

Rereading Exodus along the Anacostia explores inter-group dialogue, its role in understanding and addressing oppression and in envisioning new ways to get ourselves - all of us - out from under the millstone of racism and inequality and militarism. It explores what life in DC teaches about the Exodus story and vice versa.

Isn't It Time? shares excerpts from *Rereading Exodus* plus new thoughts and questions -

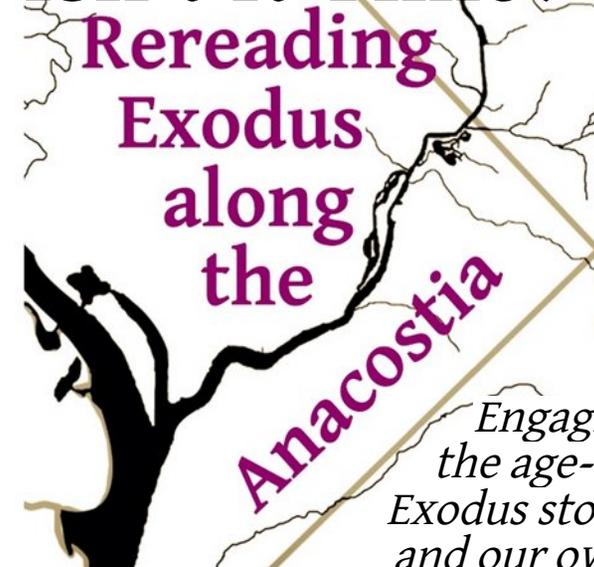
- to help in preparing for Passover,
- to explore at the seder or during the Passover week,
- for the omer journey, from Passover to Shavuot, &/or
- to help in interrogating and reimagining the Exodus story in any season

Isn't It Time? can be explored on its own or as supplement to *Rereading Exodus along the Anacostia*



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Isn't It Time?



Engaging the age-old Exodus story, and our own, to inspire change where we are right now.

Virginia Avniel Spatz

Rereading4Liberation.com

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– Virginia Avniel Spatz, author

February, 2023



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Launching a Rereading Journey

General Orientation

Edith Grayston: Politics doesn't interest you. Why?

Sherlock Holmes: Because it's fatally boring.

Edith: Because you have no interest in changing a world that suits you so well.

-- *Enola Holmes* (Netflix, 2020; Harry Bradbeer, director)

Screen Scene: London, 1884. Sherlock, detecting consultant, is a white man with land and wealth enough to accept clients only when he chooses; Edith, a Black woman organizing for women's suffrage, teaching martial arts to women, and selling revolutionary books, is dependent on income of the shop she runs.

"...no interest in changing a world that suits you so well"

"A ruler sustains the land through justice,

but one who sets himself apart [*terumah*] tears it down"

- Prov 29:4

This implies that if an individual acts as though they were a *terumah* (portion separated, or set aside, for the priests) by secluding themselves in the corner of their home and declaring: "What concern are the problems of the community [*ba-tzibur*] to me? What does their judgment mean to me? Why should I listen to them? I will do well (without them)," helps to destroy the world.

-- *Midrash Tanchuma Mishpatim 2*

Midrash Tanchuma is a Talmudic era (c.500 - c.800 CE) compilation of commentary from Babylon and other lands. "*Tzibur*" can mean "community," as in "assembly" or "congregation," or a wider "public." So, this prompts us to consider the size and composition of "community" that concerns us -- congregation? neighborhood? city? globe? -- and consequences of lack of concern.

"What concern are the problems of the community to me?"

This declaration helps to destroy the world.

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...name one change that you believe necessary but many around you exhibit no urgency to address. What factors fuel your sense of urgency? What factors seem to influence others' comfort with the current situation? Might that change with a different perspective?

...name one change that folks around you are demanding but you are not drawn to address. What factors fuel their urgency? What factors influence your comfort with the current situation? Might that change with a different perspective?

NOTE: *Reading Exodus* uses transliteration of the Hebrew words, “*Mitzrayim*” (Egypt) and “*Yisrael*” (Israel), to focus on biblical place and symbolic meanings, distinct from any country, ancient or contemporary. The invented “*Mitzrayim-ite*” parallels “Israelite/*Yisrael-ite*.”

Location

Exodus opens with a group of individuals showing up in a place that is new to them:

Now these are the names of the sons of *Yisrael*, who came into *Mitzrayim* with Jacob; every man came with his household (Ex 1:1).

