



## ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

### “Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

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#### **Pesach: Roots, Meanings, and Context—Love and Liberation**

##### **Context**

*Pesach*—Passover is the one of the greatest gifts of the Jewish People to humanity. The *Pesach*-Exodus narrative has and continues to inspire great liberation movements in Western civilization. Whereas people so often live according to expected and fixed roles, according to set power relationships, *Pesach* teaches the possibility to improve the conditions of life, and to achieve release from oppression.

Liberation requires us to release confining ideas about ourselves and the Divine, to look forward, and to open our imagination to alternate conceptions. The texts and rituals of this festival initiate participants into change, into hope and liberation. In this unit, we explore fertile imagery and potency in the liberation process and ask challenging questions about the fate of the Jewish People.

##### **Background**

While Moshe is a leader of the Israelite liberation movement in Egypt, the process begins long before him and is much broader than he. Rather than focusing on Moshe's role, here we take a more inclusive look at Exodus events.

At the outset, the Book of *Shmot*-Exodus, tells of seventy souls who descend to Egypt from Israel. The verse states that they came from Yaakov's issue (*Shmot* 1:5); we know that they came with the DNA and from the wombs of Leah, Rachel, Bilha and Zilpa.

The text portrays the fertility of the Israelite families as a mass movement. Well in advance of a new evil king, the Hebrews are conceiving a people. According to traditional commentaries, the Israelite women were giving birth in astonishing ways: to multiple offspring at closer intervals, to more vigorous infants and in exceptional locations.

It is Pharaoh who first perceives the children of Israel developing into a great nation. Their potency to birth massive numbers of robust children arouses his fear,

Look, the Israelite nation is greater and stronger than we (*Shmot* 1:9).

Before any oppression, the Israelites create their identity through their collective, lively, healthy sexuality—conceiving, gestating, birthing, and nurturing.

This generative activity continues even when Pharaoh imposes slavery and bears down on the Israelite people. The Israelite response to the king's oppression is much more proliferation.

The more oppressive the treatment of the Israelites, the more they increased and multiplied. (*Shmot* 1.12)

A midrash elaborates how it is the persistence of the women to birth that earns redemption - "By the merit of the righteous women who lived in that generation, the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt." The midrash describes sensuous scenes in the

fields after the slaves finish their daily work.

Rabbi Shimon bar Halafta said: What did the daughters of Israel do? They went down to draw water from the Nile and God would bring little fish into their buckets. They cooked some fish and sold the rest, buying wine with the proceeds. Then they went out to the fields and fed their spouses. After eating and drinking, the women would take bronze mirrors and look at them with their spouses. The woman would say "I'm prettier than you," and the man would reply, "I'm more beautiful than you." Thus they would arouse themselves to desire and they would then "be fruitful and multiply," and God took note of them immediately. Some of our sages said, They bore two children at a time, others said, six and others said twelve, and still others said six hundred thousand...and all these numbers from those mirrors.... And all these numbers from mirrors... In the merit of those mirrors which they showed their spouses to accustom them to desire; from the midst of the harsh labor, they raised up all the hosts, as it is said, "All the *hosts* of God went out of the land of Egypt" (Ex. 12:41), and it is said, "God brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt in their *hosts*" (Ex.12:51). (Midrash Tanchuma Pikudei 9.)

Exhausted and downtrodden by cruel physical labor, the slaves take refuge in each other's arms, in the pleasures of intimacy and shared delight. The imagery of fish and water, sumptuous dining, seduction, and lovemaking on the earth, among the crops make vivid a daily erotic existence. In spite of the conditions of oppression and misery that might have depressed them, they arouse each other to desire for love and life.

Both at their own initiative and in defiance of the oppression, the Israelites singularly preoccupy themselves with conception, pregnancy, and birthing. Israelite society in Egypt abounds with pregnant, birthing, and nursing women and their infants. Such prolific birthing focuses Israelite attention on caring and nurturing, on the future. Not cordoned off in hospital wards, birthing people, their attendants and families are ubiquitous. An unruly act that obeys no schedules of day or night, birthing mobilizes the energy, concerns, and prayers of all of those who are connected with the life-giving process. Nothing intervenes or takes precedence over attending to birth. Birth drives forward the impetus to liberation, to a better life.

