

Omer Day 1 5782

Shalom, Chevre,

As many of you, we begin Counting the Omer at tonight's Second Seder.

For this initial Reflection, I am providing you with some basic guidelines for the Counting of the Omer. Feel free to adhere to or discard these as you wish...as car advertisements note, "Mileage may vary" :)

- 1) We traditionally count the Omer at night because the Jewish day begins at sundown.***
- 2) We traditionally count the Omer standing as a way to connect with our ancestors, who stood in the fields to wave their Omer offerings***
- 3) Try to find a place to count where you are unlikely to be disturbed by anything or anyone, aside from the individual(s) with whom you may be counting***
- 4) Try to count in the same location and at the same time of day***
- 5) I have supplied the blessing at the conclusion of this e-mail, and will continue to do so for each day***
- 6) We generally count upwards (1-49) rather than counting down (49-1) as a way of emphasizing our spiritual ascension during the course of these next 7 weeks***
- 7) If you forget to, or are unable to, count one night, count both days the next day***
- 8) If you forget, or are unable to, count for several nights in a row, just jump back in with whatever day it is***

Most importantly, though...just count. When we take even a few moments each day to bring our attention to the Omer process, it can help us to cultivate humility, gratitude, acceptance and a deepened capacity to take a few steps into the ceaseless currents of the river of time and allow it to carry us forward.

The Jewish mystics teach that our counting brings forth blessing and healing for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for the entire world. Personally, while I remain in an enduringly conflicted relationship with mystical beliefs, any endeavor that contains within it even the *possibility* of blessing and healing during these painful and uncertain times is certainly worth a try :)

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Baruch atah adonay eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom yom echad l'omer

This is the first day of the Omer

As an added musical bonus to this year's Reflections, I will attempt to conclude each Reflection with a YouTube link to a song that (at least from my perspective) focuses on the kaleidoscopic concept of Liberation—Liberation of body, of mind, of spirit.

With this in mind, if any of you would like to play “Guest DJ” and suggest a song that you believe would also fit in with the Liberation theme, feel free to back-channel me a YouTube link via e-mail, and I'll see if I can insert it into the playlist at some point during these 7 weeks.

For our first musical selection, I was thinking of Miriam, who along with the women who musically joined her after the crossing of the Red Sea, melodically and rhythmically instructed us that there can be no true liberation without joy, and no true joy without liberation.

As Elie Wiesel once wrote, “How can you sing? How can you *not*?” And as Bob Marley invites us all: “Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom?”

So here is something by a contemporary Miriam :)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lNeP3hrm_k

Omer Day 2 5782

I will confess (once again) that I really have no idea what to make of the Counting of the Omer. I suppose it might be fair to acknowledge that I see one of my primary responsibilities when composing these Reflections is to keep it that way.

In previous years, I struggled to harness the Counting of the Omer into a stepwise, linear, ladder-like journey of personal development, climbing ever upwards, as the days increase from 1-49.

I still believe this is a worthwhile of addressing the Omer. Yet, as I grow older, life appears less and less linear and ladder-like and more and more amorphous, confusing, and dream-like.

So this year's Reflections may reveal more of that uncertainty, that lack of clarity and direction. We are often stymied, for example, when it comes to making sense of our dreams because dream-logic is just not the same as waking logic. But despite how bewildered we sometimes are by the wild and unruly tales that hover upon awakening, or that ambush us later in the day, a deep, careful, unwavering attentiveness to these tales invariably yields seeds of awareness, seeds that can germinate and blossom in unexpected ways.

This is not at all a new or different way of approaching the Omer. In fact, remaining reverent to the poetic and oneiric possibilities embedded in the Biblical text is the basis for Midrash, our ancient tradition of examining stories from every possible angle and conscientiously plumbing their infinite depths.

At the Burning Bush, when Moses asks God, "Who should I tell them I saw?", God's response is "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*", which is sometimes translated, "I am who I am." Many commentators, however, prefer a translation along the lines of, "I will become whom I become". God is not a fixed, static entity, nor are we—existence entails the art of becoming, of allowing the possible (and perhaps even the impossible) to happen.

I hope that present in these Reflections is some measure of my gratitude, respect and wonder at what is mysterious and unintelligible about the Omer—what has *not* happened but that *might* happen as a result of Counting. Through embracing the unintelligible, perhaps a new intelligence will emerge, one that elevates, magnifies and further complexifies the essence of our being.

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Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom shnei yamim l'omer

This is the second day of the Omer

Today's musical selection, "Freedom", is by Jon Batiste, from his album, "We Are", which won the 2022 Grammy Award for Best Album:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YHVC1DcHmo>

A reminder that if you would like to suggest a song that you believe would also fit in with this year's theme of "Liberation, feel free to back-channel me a YouTube link, and I'll see if I can insert it into the playlist at some point during these 7 weeks. Music from any genre and of any era will be cheerfully considered :)

Omer Day 3 5782

Rabbi Shai Held writes that, “One of the Torah’s projects is to turn memory into empathy and moral responsibility.”

Consciousness is what leads us to empathy, and the experience of memory is what helps us to become fully conscious. When we are conscious, we are better able to encounter our fellow human beings who are suffering from sickness, poverty, oppression, and/or exile not as nameless, faceless billions but as *individuals*—as our own brothers and sisters, as our own sons and daughters, as our own mothers and fathers. In other words, we develop the capacity to *see* them, rather than to see *past* them.

We first read about this responsibility in Parashat Mishpatim: “You shall not oppress a stranger (*ger*), for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the Land of Egypt” (Ex. 23:9). A *ger*, in this context, can be understood as an “alien”, one who is not a member of the ruling tribe or family, nor the ethnic or religious majority, and thus vulnerable—like so many—to social and economic exploitation.

It is worth considering how radical this expectation is, not only historically, but currently, as well. We might have been taught, for example, that because we had been mistreated and no one rose up to help us, we are now essentially off the hook from a moral standpoint when it comes to helping anyone *else* who is being mistreated—nothing more should be asked of us because of all that we endured.

Instead, we are taught the opposite. Precisely *because* no one rose up to help us, we are *expected* to rise up and help others who are being tyrannized and degraded in the ways that we were.