At this point in the narrative, without the Genesis prequel or other background, we know nothing about the people already living in *Mitzrayim* and only that these sons of *Yisrael* moved to a new place and traveled with their households. So this is a moment to consider how our own backgrounds influence our assumptions about these, and any, groups of people.

Some of us have more experience in considering the basics of our social location. Those of us with more privilege -- due to

wealth, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors -- might think these factors "don't matter." But, being able to articulate clearly what we bring into any encounter with others or with text is an important tool for this journey. (See, e.g., Neal Elliott's Introduction to *Peoples' Companion to the Bible*. Fortress, 2010. Visit Songeveryday.org for “Jews’ Self Inventory for Bible Readers.”)

Were we taught to consider either *Yisrael* or *Mitzrayim* "our people"? If so, how do we relate to the other group?

Do we identify with attachment to home and feelings about building community with newcomers? And/or do we identify with feelings about leaving home and hopes for a better future?

Do we sympathize more with a group of 70 seeking refuge, as Jacob and family are introduced here, than with the large population we will meet in just a few verses? Why?

Do our sympathies change with the state's labeling: welcome workers, economic threat, or potential enemy/fifth column?

How do we imagine these groups in terms of family structure, ethnic background, sexuality, wealth and other factors? Are they like or unlike us?

Can we explain, for ourselves and others, how our background influences our perspectives on what is happening in the opening verse of Exodus?...or anywhere in the world?

What about our hometown, original or adopted:

How do we identify ourselves and our neighbors?

Identifying Ourselves

Who We Are

One reason we re-learn the Exodus story, year after year, is to give ourselves another opportunity to grasp the many ways in which we have yet to experience Liberation. One way to seek out new perspectives is to consider ourselves as some, or all, the characters in a sacred text. For example:

Sometimes we are Moses...

...conditionally white with Cossack eyes and a quick sunburn, passing but keeping a suitcase by the door just in case. Feeling mostly safe in the palace walls, guilty but not knowing why, until one day everything changes. Until one day we see the Egyptian striking the Israelite...So sometimes we are standing next to our Black husband at the protest, and we are both chanting peacefully but the policeman strikes him and all we can do is choose not to run away, to stand firmly with our hands raised so that we both get hit. Because family means if you hit him then you hit me. -- from "After the Maggid," #BLM Haggadah Supplement, 2016

"After the Maggid: When We Imagine Ourselves Allies," by Sarah Barasch-Hagans and Graie Barasch-Hagans, offers an interracial family's perspective and presents thoughts imagined by Bat Pharaoh, Zipporah, and more. The full haggadah supplement is available through JFREJ, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, free of charge. -- along with other relevant resources.

Rather than assuming we're one character or group...

How are we, like the midwives at the start of the story (Ex 1:15-21), attempting to stand up to power and for life? or worn down by a grinding, harmful system?

How are we, like Moses (Ex 2ff), struggling with identity -- raised in one household and culture but connected in many ways to another?

How are we, like Pharaoh (Ex 1ff), impatient with the past and fearful of the future, ready to knock down anyone or anything that threatens those we believe we must protect?

As Yisrael-ite or Mitzrayim-ite, what assumptions and experiences form our views?

Can we learn to hold more than one point of view at the same time or in conversation with one another?

Who We Are Not

In his *Bible Tales*, Dick Gregory (1932-2017, ז"ל) discusses the biblical Joseph. Gregory begins his commentary with notes on dreamers and dreaming:

Joseph found out it's dangerous to be a dreamer. Just like Joseph's brothers, society today has three ways of dealing with dreamers. Kill the dreamer. Throw the dreamer in jail (the contemporary "cisterns" in our society). Or sell the dreamer into slavery; purchase the dream with foundation grants or government deals, until the dreamer becomes enslaved to controlling financial or governmental interests. -- *Dick Gregory's Bible Tales with Commentary*. (Stein & Day, 1974), p.70

Gregory goes on to say that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "experienced all the ways society tries to deal with dreamers," concluding: "Dreamers can be killed. Dreams live on."

It is noteworthy that MLK is introduced here without explicit reference to race; this passage portrays the leader as a dreamer who treaded in dangerous political territory. Today, as in 1974, readers of many backgrounds can relate to a system that tries to destroy dreams by attacking dreamers.