It is not Moshe who initiates the rebellion against Pharaoh's enslavement. Obstinate in the face of Pharaoh, both unnamed and named women instigate the process of overcoming their oppressor. The Israelite birthers, Shifra and Puah and the other midwives, Miriam and Yocheved, and the daughter of Pharaoh all conspire to birth and protect children against the law (Exodus 1:15-16). Midwives have the strength of character, confidence and purpose to defy the mortal ruler and disclose the ruse of his divinity.

The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. (Exodus 1:17)

This verse reveals how Israelite birthing *is* an act of rebellion. By insisting on the integrity of their profession, assisting at birth rather than following Pharaoh's edict to murder newborns, the midwives undermine Pharaoh's power and authority. They assert their awe of the Divine Creator.

The fact that midwives undertake the first acts of civil disobedience in the Bible is momentous. Midwives repeatedly live out the birth process. The explicit aim and profound commitment of birthing and the practice of midwifery are human life and flourishing. Ongoing exposure to the danger and vulnerability of birth and the miraculous revelation inherent in the process inculcate awe and humility.

The *Rashbam* states that the redemption from Egypt is achieved because of the

women who are unwilling to succumb to the evil decrees though no cause for hope is apparent. Through their leadership, a generation arises which merits redemption (Sotah 11b and Rashbam).

Despite the decree of death, women are not disheartened by the hardship of the bondage. Birth promotes conviction in the significance of each unique life, the staggering potential for growth, and the worthiness of freedom. In these ways, the midwives school themselves and their people in liberation.

### *Love Songs*

A less-known Passover observance than the recitation of the Pesach *haggada*—the compilation read and studied at the seder meal on the eve of the festival—is the public chanting of the biblical Song of Songs. This unique biblical book is traditionally recited on the Shabbat during the week of Passover. The Songs inflect the Exodus festival with a focus on intimacy. Male and female lovers express their uninhibited, potent and mutual desire. Rich poetry voices women's and men's erotic delight in one another and rebels against oppressive social norms and institutions. The female lover is likened to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots—perhaps she wreaks havoc there (Song of Songs 1:9). Passion erupts and leaps from the page. The beloved, aroused like spring, approaches. S/He bounds closer, "The voice of my beloved, behold he comes, skipping over the mountains, jumping over the hills" (Song of Songs 2:8). The Exodus awakens us from the slumber of subjugation.

Rather than individuation and separation as the ground and frame for human existence, loving partnership and birth structure life in rich connections and responsibility for the present and future.

Many commentators interpret the Song of Songs as allegorical love between the Jewish People and the Divine lover. The Exodus narrative also reflects this aspect of intimacy.

The human birthing initiative stimulates the Divine to participate in the birth of a nascent people. Aroused by their vigor, and their desire to end their confinement, the Divine joins the birthers and their midwives in their movement against Pharaoh (Exodus 2:23-25).

Egypt—in Hebrew, *narrow places*—is the womb of creation within the infinite where the Israelite people gestates and prepares for birth from the Divine being. The inchoate nation grows and develops self-consciousness, becoming larger and more articulated.

Signaling the end of gestation, Moses' encounters with Pharaoh are the first stage of the liberation birth, "*Send forth* my people that they might celebrate me in the desert" (Shmot 5:1). The Israelites experience the onset of birth—the Egyptians intensify the difficulty of the labor (Shmot 5: 6-9). The divine plagues and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart signify the contractions of the divine birthing body. The muscles tighten—heart and womb, organs of life and sustenance—pump new life forth. The rhythm of contractions is achieved in the text by interspersed intervals of relief between plagues, one following another, "But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart and did not pay attention to them" (Shmot 8:11). The divine cervix that holds the Jewish people within during the incubation gradually softens and dilates as the Egyptians and their ruler experience the quickening of divine muscles.

