

On the Practice of Facing Impossibility

Romemu

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When I was a young adult I wrestled with deep melancholia, oftentimes intractable depression.

I remember once in the midst of a sense of thick inner darkness I forced myself to get up and make challah, thinking that that process would somehow lift me up.

I started mixing flour with water and yeast and the opposite happened. The mixture seemed like it would never ever come together into dough. Instead of coming together it felt like it was all coming apart. It would never cohere.

I burst into tears.

But then I kept mixing and crying and then began kneading and crying and finally the dough came together, it began to feel like actually, well, dough. And if you've ever made bread, you know

that magic moment when a shaggy watery mixture comes together, becomes something else.

My tears subsided as the dough began to take on the silky smoothness that signals great challah to come.

In the face of seeming impossibility I just kept kneading.

Hope was born.

And eventually came the fullness of that hope in the form of risen bread.

Beautiful braided soft warm challah that I shared with my friends, as we broke bread over a sacred Sabbath meal, eating the very symbol of my hope born on a day of seeming impossibility.

Think for a moment. What impossibility have you faced? Are you facing? When does it feel like you just can't move, can't go forward? Have a hard time even getting out of bed in the morning?

Our sacred text this week, this week's parsha, called *B'shallach*, is all about facing impossibility. And it teaches us powerful lessons about moving forward.

Here's how the story goes:

The Children of Israel, a group of ragtag slaves, were leaving Egypt, finally being set free.

Poised before the Sea of Reeds with a raging army of their slave masters, the Egyptians, at their backs, riding on 600 chariots.

Some say more than 600.

The Israelites were terrified, desperate to be rescued.

Facing what they thought was absolute impossibility they cry out to Moses

(read in "jewish" voice) *There Weren't enough graves in Egypt that you had to take us out to die in the wilderness-- what is it that you've done to us to take us out of Eygpt??*

We told you this would happen!

we would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the wilderness!!

Exodus 14:11-12

הַמִּבְלִי אֵין־קָבָרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לְמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר-- מִה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָנוּ--
 לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם: מִה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָנוּ, לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם. יֵב הֲלֹא־זֶה הַדָּבָר,
 אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ בְּמִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר, חֲדַל מִמֶּנּוּ, וְנַעֲבֹדָה אֶת־מִצְרַיִם:

Here it is. The inception of the Israelite habit of whining of complaint, of yearning to go back to Egypt, a pattern which will repeat again and again throughout the story of their wanderings in the wilderness.

Moses assures the Israelites that God will do battle on their behalf.

But then God says to Moses in one of my all time favorite lines--

Why are you yelling at me for?

Tell the Israelites to go forward!

מִה־תִּצָּעַק אֵלַי דָּבָר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ:

Exodus 14:15

Interesting. Even in this story of Divine power and miracles, the Torah tells us that human agency is essential. Or maybe I should say, that *especially* in this story of divine power human agency is essential.

The children of Israel must *go forward*.

Instead, rabbinic legend tells us that at this very moment the Israelites are arguing.

According to the legend in the Babylonian Talmud in tractate/masechet Sotah daf/page 36A (and in other sources) one tribe says- you go first,

And another one says no you go first

And another says you go first.

Like the children they are they fight *not* to take responsibility.

As they are arguing one man, by the name of Nachshon ben (the son of) Amminadav, from the tribe of Judah.

Just goes forward.

He walks right into the sea, the water up to his knees, his thighs,
his belly, his chest, his neck, and it's only when the water was
above his nostrils and he almost drowns that the sea parted.

And so he just continued walking through water.

Clearly Nachshon did not know how to swim.

He had the faith

not to debate

not to cogitate,

deliberate,

dominate

or commiserate.

he just got up and walked right into that sea of impossibility

His courage making it possible for the children of Israel to pass
through safely on dry ground.

Just as my kneading allowed chaos in a bowl to cohere into
form, to rock and roll and become bread,

his slogging forward into the sea,

allowed liquid to shift and become dry ground,

providing a life saving path for his people out of Egypt

into the broad expanse of the wilderness.

There's another person in this tale that shows us how to step into radical possibility. It's Miriam, Moses's older sister.

To continue with our story:

The children of Israel go safely through the Reed Sea and God closes the sea and their slave masters the Egyptians drown.

These just freed slaves seeing they were saved, believing they were finally safe, raise their voices in song

(in fact this shabbat is called the Shabbat of Song-- *Shabbat Shira*)

These powerless voiceless slaves finally raise their voices in song to celebrate and show their faith and gratitude in God.