Then Gregory shifts to a more racially explicit perspective: "maybe Joseph was a Black cat." He continues, regarding Joseph's incarceration and interpretation of dreams for fellow inmates (Gen 40):

The butler in the Joseph story symbolizes America's treatment of Black folks. The butler used Joseph's talent as an interpreter of dreams and he promised to tell Pharaoh about Joseph. As soon as the butler got himself comfortably back in Pharaoh's palace, he forgot about his word to Joseph.

America was built on the sweat, toil, and talent of Black folks. But when the work was done and the talent utilized, America quickly forgot its debt to Blacks. Black folks helped lay down the railroad tracks, but they could only work as porters after the trains started running. Black slaves picked the cotton, but the garment industry belonged to white folks.

-- *Bible Tales*, p.73

Many readers can relate to feelings of being ill-used. But here Gregory specifically references experience of Black people enslaved in the U.S. and their descendants. If this is not our direct experience, we must recognize what we know and what we don't.

What we know and what we don't:

Non-Black Jews might have experiences of oppression and carry generational trauma. We can learn from others. But that does not make us first-hand experts on topics like "America's treatment of Black folks."

Non-Jewish folks might have experiences of oppression, carry generational trauma, and can learn from Jews. But non-Jews are not first-hand experts on topics like "alarm bells that anti-Jewish conspiracy raise for me."

How do we speak and write so as to distinguish shared, or universal, experiences from more particular ones?

Framing the Journey

Starting Points

Exodus (1:1-5):

Now these are the names of the sons of *Yisrael*, who came into *Mitzrayim* with Jacob; every man came with his household:

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

Altogether there were seventy persons of Jacob's issue; and Joseph was in Mitzrayim already.

These lines assume a lot: Who is *Yisrael*? Where were his sons before? Why did they move? Is this story only about men? And who is Jacob? (Supposing we already know that Jacob and *Yisrael* are two names for the same person: Why is the text using both names?)

Where to begin reading or studying is one important decision. Think of playmates explaining to their adult "who started it," a candidate dropping a re-election bid, a restaurant closing for the last time: A political journalist might start at one point and a business reporter at another, while an oral storyteller might make a third choice. Where we start is crucial to the telling and to what we learn from the story.

Where does the story of a killing by police start?

Consider how we report violence, especially killings, by police officers. Where we start the telling has a great influence on how we understand what happened and this, in turn, has lasting implications for policy and other consequences....as well as for our own orientations in the universe.

Consider the shooting death of 18-year-old Deon Kay (9/2/20) by DC's MPD (Metropolitan Police Dept): Do we start that story with MPD reporting a justified fatal shot? With reports of the officers' earlier actions? With young Deon's life?

We could start instead with what the DC Auditor called the “entirely improvised” and “reckless” approach of the officers (Office of DC Auditor: *The Metropolitan Police Department and the Use of Deadly Force: The Deon Kay Case*. 5/25/21) Or we could take a wider look at MPD use of force, officer training, supervision, etc.

We could start with legal analyses of the relatively new DC Justice Lab or reports from the older policy groups, Stop Police Terror Project DC or Black Lives Matter DC. Or, should we step back further and begin where Kelly Brown Douglas does in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Orbis, 2015)?

Where does the story of a hostage situation start?

Colleyville, TX is not geographically near DC, but the hostage situation that took place there reverberated along the Anacostia, and we can profitably consider how this story was reported.

Congregation Beth Israel, 1/15/22

Do we start with police and FBI sources outside, saying “hostages rescued”? Or do we begin with the story from inside, describing an escape without external intervention?

Does the story start with R’ Charlie Cytron-Walker’s decision to value hospitality and allow a cold stranger inside the synagogue?

Does it maybe start with this history?

[The suspect] chose a Jewish synagogue, because he thought that Jews control the world. He thought that he could take Jews hostage, call up an influential rabbi** and she would snap her fingers and give him what he wanted. He truly believed that Jews control the media, that Jews control the government, that Jews control everything.

...Over the centuries entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews drank the blood of non-Jewish children. Entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews wanted to torture communion wafers. Entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews were

responsible for all the bad things in life – that we are the root of all evil.

...Far too many Jews have died because of it. This isn’t distant history. This is a month ago.