While this prescription sounds lovely and noble from an ethical standpoint, it presents quite a challenge from a psychological standpoint. After all, a temptation for most of us when we have been forced to suffer is to feel completely *exonerated* from moral responsibility, to excuse ourselves from having to address or prevent the suffering of others precisely because of how we ourselves have suffered.

It is with this awareness that contemporary scholar Leon Wieseltier has written that, paradoxically, “The Holocaust enlarged and shrunk our Jewish hearts.”

To cite a modern example, you might think and hope that enduring the Nazi genocide would absolutely ensure that Jews would never subsequently play the role of aggressor and oppressor, but some (although certainly not all) would look at the current military and political situation in the Middle East and conclude that the hearts of some Israelis and their leaders have “shrunk”, that the experience of the Holocaust has somehow entitled us to operate outside of the moral sphere that the Torah has so carefully constructed.

Literary scholar Elaine Scarry observed that, “the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small.”

Through telling and re-telling the Story of the Exodus and reminding ourselves of our vulnerability in Egypt, we are encouraged to remember and imagine not only the lives of our ancestors, but the lives of others, as well. It is through such remembering and imagining that we become better able to summon the compassion and empathy that are necessary when it comes to hurting others less, and helping them more.

There is a short poem by Jane Hirshfield called “Bees” that speaks to this theme:

In every instant, two gates.
One opens to fragrant paradise, one to hell.
Mostly we go through neither.

Mostly we nod to our neighbor,
lean down to pick up the paper,
go back into the house.

But the faint cries—ecstasy? horror?
Or did you think it the sound
of distant bees,
making only the thick honey of this good life?

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Ha-yom sh'loscha yamim l'omer

This is the third day of the Omer

Today's musical selection is “I'll Take You There” by the Staples Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhHBr7nMMio>

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Omer Day 4 5782

Yesterday, we were discussing the responsibility to “not oppress the stranger”, rooted in our remembrance of our experience as having been enslaved in Egypt.

It is interesting to note that this expectation initially shows up in Exodus, but reveals itself again in Leviticus, where it is taken one step further, transforming from a negative commandment (*lo ta'aseh*) to a positive one (*aseh*): “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens: you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God” (Lev. 19:33-34)

So now, we are told not only to resist oppressing the stranger, but that we are obligated to *love* the stranger.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is asked by a legal expert how to ensure eternal life. Jesus’s two-pronged response is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

“Who is my neighbor?”, the lawyer then asks, and Jesus tells the story of a man who was robbed, beaten and left by the side of the road to die. He was ignored by a Priest and a Levite, but a Samaritan stopped to take care of the victim. “Which of these was a neighbor?” Jesus asks, and the lawyer correctly responds, “The Samaritan.”

In a way, however, the Hebrew Bible has anticipated this question. “Who is my neighbor?” The answer is that our neighbor is the stranger who lives among us, the stranger we must find a way to love because we know in our souls what it is like to be a stranger, to be downtrodden and tyrannized *because* we are a stranger.

We are called upon to love not just those with whom we are familiar, but also those who are not a part of our family, those who are not members of our faith, those who do not share our political beliefs or our socio-economic status. We are called upon to do so because we know all too well what vulnerability and powerlessness feel like, and we must never forget that.

But the Hebrew Bible does not stop there. Yet another version of this commandment shows up in Deuteronomy: “For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty and the awesome God. Who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must love the stranger for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” (Deut. 10: 17-19).

What makes God “great” and “mighty” and “awesome”? Not supernatural feats, but care and compassion for those who are persecuted, hated, and expelled. And is this care and compassion limited to divinity? Not at all—we, too, become divine, and in fact are *expected* to become divine, when we act just like God and “love the stranger”.

Empathy for others is certainly not a panacea, and will not by itself make evil disappear. But think for a moment what the world would be like *without* empathy.

The concrete implications of “loving the stranger” are not always easy to discern, and inescapable feelings of futility and helplessness will accompany our pursuit of this love. But our tradition instructs us that while wrestling with this foundational love is not an easy task, it is a *fundamental* task, one that requires us to take on the radical obligation that the Torah challenges us with.

The 18th century Urdu poet Ghalib had another way of saying this:

For the raindrop, joy is in entering the river

Unbearable pain becomes its own cure

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Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom arba'ah yamim l'omer

This is the fourth day of the Omer

Tonight's musical selection, “Freedom”, by Beyonce, from her album “Lemonade”, and featuring Pulitzer Prize winning composer and performer Kendrick Lamar, was supplied for us by Guest DJ, Dr. Stephanie Smallets:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FWF9375hUA>

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Omer Day 5 5782

We are familiar with the “usual suspects” in the Exodus story—God, Pharaoh, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Yocheved, the midwives—but there is one individual who plays an absolutely fundamental and indispensable role yet is generally overlooked when we study this narrative.

Batya is the name that, in Midrashic tradition, was given to Pharaoh’s daughter, the woman who enters the tale as a major character, takes the story to its next level, and then essentially disappears.

Here is what most of us are familiar with: Moses’s mother, Yocheved, attempts to save her third-born by setting him afloat in a basket in the Nile. His older sister, Miriam, follows him along from the riverbank, keeping an eye on her infant brother.

The basket floats over to where Pharaoh’s daughter is bathing in the river. She saves the baby, taking him in as her own and raising the eventual savior of the Jewish people in the very palace of their oppressor, the man who is also her father.

Miriam arranges for Batya to pay Yocheved to nurse the baby for two years while he is safely growing up in the palace.

What is often ignored in the telling of this tale, however, is the extent to which Batya is defying her father. In the fine Jewish tradition of children opposing and resisting their parents, she is saving a Hebrew baby from the very nation that her father is committed to erasing, quietly neutralizing her tyrannical father’s despotic decree. What a staggeringly provocative act on her part, to raise a Jewish child and to do so as a single mother, right in front of her father, the man who is also her King.

Midrashic tradition suggests that when Batya came upon baby Moses, she was secretly attempting to convert to Judaism, and using the Nile as a natural “mikveh”, perhaps as a way of aligning herself with and respecting the clan her father was murderously committed to annihilating.

In fact, her rebellious spirit is captured in the name that our tradition has given her: Batya means “God’s daughter”—not the daughter of *Pharaoh*, who is her birth father and God’s antagonist, but the daughter of God.

