

As we approach this Shabbat/Rosh Hodesh Adar, I have some thoughts I want to share with you, relating to the situation in Egypt. I am well aware of the dangers inherent in the radically shifting sands of the Middle East -- dangers for the United States and Israel, and for the world as a whole. Like many, I am frightened. And I am all too aware of the limits of my knowledge and wisdom. I am neither a political scientist nor an expert on the intricacies of Egyptian culture and society. I do not speak Arabic, and I am dependent upon the American news media for my information. I know that we are in desperate need of extraordinarily delicate diplomacy by both the United States and Israel, but I don't know if either government (or indeed if anyone) is up to the task, or what that diplomacy might look like. So my purpose in writing today is not to suggest what we might do, but rather, one way we might think, about these events.

Egypt looms large in Jewish consciousness. *Yetzi'at Mitzrayim* -- the Exodus from Egypt -- is probably *the* most central metaphor in our liturgy and our ritual. We mention it twice a day, every day, in the *Sh'ma*. We remember it whenever we sanctify Shabbat, or any holy day, with *Kiddush*. And we re-enact that exodus every year, at *Pesah*. To Jews, Egypt is more than a physical place. It is a symbol, a metaphor, for all the ways that a society can abuse or degrade a human being. Egypt stands for oppression, inequality, intolerance, poverty, disenfranchisement, slavery. Egypt -- metonymically represented by Pharaoh -- stands for illegitimate rulers of all kinds: dictators, autocrats, politicians (as opposed to true leaders) concerned for the own power at the expense of the people they are called to serve. In contrast, the essence of being a Jew is continually affirming the possibility of freedom, dignity, equality -- continually affirming that "coming out of Egypt" is possible.

So despite my fears as an American and as a Jew, something in me is also excited and hopeful. This morning, as I *davened* the Hallel for Rosh Hodesh Adar -- *b'tzeit Yisrael miMitzrayim*, "When Israel went out of Egypt..." -- I couldn't help but feel thrilled at this remarkable moment. Is it possible that after all these years, *the* central message of *the* central historical and theological Jewish narrative -- the coming out of Egypt -- could be taking root in Egypt itself? Our ideas and ideals -- our commitment to the possibility of radical societal change, to the fundamental dignity and freedom of every human being -- have had an enormous influence on Western consciousness, and on the remarkable history of these United States of America. Our narrative -- the Exodus from Egypt -- incubated liberation theology, providing a framework for the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and countless other strivings for full enfranchisement and dignity. Could it be that the lessons of *Yetziyat Mitzrayim* are now "coming out of Egypt" in a way previously unimaginable?

I don't know. God willing, the Egyptian people's yearnings for freedom and democracy will be able to take root and flourish. But it is also possible that the Mubarak administration will succeed in re-establishing its authority, or that one autocratic regime will be swept aside only to be replaced by another that is equally or even more oppressive. Only time will tell.

What I do know is this. The Jewish near-obsession with the Exodus from Egypt is supposed to teach us that freedom and prosperity grounded in another peoples' suffering and degradation is untenable. It's supposed to move us to identify with the liberation struggle of any people, any time, anywhere. And more than that, it is supposed to move us to have faith in the potential success of the liberation struggle of any people, any time, anywhere. After all, what story was more improbable, more absurd, than our own? There are, of course, innumerable and immeasurably complex lessons from our Exodus story. Particularly salient among them is that the path to true freedom is hard, long, and easily lost. There is certainly no reason to think that it will be easier now in Egypt than it was so long ago, for us or for them; I wish I knew how best to be of help in transmitting our learning to those who will soon emerge as leaders in a new Egypt.

But despite all the difficulties, I can't help feeling that if Jews today cannot find a way to bracket our fears for our own well-being (legitimate and real as those fears are), and to feel along with those fears the quickening rush of excitement that heralds the intervention of the God of Possibility -- "I will Be as I will Be" -- in history, then we've missed the point of our own tradition. The Torah states explicitly that our enslavement and redemption from Egypt was intended to be a curriculum in compassion, and in faith. If that compassion, and that faith, is too narrow to encompass more than our own journey and our own well-being, then it seems to me that the whole enterprise is largely a failure.

We stand in a perilous moment of history. As I've said, I wish I knew what to suggest we *do*. But what we think -- how we feel -- is also important. When the Egyptians were drowning at the Sea of Reeds, God silenced the ministering angels, who had begun to sing songs of praise in celebration of our redemption. "My children are perishing," God said, "and you would sing songs?" To this day, we remove ten drops of wine from our cups at the *seder*, in acknowledgement of the Egyptian suffering. In today's NY Times, Nicholas Kristof ended his op-ed with the Egyptian Arabic for "we are all Egyptians!" It is stunningly close to the Hebrew: *Ehna kulina Misryeen* in Arabic, *Anu kulanu Mitzriyim* in Hebrew. The linguistic similarity reminds us that we go back a long way, we and the Egyptians; our histories are intertwined.

So this Shabbat, let us pray that God guides the hands of those charged with the responsibility of acting on behalf of the United States, Israel, and the emerging Egyptian revolution. We came out of our enslavement in Egypt to bring to the world a message of faith in human dignity and freedom. Not long ago, we witnessed a magnificent blossoming of that message, as our nation with its history of slavery elected our first African-American President. Wouldn't it be amazing if the story came full circle, and that very President now assisted the Egyptians in ending their own oppressive regime? Let us pray for Egypt, and let us stretch our compassion, our vision, and most importantly our faith, to imagine a new kind of *Pesah Mitzrayim*, one in which both our cups and the cups of the Egyptians can be full.

Shabbat shalom v'hodesh tov,
Rabbi Jan Uhrbach