– R’ Cytron-Walker, 2/17/22 testimony U.S. House Subcmt. on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security

****Does the story start with the career of R’ Angela Buchdahl, prominent rabbi (and one of the country’s most prominent rabbis of color), and how the alleged perpetrator came to think her in charge of what he wanted?**

Does it start with the individual who admits that, a few days before the incident, he sold a stolen, semiautomatic weapon to the suspected gunman, who claimed to need it for intimidation to settle a debt? Or with a judicial system, and its reporting apparatus, that can make this Black man the face of an anti-Jewish hate crime/act of terrorism that he did not commit?

See also: R’ Buchdahl. “Captives of Hope,” 1/21/22 sermon, Central Synagogue (NYC). AP/Fort Worth Star Telegram, 2/17/22.

Whose story, and whose perspectives, are in the telling?

It is within the author's lifetime, and only after years of feminist/womanist Bible teaching and scholarship, that it became common to note that "these are the names" includes only men, to wonder about those not mentioned, and to realize how quickly the few women in Exodus disappear from the story. It is still far less common to recognize that some gender expressions and sexualities are not reflected at all in the Bible or in most Bible teaching.

The Book of Exodus is already richer and deeper than the one available when some of us first encountered the text. Queer and other perspectives that used to be kept at the margins, if given space on the page at all, have already changed the shape of the text. But we are still in a Narrow Place in many aspects of our reading and have much work yet to do.

Where does any story
– including Passover's saga – begin?

How does the **starting point** affect the tale?

Who is included in the telling? **Who missing?**

How does that affect our understanding of the tale?

Ending Points

Another crucial journey element is its end: Sometimes the whole point is to get out; sometimes the journey has a pre-determined a destination; and sometimes the aim is the journey itself.

The Exodus story can be read with all three end-points in mind:

- Much of the drama, in popular tellings and in the Bible itself, and a great deal of the emotional energy is around getting out of the Narrow Place;
- Early in the Exodus tale, Moses is told that God has a "better place" destination in mind, while the Genesis prequel suggests a sense of returning home as well; and
- The Jewish calendar sends us on a journey that keeps us wandering in the wilderness for much of the year.

We might picture the story as told in Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), or DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* (1998). Whatever our sources, escape from *Mitzrayim* is dramatic and often treated as decisive and final: Oppression behind us; freedom ahead; halleluyah! (Let's eat.)

The story is longer and messier than we sometimes remember, however, and not nearly as final. Even after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, there are 27 more chapters of Exodus and then the next three books of the Bible, all in the wilderness. The Torah closes, forty years on, an entire generation having perished on the journey and a river still to cross.

Hurston's 1939 readers were expected to see parallels between the ancient drama and both Black experience in the U.S. and the rise of Nazism worldwide. The "better place" had yet to materialize. Eighty years after Hurston's writing, some dynamics she described continue to apply.

National leaders, not unlike Pharaoh, seek war abroad while declaring "We don't have any home problems that I can see" (*Moses*, p.62), for example. And with Fascism again (or still) on the rise, we have much work to do toward understanding race and how it works in our overlapping Jewish and Black contexts.

...The Jewish holiday and Torah reading cycle leaves us forever in the wilderness. The circularity might suggest that we are perpetually trapped. But cycles also bring new opportunities.

We can show up better prepared.

We can bring new resources, friends, and colleagues..

We can approach perennial challenges with fresh energy.

We can look at the Exodus narrative new this time.

What is the journey's aim?

With a view to "getting out" --

What Narrow Place are you attempting to escape this year? What Narrow Place does your community need to leave behind?

Considering a "better place" --

Do you have a destination in mind, as you leave the Narrow Place? What do you envision, at the end of the road, for your community?

On this journey --

Is there something essential to be learned from the wilderness itself? How might your community benefit from accepting that some things have been left behind, while the destination is still out of sight?

Upheaval and Learning

Far Enough?

Decades ago, Michael Walzer concluded *Exodus and Revolution* with this adage about "what the Exodus first taught" --

-- first, that wherever you are, it is probably [*Mitzrayim*];

-- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;

-- and third, that the way to the land is through the wilderness. There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.

-- *Exodus and Revolution* (Basic Books, 1985)

In the years since 1985, this passage has found its way into countless essays, sermons, and Passover readings. Is this image still working for us, though, in approaching Passover and Exodus? Envisioning *en masse* departure of the oppressed -- a violent, permanent parting -- may not be the most helpful metaphor for many circumstances we face today.

