

May 23, 2016

Emor: The Fulfillment of Goodness, Aging Intentionally, The Spring Holy Day Cycle - “Get On With It!”

A drosh given at Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, Shabbat Emor 5776 in celebration of just entering the last month of my 65th year in body during this incarnation.

Like many of my boomer generation, I am in that moment of life during which I reflect with a greater sense of urgency than I had 10 years ago, that – if I am so blessed - I have about 1/3 of my life left to live. And it is with gratitude to my rebbe Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi’s Aging and Saging and December Project work, and to the IJS and Rabbi Rachel Cowan for the Wise Aging training, and to our own inspirational teacher Rabbi Kelman, that we all are beginning to deeply benefit from the richness of living each moment knowing that we are dying and thus finding ever deepening meaning and appreciation and joy and love in each unfolding experience we share on this earth plane.

Parsha Emor contains instructions about the yearly cycle of holydays.

I would like to share with you a timely and, what I find to be a profound, teaching from the Slonimer rebbe relating the mythos of the holy day cycle that informs our identity as a people, to the spiritual practice of living through the yearly enactment of the Egypt-to-Sinai drama, including the period of the Omer in which we are currently immersed, and thirdly to the avoda / holy work of conscious aging.

The Slonimer rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovsky (1911-2000) also known by the name of his opus The Netivot Shalom – he claimed the name long before our shul did! – has been my text rebbe ever since Reb Zalman instructed me to start studying him close to 20 years ago. He survived the Shoah, led the Slonim

community in Israel and wrote in clear, modern, comprehensible rabbinic Hebrew. He combines hasidut and kabbala with mussar and so has been a profound teacher for me through his texts.

Let me give over a summary of his teaching (found in the section on Shivi Shel Pesah):

There are 3 parts of the redemption/ the **geula** from Egypt - and 3 ways this sacred story brings meaning to our lives:

The sacred narrative that is integral to our mythic-historical collective memory [my framing] - our way of seeing the world - has 3 phases. The Netivot Shalom brings some of the mystical perspective to this story:

- The first is the actual Exodus. In Egypt, the Israelites were so sunken into negativity, their consciousness was so deeply in exile, that they could only moan but not extricate themselves. The forces of negativity that subjugated and constricted Bnei Yisrael are called “klipot” – spiritual shells/ encrustations, the spiritual parallel to the bondage of slavery. The Hebrews experienced what the kabbalists call “itaruta de-l’eyla” the arousal from Above [the Awakening of the Force], and outpouring of Divine Love which literally pulled us out of a place so narrow we could not get out of our own accord. The initial phase of the exodus was by “pesah” or a “dilug” – a leap by Divine Aid.
- The second aspect of the geula/redemption was kryiat yam suf – the tearing open of the sea when it was our task to smash these spiritual encrustments/ entanglements, break away from them, and watch them drown. At this point, we became part of the spiritual agency as the Torah said in Exodus 14:15 ויאמר יהוה אל־משה מה־תצעק אלי דבר - אלבני־ישראל ויסעו

Me? speak to the children of Israel and tell them to **get going!**” When Bnei Yisrael jumped into the midst of the sea, giving over their very souls, then they experienced miracles which the Midrash tells us surpassed even the visions of the later prophets!

- The third part and the ikar/ the essence of the entire redemption/ geula was standing at Sinai: this was the ultimate purpose of the Redemption – to bring them to the fulfillment of goodness – complete tov; זה היה הטוב תכלית הגאולה לבוא לשלימות הטוב – in fact Anokhi/Eheyeh at the burning bush told this to Moses: “bring them out so they can serve Me on this mountain!” **So, the receiving of Torah is also part of the redemption/geula. Revelation is not something separate from geula but its ultimate fulfilment.** The Slonimer’s choice to use the words “hashlamat ha tov” to describe Sinai merit deep contemplation.

Whereas the first two aspects of Yetziat Mitzraim, getting out of Egypt, had to do with escaping and uprooting the encrusting and embedded negativity, arriving at Sinai was about the fulfillment of goodness, the achieving of the highest level of Connection of which they were capable. To me this means, connection vertically and horizontally – not just the experience of Divinity, but also the experience of unity – to use Rashi’s classic words from the midrash – כאיש אחד בלב אחד – like one person with one heart.

In summary, the first part of the redemption was a divine gift helping us make the leap – the pesah - the jump out of Egypt; the second, a joint effort with God, requiring our participation to rip open the sea; the third, our willingness and unity of heart to receive Torah – “naaseh v’ nishma: let us hear and we will do.” The first two phases had to do with breaking out of the negativity, and the 3rd with hashlamat ha tov – fulfillment of goodness – of opening to our purpose and potential as a People. *First, the leap out of the narrow place, next, the breaking through with*

trust and the drowning of the opposition, third, the receptivity to spiritual perfection.