As I noted, the Hebrew Bible says little about Batya, so there is much that is left to our imagination. Here are some questions that come to mind as we consider this adoptive mother:

- Was she concerned about what her father, and others, would think about her adopting this foundling?
- Did she know that Moses was of Jewish descent? If not, does that change the story? If so, to what extent did she keep this under wraps?
- Did she maintain a connection with Yocheved and/or with Miriam?

- How did she react when her adopted son fled after killing the taskmaster and lived in hiding for so long? Did she imagine that he was still alive? Did she wonder if she would ever see him again?
- What did she think when he returned as a married man to set into motion the revolution that she herself had catalyzed when she first saved him and chose to raise him?
- Did she ever have other children, either by birth or adoption?
- Did she leave Egypt with the Hebrew slaves and what happened to her after that?

We could go on and on with our wondering and speculating, but suffice it to say that many believe that Batya deserves a good deal more attention than she is traditionally given. After all, here is yet another marginalized female whose story seems to have been muted but deserves to be told and listened to.

Yes, she was a princess, nicely ensconced in the ruling class, so her journey is not the same as that of countless minority and indigenous women who face unique challenges and barriers on account of their gender and diminished community status. But nevertheless, the fact that this extraordinary woman seems to be chronically left out of our people's history prompts us to think about *all* of the women who are left out, and the price we all pay for their voices being dampened, dismissed, or ignored.

Pharaoh attempted to erase the Hebrews. But to what extent are we complicit in erasing women's stories and consequently preventing and precluding their voyage from exclusion to inclusion?

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Ha-yom chamesah yamim l'omer

This is the fifth day of the Omer

And speaking of women's voices, today's musical selection, "I am Light", by India.Arie, was provided by Guest DJ Cantor Caitlin McLaughlin:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpOpKneH2j4>

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Omer Day 6 5782

In writing about Moses, Martin Buber suggested, “It is laid upon the stammering to bring the voice of Heaven to earth.”

Moses’s leadership depends upon language yet, paradoxically, it is his very capacity to *form* language that is handicapped—he is “heavy of mouth” in one translation, “slow of speech and slow of tongue” in another.

We tend to think of this in physical terms—some anatomical abnormality is interfering with his capacity to articulate. And most of us know the tale of how an angel guided Moses’s hand away from the bowl of gold and towards the bowl of coals such that his life was saved but he burned his tongue when he put the glowing coal to his lips.

But there are other ways to consider the meaning and significance of this impediment, as well.

Israeli political scientist Julie E. Cooper, in an essay entitled “Moses the Modest Law-Giver”, writes of Moses’s stammer in a positive sense. What he is attempting to convey to his people is so powerful and, at some level, so inexpressible, that it must not be travestied or vulgarized by an easy utterance. Moses’s halting delivery of the message becomes an essential part of the message, because the message itself is so overwhelming.

So a certain kind of reticence, clumsiness, or inarticulateness may be absolutely necessary when faced with what is immensely, unfathomably revelatory. In other words, when one is in the position of “speaking the unspeakable”, doing so smoothly and fluently, with slick, sleek polish, is simply not possible—nor advisable.

In contrast, we might look at how Fascism works. Romanian-born Jewish poet Paul Celan referred to “the thousand darknesses of deathbringing talk”, which was a reference to the Nazi use of language as a means of genocide, “slogans, pseudo-scientific dogma, propaganda, euphemism.”

American philosopher Jason Stanley has described the ways in which Fascist leaders cleverly use language to simplify human existence, creating a nostalgia for a mythic past that is supposedly being destroyed by immigrants, sowing divisiveness (citizen vs. foreigner, black vs. white, vaccinated vs. unvaccinated, etc.), and fostering an anti-intellectualism in which the truth is attacked, quickly creating a Petri dish for the growth of conspiracy theories.

We frequently hear contemporary versions of Celan’s “thousand darknesses of deathbringing talk” right here in our country, such as when, for example, Rudy Giuliani declares that “Truth isn’t truth”—so perhaps Fascism is not as distant a reality as we might like to believe.

In this regard, we might imagine that Moses was chosen to be our prophet precisely *because of* his verbal limitation, not just in spite of it. Maybe if we were all a bit more suspicious and skeptical when it comes to the fluency of rhetoric—maybe if we took the time to

struggle more with language, as Moses had to do—we'd be less vulnerable to false, dumbfounding propaganda and better able to seek out what is true, difficult as that pursuit may often be.

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Ha-yom shesha yamim l'omer

This is the sixth day of the Omer

Today's song, Paul Simon's "A Song about the Moon" from his album "Hearts and Bones" was recommended by Dr. Jean Silver-Isenstadt:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdkDkWPXzmc>

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Omer Day 7 5782

Whether or not you celebrate seven days or eight days of Pesach, we are now approaching the conclusion of our holiday. Many of you have written to me about what you did (and did not!) enjoy about the seders you created with family and friends.

For his family's seder, Bill Frelick, Director of Human Rights Watch's Refugee and Migrant Rights Division, composed a contemporary version of the 10 Plagues that he shared with me, and which I, in turn, wanted to share with all of you for tonight's Reflection.

There is a custom of attempting to remain awake the entire night preceding the seventh day of Passover, studying Torah as a way of thanking God for the miracles that led to our release from slavery.

While you may choose not to hew to this tradition in the literal sense, another version might be attempting to keep your eyes open to the suffering of others not just for a night, but for *every* night. We want to view Redemption not as a one-time event that occurred at a discrete point in time, but an ongoing process that is both ancient and eternal, one that needs to be sustained so that it endures.

Steadily keeping in mind Bill's compelling, compassionate version of the 10 Plagues might help us to stay alert and aroused such that our redemption story stretches out as far into space and time as it possibly can:

The 10 Plagues of 2022

Blood Much blood has spilled and is continuing to spill right now in Ukraine. As of April 13th, more than [4,500 civilian casualties](#) have been recorded since the Russian invasion of February 24th, including nearly 2,000 killed, and the actual number of casualties is believed to be much higher. Most of the recorded casualties were caused by explosive weapons but have also included execution-like shootings.

Frogs In this case frogs are not the plague itself, but the victims or consequences of the plague of pollution. Frogs and their eggs have thin membranes that allows chemicals and minerals to easily pass into them. Pesticides, chemical runoff, including from detergents and fertilizers, and minerals from mining and oil spills kill frogs.

