



Pesach Day III
April 11, 2020 / 17 Nissan 5780
How Can We Keep From Singing?
by Rav Hazzan Aliza Berger
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

[sung] My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation. I hear the real, though far off hymn, that hails a new creation. Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing. It sounds an echo in my heart, how can I keep from singing?

Every year when we read the Passover story, and every time we sing the Song of the Sea, I wonder what it would have been like to be an Israelite passing through those tumultuous waters. I imagine them exhausted after weeks of not sleeping because of the plagues and because of the Egyptians crying in the night. I imagine them worn tired by the journey to the sea. I imagine the way their heartbeats must have thundered in their ears as they crossed through the waters, the way they must have panicked with each squelchy step, turning to see Egyptians approaching from behind.

And that moment, the ultimate moment, when they reached the other side and watched the waters crash down on their pursuers. What did they feel?

Were they relieved? Did they feel grateful that the Egyptians were made to suffer? Or did the loss of life upset them? Were they upset that God's brilliant plan to free them required oppressing and afflicting the Egyptians?

We don't know how they felt. All we know is that when those waters crashed down, the Israelites and the angels burst into song.

God rebuked the angels strongly, saying, “how can you celebrate while my creations are dying?”

God rebuked the angels, but God did not rebuke our ancestors. The Israelites kept singing.

Why? Why was it ok for our ancestors to sing, but not the angels?

At the heart of this story is a core paradox of human existence. Many times, our redemption, our glory, our freedom, comes at someone else’s expense. It’s not our fault. And often there’s nothing we can do about it one way or the other. It’s not wrong for us to be happy about our circumstances and to praise our good fortune. But it is important for us to find our better angels, too, and acknowledge the unintended consequences of our good fortune.

Let me give you an example. Recently, there was a story in the New York Times about a young newlywed couple from South Africa. A few days after they started their honeymoon at a 5-star resort in the Maldives, South Africa shut down its airports with only hours’ notice. The couple didn’t have time to fly home, and worried that if they left the resort, they would get stranded somewhere less pleasant. So, they stayed. They woke up late, snorkeled and swam on the beach, and ate delicious meals in the hotel’s luxury restaurant. Aside from a much heftier bill than they had planned for, for them, being stranded in paradise was pretty great.

But for the staff working at this resort, their trip extension has been anything but paradise. Hotel employees are required to stay at the resort until the last guest checks out, at which point hotel employees must quarantine themselves for 14 days before they can go home. While this newlywed couple is having a fabulous vacation, the hotel staff are bored and lonely and have no idea when they will be able to get back to their lives. They are trapped in purgatory

while this couple is in paradise. This situation is no one's fault. The couple didn't set this in motion. They didn't make the rules. The countries at play are doing their best to protect their people and to stop this pandemic. The hotel staff did nothing wrong. And yet, somehow, one group of people is redeemed while another group is held in bondage.

This doesn't just happen in the Maldives, it happens in our lives all the time.

We go shopping and score a bargain on a beautiful blouse. We celebrate the find, the savings, the joy it brings us without thinking about the many people laboring in tiny sweat shops in far-away countries whose hard work and tears brought that garment into reality. It's not our fault that they work in terrible conditions, but it also doesn't feel fully right for us to celebrate without acknowledging their sacrifices.

We love our cars, the way we can just jump in and whiz off to any destination we desire. Is it wrong to only think about our own transportation and not to consider the ways in which our carbon emissions further destroy the atmosphere and negatively impact those in the most precarious positions in the world?

We are hired for a job and celebrate that achievement with our friends. After looking for so long, it feels so good. At our celebration, should we be thinking about the many people who applied and didn't get the position in addition to our own gratitude for success?

There are so many moments in which we celebrate our walk to freedom, without acknowledging the casualties of our success. Our tradition does not ask us to stop singing. On the contrary, our tradition demands that we sing.

Today and all days, we begin the morning by singing the Song of the Sea. We sing the very melody that symbolizes both great liberation and terrible suffering. We remember not just

what it felt like to reach the safety of dry land, but also the horror of watching Egyptian soldiers crashed to pieces by the waters. In the face of that complexity, we sing.

Chef Emrys Young, chef-owner of Kitchen 216 in Albany, knows this deeply in her core. Each day, she and her husband Wasiim go into the restaurant with their toddler, Nubia, and cook meals for their many loyal customers. For them, the shut-down hasn't been so devastating. In fact, they're sending out more than 200 meals a day. They're making a living despite the intensity around them. In the face of this pandemic, it would have been totally reasonable for Emrys to simply sing with gratitude that she is still able to provide for her family.

But that wasn't enough for Emrys. She knew that even though she was having a moment of opportunity, there were so many in her community who were struggling as a result of the very same world events. Albany city schools closed on March 16. On March 17, Emrys and her husband began serving free and highly nutritional meals to kids in need. Each day, she and her husband make 75 meals to distribute for free, though as she shared with the Times Union, they often end up giving out more because it's hard to say no to hungry children.

As Emrys shared recently, "with everything else we're doing, it's not that difficult or expensive to do the lunches too...we provide enough food that there's enough for dinner too...if this madness goes on for months, kids with no money and no real food pretty much can get by on this. That's why we do it."

In other words, it may be totally reasonable to sing just for our own gratification, for the blessings that blossom in our lives. But tradition demands that we look around to see what collateral damage there is, and demands that we do our part to make it possible for others to sing too.

As we sing in the Song of the Sea, *Mi chamocha baelim Adonai* “Who is like you, Oh God?”

Every time we lift our voices in song, every time we extend our arms and our resources to help others sing, we are. *How can we keep from singing?*