Destruction of the Temple, close to 2000 years ago, resulted in the "crash" of Judaism's organizing story, according to R' Benay Lappe of SVARA: The Traditionally Radical Yeshiva. The Rabbis of the Talmud responded to that crash in a way that resulted in the Judaism we know today. Perhaps we are seeing something of a "crash" around Exodus as a "joining together and marching."

Has the Exodus/Passover story – and this "joining together and marching" – experienced something of a "crash" for you? for your community?

Are we prepared to head toward something **truly different**?

Will we **let go of what we have** in order to get there?

With whom have we **joined hands**? Whom have we **left behind**?

Have we been marching toward a liberation

-- that never seems to materialize --

for so long

that we now wonder if it's worth the upheaval?

Coming Forth?

What would it mean for us, collectively, to "come forth from *Mitzrayim*"? One clue is suggested by a passage, Exodus 6:1-7, in which God and Moses discuss names and big changes to come. It appears here that God intends the people to learn something new.

God says: "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty [*El Shaddai*], not by My name YHVH..." (Ex 6:3). An odd thing to say, given that "YHVH" was already used several times and Moses was told to share the name (Ex 3:6,15,18; 5:1ff).

So, what does it mean, this "but (by) my name YHVH I was not known"? What is it that is still unknown?

Umberto Cassuto (Italy, 1883–1951) argues that this references a future experience.

In Ex 6:6-7, YHVH promises:

"I will bring you out from under the [*sivlot*]* of *Mitzrayim*...
...so you will know that I brought you out from under the [*sivlot*]* of *Mitzrayim*." [Ex 6:6 is associated with the first cup of wine at the Passover seder.]

We won't really know a divine Liberator, Cassuto argues, until we collectively experience the getting out from under those "*sivlot*."*

*"*Sivlot*" [singular: "*sivlab*"] appears six times in the Torah as a noun. It is commonly translated as "burden," sometimes "yoke" or "oppressive work." *New American Haggadah* (Little Brown, 2012) offers the unusual translation of "millstone" --

"And I will lift you out from under the millstone that is [*Mitzrayim*]."

The translation choice captures the constant, grinding nature of oppression in the Exodus story, along with that of racism in the U.S. The imagery also suggests regular and fundamental alteration -- as when grain is transformed into flour -- apt, too, for tyranny and oppression, which affects oppressor as well as oppressed.

New American Haggadah also translates the verb [*v'hotzeiti*], more usually rendered "bring out," in a way that enhances the millstone metaphor, highlighting the weight involved and the difficulties of escaping it: "I will lift you out from under."



Old, worn millstone atop flour; image by Falco via Pixabay

CRUCIAL NOTE: Gospel "millstone" imagery – e.g, Matt 18:6: "...better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" – is **entirely unrelated** in terms of context or linguistics.

Aurora Levins Morales uses that same "millstone" imagery in the JFREJ publication, *Understanding Antisemitism*:

Racism is like a millstone, a crushing weight that relentlessly presses down on people intended to be a permanent underclass. Its purpose is to press profit from us, right to the edge of extermination and beyond....

-- *Understanding Antisemitism: An Offering to Our Movement, a resource from Jews for Racial & Economic Justice*, 2017.

Exodus 6:6 appears early in the Passover Seder. At that point, we are still under the weight of old circumstances and assumptions and have not moved through the Exodus experiences meant to help us learn something. (How) can the Exodus story/Passover observance help? What experiences do we need to learn how to get ourselves and others out from under?

 "Sivlah," as a noun (pl: *sivlot*), appears six times in the Torah:

Ex 1:11) "...taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens [*sivlot*]. And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pitom and Ramses.

Ex 2:11) Moses "grows up," goes out to see his kin, observes their "burdens [*sivlot*]," sees a *Mitzrayim-ite* strike a *Yisrael-ite* and so kills the *Mitzrayim-ite* -- all in one verse, Moses' first recorded adult acts;

Ex 5:4-5) Pharaoh chastises Moses and Aaron for interfering with *Yisrael-ite* work (different word: *maasan*) and tells them to get back to their own burdens [*sivlot*]; then rejects the request for a three-day cessation of the people's labors [*sivlot*].

Ex 6:6-7) YHVH promises: "I will bring you out from under the burdens [*sivlot*] of *Mitzrayim*...so you will know that I brought you out from under the burdens [*sivlot*] of *Mitzrayim*."

Can anyone be brought out "from under the millstone that is [*Mitzrayim*]" while they themselves remain unmoved?