Lice Malware, botnets, spam, phishing, trolls and cyber bullies: the parasites of the web swarm around us like lice and infest everything. Surveillance, like lice, infests us: big data

communications collection, internet connectivity devices, drones, facial recognition technology: Like lice, it's difficult to remove the infestation once it becomes part of everything.

Wild Beasts On December 19, 2021, then lame duck-President Donald Trump tweeted, "Wait until January 6! It's going to be wild!" The wild beasts unleashed on January 6, 2020 threatened democracy, the rule of law, and the lives of elected members of Congress; the wild beasts that threaten democracy have yet to be contained.

Pestilence COVID-19 is still causing sickness and, so far, the deaths of more than 6 million people worldwide. Much suffering and death could have been avoided if people had taken common sense, scientifically grounded precautions, but ignorance and denial has gone hand in hand with the spread of disease.

Boils look something like mosquito bites. Malaria, spread through the single bite of a mosquito, killed about [627,000 people](#) in 2020. Malaria keeps countries poor, costing the African continent approximately \$12 billion a year in lost productivity and using up to 40 percent of all public health care resources.

Hail Last year, 2021, ranked as the fourth-warmest year on record in the United States, with December 2021 being the warmest December ever recorded. Severe weather events last year included [Hurricane Ida](#), [wildfires](#) and a [deadly heat wave](#) in the West, [tornado outbreaks](#) in the South and mid-West, and [unusually cold temperatures in Texas](#) that left millions of people without electricity. Hail and other types of severe weather will increase as long as we continue increasing carbon gas emissions and our planet continues to heat up.

Locusts Fear of the “other”—especially in this time of pandemic—swarms like locusts. This is how xenophobia, the fear of foreigners, takes hold and grows. The Biden administration has been slow to lift a Trump administration bar on the entry of asylum seekers at the southern border, and political pressure is building to continue a policy that expels asylum seekers without giving them any chance to argue their claims.

Darkness Anti-science, anti-vaccinations, climate change denial, those capable of reading who choose not to read, fundamentalism, the plague of willful ignorance, intellectual darkness.

Slaying of the Firstborn The homicide rate in the US [rose 30%](#) between 2019 and 2020. It is the highest increase recorded in modern history. [Gun violence kills 40,000 Americans](#) each year and wounds another 85,000. Supposedly protected by the Second Amendment, which predicates the right to bear arms on the need for a “well-regulated militia,” ten states allow people to carry concealed guns with no permit or other restriction.

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Ha-yom sheva yamim l'omer

This is the seventh day of the Omer

Bill is not only our Guest Contributor tonight, but also our Guest DJ :) His recommendation for the Omer Playlist is Bob Marley's "Exodus":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDM1bZz3gQk>

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The narrative of Exodus begins, “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” (Ex. 1:8). The theme of “not knowing” is one that saturates the story of The Exodus, and of course any traumatic story. The new king’s amnesia results in an inability to remember the national gratitude that is owed to Joseph, whose foresight and planning kept Egypt alive during the famine.

As we discussed back on Day 3, ethical consciousness is fundamentally rooted in our capacity to remember—when we lose that capacity, we lose our moral compass. The racial reckoning that the United States is currently convulsed in is anchored in just that loss—we forget, or perhaps more importantly, *choose* to forget, the dark legacy of racial terror that has shamefully characterized our country since the first White settlers arrived.

This concept of “choosing to forget” seems particularly important to me. Some commentators, for example, have suggested that this Pharaoh was a new king who, for reasons that are unclear, simply was not acquainted with relatively recent Egyptian history—in particular, Joseph’s life-saving contributions. The *past* had simply *passed*, disappearing into the receding fog of antiquity.

But others have suggested that Pharaoh’s politics of genocide arose because he *chose* to forget. Rashi, for example, explains that: “‘He did not know’ means, ‘he made himself *as though he did not know*.’”

Pharaoh’s mind figures out a way to numb itself so that he loses awareness of Joseph’s historical impact. This mechanism can be psychologically understood as a form of repression, the act of working (often unconsciously) to *un-know* what one knows.

In Hebrew, Egypt is called *Mitzrayim*. According to the Zohar, the name is derived from *m'tzarim*, meaning “narrow straits” (*mi*, which means “from,” *tzar*, which means “narrow” or “tight”). The political climate of Egypt was one of very narrow, tight straits—not knowing, not seeing, not hearing, not speaking.

A moral stenosis gripped this cruel leader and his nation, annihilating the possibilities of memory, compassion, communication and understanding, creating a world within which the shadows of hatred, murder and, ultimately, genocide suddenly began to gather.

The counterpoint to this human “unknowing”, Pharaoh’s imperviousness to the slaves’ suffering, shows up when God enters the narrative in chapter 2 of Exodus: “The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out. And their screams rose up to God. God *heard* their groaning and God *remembered* the Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. And God *saw* the Children of Israel and God *knew* them.”

God hears, remembers, sees and knows, the very actions that Pharaoh refuses, refutes and restricts. And suddenly there is a connection, or perhaps *re-connection*, with the Divine, and life

slowly begins to stir within the darkened fatality of existence that has spiritually deadened our ancestors in this foreign land.

Here is the transliterated prayer to recite before the Counting. If you have a copy of the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Haneshama*, this prayer, and some additional thoughts and meditations, can be found on pages 674-683:

Baruch atah adonay eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom shemoneh yamim l'omer

This is the eighth day of the Omer

Today's song, a visually-riveting version of "Rivers of Babylon" by Boney M., was recommended by Guest DJ Brian Hinman.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3QxT-w3WMo>

A reminder that if you would like to suggest a song that you believe would also fit in with this year's theme of "Liberation", feel free to back-channel me a YouTube link, and I'll see if I can insert it into the playlist at some point during these 7 weeks. Music from any genre and of any era will be cheerfully considered by the host :)

Omer Day 9 5782

As we noted in yesterday's reading, Pharaoh is generally depicted as the xenophobic, genocidal villain in the Exodus story. But there are other ways to read this narrative, as well, ways that may disturb us, but that could have thought- and spirit-provoking value, nonetheless.

