enemies, chaos!

Would you have gone? Would I have done so? Psychology tells us that many people chose to remain in a situation that is toxic, harmful and painful rather than leave that familiar situation for the unknown as the unknown may be even more horrible, and even worse, its unknown! I return to the instructions. Consider the logistics! Moses and Aaron had to mobilize possibly 50, 000 people. That's men, women, children, old people, tiny babies. They had livestock, so we have to include sheep, goats, maybe cattle. All the people had possessions that had to be carried or

conveyed on carts. Consider how difficult it used to be just to get a family of five organized for a trip to the coast!

Without very specific guidelines, the Exodus would not have worked at all. Each household had to trust that every other household was doing exactly the same things at exactly the same time. They had to trust they had a shared purpose for a shared goal. They had to decide it was for all or none. Again, there are Covid echoes in this portion. This pandemic is global. This is difficult for me to fathom, but every single person on this planet has borne this disaster in some way. Every life is affected by the events of this past year. It's all of us. Every one. The rules help me. Six-foot distancing, masks, hand washing. These rules beat back some of the chaos and give us the sense that each household will be putting on their sandals at the same time to face the changing reality we share.

Wilderness is uncertainty, unfamiliarity, a disruption of the social order and what we have known. I can't go down to my mom's house this Pesach and sit at her table with her eccentric and delightful friends to tell stories and sneak a little more charoset with horseradish. At my mom's house, we always end the seder with "Amazing Grace", as not everyone knows the words to the Hebrew songs. This year, I celebrated in a small way, with my cousin and a dear friend; some prayers, some storytelling and a bite of the matzoh that Rabbi Avi drops by my house each year. We carry the familiar into the unknown and we adapt as we go.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."