

Sting of the Serpent: Reflections on Passover

A Sermon by Rev. Tim Kutzmark

March 24, 2013

Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

THE MORNING READINGS:

FIRST READING

From Let My Nation Go, by Yosef Deutsch, adapted

Our first reading is a re-telling of the story of Moses and his first confrontation with the Pharaoh of Egypt, drawn from centuries of oral Rabbinic tradition.

This is the story's setting: Egypt was filled with rumors concerning the return of Moses. Once an adopted prince, then a fugitive from the law (wanted for murder), Moses was coming to Pharaoh's court with a message from Hashem, the Israelite God. Hashem, rumors said, reportedly spoke to Moses from the midst of a burning bush, telling him to go down to Egypt and free the Israelites, who were all slaves. Moses and his brother Aaron arrive in Egypt and present themselves at the palace.

As both Moses and Aaron strode to the center of the throne room, a shiver of terror rippled through the assembled crowd of advisors, sorcerers, magicians, and sages.

“What do you want here?” Pharaoh asked them belligerently.

“We are emissaries from Hashem, the God of the Israelites,” Aaron replied. “Hashem demands that you let the Jewish people out of Egypt, and free them from their enslavement.”

“How do I know you are really messengers from Hashem?” Pharaoh asked. “Maybe you are just a pair of adventurers and imposters.”

This was the signal for Aaron to take his staff and follow the instructions Hashem had given him.

In full view of Pharaoh's entire court, Aaron threw his staff down to the ground.

“Staff, become a serpent,” Moses commanded.

The staff turned into a serpent.

When Pharaoh saw this, he began to chuckle and giggle like a chicken.

“Do you call these wonders?” he sneered, laughing aloud. “Are you bringing magic to Egypt? Well, my friends, there is plenty of magic in Egypt already. We don’t need any more. We are the international capital of sorcerers and magicians. And what you have done is merely a simple act of magic. You are just laughable. It is elementary magic. It can be done by children who are just beginning to learn the secrets of sorcery.”

The guards brought several children between the ages of four and five. When they arrived, Pharaoh gave them all staffs and told them what was required of them. Each one was able to turn his staff into a serpent.

A mocking laughter reverberated around the great chamber. “How simple it is!” people cried. “Even a young child can do it!”

Pharaoh roared with laughter. “Sages, Magicians!” he shouted. “Turn your staffs into serpents. Let us show these Jews how foolish this demonstration has been.”

All the wise men and magicians turned their rods into serpents and turned to stare mockingly at Moses and Aaron.

The floor was now covered with slithering serpents. Suddenly, Aaron’s serpent lunged forward and devoured all the other serpents. In an instant, they were eaten.

The mocking laughter came to a sudden halt, and all the magicians stared in open-mouthed awe at the spectacle unfolding in front of them.

SECOND READING

From True Grit, by Charles Portis

Our second reading comes from True Grit, Charles Portis’ novel about courage and justice in the Wild West. True Grit was adapted into the hit 1969 film starring John Wayne as U.S. Marshal Reuben J. “Rooster” Cogburn. In the 2010 remake of the film, Jeff Bridges played “Rooster” Cogburn. Here’s the story: Cogburn is hired by a gutsy and determined fourteen-year-old girl, Mattie Ross, on a mission of justice. Mattie wants to find Tom Chaney, the man who murdered her father. We catch up with Mattie just as she is about to shoot the man who killed her father.

I hurriedly cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger. The charge exploded and sent a lead ball of justice, too long delayed, into the criminal head of Tom Chaney.

Yet I was not to taste the victory. The kick of the big pistol sent me reeling backward. I had forgotten about the pit behind me! Over the edge I went, then tumbling and bouncing. I struck the bottom with a thump that fairly dazed me.

It was cold and dark down there, though not totally dark. A slender column of sunshine came down from above and ended in a small pool of light.

My eyes were attracted by something—movement. I leaned over for a closer look. Snakes! A ball of snakes. I flung myself back but of course there was no real retreat for me, imprisoned as I was in the mossy trap.

I cannot accurately guess the number of rattlesnakes in the ball, as some were big, bigger than my arm, and others small, ranging down to the size of lead pencils, but I believe there were not fewer than forty. I had disturbed their sleep in the curious winter headquarters and now, more or less conscious, they had begun to move and detach themselves from the tangle, falling this way and that. This, I thought, is a pretty fix.

One of the smaller snakes approached my hand and rubbed his nose against it. I moved my hand a little and the snake moved to it and touched his nose to the flesh again. From the corner of my eye I saw another snake on my left shoulder. He was motionless and limp. I could not tell if he was dead or merely asleep.