Some commentators have speculated that the ethical failure here lies not solely with Pharaoh, but also, to some extent, with the Jews, themselves. The 16th century Italian scholar Seforno is one of those.

He notes that the opening chapter of Exodus is called Shemoth ("names") because it begins by listing names: *"These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin, Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher. The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation."* (Ex. 1:1-6)

These individuals are noted, but they are noted as being deceased. What follows upon their deaths, in the story, is an explosion of life: "And the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them." (Ex. 1:7).

This can certainly be read as a celebration of fecundity, of life, a grand fulfillment of God's promise to Jacob: "Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation." (Gen. 46:3).

But Seforno and others focus on the word *vayishretzu* ("swarmed"), which has insectoid or reptilian associations. In this context, the generation of honored, highly-evolved individuals who originally went down to Egypt has ceased to exist, and been replaced by masses of anonymous, "insect-like" conformists whose primary project is to seamlessly assimilate to their surroundings—notice that they are not given any names.

This could be understood as the grandchildren of Jacob and their descendants having lost their moral "mojo", their sense of purpose, as they endeavor to sacrifice their collective identity on the altar of assimilation.

Of course, the project backfires. Within this framework, we might suggest that Pharaoh doesn't recognize them not because he "chooses" not to recognize them (as hypothesized in Day 8) but because they are no longer recognizable as a distinct clan as a result of having eagerly abandoned their traditions and their individuality in an effort to fit in.

This is certainly not as consoling a story as the one that positions our ancestors as harmless, faultless victims of Egyptian oppression and evil. In fact, read superficially, it can be interpreted as a clearcut example of victim-blaming, in which victims of crimes are held accountable for what has happened to them.

But Lawrence Weschler, in his study of modern totalitarianism, "Calamities of Exile", has written that taking responsibility for a situation, "has heuristic value: it makes possible a future politics that otherwise might become lost in a bottomless sense of victimization and despair." In other words, concentrating on our responsibility (although not blaming ourselves) for our own predicaments opens up an interior world in which inner growth becomes possible.

What an unpopular and, to some extent, counter-intuitive way of reading Exodus. Extrapolated thoughtlessly, it has horrifyingly odious implications as we think about groups and individuals who have been injured, harmed and wronged. Were the European Jews responsible for the Holocaust? Are the Ukrainians responsible for Russia's invasion? Are African-Americans responsible for their slavery, or for Jim Crow laws?

On an individual basis, what about a girl forced to marry at 13 because climate change might be responsible for flooding her family's crops and they can no longer afford to keep her at home? Or a homeless man with mental illness abducted from a soup kitchen and forced to work on a caravan site? Or a migrant whose visa has expired and who can be threatened with deportation if she doesn't do what the trafficker demands.

The reality is that evil does exist—and evil in the form of slavery has a long history to it, a history that has not nearly come to an end. The UN's International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that roughly 13 million people were captured and sold as slaves between the 15th-19th century, but today an estimated 40.3 million people are living in some form of modern slavery. Women and girls comprise 71% of modern slavery victims.

From its very origins, Judaism has wrestled with the problem of evil, with the question of how a good God could allow the wicked to prosper and the righteous to suffer. From Genesis to Job, from Isaiah to Ecclesiastes, and in Lamentations and Psalms, the Tanakh tells the story of a people who, despite all their suffering, remain stubbornly committed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Such steadfast fidelity, however, did not shun the often-harsh reality of the Jews' condition, nor did their devotion blind the Jews to the reality of either suffering or wickedness.

Perhaps one way to acknowledge what Seforno and others have suggested without descending into the depths of irrational victim-blaming is to acknowledge that when we abandon the best parts of our heritage, we become more vulnerable to being manipulated, perhaps without even knowing it. From there, exploitation can slowly but inexorably become more of a possibility.

I confess to being made terribly uncomfortable by this interpretation of Exodus, but it is one that deserves our attention. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about life in a free society, "Few are guilty, but all are responsible."

With this in mind, I will (sort of!) look forward to continuing to struggle with these competing interpretations in the coming Days of Counting. The historical narratives of any tradition can easily become crusted over such that the beautifully bewildering and edifying complexity of their internal engine disappears, leaving us with a deflated, weakened tale that does not challenge us to grow.

Part of our tradition entails undercutting and de-stabilizing the standard retellings of our narratives—being the People of the Book means not only being able to *read* The Book, but being hospitable to different ways to *understand* The Book.

As poet Wallace Stevens wrote in his poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction:",
Two things of opposite natures seem to depend

On one another, as a man depends

On a woman, day no night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change...

Here is the transliterated prayer to recite before the Counting. If you have a copy of the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Haneshamah*, this prayer, and some additional thoughts and meditations, can be found on pages 674-683:

Baruch atah adonay eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom Tesha yamim l'omer

This is the ninth day of the Omer

Today's musical selection was recommended by Guest DJ, Helen Metzman, who generously suggested several versions of "Wade in the Water", this one by the inimitable Eva Cassidy. Hopefully we will get to some of the other versions that Helen recommended, as well:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-hKDYQ6F54>

reminder that if you would like to suggest a song that you believe would also fit in with this year's theme of "Liberation", feel free to back-channel me a YouTube link, and I'll see if I can insert it into the playlist at some point during these 7 weeks. Music from any genre and of any era will be cheerfully considered by the host :)

Omer Day 10 5782

I have continued to wrestle with the themes that we have been exploring the last few days, having to do with the origins of our ancestors' slavery in Egypt and the issue of where the responsibility for that enslavement lies.

Another angle of entry into this discussion is to remember that the stories that we tell, and that evolve into the ones that are the most meaningful to us, are defined in part by where we begin them and where we end them.

The traditional narrative arc of the Exodus story begins with our enslavement, continues through The Plagues, describes our rapid, dramatic departure from Egypt and across the Red Sea, and concludes with our arrival at The Promised Land.

During Pesach and the Counting of the Omer, we focus understandably (and incessantly!) on our Egyptian enslavement. But it's important that we not forget how we wound up in Egypt in the first place—as a result of Joseph residing there. And, with this in mind, it's important that we not forget how *Joseph* wound up in Egypt—as a result of his rivalrous brothers selling him into slavery and deceiving their father, Jacob, into believing that his beloved son was dead.

