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The Journey of Faith in Light of Passover and Psalm 22

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Just short time ago, I started my day counseling our preschool teachers after the tragic death of the young fiancée of one of our teachers. I spoke with them about how God could not possibly have caused the death of this great guy, could not possibly have caused the pain and suffering of a woman excited to see her life moving in the right direction after so much work and effort. And then I left and went to officiate at the funeral of a beloved member of our congregation. I spoke with people about how God had blessed her life and blessed her family with her amazing spirit. And afterward, I went to the hospital and sat with someone dying of cancer. I spoke with him about how God would certainly forgive any one who asked and God would be there for anyone who would pray, no matter where they were, no matter when they had prayed last.

And at the end of the day, I walked into the doors of this building and felt exhausted from defending God all day. I had defended God from everyone's judgment. I had defended God from resentment and rejection. I had protected God from accusations, insults and slurs. *How could God have allowed this to happen? How could God have done this? Is this the kind of God that we believe in, Rabbi?*

I know it is my role to help people stay connected; to offer people words of comfort and support; and yet sometimes I just want to say, yes, God has created a world in which these horrible things can happen and we must call out in protest, we must scream out in anger, we must lash out in despair...just like the Psalmist...

Psalm 22 reads (translation by Martin Cohen, *Our Haven and Our Strength: The Book of Psalms*, Aviv Press, New York, 2004):

My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?
Why are the words I roar in agony so distant from effecting my salvation?
I cry out all day, O my God, but You do not answer;
I cry out all night, not letting even a single moment pass in silence.
You, O Holy One, You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel,
In You did our ancestors place their trust; they trusted in You and You delivered them.
They cried out to You and escaped harm; they trusted in You and were not disappointed.

Passover's message can be theologically stifling. God—not angels, not seraphim, not messengers—but God alone brought about the miracles that redeemed the Jewish people. This is the message of the Haggadah. The people of Israel called out to God from amidst their suffering in Egypt, and God heard their cries, God answered their pleas, God sent miracles and brought Israel out of Egypt with his own outstretched arm and wondrous signs....After sitting through two nights of s'darim we can be lulled into the false hope that God will offer *us* miracles whenever *we* call upon Him, that God will intervene in history, saving individuals from suffering, pain and death.....and yet, we know, that so many of us suffer in this world, so many of our loved ones suffered illness in their lives and their only redemption was death. Where are the miracles, you ask? Where is God when we need Him?

The power of the Book of Psalms, and the reason I believe that we read from them in times of sorrow as well as joy, is that the Book of Psalms express within **them the range of expressions of faith and despair**. They praise God and they accuse God. They celebrate God's gifts and redemption and they demand more from God. They offer us a model of faith.

As Psalm 22 continues, the psalmist is not going to remain quiet. The psalmist demands God's presence in his life, as God was there for our ancestors.

In You did our ancestors place their trust; they trusted in You and You delivered them. They cried out to You and escaped harm; they trusted in You and were not disappointed. But I, continues the psalmist, I am more of a worm than a human being, an insult among people and an object of national scorn.

In the realization of his suffering, the psalmist not only feels isolated, but he feels scorned by humanity and rejected by God. Where does he turn in this most lowly of moments? What does he do when he fully enters the experience of his suffering?...he turns to God. He remembers what God has done for him in the past.

But it was You who brought me forth from the womb, You who made me secure while I was still a suckling infant at my mother's breast. Indeed, I have been dependent on You since the womb; You were my God when I was still in my mother's belly. Therefore, be not far from me now, for trouble is near and there is no one to help....

In the moment of threat, in the moment of physical agony, in the moment of social isolation and physical exhaustion, the poet is able to look back at his life and realize the experiences that confirm God's presence in his life. He is able to realize how God has offered him comfort, security and peace in the past. Strengthened by his memories of God's presence in his life, he is empowered/emboldened to makes his demands of God...Do not abandon me, he cries; Be not far from me now...

But You, O Adonai, be not distant from me; You who are my strength, hurry to my aid. Save my soul from the sword, my inmost self from the dog's hand; save me from the lion's mouth and answer me before I am impaled on the horns of oxen. I shall proclaim Your name to my brethren; I shall praise You in the midst of the congregation. All you who fear Adonai, praise God, All you who are of Jacob's seed, honor God. All you of the seed of Israel, fear God. For God neither scorns nor abhors the prayer of the poor man. God will never hide the divine face from him and will listen when he cries out....

Maybe the story of the Exodus is **not** to teach us that God will always take care of us so that no harm befalls us. Maybe the story of the Exodus is to remind us of God's enduring presence—throughout the persecution, throughout the suffering, whenever an

oppressor rose up against us, whenever we found our lives embittered—God was there. We called out to God and we found redemption. When we called out, when we screamed and fought and demanded and accused....as long as we cried out, we were connected. God provided us with strength and mercy, God provided us with comfort and solace, God provided us with a contented soul that could lift us up and enable us to face life's most cruel and punishing suffering.

And if God was there in the past, God can be there in the present and in the future.

Psalm 22 concludes:

May even those who live at the very ends of the earth remember and return unto Adonai...Their progeny will worship God as well as tell of the great deeds of Adonai to the next generation; they will go and tell of God's righteousness, of what God once did for a newborn nation.

From one generation to the next we tell the story. We must do it. The majority of the Jews in America feel this obligation. What story are we telling? We are telling the stories of our families' history. We are telling the stories of our families' traditions. We are telling the stories of our families' suffering. And we are telling the story of the eternal connection between God and the Jewish people, each one of us, when we tell the story, when we cry out in anger over slavery, in suffering over oppression, and in joy over freedom, in happiness over survival and rebirth...When we do this, **we are being taught why we should have faith, how we should have faith, how we can remain connected to God.**

The challenge of living a life of faith is maintaining a connection with God in the face of despair. This Pesah, I wanted to have faith and I wanted to sing Hallel to God, but all I could endure was Psalm 22 and the other psalms which give voice to despair and suffering. I want God to be present in those moments, in our darkest moments, as well as when we invoke God's name in praise and thanksgiving.

The beauty of our rituals, the beauty of prayer, is that it **mentors us in faith.** Eventually the psalms of Hallel draw me in. The psalms of Hallel, the psalms of our service, the prayers all help us realize the moments of God's presence that we had forgotten—the gift of nature, of community, of Israel, of our history, of our lives and our breath. Our rituals also help us give voice to the deep need that we all have to not be alone, to have a source of strength to rely upon in God. The need that we all have to acknowledge our limits and rely on One who is greater and more powerful than we are, sometimes the only One who can fully know and understand why things happen in our world. We all need to know that there is One to whom we can turn in joy as well as sorrow, who will never reject us, and will always hear our pleas.

I want to close with the prayer that is given to us in the Sim Shalom prayerbook at the end of the Festival Amidah as a personal prayer we can offer to express our spiritual

needs on Yom Tov. May we all be blessed with a holiday that lifts us up and brings light to the darkness that we so often experience.

Ribono shel Olam, Sovereign, Master of joy in whose presence despair takes flight, grant me the capacity to welcome and extend the holiness of this Festival with happiness and delight. Let all who seek You be jubilant, rejoicing in Your presence. Teach me to transcend sorrow with abiding contentment, for estrangement from You grows out of despair. Revive in me the joy of Your deliverance; may a willing spirit strengthen me. May the words of our mouths and the mediations of our hearts be acceptable to You, our Rock and our Redeemer.

(from *Siddur Sim Shalom: For Shabbat and Festivals*, RA/USCJ, New York, 2003)