I felt a sting and I saw the little snake pulling his head away from my hand, an amber drop of venom on his mouth. He had bitten me.

THE SERMON

Sting of the Serpent: Reflections on Passover

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It is no accident that the mythological liberation of the Israelites begins with a single serpent—a serpent side-winding across the floor of the mighty Pharaoh's palace. The serpent power had great meaning for ancient peoples. But the serpent power—the sting of the serpent—can still offer us spiritual wisdom in this present post-modern Passover season.

So this morning, let us explore the symbolism of the snake, and see how it intertwines itself in the Jewish Passover story, the myth of Moses and the Israelites finding their way to liberation from Egyptian slavery. Let us see how how this snake power—this snake medicine, as the Native Americans call it—can work its mythological magic in our own personal and spiritual lives. So, with apologies to Indiana Jones—who (in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*) famously said, “Snakes. Why’d it have to be snakes”—let us slither together into the ancient world of the serpent.

Living deep in the crevices of the earth, the snake makes its home in the hidden places. Long ago, at a time when the Earth was worshipped as the Divine Mother, the snake penetrated deep into her being, touching the very core of feminine wisdom and power. In that subterranean womb, Divinity regenerated herself away from human perception. It was there, deep in the earth, in the unconscious, that raw Divine power could be tapped and released. And it was the serpent who became the messenger, the one who could carry the power from the Earth Mother to the people waiting above. In Arabic, the word for God is *El-hay* and the word for serpent is *el-hayyah*. God, serpent; *El-hay, el-hayyah*. The serpent was not only a messenger for the Divine; it could become the Holy One herself.

Among the oldest Goddess figures in Egypt was the Serpent-Mother. Her name was Iusaset. Pyramid texts say this Snake Goddess was the Celestial Serpent, the giver of the food of eternal life. Her symbol was the uraeus, “a headband in the shape of a snake” [with the serpent’s head in the front] . . . It represented insight, perception and awareness . . . wisdom and understanding. It was believed to give “the wearer control of the universe.”¹ The word *uraeus*, means both “serpent” and “Goddess.” The Pharaoh of Egypt is often depicted wearing this serpent headband. Another of the Pharaoh’s headdresses was a great gold hood over and around his head—transforming his face into that of an enraged cobra. The Pharaoh himself was believed to be divine. The serpent headband and hood revealed the source of his power and his divinity. The source was the Goddess, the Serpent-Mother, the bestower of life.

So, when Moses challenged Pharaoh to a serpent duel, he was engaging in much more than a show of magic. Moses was literally throwing down his God at Pharaoh’s feet and saying, “Let’s see which God is more powerful.” Moses was saying, “Is your ancient Earth-based tradition, your power that draws on the feminine and intuition and cool dark hidden places, more powerful than my Yahweh, my sky-God, my God who appears in fire, in raw masculine energy?” It was a showdown between a new God and an ancient, Earth-based lineage. It was a battle between the feminine and the masculine.

It was, in a very real way, like a shoot-out in an old John Wayne western. Instead of drawing pistols, Moses and Pharaoh pulled out their serpents and fired their best shot.

Moses fired one shot only, his one God; Pharaoh responded with multiplicity, filling the room with his many Gods. One lone Israelite serpent pitted against a slithering mass of Egyptian snakes. Things did not look good for Moses and the liberation of his people from slavery.

But in an instant, it was over. Doesn’t change sometimes happen that way? Doesn’t life sometimes happen that way?

Moses’ serpent lunged. Moses’ serpent lunched.

No wonder Pharaoh quaked. No wonder the magicians and advisors were dumbstruck. Before their eyes, they saw the ancient source of their power eaten by this new, upstart Israelite God from the wastelands.

Without the serpent, the Pharaoh lost the symbol of his authority, the protector of his power. He lost his religion and his authority.

Although there was still a long battle ahead to win freedom, and ten plagues to pound the Egyptians into submission, the war was over at that moment. Just as the one serpent ate its prey alive and whole, this Israelite God called Yahweh was going to devour the people of Egypt.

And so, on that Passover night so many mythological years ago, over 2 million Israelites did as Yahweh told them:² they packed up their belongings, put on their walking shoes, and baked unleavened bread to carry on a journey. Then the Israelites slit the throats of hundreds and hundred of lambs and smeared their warm blood over their doorways. The lamb was worshipped as a god in Egypt. By killing the lamb, the Jewish people were declaring the Egyptian gods powerless, they were declaring the Egyptian gods dead. With this act of open rebellion, they sat in the darkness to wait.