So while our ancestors were slaves, *their* ancestors before them were slave-*sellers*—our history is characterized not just by being victims, but by being victimizers. And most of us are of course aware that this applies not only to the ancient Israelites, but to the *modern* State of Israel. One of the most vexing and perplexing debates when it comes to contemporary Middle East politics, for example, has to do with the ways in which Israel is conceived of by others as either victim and/or victimizer when it comes to its relations with its Arab neighbors.

So perhaps that is one of the reasons that the final lines of *Bereshit* focus on what to do with Joseph's body after he dies—“*And Yosef took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, “God will surely remember you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.” So Yosef died, being a hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt* (Genesis 50: 25-26).

How extraordinary, and how touching, that amidst the hasty, terrifying backdrop of preparing for their abrupt departure from Egypt, Moses fulfills this ancient promise, ensuring that Joseph's body accompanies his people as they leave. What better reminder of the unspeakable, unthinkable transgression of Joseph's brothers than for the Israelites to carry with them for forty years the body of the man whom his own brothers sinned against.

Transforming victimhood into agency, and into working forcefully to avoid victimizing others and supporting those who are being victimized, requires us to understand our *own* capacity to be a victimizer—like it or not, as our religious history unmistakably reveals, we all will at times display that capacity, explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or unintentionally, in or out of our awareness.

In our tradition, neither story eclipses the other, and both tales are closely, inextricably intertwined. Yes, our ancestors sinned and contributed to enslavement. And yes, our ancestors were enslaved.

It is only when we tell the full truth about our past, painful as that truth may be, that we increase our chances to find and promote redemption in the future.

Here is the transliterated prayer to recite before the Counting. If you have a copy of the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Haneshama*, this prayer, and some additional thoughts and meditations, can be found on pages 674-683:

Baruch atah adonay eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom Tesha yamim l'omer

This is the tenth day of the Omer

Today's song, "I Live" by Norah Jones was recommended by Guest DJ Susan Levine:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=sb_TOzXkt_Q

A reminder that if you would like to suggest a song that you believe would also fit in with this year's theme of "Liberation", feel free to back-channel me a YouTube link, and I'll see if I can insert it into the playlist at some point during these 7 weeks. Music from any genre and of any era will be cheerfully considered by the host :)

Omer Day 11 5782

Continuing with our voyage into the troubling origins of our enslavement in Egypt...

In his classic essay, “The Power of the Powerless”, Vaclav Havel, the last President of Czechoslovakia until its dissolution and then the first President of the Czech Republic, writes about the “post-Totalitarian” state and discusses its banality, the absence of any overt cruelty or sadism.

“The system reveals its most essential characteristic to be an introversion, a movement towards being ever more completely and unreservedly itself...the social phenomenon of self-preservation is subordinated...to a kind of blind automatism which drives the system...(and which) will always triumph over the will of any individual.”

In such a system, citizens must “live within a lie...(they) confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system...everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system.”

He goes on to emphasize, “...there is obviously something in human beings which responds to this system, something they reflect and accommodate...Human beings are compelled to live within a lie, but they can be compelled to do so only because they are in fact capable of living in this way.”

Havel is specifically referring to the imprint of Stalinist Russia across the former Soviet Union, but he is also illuminating what he believes is an ineradicable aspect of human nature, which is our tendency, our willingness, and at times even our *desire* to sacrifice our autonomy and deny our responsibility as individuals.

With this context in mind, we might then consider the possibility that our ancestors, having lost their moral mooring in an effort to assimilate, become susceptible to being incrementally, perhaps even imperceptibly, recruited into participating in Pharaoh’s sophisticated plot. It can be imagined that, in a trance-like state, we agreed both by *decrees* and *degrees* to become “builders” in Egypt—builders not only in the literal sense of building with bricks, but also in the political sense of building *up* and building *out* the very system that oppressed us, a system that inexorably vanquished our *autonomy* and transformed it into a version of Havel’s *automatism*.

Deluded into thinking that we were actually being accepted and honored as Egyptian citizens, we were actually being *reduced* and *degraded* from humans to slaves.

In this context, it took an extraordinary leader like Moses to awaken our people from their collective syncope and help us to find a language for liberation that would slowly, painfully pry us out of the deadening, despotic machinery that we were simultaneously victimized by and supportive of.

Many commentators have suggested that Moses was not the only person who saw the Burning Bush, but he was the only person to stop and pay attention to it. Perhaps that is a crucial piece of foreshadowing in this story. His genius was in being able to see the imprisonment that the Israelites were seeing, but were too defeated and myopic to comprehend, and to offer up the ancient Truth of Israel in an effort to supersede the anesthetizing Lie of Egypt.

We refer to the prophet Moses as *Moshe Rabbenu* (literally, Moses our Teacher) but it may not only be that Moses is *instructing* us, but also *reminding* us.

In this context, *Moshe Rabbenu* (literally, Moses our Teacher) may not only be *instructing* us, but also *reminding* us.

Here is the transliterated prayer to recite before the Counting. If you have a copy of the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Hanesama*, this prayer, and some additional thoughts and meditations, can be found on pages 674-683:

Baruch atah adonay eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom echad asar yamim l'omer

This is the eleventh day of the Omer

Today's song, "Invincible" by Big Wild, was recommended by Guest DJ Laura Menyuk, and evocatively echoes and amplifies the "wade in the water" theme from Day 9:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sepGQ71PSEQ>

A reminder that if you would like to suggest a song that you believe would also fit in with this year's theme of "Liberation", feel free to back-channel me a YouTube link, and I'll see if I can insert it into the playlist at some point during these 7 weeks. Music from any genre and of any era will be cheerfully considered by the host :)

Omer Day 12 5782

On the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, it is natural to attempt to link up our effort to understand our ancient Egyptian attempt at genocide with the modern genocide perpetrated by Adolph Hitler.

Religion attempts to make sense out of the world around us, looking for order and meaning in a world that often seems chaotic and meaningless. But it would be safe to say that nothing has shaken the foundation of our religion like the chaotic and senseless *Shoah*. Its devastation was so widespread and its perpetration of evil so extensive that we still wrestle with the searing and unanswerable theological questions that have resulted: about God and God's role in the world, about good, evil, and justice, about the value of life and death, and about the destiny of our people.

