

The Promise of Exile

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The year I spent living and traveling in New Zealand was a year in which I lived entirely on what I could carry on my body. All of us backpackers, bouncing at once together and separate from hostel to hostel, were reduced to the same couple of unwashed t-shirts and pants, essentialized versions of ourselves, stripped of what made us distinguishable from one another. It was a year of living in an exile of sorts, a chosen exile, but exile nonetheless far from my family, from my friends, from a version of myself that I thought I knew.

But, this is not how we normally understand exile. For hundreds of thousands of people, exile brings with it the very real experience of immense suffering and loss. When we think of exile, we think of the involuntary exile of many forced to leave their homes driven by violence and compulsion. We think of being strangers in a foreign land, a choice not of our choosing. This is closer to the exile of Egypt. We may have gone down to Egypt

voluntarily, seeking food in a time of famine, but once there, we found ourselves enslaved at the hand of Pharaoh. In the Book of Genesis, God tells Abraham,

בראשית טו:יג-יד

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יְדַע מֵדַע כִּי־גֵר
יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעַבְדוּ
דֹּם וְעַנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה:
וְגַם אֶת־הַנָּשִׁי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ בֶן אֲנֹכִי
וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְרֶכֶשׁ גָּדוֹל:

Genesis 15:13-14

And God said to Abram, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.

For four hundred years, we would be strangers in a foreign land. We would be enslaved and oppressed, separated not only from our land but also from God. And then we

would go free with great wealth. *Yetziyat mizrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt, marks the redemption from exile, or at least this particular exile.

While we may have been redeemed from our exile in Egypt, that was just the first of what would become a series of exiles in which the Jewish people found themselves wanderers in a strange land. The Jewish story is a story of exile. For many of us, as we make our permanent homes in the Diaspora, we hold a tension between rootedness in our home communities and a religion whose holidays and liturgy is structured around a continued sense of exile. Three times daily, we pray,

עמידה של חול

תִּקַּע בְּשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל לְחֵירוּתֵנוּ. וְשֶׁאֵין
לָנוּ לְמִצְרַיִם גְּלוּתֵנוּ. וְקִבְּצֵנוּ יַחַד
מֵאַרְבַּע כְּנָפוֹת הָאָרֶץ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה
ה', מִקְבִּץ נִדְחֵי עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Weekday Amidah

Sound upon the great shofar for our freedom and raise

the banner to gather our exiles, and gather us together from the four corners of the earth. Praise are you, God, who gathers the dispersed of God's people Israel.

If exile is not a one-off thing from which we were redeemed in Egypt, but rather part and parcel of what it means to be Jewish, then what is the meaning of this exile? Why did God bring us to Egypt to suffer in exile for hundreds of years only to redeem us with God's strong arm? Is exile only a means to an end, the end being redemption, or could there be something redemptive about the experience of exile itself?

One of my favorite teachings comes from the Mishnah of Pirkei Avot. Rabbi Nehorai teaches,

משנה אבות ד:יז
הָנִי גֹלְהָ לְמָקוֹם תּוֹרָה

Mishnah Avot 4:14

Exile yourself to a place of Torah.

It is striking that Rabbi Nehorai chose to use the word exile here. The exile we know is an exile of loneliness, an exile that we would never choose for ourselves but that is chosen for us, something that is altogether uncomfortable and foreign. And yet here we're being told that part of learning Torah is

deliberately seeking out an experience of exile. What is this exile that Rabbi Nehorai encourages us to seek out? What do we gain from it? The experience of removing ourselves from our home, away from the familiar comforts of friends, family, and beloved objects, strips us to our core. We are left vulnerable. In this exile, we are exposed to new Torah and, for once, we are in a position where we open to receiving it.

The year that I spent backpacking around New Zealand was perhaps one of the most formative periods of my life. Still today, I identify myself as a "backpacker," as someone who once carried all my possessions on my back, who wandered from place to unknown place, as I explored a foreign land. That period of exile helped shape me into who I am today. In a part of the world with few Jews, it awakened in me a desire to live deeply in Jewish community. It taught me that sometimes my own company was enough, that I had it in me to get myself where I needed to go and to be okay with doing it alone. Most of all, it challenged me to see myself as distinct from my possessions. My identity wasn't bound up in the style of my clothing, in the books on my bookshelf, or in the objects that defined me. It was something that I carried inside me, something invisible that

translated into the way I saw the world and interacted with those around me.

This year, when we sit our Seders, we will celebrate our redemption. We will praise God's strong arm and give thanks for our freedom. But, the experience of exile will stick with us. May this experience of exile teach us the importance of seeking out new experiences and the willingness to push ourselves beyond our boundaries. May we lean into the discomfort of what it means to be a stranger and may this open for us pathways of new Torah.

Long after our backpacks have been set aside, we remain backpackers. Generations after we have been redeemed, we are a people shaped by our experience in exile. As the poet Yehudah Amichai wrote in his poem on Israeli travel,

מה נשאר? המזוודות על הארון
זה הדבר שנשאר.

What remains? The suitcases on top of the closet, they are all that remains.¹

Long after we return home, those suitcases connect us to all of the places we have been and serve as a reminder of a future exile that may await. ♦

1 Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open*.