Of course, this way of describing the geula relates, not just to the foundational narrative of our people, but to our spiritual journey each year - the journey delineated in this week's parsha. The 3 aspects of geula/ redemption correspond to this very holyday season. First, on Passover, we escape constriction, we experience the Divine love of the Song of Songs, and, grounded in and by that love, we immerse in the spiritual work of Sefirat Ha-Omer during these current 7 weeks – plunging ever deeper into the 49 aspects of our souls – each day revealing and uncovering sparks and clearing the channels so we can be a clear conduit for Divine wisdom. And, then we can show up on Shavuot prepared, connected vertically and horizontally, to receive the **ha'arah, the illumination that can only be experienced this year uniquely**. And that illumination carries us through until next year when we repeat the cycle over again but on another completely unique level.

The Netivot Shalom continues, just as we experience this three-part redemption historically/mythically, and annually, so does each individual experience these three eras in our lifespan as we work through our “stuff”. First in our youth, we have to get out of Egypt and free ourselves from enslavement to all of the “I want’s and “I need’s. In mid-life, perhaps the most difficult of times, we are plunging into the sea of work and career, possibly of family, and of building self and relationships and community – “**v’yi-sa-u**” - **get on with it!**” And when we throw ourselves into the sea of living, G-d willing, we receive Divine help – although often the aid is not in the form we would have chosen. We can finally reach our Sinai when, in later years – let be really true for us all – we are free of worries and burdens and we can do the holy work of fulfilling our goodness – *discerning our paths and purposes, completing the tasks which we were sent here to fulfill, and basking in Connection.*

The Jewish mystics teach that each of us has a soul mission, a unique purpose that only we can fulfill and completing this task is the work of our later years – hashlamat ha-tov. We can focus on cultivating our higher selves and in pouring out compassion toward others. Of course, in most of our lives, these stages are not linear, and the three stages interpenetrate. I know that I, personally, am still working on many of the same issues I did in my teens. But, I am, at this point, freer to contemplate my purpose in being here and to be able to offer wisdom and support to my loved ones and my community. I am freer to sit at Sinai and receive Torah. And while the process might not always be sequential, this framework is helpful as a mashal/holy metaphor to inform my own life and my spiritual growth. *I move through the three phases of escape, moving/pushing through and fulfillment over and over, every deeper and more profoundly.* And, the harvest of learning and experience allows deepening of the integration of goodness – hashlamat ha-tov – over the years.

I conclude this drosha with a brief bit of advice from the commentaries on the first line of our parasha: **וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲמַר אֶל־הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם** - The Holy One said to Moses – using the Hebrew word a-m-r – say (Hebrew a-m-r) to the priests, sons of Aaron, and say (same Hebrew) to them...”

The Rabbis (the Talmud Bavli Yevamot 114a as brought forward by Rashi) question the doubling of the word say/ a-m-r. "אמר" "ואמרת" –“Emor”...

“v’amarta” – why is the instruction to say something to the priests doubled here? , להזהיר גדולים על הקטנים: **to warn/enjoin the elders about their responsibility to those younger.** This section of the Talmud warns the elders not to do anything that would render the children impure – not by their teaching, not by enticement, not by example. **Elders in wisdom and experience are responsible not to mislead those of lesser knowledge or sophistication.** In another Midrash, the Rabbis teach that the doubling of instructions about holiness also speaks to our inner lives - to our child and adult selves – to our two inclinations – to our higher and lower selves. As

*agents of kedusha, we must not only teach but live and demonstrate – and not do anything to block – the dissemination of holiness; and to do the internal self-reflection and self-admonition that comes with maturity. **In the context of any discourse about conscious eldering, our parsha has very profound advice speaking to the importance of intergenerational community.***

A final blessing: let us all take this work of redemption seriously and to heart. We can break free with Divine love as our support and then do the work of bringing that freedom with trust and faith into our ever-maturing souls. Let us all be able to reach that Shleimut HaTov – an all-encompassing goodness that we can share as elders might share with those younger – no matter what our actual chronological age. Let us share our journeys and wisdom with those with whom we walk the path. For those of us who actually are “seniors,” I bless us that we can find the support we need to live vitally, to do the work of eldering, of reviewing our lives, of discerning our unique gifts and teachings, and – just as important – to find the place for sharing these precious sparks of holiness with our loved ones and our communities. Our spiritual community can be the divine agent in supporting us in this holy work and in helping us spread the gleanings, purposes and meanings of lifetimes.