For today's Reflection, I turned to the philosophy of Emil Fackenheim, the Jewish, German-born philosopher and Reform Rabbi whose belief, after many years of struggle to make sense of the Holocaust, is that one hears in the silence of the Shoah's victims a voice issuing what he refers to as the 614th Commandment—"Thou shalt not hand Hitler posthumous victories. To despair of the God of Israel is to continue Hitler's work for him." From Fackenheim's perspective, the people of Jewish heritage have a moral obligation to observe their faith and thus frustrate Hitler's goal of eliminating Judaism from the earth.

For Fackenheim, the Holocaust is entirely unique, surpassing the despotism of Pharaoh, the deprivations of the Babylonian Exile, and the ruthless destruction of Jerusalem and the Temples. As he states, "...that where the Holocaust is, no thought can be, and that where there is thought it is in flight from the event."

With this in mind, how are we to find our way along the horizon that was so devastatingly darkened by the Nazis?

One of Fackenheim's responses is that we must look for guidance to those who resisted in a time when resistance itself should have been impossible. He identifies several instances, both religious and secular, Jewish and Christian, of bravery and defiance in the face of nihilism and despair.

For example, he quotes the testimony of Pelagia Lewinska in his magnum opus, “To Mend the World”:

They had condemned us to die in our own filth, to drown in mud, in our own excrement. They wished to abase us, to destroy our human dignity, to efface every vestige of humanity, to return us to the level of wild animals...but from the instant I grasped the motivating principle...it was as if I had been awakened from a dream...I felt under orders to live...and if I did die in Auschwitz, it would be as a human being; I would hold on to my dignity...”

Some commentators have noted that Fackenheim’s 614th Commandment is not so much a new addition as a novel reformulation of that oldest imperative, for it asserts that, as Rabbi Yochanan states in the Talmud, “anyone who repudiates idolatry is called a Jew.” Pronouncing in thought and deed, in word and act, an absolute “No!”, an unwavering resistance to the radical evil of the Shoah, is, in Fackenheim’s philosophy, the only legitimate response to six million deaths.

In Lewinska’s unforgettable words (“It was as if I had been awakened from a dream”), I hear an echo of Moses. The Burning Bush awakened him from his dreamy, quotidian life, and he, in turn, awakened the slaves from their spiritual torpor, guiding them towards a belief that freedom, not slavery, was their ultimate destiny.

Jewish survival, and the survival of our moral compass, requires us to repudiate despair and desolation, and to remain alert to the dimensions of the human spirit that can countermand history by fighting evil with goodness, madness with sanity, and inhumanity with the eternal powers of Truth and Justice.

Here is the transliterated prayer to recite before the Counting. If you have a copy of the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Haneshama*, this prayer, and some additional thoughts and meditations, can be found on pages 674-683:

Baruch atah adonay eloheyinu Melech ha’olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha’omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom sh'naym asar yamim l'omer

This is the twelfth day of the Omer

Today's song was recommended by Cantor Caitlin, a lovely version of the *Sefirat Ha'Omer* prayer performed by some of the musicians from Hadar:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8hCiPI1tMQ>

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Omer Day 13 5782

Continuing our Counting of the Omer through our observance of Yom Ha'Shoah, which concludes momentarily...

Yesterday, we turned to philosophy, particularly the work of Emile Fackenheim, as a way to try to make sense of the atrocity of the Holocaust. It is natural, when confronted with crimes against humanity, regardless of their proportion, to look in the direction of scholars—historians, logicians, psychologists, sociologists, biologists, ethicists—for guidance regarding how to learn from what has happened and how to prevent it from ever happening again.

But sometimes, in the face of what is truly unfathomable, another language is necessary, the language of poetry. Poetry is a music of thought and feeling that, in its unique way, helps us to remember, from the other side of time, what has wounded us beyond repair, and what might enable us to consider the possibility of healing those wounds.

German philosopher Theodore Adorno has famously written that “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Yet is it truly a viable alternative after such a sickening hurricane of shattered hearts to *not* write poetry? Imagining the unimaginable, uttering the unutterable, speaking the unspeakable—aren't these ultimately the ways in which we stagger forward out of history's incinerating ovens and valiantly find a way to restore faith and resurrect hope?

With this in mind, and in memory and in honor of those who were murdered, whose voices were silenced forever, here are the voices of several American poets who have bravely written about the Holocaust:

AFTER THE HOLOCAUST, NO POETRY

By David Koenig

After the Holocaust,

No poetry—

That is what they say—

But I write poems about it.

What's that?

You do, too?

Come then,

Let us sit down together.

How do you spell your name

In this country?

With an umlaut or a vowel?

Shall we speak a bit

In the old tongue?

The one they tried to cut

Out of our parents' mouths?

Forgive me.

I'm not unstrung.

The poems keep me sane.

I guard them

Like torn and injured pages

From buried books of prayer.

RESPONSE

By Linda Pastan

It is not dusk

In Jerusalem

It is simply morning

And the grandparents have disappeared

Into the Holocaust

Taking their sabbath candles with them.

Light your poems, hurry.

Already the sun is leaning

Towards the west

Though the grandparents and candles

Have long since burned down

To stubs

WOMEN BATHING AT BERGEN-BELSEN

By Enid Shomer

Twelve hours after the Allies arrive

There is hot water, soap. Two women bathe

In the makeshift, open-air shower while nearby

Fifteen thousand are flung naked into mass graves

By captured SS guards. Clearly legs and arms

Are the natural handles of a corpse. The bathers,

Taken late in the war, still have flesh

*On their bones, still have breasts. Though nudity was
A death sentence here, they have undressed,
Oblivious to the soldiers and the cameras.
The corpses push through the limed earth like upended
Headstones. The bathers scrub their feet, bending
In beautiful curves, mapping the contours
Of the body, that kingdom to which they've returned*

BLESSED

By Robert Deluty

Auschwitz survivor

Holds great-grandchild, savors

New defeat over Nazis

This last poem, by Robert Deluty, vividly echoes Fackenheim's 614th Commandment, which we were discussing last night: "Thou shalt not hand Hitler posthumous victories."

Elie Wiesel wrote, "The Holocaust is a sacred realm. One cannot enter this realm without realizing that only those who were there can know. But the outsider can come close to the gates."