Moses leads them in song, the Song of the Sea, *Shirat Ha-Yam*

And after the song is complete

Miriam jumps right in to lead the women in song and dance.

The Torah tells us:

Miriam, the prophet, Aaron's
sister, took a timbrel in her hand,
and all the women came out after
her with timbrels and with dances.

כַּוְתָקָה מְרִיָּם הַנְּבִיאָה אֲחֹת
אַהֲרֹן אֶת־תֶּבֶל בְּיָדָהּ וַתֵּצֵא
כָּל־הַנָּשִׁים אַחֲרֶיהָ בְּתַפִּים
וּבְמַחֲלֹת:

And Miriam called out to them,
Sing to the Lord, for very exalted
is She; a horse and its rider He
cast into the sea.

כֹּאֲוַתְעִן לָהֶם מְרִיָּם שִׁירוּ
לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאֹלָהּ גָּאָה סוּס וּרְכָבּוֹ
רָמָה בַּיָּם:

Exodus 15:20-21

Rashi the 11th century French commentator who wrote a
commentary on the entire Torah, explains that first Moses led
the men in song and then Miriam led the women in song and
dance.

Let's think for a moment about Miriam's leadership. After the song led by Moses Miriam didn't whine to her little brother saying-- why did you leave me out? .

She didn't ask anyone's permission.

She didn't hesitate wondering if women were allowed to sing and dance in public.

Like Nachshon she just goes forward, moves into the impossible space.

And in so doing she includes those who were left out of the community-- she danced them into inclusion.

she danced right through that male space, inviting the women to dance with her,

transforming the public space into one that I imagine became radically inclusive for all genders, for all humans.

Now, you might be wondering where in the world, I mean where in the wilderness, the women got Timbrels from.

Rashi tells us that

the women of that generation were [so] certain (So Certain!!) that the Holy One, blessed be She, would perform miracles for them, they carried timbrels out of Egypt.

Indeed the rabbis tell us again and again that overall the men did not have faith (I guess it's men that complain all the time) and women journey through the wilderness in faith.

Wow. Sufficient faith, sufficient hope, sufficient confidence in this great adventure to carry a timbrel in their sacks, waiting for just the right moment to celebrate.

Here are the ways then, here are the movements through which to get through impossibility:

- Kneading
- Sludging forward
- Walking into the impossible sea
- Dancing into the impossible space with timbrels.

For me, to this day,

the movement required depends on the day,
the mood, the weight and freight, the feel of the burden,
The intensity/density of the sense of impossibility.
The fierceness of the taskmaster.
Sometimes all I can do is slog through,
Other times I can knead my way through to silken dough that
rises through and through.
Or sludge through the sea until it opens to reveal dry ground.
A kind of continuous muddling until whatever obstacle I am
faced with shifts or even becomes its opposite.
Wet becomes dry.
Despair becomes hope.
If only for a short time.
Until we hit impossibility and have to move again.

On days I'm really feeling strong, really feeling *I can*--
I take out my most formidable weapon --
my proverbial timbrel and I leap my way across life's
impossible spaces,
Into closed rooms, ignoring all signs saying do not enter.

I leap my way into the closed spaces where signs have it that
my body is not allowed, my age, my shape my gender,
My being.

Think again now, about your impossibility.
Or the impossibility of the world right now.
With all that we are facing.
An intractable climate crisis.
A plethora of Pharaohs.
World conflict.
Poverty.
Racism.
Gross inequality.
No clear dry ground in the impossible sea.
Even in the face of all that.
A path just maybe, might open up.
Despite so many signs that say Do Not Enter--

Enter.

You are allowed.
I am allowed.
To enter a forbidden space.
A hallowed place
where I where we
can finally breathe the fallow air.
As I am. As you are. As we are.
Full bodied
Full spirited
Whoever you are.
Whatever color. shape, spirit
Proportion of hope and despair
Mix of wet and dry YOU are.
Let us take a full breath into all that is.
This breath.
This dance.
This moment.
This song.
This warm bread of hope.

The ancient rabbis tell us that the song of Moses and the Song of Miriam are two of ten Israelite songs. Nine are currently recorded in the Torah.

The last song is as yet unrecorded.

It is the song of redemption to come.

May each of us have hope enough to carry timbrels, instruments of redemption,

ferreted away in our knapsacks or tucked away in our pockets or even hiding in our briefcases,

carrying them with us always

and merit to take them out at just the right moment,

as we dance and sing and play our way into impossibility.

THE END

