

A small group of Jews eats indoors. Though their neighbors are close by, they can't go out and see them right now – there's a plague raging outside, and they need to stay indoors.

I imagine many of us have had nights like that recently.

I took an odd comfort this week rereading the Torah's description of the first seder, which occurs while the terrifying, horrifying tenth plague is happening just outside their doors. The Israelites know that to leave their houses is to risk death; we can imagine them huddled together around their small tables, not knowing what the morning will bring, not knowing who may be among the dead.

Certainly, the Israelites had it worse than we do— even leaving aside the obvious fact that they were an enslaved people, the plague they dealt with was even more destructive than the one we have today.

And yet, there's still something powerful knowing that our experience with Covid today bears at least some similarity to our ancestors' experience thousands of years ago.

I didn't want to talk about Covid this week. But talking about anything else wouldn't feel honest. As we find ourselves back on our computer screens, back indoors, back distancing, I'm thinking about Covid. I imagine you're all thinking about Covid too.

But, at the same time, what's left to say? After almost two years, is there really anything more to say about Covid? I don't want to talk about Covid just for the sake of talking about it.

Instead, I want to see what insight our parshah – in particular, the description of the seder – might have for us as we continue to trudge through. What hope can Torah offer us right now?

I don't know that I have *the* answer, but I think I do have *an* answer, and it comes in the form of a typo.

We're going to look at two versions of a fairly simple rabbinic passage about the seder. In fact, the two passages are exactly the same except for a single letter. But that small difference, I think, has radical implications.

In the Mishnah, the legal code redacted by the Rabbis in 200 CE in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis talk about why we eat matzah. In tractate Pesachim, which deals with the laws and sacrifices of Passover, the Rabbis ask, Why do we eat matzah? They answer: Because our ancestors were rescued *v'Mitzrayim*: our ancestors were redeemed *in* Egypt (Mishnah Pesachim 10:5).

So far, pretty simple.

In the Talmud, which records later rabbinic discussions of the Mishnah and similar material, the Rabbis quote that same Mishnah we just saw, again in tractate Pesachim. But in the Talmud's version, even though the question is exactly the same, the answer is ever so slightly different.

Why do we eat matzah? Whereas the Mishnah said it was because our ancestors were rescued *in* Egypt, the Talmud says it's because our ancestors were rescued *miMitzrayim*: they were redeemed *from* Egypt¹ (Babylonian Talmud Masechet Pesachim 116b; Jerusalem Talmud Masechet Pesachim 10:4)

OK, so the two versions of the text use different prepositions. But is there *really* a difference between saying that our ancestors were redeemed *in* Egypt as opposed to being redeemed *from* Egypt?

I don't know that the difference is actually intentional. In fact, later on, the Mishnah² also uses the Talmud's phrasing ("redeemed *from* Egypt") and there are manuscripts of the Talmud³ that have the Mishnah's phrasing ("redeemed *in* Egypt").

But whether or not the difference was intentional, I think it *does* suggest two different possibilities about what we think being saved looks like.

According to the version in the Talmud, which says that God redeemed our ancestors *from* Egypt, the Israelites were saved once they were finally physically out of Egypt – perhaps not even until they had crossed the Sea, with the Egyptian army drowned behind them

According to the version in the Mishnah, which says that God redeemed our ancestors *in* Egypt, the Israelites were somehow free, saved, redeemed – at least partially – *before* they actually left Egypt. Even though they were still physically in Egypt, something fundamental had already changed.

So, which of these understandings of freedom is “correct”?

As is often the case, I think they both have something to teach us.

As I understand it, the version in the Talmud – “our ancestors were redeemed *from* Egypt” – reminds us that at the end of the day, the Israelites were only completely free once they had totally left Egypt behind. So long as they were still literally in Egypt, surrounded by their oppressors, still in the land in which they'd suffered, they were still in bondage.

By contrast, I think that the version in the Mishnah – “our ancestors were redeemed *in* Egypt” – emphasizes that even though the Israelites' redemption was *completed* when they *left* Egypt, it *began in* Egypt.⁴

¹ Pinhas Kehati, in his comment on the Mishnah, takes note of the two different versions. It appears that Rosh's version of the Mishnah states that matzah is eaten because “They baked unleavened cakes of dough that they had taken out of Egypt” (Ex. 12:39). See also Rambam (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Chametz and Matzah, Haggadah) who offers a similar version.

