

Shabbat Pesach

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Here's a little riddle about Passover from the famous Hasidic rabbi, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev [c. 1740-1810]. Why does Torah continually call this holiday Chag Hamatzot – the feast of matzah, of unleavened bread, while Jews themselves mostly refer to it as Chag haPesach – the feast of Passover? Because, said Levi Yitzchak, as lovers often do, they stress each other's goodness. Israel calls it "Passover" in order to praise God, who "passed over" the homes of the Jews when destroying Egypt. While God (who wrote Torah) calls it Chag Hamatzot in order to praise the Israelites who went so trustingly out of the fertile plain of Egypt into a barren desert with such meager food as the hard bread called matzah. [from *The Jewish Way* by Rabbi Irving Greenberg, p.47]

Because, said Levi Yitzchak, as lovers, they stress each other's goodness. It's nice to have someone around to stress your goodness, isn't it?

I wrote a friend of mine an email a few weeks ago, thanking him for doing something or other that was sweet and helpful and thoughtful. Not long after I received an email from his wife that turned out to be an email intended for him, not for me. In it she responded to the note I had sent, which my friend had obviously forwarded to his wife. [Has this ever happened to you – the dangers of email!] Anyway, her response to him upon seeing my note: "Wow!! you are an amazing and sensitive man." I loved it! I was so pleased to be the instigator of that exchange between two lovers, and though I felt a little awkward to have received the wrong email, if I was going to be an eavesdropper or voyeur, that was a nice moment to witness.

I think Levi Yitzchak noticed something similar when he made mention of our little trade off with God over the names for Passover. Each of us praises the other's strength, the other's "goodness." It's a small gesture, but significant, just like my friend's wife's one-sentence, dashed-off-email praise of his goodness, a small gesture in a way, but significant. To have someone with whom you can share the little triumphs or pleasures of your life, someone who also takes note of what you do and praises you for your goodness – such a relationship is a gift, a treasure.

Levi Yitzchak was on to something – and by pointing it out he also adds to the pleasure of this developing relationship. In fact, his observation supports a recurring theme about Passover and the days that follow it. For according to tradition, the events of the Exodus are the beginning of a courtship between God and the people Israel, a courtship that will have its ups and downs, to be sure, but one that will grow and last.

Can you think of examples of love and courtship in this time period? Here's one: what megillah, what scroll, do we read during Passover? ...Song of Songs – the most undisguised love poetry in the Bible--erotic, tender, beautiful poetry about love between two people-- how did this book get into the Bible? The Rabbis said it's actually a love poem about the love between God and Israel (yeah, right). And how did it become one of the texts for

Pesach? Because Pesach is the beginning of love between a people and their God. So if the courtship begins with the going out, the escape from Egypt and the entrance into the wilderness, when's the wedding? Right...Shavuot. For also in Jewish tradition, God's giving of Torah to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai is perceived as the wedding between God and God's people. The Ketubah, the written marriage contract, is the Torah itself. And Mt. Sinai, under which the people stand during God's revelation, is, according to this version of the story, the chupah, the wedding canopy. Listen to the wedding vow that God makes there: "If you will listen to my voice and keep my covenant (brit), you shall be to me a special-treasure from among all peoples." [Ex. 19:5] Isn't that what a wedding vow is? When one says to another, "I will separate you out from among all others, you alone will be my special-treasure."

This scenario explains too the period we entered into last night, the period of the counting of the omer, in which we count the days between the second night of Passover (after we left Egypt, finally a free people) up to the night before Shavuot. 7 weeks we count, day by day, 49 days. We count, say our sages, as one counts the days while waiting for the arrival of a beloved friend. . .or as we might count the days until our wedding day, providing we are marrying our own true love.

Also on the days of Pesach we stray from the chronological Torah portions which would be in Leviticus, and head back for a week's vacation to the Book of Exodus and the story of the Exodus.

I chose this week's Torah verse from that special portion for the Shabbat/3rd day of Pesach because the verse furthers the love story, in a way. It comes in the midst of an almost playful conversation between God and Moses, a conversation that turns quite serious though. It takes place at a later stage in the Exodus story, after the golden calf and the broken tablets, when it is time to move on, to create a new covenant. Moses says to God something to the effect of, "look, you're saying lead this people forward again, but you haven't told me who's going with us. I'm not doing this alone." And God answers, sort of sweetly, I think: "If My presence were to go (with you), would I cause you to rest easy?" And Moses answers, less sweetly-- sort of teasingly, I think: im-ayn panecha hol-khim, al ta-ah-leinu mi-zeh "If Your presence doesn't go with us, do not bring us up from here!" [Ex. 33:13-15] Their exchange leads to agreement. God agrees to do as Moses asks, saying, "for you have truly gained favor in My eyes," [17] at which point Moses asks to behold God's Presence, and God answers, "I will make all My goodness pass before you – kol-tu-VI al panekha." [v.19]

Why do we read this passage on Passover?

Remember what Levi Yitzhak said about God and Israel? That as lovers, they stress each other's goodness. Sometimes we assume that when people fall in love with one another they automatically see all of their lover's goodness, and see only goodness in their lover. But it doesn't just happen, does it, that someone comes along and sees someone else's goodness? At least it doesn't happen in a vacuum. We see one another's goodness when we show one another our goodness, when we find ourselves willing to reveal our goodness.

This scene in Torah is almost embarrassingly intimate, for it is about the deepest kind of intimacy – Moses begs God, "Let me behold Your presence"--k'vodecha, the Hebrew says,

“Your glory,” “Your full weight.” Let me look deeply into you. It doesn’t happen all that often in a life, does it, that someone comes along who wants to look deeply into us. Nor does it happen all that often that someone comes along into whom we want to look deeply. And even less frequently do we find someone to whom we want to fully expose ourselves, our deepest selves, our kavod, or our kol-tuv – our whole goodness. But what a gift when that does happen, what a treasure.

This season of our freedom – from Passover, through the counting of the omer, all the way to Shavuot -- is about leaving slavery behind and moving toward freedom. It is also about the growing love – a deep, abiding love – between God and the people Israel, a love that leads to marriage. Freedom to marry, marriage as a route to freedom.

Ana ha-I-ri pa-na-yikh e-lai, says a verse from the Song of Songs, the song sung at Passover, “please turn your face to me, o Beloved, you delight me greatly, reach out and embrace me, again and again” [BCC siddur, p.3].

In this season of our freedom, may each of us learn the full goodness of another, may we come to understand the freedom that deep relationships – with God or with another human being - can bring.

Shabbat shalom.