Is **rescue possible** for those who remain chained to old ideas, accepting enslavement, for themselves or others, as due course?

Can anyone be redeemed "with an outstretched arm and formidable judgments" without experiencing disruption to life as usual?

Can a Liberation experience have an impact for us or for anyone else, if nothing changes in our commitments?

Cross-Community Links

Interactions

Exodus text tells us very little about interaction between ordinary *Yisrael-ites* and *Mitzrayim-ites*. It is not even clear where the two groups lived, relative to one another. One of many viewpoints is offered by R' Benno Jacob:

The details of our story suggest that [the *Yisrael-ites*] were scattered throughout [*Mitzrayim*], which must have led to many personal friendships; only a systematically encouraged hate propaganda was able to change this.

-- B. Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible* p.343

This viewpoint may seem unremarkable, if a little preachy...until considering that Benno Jacob (1862-1945) was born in Breslau and lived in Germany during the Third Reich. Watching synagogues burn and community members shipped off to concentration camps, he continued to indict "a systematically encouraged hate propaganda," rather than the neighbors.

This perspective strongly affirms the humanity of all involved. In addition, R' Jacob argues that *Mitzrayim-ites* engaged in "clear public protest against the policies of the royal tyrant," and that Moses was continuing to work for "peace between the two peoples" (*The Second Book of the Bible*, p. 343-4). The picture he draws is one in which individual *Mitzrayim-ites* have no more power over the tyrant's policies than do the *Yisrael-ites*.

R' Jacob suggests that individuals, *Mitzrayim-ite* or *Yisrael-ite*, are relatively powerless in the face of Pharaoh's policies and "systematically encouraged hate." What about our lives today --

What power do we have over policy and hate?

Do we experience "systematically encouraged hate"?
If so, how has it affected relationships between community groups and individuals?

R' Jacob argues that existing personal friendships were changed through propaganda: **Might a counter-effort** have helped them survive?

History is filled with individual friendships surviving, and ameliorating short-term effects of, oppression: **What about the long-haul?** Does friendship become untenable if systemic conditions are not addressed?

Relationships

In Exodus, when Joseph dies and a new king "does not know" him, disaster immediately follows:

Now there arose a new king over *Mitzrayim*, who did not know Joseph. And he said unto his people: 'Behold, the people of the children of *Yisrael* are too many and too mighty for us...' -- Exodus 1:8-9

Discussing this verse pair, R' Daniel J. Moskovitz asks:

Does the text mean to suggest that it was the memory of Joseph that had kept the [*Yisrael-ites*] safe from oppression in [*Mitzrayim*]? In other words, was the hatred always there just below the surface, waiting for the opportunity to arise? -- "Pharaoh Didn't Know Joseph," commentary provided by Union for Reform Judaism, at MyJewishLearning.com

This phrasing seems to cry out for Perry Mason (or other fictional attorney) to shout, "Objection. Leading!" But the contrast with R' Jacob's view is valuable: Here, in place of active force promoting hate, an active force is required to keep it at bay -- and it seems this force could be centered on an individual.

In Genesis, Joseph's relationship to *Mitzrayim-ite* life looms much larger than that of his brothers, and he is presented as a bridge between his extended family and the surrounding culture. But, is it possible that Joseph was the only link between the two groups? Or that his role was so crucial that all collapsed without him?

Attributing all that power to one person makes Joseph seem reminiscent of an organized crime leader or "the Boss" of a political patronage machine, like Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley (1902-76, *qtd.*). Is R' Moskowitz suggesting that Joseph, or his memory, kept a lid on intergroup animosity through doling out of protection, jobs, and essential resources?

This is not inconsistent with Joseph's story in Genesis. And it is reminiscent of the contemporary strategy of relying on one big name with known ties to a particular group for entrée to a whole community or to signal "understanding" after some kind of harm has occurred. (Visiting Sylvia's restaurant in Harlem with Rev. Al Sharpton, or joining a high-profile Passover Seder come to mind.)

Beyond optics, what is the power of a single relationship in intergroup understanding?

One relationship can provide some education, illuminating past harm and helping to avoid further hateful incidents. One relationship can serve some conflict-calming functions, helping to keep misunderstanding and anger from snowballing. But, can a single relationship -- or even a bunch of them -- reduce the kind of endemic hatred that R' Moskowitz suggests is "always there just below the surface"? And what, if any, impact can individual relationships have on systemic racism and oppression?