² M. Pesachim 10:6

³ See the Venice 1520-1523 manuscript. Most other manuscripts of the Talmud simply have “because our ancestors were redeemed.”

⁴ See “Ma'amar HaGe'ulah (The Essay on Redemption)” by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (an 18th-century Italian Kabbalist), where he argues that the redemption from Egypt begins with God taking note of the Israelites' suffering and concludes with the splitting of the sea and drowning of the Egyptians.

Maybe the Israelites' redemption began when God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and commanded him to free the Israelites. Or maybe it began even earlier, when the Torah tells us that God "heard the cries [of the Israelites] and remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Ex. 2:24).⁵ Or maybe even earlier, when God spoke to Moses at the burning bush. Or maybe even earlier, when Pharaoh's daughter rescued Moses from the Nile. Or maybe even earlier, when a Levite woman and a Levite man took the incredible risk of bringing a new baby into a world of violence and suffering, and then placed him in a basket on the Nile.

We could keep going back further and further if we wanted. What strikes me about all of these potential "start dates," though, is that the average Israelite was totally unaware of them. None of them took notice of the fact that yet another Israelite boy was born; none of them knew that he'd been placed in the Nile or rescued by Pharaoh's daughter; none of them knew that God had chosen him to redeem the Israelites. A series of small, barely perceptible steps had already set the Israelites' redemption in motion long before they had any inkling that their fates would or could change.

In fact, in the months and weeks just before the Exodus, it may have seemed to the Israelites that redemption was *farther* away than ever. When Moses first approached Pharaoh and demanded that the Israelites be allowed to worship God, for instance, Pharaoh responded by increasing the Israelites' backbreaking labors (Ex. 5:6-9). Later, when Pharaoh had finally agreed to Moses' minimal demand that the Israelites be allowed to worship God in the desert for three days (Ex. 8:23), Pharaoh quickly reneged on his word.

"Can you believe we're back where we started?" we can imagine the Israelites saying to each other. "We should never have gotten our hopes up." They probably experienced the narrative as cyclical – two steps forward, one step back, maybe even three steps back, again and again and again. It's only we as readers who experience the story as a linear narrative. Even in the Israelites' lowest moments, we know that their exodus will progress, step by step, until they're finally free.

Today, we, too, find ourselves going backwards. Back to zoom. Back to isolation. Back to masks, back to tests, back to fear. It feels like, God forbid, that we're almost back where we started a year ago.

But even if that's how it *feels*, that's not how it is. We could never be back where we started, if only for no other reason than that time has passed.

However long Covid continues to be a threat, we are closer every day to the day when it no longer dominates our lives. That doesn't mean that day is coming tomorrow, or next week, or next month. Like the Israelites, we are definitely not out of Egypt, and we've got a lot of wandering left to do.

But also like the Israelites, even though we're still in Egypt, our redemption has already begun. We don't know it yet, and we won't be able to see it except in retrospect, when we're on the

⁵ See, for instance, Rashi and the Ramban (among others) on Ex. 2:25.

other side of the wilderness. New medications are on the way. The person who will come up with another cure, or an even more effective vaccine, or some other medical thing I don't know the word for, is already working on it.

I am not, God forbid, saying that any of this is happening for a reason. And I am not saying that the rest of the story will feel linear: there may be more steps back, steps forward, steps back, and steps forward again.

What I *am* saying is that every month, every week, every day – no matter how painful, how frustrating, how slow, how repetitive, how challenging – is one day closer to freedom. When we tell the story of Covid, we'll know that this moment was just one part of the arc of our own exodus.

Until that day, our job is to keep supporting and loving each other, to keep giving and receiving strength and nourishment, to keep building and maintaining community so that we can all hold on.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote to a friend about God:

Why don't you think of him as the one who is coming, who has been approaching from all eternity, the one who will someday arrive, the ultimate fruit of a tree whose leaves we are? What keeps you from...living your life as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy?... As bees gather honey, so we collect what is sweetest out of all things and build Him. (Letters to a Young Poet, ch. 6)

We, too, are living painful, beautiful lives in the midst of this great, slow birth of a new world.

Blessed is God, who redeemed our ancestors from Egypt, and who began their redemption even before they knew of it. May You redeem us from our suffering, too, and may you give us the gift of knowing that our redemption is already on its way. Soon and in our days.