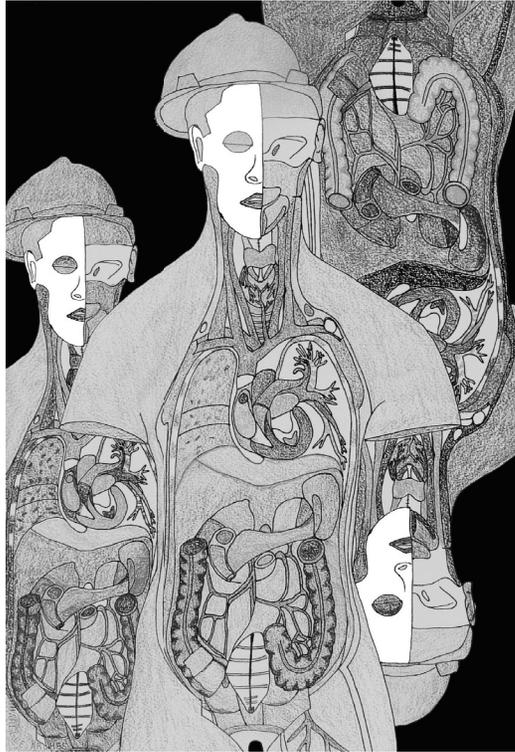


דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Inside Out

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Inside Out (2015)
Pencil on paper

This week's parashah, Metzora, details the special procedures a *kohen* performs to purify the recovered *metzora* (a person suffering from some kind of skin condition), *tzara'at* in the home, and ritual impurity. Metzora is about the insides (childbirth and emissions) and outsides (skin afflictions) of the body. I created *Inside Out* as part of a series of biological drawings that explores the beauty and intricateness of the inner workings of the human body. When I made *Inside Out*, I wanted to explore the different functions and shapes of human anatomy and physiology, and also the way in which everything is connected.

Inside Out was created as part of JTS's Artist-in-Residence program.

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TORAH FROM JTS



Parashat Metzora 5776
Shabbat Hagadol

פרשת מצרע תשע"ו
שבת הגדול



Beyond the Exodus from Egypt
Professor Arnold Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

Most of us, at one time or another, have asked the question about the Passover seder that the Haggadah attributes to the “wicked son”: *What is the point of all this?* At such moments of skepticism, we probably understand why an annual family gathering is worthwhile, we perhaps remember fondly the seders of our youth, and we may even confess to being moved by the rituals reenacted at the seder table year after year: reciting the four questions, dripping wine from cup to plate at the recital of the ten plagues, singing *Had Gadya*. But really, we ask: Why is the event of Israelite slaves leaving Egypt over 3,000 years ago (if it ever happened in the first place) so important that an entire holiday is devoted to it (not to mention countless daily prayers)? Why does the story have to be told and retold at the seder year after year?

One excellent reply to this excellent question is that, in fact, the Haggadah is *not* all that interested in retelling the story of the Exodus. That is not the point of the seder or of Passover as a whole. Very few of the details recounted in the Book of Exodus are ever mentioned in the Haggadah. No historical chronology of any sort is presented. Moses never appears in the text. The plagues are named but never discussed. Perhaps the Haggadah does not bother to retell the Passover story because it assumes we know it already (otherwise why would we be observing the Passover holiday?). Or—as I believe—the absence of detail about the Exodus is another clue that the point of the seder is not to remember what happened in Egypt long ago, but rather to pay closer attention to what is happening *here and now*. The purpose of the seder is not to recall the past. It is to heed the Torah's call to action in the present—action that transforms, and redeems, the future.

In some respects the call to action is straightforward. In the very first paragraph of the Haggadah, we identify the matzah on the table with the matzah eaten by our ancestors in Egypt, and thereby identify ourselves with those ancestors. We then resolve not to let others suffer as the ancestors did. “Let all who are hungry come

and eat. Let all who are needy come and celebrate Passover with us.” We must treat strangers well, the Torah says at several points, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Former slaves, now liberated, must use their freedom to help liberate those still in bondage.