Toward the end of the labor, the Israelites smear their doorposts with blood; their homes in Egypt represent the uterine enclosure from which they are to emerge (Shmot

12:21-23). The blood offering ritualizes the petition for life and salvation from death. This blood signifies the Israelite intention for safe deliverance through the precarious passageway from slavery to freedom—it fulfills the imagery of the blood of birth at the vaginal opening. The final plague of death that passes over the Israelite homes alludes to the mortal danger of birthing liberation.

Facing the Sea with the Egyptian army at their heels, the Israelites plunge forward—the crowning of the Israelite head in the birth canal; the body of the people follows through.

The Israelites wrest their way from constrained enclosure into the wide world. Pressing out from the divine womb, through the parted waters of the Reed Sea—the birth canal, and between divine spread thighs, the Israelite nation is delivered from Egypt onto the dry land of the Sinai Desert. There, the Divine breastfeeds Israel with infant food—the soft, moist manna from heaven (Shmot 16:13-32). The Egyptian army in pursuit is the placenta, part of the organism which once participated in nurture, now expelled lifeless during the final postpartum closing.

Birth is a transition from enclosure to manifestation—Exodus, a road out. Each birth releases one being encompassed within the domain of another—from powerlessness and dependence into a new and unfolding relationship of connection and mutuality. This approach dilates the *narrows* of birth culture and liberates women and men to participate together in this formative personal and political act.

The Pesach *hagaddah* omits Moshe completely from the text to focus on the Divine redeemer, *His* miracles and wonders, and *His* outstretched hand. Here we focus on liberation as a multi-layered birthing process, what I term *liberation-as-birth*, where the Divine Creator figures as birther partnered with her People.

Traditional Pesach narrative reveals divine potency to act in history *beyond* the laws of the created world. *Liberation-as-birth* reveals miraculous and wondrous divine potency *within* acts of the created world—divine mysteries are hidden in generative creation.

The Israelite people participate together with the Divine in fertile, embodied life-giving. These activities entail commitment to forward-looking attitudes, and to love and connection. They dispose participants to criticize and resist authority that interferes with or contravenes divine Creation, such as the edicts of death that the midwives disobey. *Liberation-as-birth* proposes foundations for freedom in a physiological-spiritual-social matrix of insubordinate love.

*Liberation-as-birth* depends to a large extent on

1. Our concepts and experiences of birth, and
2. Our desires for and commitments to the future of our People.

### *Birth Experience*

To a large extent, the medical profession and Western culture socialize us to accept manipulation and control of birthing women and their partners. Western births tend to normalize the administration of unnecessary drugs that lead to a cascade of interventions and even the cutting of flesh, that is, unnecessary surgical procedures. Under the influence of dominant cultural norms and powerful professionals in white coats, women are laid out supine, drugged, their muscles disabled and deprived of what might be one of the most thrilling, active, enlightening and liberating experiences of life.

Empowering active natural birth initiates people during a formative and vulnerable

experience into extraordinary potential for change, growth, and hope. Participating in a divine miracle, birth has the potential to school us in the foundations of liberation.

### *Future of the Jewish People*

Pesach-Exodus from Egypt traditions and observances have been among the most popularly observed in Jewish communities throughout the world. They have helped forge the identification of many generations of Jewry with the hopeful Pesach outlook. Like the birthing women, their partners, midwives and families, Pesach aims toward a more redeemed condition. Pesach gathers families to share, discuss, question and sing through the night about the formative story of the conception and birth of Jewish Peoplehood. Under any and all circumstances, flourishing or floundering, Pesach-Exodus proposes, inspires, and initiates participants into the possibility of a better future, material and spiritual, for Jews and for all humanity.

Fulfilling the potential of Pesach depends upon writing ourselves into the Exodus narrative. Not only do we experience Pesach as if we ourselves left slavery in Egypt. We also need the forceful drive of the Israelite women and their families, and the midwives who initiated the insurrection, and birthed the Jewish nation. Pesach is a time to convey these precious messages to the generations of our children and grandchildren—a core commandment of Pesach. Pesach nurtures the conviction that Jewish Peoplehood, lifestyles, practices, languages, traditions, beliefs, and hopefulness are worthy and meaningful. Not only on Pesach night, but every day.