Midnight arrived. Like a cobra opening its hood, the God of the Israelites enveloped the land of Egypt. And then Yahweh struck, quickly and without mercy. Rabbinic tradition says that the darkness of the night was instantly dispelled, and all of Egypt was illuminated as if by the midday sun. Thunder and lightning exploded in the skies over Egypt, and a poisonous gas fouled the air. The venom of Divine death surged through the veins of all first-born Egyptians, male and female. According to the teachings of the rabbis, “not all the firstborn Egyptians died right away. One group did indeed die instantly at the stroke of midnight. A second group collapsed and continued to struggle for life until morning. A third group fell mortally ill but managed to cling to life for three days.”³ But this terrible death passed over the Israelites, who were protected by the blood of the lamb smeared on the doorways. As the Divine agent of death withdrew from the land, Pharaoh finally admitted defeat, and told the slaves they were free to go.

Then the serpent appeared again. This time, an entire enslaved people was transformed into a long line, a giant moving serpent, winding its way out of the land which had held them captive, snaking out of the cities of Egypt towards their unknown future.

It is such a direct and simple story, this Passover myth. No matter what our faith or religious conviction, Passover and its serpent’s sting can speak to us.

This myth of slavery and snakes asks us some uncomfortable questions. Are we, in our own lives, slaves to something? Is our spirit—our hope—tied down? Where in our own lives do we feel restrained, limited? Where are we spending our time, where are we putting our effort? Are our priorities in order? Are others enslaved in the world around us? How and where and why do our choices enslave others or subjugate the Earth? Do we, as individuals or as a culture, worship (glorify, elevate, celebrate) things that destroy,

that take us from our inherent humanity? How do these things keep us from making wise and skillful choices? What needs to die in our lives so a new freedom, a new form of life, might emerge?

The Jewish Passover story, and any great liberation story, gives us clues to confront the chains that keep our souls, and spirits, and lives in bondage. The Passover story, and any great liberation story, gives us a map leading to the possibility of wholeness and spirituality.

First, the myths tell us, we must journey to someplace new. The snake must crawl down into the earth. Moses must leave his comfortable life and go down to “Egypt Land.” In our reading from *True Grit*, young Mattie must leave home and fall down into the dark pit behind her. In short, we must go beneath the surface of our situation, we must go beneath the surface of our lives. We must find a deeper understanding of what forces are at play. We must ask the questions that penetrate. On the surface, Moses’ story tells us, we will find only reasons for more enslavement and more worship of the current situation. On the surface, Mattie’s story tells us, we will only find more cowboys posturing for a gunfight. We must go down to the center, to the core, to the truth that has been exiled from the surface of our lives.

Then, we must confront the serpent. In that deep place, the myths promise us, there waits a power and a wisdom that will change and transform us. But we must be willing to search for it. We must be willing to reach for it. Call that power and guidance what you will: call it God, call it the Goddess, call it the Universe, call it your Higher Power, call it human potential. But call it something, and let us claim it. In our reading from *True Grit*, Mattie must allow her hand to touch that snake. Moses must take his staff in hand and hold that power. Conscious contact must be made. But know that contact comes with great risk, because, the stories tell us, if change and liberation are to occur, something must die. In nature, the serpent must shed its skin. In the Moses myth, a new power must destroy the old one, a great death must sweep over a land. In *True Grit*, Mattie’s father must die, she must shoot another man, and then she herself must be bitten with deadly venom. Change is not often easy or pretty. Transformation and liberation come at a price. The great myths ask, “Are you willing to pay that price? Are you willing to let something die in order to claim something new?”

But don’t expect to know what that newness is going to be, how it will look, or what it will feel like. The unknown is part of the serpent’s sting, part of the mythic journey. We know we must leave something behind, but we have no guarantee of what we will get in return. We must lose sight of what is coming next. For the serpent to shed its skin, its eyes must become cloudy as the skin passes over them. Moses and the Israelites must walk into the wilderness, moving towards a place they’ve never seen. Mattie must sit in the darkness where she can barely see the shapes moving around her. We must lose sight in order to learn how to see a new way. External sight is taken from us in order to gain inner sight, what we call insight.

This is the legacy of Passover, the gift of the serpent's sting. We must go down beneath the surface. We must confront the power and wisdom that await us there. We must let something die. We must use new eyes to walk forward into the unknown.

Passover promises that if we do these things, we will one day catch sight of a Promised Land. We will one day taste the sweetness of knowing our true self. We will one day liberate those around us. It may take longer than we can even imagine. We may never actually finish the journey. But Passover promises that if we have epic courage and epic commitment, life can be somehow be born anew.

1. Ted Andrews, *Animal Speak: The Spiritual and Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small*, p. 361.
2. Rough average of various Midrash estimations. Source: Yosef Deutsch, *Let My Nation Go*, p. 13.
3. Andrews, *Animal Speak*, 293.

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