Leaving aside hate's relationship to oppression --

Can a single relationship -- or even a bunch of them -- influence the kind of endemic hate suggested here?

Can a single relationship -- between particular political or community leaders, for example -- help to control hate-based behaviors?

What, if any, impact can individual relationships have on systemic oppression?

Meanwhile, **what it is the cost** of maintaining those relationships?

Placing Ourselves in History

Erasing and Forgetting

"Chocolate City"

Funk band Parliament released its "Chocolate City" album in 1975. The title song references DC's status, at the time, as a majority Black city, honoring its Black culture and leadership:

...There's a lot of chocolate cities around
We've got Newark, we've got Gary
Somebody told me we got L.A.
And we're working on Atlanta

...The last percentage count was eighty
You don't need the bullet when you got the ballot
Are you up for the downstroke, CC?
Chocolate City
Are you with me out there?..
-- George Clinton

Since 2010, DC has gained nearly 100,000 new residents, many of whom "don't know Joseph," i.e., DC history and music. In the last 20 years, DC has lost (net) 80,000 Black residents and is longer majority Black. In 2019, a battle erupted in DC over music and public space at an intersection of 1) long-standing culture exemplified by a corner store blasting Go-Go music, with 2) new luxury, exemplified by relatively new condo residents complaining about noise.

Julien Broomfield, then a senior at Howard University, created the hashtag #DontMuteDC, launching a movement celebrating DC's signature music and culture. Cross River Dialoguer Ron Moten, who now directs DC's new Go-Go Museum, co-founded the "Don't Mute DC" campaign.

The incident served to highlight divides in connection to DC's history in general and, more specifically, to "Chocolate City." Aspects of local culture, including drummers and other street musicians,

become focal points for conflict, often pitting longer-term and newer DC residents and businesses against one another. But many newer DC folks joined in the movement, and many older ones opposed it, or remained uninterested.

In addition, people newer to DC -- and anyone listening to governmental rhetoric -- could easily be fooled into believing that the District has always universally celebrated Go-Go music and culture. But designation in 2020 as DC's "official music" obscures years when it was blamed for drugs, violence and other societal ills.

Does a newcomer have an obligation to learn a place's history? Whose story? How far back?

Who gets to define the culture of a place with disparate residents?

How can we recognize multiple paths bringing varied communities into one spot and notice how those paths have been intertwined?

Multiple Paths

Two roads to *Mitzrayim* are explicitly outlined in the first verses of Exodus:

Now these are the names of the sons of *Yisrael*, who came into *Mitzrayim* with Jacob...

...and Joseph was in *Mitzrayim* already -- Exodus 1:1-5

The path of *Mitzrayim-ites*, presumably already in the land for generations, is never made explicit.

Joseph's path involves ups and downs (which he and the narrator understand as divine plan): arrival in *Mitzrayim* as property, "success" in service to a palace household, years in prison, and finally Pharaoh's exalted second in command. In this last position, he engineers a national economic shift -- brilliant strategy for managing a deepening famine and/or a huge land- and resource-grab for the crown. Through all these ups and downs, however, Pharaoh is never down....until Exodus 13.

After Joseph dies, the king who didn't know him initiates a path bringing the *Yisrael-ites* to Pharaoh's store-cities, Ramses and Pitom (Ex 1:11). What we might find, some decades down that path?

Imagine a realtor selling high-end dwellings in the city of Pitom, where enslaved people were forced to build. Then take a look at the DC-area public television program, "If You Lived Here," launched during the pandemic (2021).

The first episodes of this series are case studies in residential displacement, gentrification through erasing existing local commerce, and consequences of promoting density as a solution for increased affordable housing. Episode 1, "H Street Corridor," is, in fact, an illustration of everything Brandi Thompson Summers writes in her 2019 book, *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City*: "blackness has become a prized and lucrative aesthetic that often leaves out D.C.'s Black residents."

Pursuing the Pitom analogy for another moment: A tale of housing already for sale is one story, with an obvious starting place, as in "If You Lived Here." However...

Who convinced potential residents that the area was "hip"?

How do long-time residents and formerly-enslaved people fit into the story of the new, hip Pitom?

What kind of stories about the not-so-hip, old Pitom helped pave the way for the new?

How long did developers let properties sit, waiting for the day they could cash in, instead of contributing to the vibrancy of Pitom all along?

Returning to DC:

Consider the numbers: 80,000 Black residents (net) lost in twenty years. The percentage of Black residents dropping by half in fifty years.

