

Pesah holds many meanings for us  
We think about freedom, slavery, struggle and hope  
We perceive the darkness of the narrow space, mitzrayim  
As we long for the light

We hold both the light and the darkness  
The darkness of mitzrayim, the tunnel, the narrow place  
We left Egypt in the darkness of night  
But in the fullness of the moon we were able to find our way

The modern day plagues live within the darkness of the tunnel  
We feel surrounded by the darkness, the chaos and the sadness that  
Reside within the darkness

We yearn for the glimmers of light, the glimmers of hope

How do we navigate this journey of darkness and light?

We reach inside ourselves and ask what can I bring with me  
As I make my way through the darkness?  
How can I hold onto the glimmering lights of hope?

With attention we unpack our inner resources  
We notice each and every one of them  
We hold them tightly before we gently unwind them  
And as we open ourselves to the unwinding  
May we feel held in the light of Aviv, the renewal of Spring

Commentary

The Mishnah teaches that the Seder leader should relate the narrative of the Exodus in the following manner: מִתְחִיל בְּגִנוֹת וּמְסִיִּים בְּשִׂבְחָה - begins with (the Jewish people's) disgrace and concludes with their glory. What is this disgrace? The Talmud offers two answers that make their way into the Haggadah. One is that the Israelites' ancestors were idol-worshippers, reflecting a view that our their behavior can be a cause of our own shame. The other states that the Israelites were physically enslaved, Pharaoh's malice causing their disgrace.

Pain and darkness are experiences that all humans endure. Sometimes, it is physical suffering due to illness, war or other factors beyond our control, like the suffering our ancestors endured in Egypt. Sometimes, our own choices lead us down paths that are unhelpful, as was the case with those who chose idol-worship.

The Hebrew word for Egypt – Mitzrayim is linked to “makom tzar - a narrow place.” The narrow place can be a feeling of being constrained either by our own emotions or by external realities that make life challenging.

Nahman of Bratzlav, a 18th century Hasidic rabbi, taught that “the entire world is a narrow bridge and the essential matter is not to be afraid.” Like a narrow bridge, a tunnel is a place where we can be anxious, nervous or afraid. It is natural.

But, our meditation and the Mishnah invite us to look beyond this feeling of being afraid, stuck in a tunnel. We are invited to look towards hope, towards light, and towards a different reality.

We can find this in the narrative of the Exodus itself: as the Israelites escape, they find themselves trapped between Pharaoh's army and the Sea of Reeds. Truly, a moment of darkness. But the midrash explains that while God split the sea, it was the action of Naḥshon that truly saved the people. He went into the waters up to his nostrils and then, and only then, the waters parted. Sometimes, we dig deeply into ourselves, finding strength we did not know we had. Those inner resources can help us in times of darkness.

Once the waters split, the Israelites came through this tunnel that births the Jewish people. A tunnel can be dark, but it can also be the beginning of life. Traditionally, the seventh day of Pesah is the day the Israelites made it through the waters and sang Shirat Hayam, the Song of the Sea, which we still sing on that day of Pesah.

This move from sadness to joy, from tunnels to dry land, from darkness to life, from the womb to giving birth is found throughout the tradition. In a leap year, when there are two months of Adar, Purim is always celebrated in the second month so it maintains its connection to Pesah. As was the case on Purim, during Pesah, the people were threatened. But the Megillah states: *V'nahafokh hu* (Esther 9:1) - and it was all turned on its head. Sometimes, a moment of true challenge can also be an opportunity for healing.

There are many moments in our lives when we feel overwhelmed and perhaps even disgraced by our behavior - sometimes, this is caused by our own actions and sometimes, by the situations in which we find ourselves. But how we process them and find the light and hope is the journey from slavery to freedom. It is not merely the journey of the Exodus, but it is the journey of our lives.

For Further Study:

Psalm 30:6: בְּעֶרְבַּי לַיְלִין בְּכִי וְלִבִּיקָר רָנָה: "Weeping may linger for the night, but at dawn there are shouts of joy." How do you move from tears to happiness? What are your resources? What comforts/helps you when you cannot get there?

Look to add the Pre-Pesah or another:

We also find a similar idea in the Hasidic understanding of hametz - this leavened product represents something that has expanded, analogous to offering up מחשבות רעות - evil/unhelpful thoughts on the altar. The Sefat Emet teaches that finding the hametz (as we do in the search for hametz the night before Pesah) is the process of discerning what is helpful from what is not helpful to us. Removing the חמץ represents the shift from darkness to light, from night to morning.