Throughout Jewish history, the Jewish People has persisted to birth and to raise children committed to the development and growth of Jewish civilization. In our time, many Jews opt out of this chain of generations—bearing few children, and assimilating into the dominant cultures where they feel welcome, or intimidated by anti-Semitism.

This Pesach, let us discuss, celebrate, and strengthen the indomitable will of Jewry to reveal mysteries of spirit, and to muster conviction to proceed with the fruitful labors of liberation.

### **Observances, Practices and Resources**

According to most estimates, outside Israel, the Jewish birth rate has plummeted below the level needed to reproduce. See Sergio DellaPergola's "[World Jewish Population, 2012](#)" from the 2012 American Jewish Year Book. For a different perspective, see also "[American Jewish Population Estimates: 2012](#)".

The American caesarean birth rate is the highest in the history of humankind, yet less safe than homebirth. [This Canadian study](#) finds the mortality rate of physician-attended hospital births to be nearly twice as high as for midwife-attended homebirths.

Most people relate to natural birth from the point of view of pain, and therefore, fear. This is one of the means by which culture manipulates people's choices. Judith A. Lothian explains, "[Why Natural Childbirth?](#)". "*Giving birth to Oliver was the most profound experience of my life.*" Read [Brandi's](#) and [Alicia's](#) homebirth stories.

### **Questions for Discussion**

Often people are constrained by male images of the Divine from childhood, and from their cultural milieu. A mystical Jewish text, *Shiur Komah* defines the Divine beard and describes the dimensions of *His* body mainly based on verses describing the male

lover in the Song of Songs (5:10-16). Images of the Divine Birther rarely appear in the West.

The prophet Isaiah writes graphically of God birthing and nursing Israel.

“Shall I bring to the point of birth and not deliver?” God says. “Shall I who deliver close the womb?” (Isaiah 66:7).

“For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept myself still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.” (Isaiah 42:14)

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” (Isaiah 49:15. See also Isaiah 56:3; Ezekiel 16:4-7)

Refresh your attitudes and images of the Creator by means of the Exodus-Pesach story in terms of *liberation-as-birth*. How do you imagine the Divine Birther?

Evaluate the liberation needs in your immediate environment—are there groups, laborers, minorities, communities who are living under oppression? How can you contribute toward their freedom?

What assumptions/conceptions/pressures influence choices about birth in your family, community, society? Evaluate problematic attitudes and practices such as control, manipulation, denial of freedom, even violence against women in the birth process. How might you work to dispel fears and initiate people into more physically and spiritually meaningful birthing that might better power liberation?

To what extent does your family, your local and regional Jewish community understand and identify with deep meanings of Exodus-Pesach? How might you enliven this narrative in your personal and community conversations?

Comparing with the Israelite women of Pesach-Exodus, who will take responsibility for building the Jewish People in ours and succeeding generations? How do you see yours and your family's role in Jewish destiny?

### **Summary of Issues**

We read the Exodus-Pesach through the lens of *liberation-as-birth*—a multi-layered birthing process whereby the Divine Creator-birther partners with her People to liberate us and our conceptions from the narrows of oppression. Empowering active natural birth initiates people during a formative and vulnerable experience into extraordinary potential for change, growth, and hope. With commitment to life and connection, midwives and a birthing nation defy mortal pretenders who oppress and seek to enforce edicts of death. Framed in the context of participating in a divine miracle, the force of the Exodus-Pesach birth has the potential to school us in liberation. In our generation, we need to strengthen the indomitable will of Jewry to reveal mysteries of spirit, and to muster conviction to participate in and proceed with the fruitful labors of liberation.

### **Methods & Observations**

This unit draws from my book, [Israeli Feminism Liberating Judaism: Blood and Ink](#). There I develop a feminist Jewish theology rooted in the biblical Exodus.

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