Abraham Joshua Heschel took this message to heart when he declared at a 1963 conference on “Religion and Race” that Jim Crow oppressors were the Pharaoh of our day and African-Americans struggling for civil rights were the ancient Israelites. That application of the Passover story to present circumstances seems, in retrospect, uncontroversial. But when Heschel attacked the War in Vietnam in the name of God and Torah, I needed to know—as do we all, at any age, on any issue—what gave him the right to apply scripture in that way. Many of the people who quote scripture to their purpose in our day quite frankly scare me to death. One can predict confidently that Passover seders in America this year will feature references to various presidential candidates and arguments as to why the Exodus narrative requires us to support or oppose their policies. Before we can responsibly answer the Haggadah’s call to action, then, we have to figure out what inferences about, and applications to, our situation we are justified in gleaning from the Haggadah and Judaism’s other sacred texts. The Haggadah itself, I think, offers several guidelines for doing so.

First, it leaves no doubt that *something* is required from us, here and now. The Exodus led to Sinai: the giving of Torah, the making of covenant. God took the Israelites out of Egypt because God wants partners in the work of making the world more just and more compassionate: that is, less like the Egypt in which Israel was enslaved. Not everyone agrees that the world *can* be made better, of course, let alone that you and I, with the guidance of Torah, can help to make it so. The Passover seder, however, insists this is the case: “In every generation a person must look upon oneself as if he or she had personally come out of Egypt.” It is therefore our duty to thank God for that freedom, and—the inference seems clear—to work with God to free other human beings made in God’s image.

Second: The Haggadah tells us the *general direction* in which we need to move ourselves and the world (slavery to freedom; hunger to plenty), even while not specifying how exactly we are meant to get there. The conditions in which change must occur are too varied for prescription once and for all. The Torah provides a blueprint, reinforced by the Haggadah, but contemporary experience and wisdom are needed to figure out how to move God’s agenda forward in our particular circumstances. Disagreement among us on that score is inevitable. We must not let it paralyze us.

I believe that the Haggadah implicitly offers basic instruction about being human in the world that transcends differences of politics or policy: Your life matters, it insists. The world matters. Don’t give up on it or on yourself. Don’t accept the verdict of the Roman general who declares defiantly, in a story recounted in the Talmud, that if God cares about the poor, let Him take care of them! (BT Bava Batra 10a). If there are poor people in this world, the general implies, God must want it that way. The Haggadah, by contrast, calls on us to ponder what it means to be enslaved—politically, economically, personally—and what it means to be free, and then demands that we think together at the seder about how to move ourselves, our society, and our world from slavery to freedom.

The work seems endless. We are confronted in 2016 with a refugee crisis greater than any since World War II. One is tempted in the face of such challenges to rest content with a ritual reminder at Passover that it would be good if fewer people were hungry. That is the added force, I think, of the specific actions suggested by the Haggadah from the first words of *Maggid* onward: Alleviate the suffering of some who are needy. Consider, as well, larger systems of oppression like Pharaoh’s Egypt, and not only the fate of this or that individual. The Haggadah’s object is not guilt but responsibility and generosity. Once we realize that Egypt is not far away and long ago but around the corner and today, and the more we begin to *remember* in this way, focusing on the present and not the past, we come to understand that there is much we can do, and therefore must do, not just next year “in the Land of Israel” but this year, here, wherever we are. This is a lesson that we are tempted to forget, because of how much it demands of us. That is why the seder is required year after year: to remind us.

People who are as happy and well-fed as we are, especially at Passover, are more likely to take on these responsibilities. In the face of a world that often treats people badly, trivializes life, and smothers hope, we know that we can seize opportunities, every day, to do and be the opposite. Let’s get up from the seder table with the resolve that we will.

May your Passover, and that of the neighbors you love as yourself, in this coming year be sweet.

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