These poems, along with many others, take the risk of bringing us closer to the gates by giving us a broken-hearted, word-woven glimpse of what elusive, unsolvable mysteries lie behind them.

In the words of Aharon Appelfeld wrote, "Though the tree has been chopped down, the root has not withered..."

Here is the transliterated prayer to recite before the Counting. If you have a copy of the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Hanesama*, this prayer, and some additional thoughts and meditations, can be found on pages 674-683:

Baruch atah adonay eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom sh'losa asar yamim l'omer

This is the 13th day of the Omer

Today's song is a section from Steve Reich's composition "Different Trains":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E4Bjt_zVJc

For some additional background on this extraordinary piece, here's a link:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Different_Trains

And here's a podcast, "Song Exploder" which interviews the composer and explores the origins of this piece:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/steve-reich-different-trains-america-before-the-war/id788236947?i=1000555007859>

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Omer Day 14 5782

Many of you have written to me with reactions to the several Reflections I composed having to do with the origins of our slavery in Egypt, and some of you agreed to allow me to share these thoughts with the entire Omer study group.

Mary Myerson wrote:

What if there is Pharaoh “doesn't recognize them” because the story that has been passed from generation to generation didn't recognize Joseph's and the others' contribution towards saving the Egyptians from starving. If their contribution had been recognized, acknowledged and passed from generation to generation until Moses arrived on the scene - is it possible that Pharaoh's power would have been diminished? That he would have had an insurrection on his hands?

Rabbi Gordon Fuller shared the following:

Another interpretation of the slavery issue is a traditional rabbinic “Midah k'neged midah” – measure for measure, or colloquially, “tit for tat”. At the end of Vayigash, Joseph goes beyond rationing to “save” the Egyptians. In the later years of the famine, they had no money for the rations, so Joseph sold rations for animals, then land, essentially dispossessing the Egyptians of everything they owned, and making them slaves, or at least serfs. Some see our enslavement as payback for what Joseph did on pharaoh's behalf. Just a thought to consider.

Linda Solomon provided a valuable historical backdrop against which assimilation and anti-Semitism can be understood:

Your ideas made me think about other points in history. Each of the points in history seem to suggest that assimilation was not enough to be accepted by general society.

The Hanukkah story is about more than the revolt on Antiochus. Some scholars say that there was a civil war among the Hebrews. Many had assimilated and some were zealots. Did the zealots remind society that Jews were different? Or did the assimilated Jews not assimilate enough to lose their distinctive ideas/ways of living?

The Golden Age in Spain came to an end when the King was tired of the Jews being different. He ordered them to convert or die. Those that chose to convert still practiced Jewish traditions in secret. It was incredible to read a recent story about a woman in Florida that had her Spanish mother's handwritten recipes translated and discovered that the recipes were traditional Jewish foods. The woman had not grown up Jewish, yet followed some Jewish traditions that she had not realized were Jewish.

History tells us that Western Europe struggled with the "Jewish Question", that is, what to do about the Jews? As freedom/democracy opened in Western European countries, they wondered how to manage the Jews. Some pondered that if they stopped persecuting Jews would they assimilate and stop being Jewish? Reform Judaism began in Germany. Many Jews assimilated; many did not. Hitler irrationally hated Jews. Did the assimilated Jews not assimilate enough or did the observant Jews bother Hitler more? Both were targeted during the Holocaust.

I imagine that, in Egypt, many Hebrews assimilated over time and many continued to follow Jewish traditions – as much as was defined at that time. Is the Jewish upbringing that encourages questioning and pondering many viewpoints so different that even non-observant Jews are noticeably different from non-Jews?

I find Pharaoh no different than Antiochus, King of Spain, leaders of Western Europe during Emancipation and Hitler. Each of them seem to think that uniformity to one viewpoint will enable them to keep their power over the people. Perhaps it is fear of physical harm from the rulers that keeps people in their place.

I think about the Afghan people, too. Was it inevitable that the Taliban would gain control? Nearly 20 years of US support, girls attending school, more liberties for all, and training an Afghan army. Yet, the Afghan army was bribed or coerced into stepping aside or joining the Taliban in the final months before the US left. Now, girls are forbidden from attending school, again, and those families that worked with the US fear for their lives.

Moses was a unique leader of his time. Who else would understand Judaism, grow up in freedom, understand that enslaving the Hebrews was wrong and get pushed, by G-d, to make change? He relied on his faith that freeing the Hebrews was going to succeed. He had to convince Pharaoh and convince the Hebrew slaves. That is a tall order. At any of the meetings with Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron could have been killed. What was it that stopped Pharaoh from killing them after the first, second or third plague? Was Pharaoh so full of himself that he thought all of those plagues were parlor tricks?

Many of our leaders in history are people that recognized that they needed to step up and take action. I think about Yonatan "Yoni" Netanyahu. I read the book made from the many letters that he wrote to friends and family. He lived in the US with his family for several years while his father was a visiting Professor of a university. Even though he had other interests in life, he recognized that he needed to help Israel survive. He became an officer in the IDF; strategized the Operation Entebbe raid and saved those that were hijacked in Entebbe. He was the only person injured during the raid and died from his injuries.

There are more leaders that stepped up during different times in history. It takes courage to become a good leader because a good leader has to recognize that they have faults and limitations.

I, personally, do not think that assimilation brought about the enslavement of the Hebrews. I think enslavement stems from bad leaders that use hateful speech to convince the masses that people that are different cannot be trusted, that they are the enemy and must be controlled.

I think Jews observe Judaism on a spectrum from non-observant to orthodox throughout time.

To me, it is most important that each generation encourages the next generation to learn as much as they can about Judaism, its values, and history and learn to question. In that way, Judaism will survive, in all of the various ways that Jews observe.

Thank you to these insightful contributors to our ongoing conversation and Shabbat Shalom.

Baruch atah adonay eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom arba-ah asar yamim l'omer

This is the 14th day of the Omer

Today's musical selection is "Barley" by Birds of Chicago

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-rCa9sOLMQ>

A reminder that if you would like to suggest a song that you believe would also fit in with this year's theme of "Liberation", feel free to back-channel me a YouTube link, and I'll see if I can insert it into the playlist at some point during these 7 weeks. Music from any genre and of any era will be cheerfully considered by the host :)