Is this "just" a result of market forces?

A Long Interval

30 years and 400 years

"The length of time that the *Yisrael-ites* lived in [מִצְרַיִם, *moshav*] *Mitzrayim* was thirty years and four hundred years" (Ex 12:40).

The specified length is explained in a variety of ways in Jewish teaching: numerology and symbolic readings, ancient numerical systems, various narrative approaches, and a range of interpretations of God's words to Abraham: "...your seed shall be strangers in a land not theirs, they shall be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years" (Gen 13:15). Some insist that the meaning is, more simply: "a very long interval."

However, it is also useful to consider how duration is expressed in biblical Hebrew: literally: "thirty years and four hundred years."

Four hundred years of oppression is in some ways abstract, beyond the direct experience of any human. A span of thirty years, however, can see a human born and grow to adulthood, perhaps become a parent. Three decades are long enough for art trends to develop and fashions to come and go, for businesses to flourish and fizzle, for whole regimes to rise and fall. And it's useful to consider 30 years of oppression, as both part of the whole 430 and a distinct experience.

Returning to *Dick Gregory's Bible Tales with Commentary*, consider the following reflection on the Exodus story:

Black people are herded into small, over-crowded areas called ghettos, made to live in substandard housing...Add to this the poor food found in ghetto supermarkets, the absence of health services...

The result is an infant mortality rate that is at least twice as high for Black folks as it is for white folks. a genocide plan a lot more subtle than Pharaoh's.

-- *Dick Gregory's Bible Tales*, p.76-77

He wrote those words in 1974, and many of those conditions -- including the unconscionable infant mortality statistics -- have not improved. (See main text, *Rereading Exodus along the Anacostia*.)

Even if all these conditions **had** been eradicated health effects for living people would still be with us. As it is, however, there have been another 30+ years of the conditions Gregory describes: whole generations still under the "millstone that is *Mitzrayim*."

The effect of the decades since 1974 is one weight, and the cumulative effect of the centuries is something else again. Each duration contributes to the urgency of now in a different way.

Dwelling or Lifestyle

The language of Ex 12:40 has more to say about the duration of oppression: Just as some translators use the smoother English, "four hundred and thirty years," rather than the clunky literal version, some translators choose a smoother "the children of Israel dwelt (or lived)..." in place of something more literal.

Here are examples using a noun for "*moshav*" [dwelling, situation]:

“settlement” (Robert Alter; Everett Fox, both 20th Century US)

“habitation” (Artscroll, 20th Century Ashkenazi Orthodox)

“lifestyle” (*Me'am Lo'ezer*, Ladino/Sephardic text, 1700s Turkey).

The use of “lifestyle” is unusual and evocative, suggesting --

-- that the situation in *Mitzrayim* was, in some sense, a way of life for both *Mitzrayim-ites* and *Yisrael-ites*; and

-- like all lifestyles, it will come to an end.

Taken together, the alterable "lifestyle" and that "30 years and 400 years" can be read as a hint that we need to gather experiences of the last three decades and put them to use.

Everything from the last 30 years -- all the lessons and the anger, wariness and urgency and exhaustion, all the colleagues we've met, all the resources developed -- can help us find new ways forward.

Each new reading of Exodus, each Passover season and beyond, is an opportunity to become mired again in old arguments and hopelessness -- repeating in our own lives the same grumbling and stumbling that we watch the *Yisrael-ites* experience time after time.

We can let that *Mitzrayim*-to-wilderness passage trap us again

...or we can use it to illuminate places we've been stuck,

ground under and grinding with that millstone,

and explore the Exodus narrative

for some new clues to getting out from under.

Will the next rereading of Exodus or the next Passover be the beginning of the end for oppressive aspects of the current "lifestyle" along the Anacostia and beyond?

What lessons can we bring from recent decades to forge new ways forward?

In Exodus 14:3, just before the people cross the Sea of Reeds, YHVH tells Moses:

Now Pharaoh will say of the Children of Israel:

They are confused [נְבוּכִים, *nevukhim*] in the land!

The wilderness has closed [סָגַר, *sagar*] them in!

-- Fox translation (Schocken, 1995)

Is it only Pharaoh who believes, or says, this?

Are we stuck due to our own inability to see what confuses us or encloses us?

Looking more closely at what has us confused/enclosed is a first step toward finding a way out.

Isn't it time?

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