

## Getting Out of Egypt<sup>1</sup>

Rev. Myke Johnson

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

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Passover celebrates the ongoing human journey toward freedom. Freedom is a sweet word in America, perhaps the best loved word in our patriotic lexicon. When we were mad at the French, what did we name our fries? Freedom fries! Those who stand out on the sidewalks protesting the war in Iraq hold not only their signs but also cling to freedom of speech and dissent. And just as passionately, those who fight on the front lines in Iraq hold the dream of bringing freedom to the Iraqi people. What do any of us love best about America? Sweet land of liberty, we sing, let freedom ring!

And yet, freedom is not such an easy legacy, not just a celebration song. Americans can learn a lesson from the Seder Haggadah. Each year Jewish people hear again the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into a new life of freedom. But they are also instructed to look upon themselves as if they personally had come out of Egypt. They are invited to give attention to their *own* freedom journeys. And so must we all.

It is not so easy to get out of Egypt. Each generation has had its Moses and its Pharaohs, and sometimes they were even the same people. America is a nation built on a dream of freedom. America is also a nation built on slavery and colonial power. From the very beginning, these two Americas vied for the right to forge the way to the future.

Black poet, Langston Hughes wrote,  
Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.  
(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.  
(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

...Let America Be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.<sup>2</sup>

The dream of America is a journey toward freedom. The dream of America is a journey toward equality. Marianne Williamson, author of *Healing the Soul of America*,

writes that “every generation must relearn and recommit to the foundations of democracy, as they are something that can never ever be taken for granted. The strength of the democratic concept has not gone away—but neither have the forces of narrow-mindedness, dominance, and fear that would threaten its existence.”<sup>3</sup>

In every generation we must look upon ourselves as if we personally had come out of Egypt. And in every generation, if we look honestly, we know that we are tempted like the Israelites to go right back into Egypt again. Each age must struggle with the questions and the challenges of freedom, must give more than a rousing cheer and a boisterous song.

What are the challenges of freedom we face in our own day? Look around us! America has become the military super-power of the world. It has the power to enter a foreign country and unseat its government, with or without allies. Now that the war with Iraq has been going on for three years, many people want to forget the questions of conscience that were raised by the whole world before it began. Many want to forget the questions of international law that were raised by the world after it began. But the questions are just as relevant as ever.<sup>4</sup>

After World War Two, the countries of the world set up the United Nations as an arbiter of international freedom. The U.N. Charter, which the United States has signed, prohibits war without Security Council authorization. It has been working to establish an International Criminal Court to deal with despots, dictators and those who violate human rights. But the U.S. defied the U.N. Security Council to invade Iraq, and also has refused to acknowledge the authority of the International Criminal Court.

We still confuse *freedom* with *doing whatever we want*, whatever we can get away with. We confuse *freedom* with *not having to answer to anyone*. But that’s the false freedom of a bully, an outlaw, a tyrant. That freedom depends upon depriving others of their choices.

True freedom within a community is democracy—sharing cooperatively in the decisions which affect the whole group. In a democracy, knowledge is shared; issues are discussed; people gather to sort it out. In a democracy, power must be balanced, so no one can be a Pharaoh, and no one need be a slave. In a democracy, no one is free unless all of us are free.

Will America embrace restraint and multilateral decision-making in our international relationships? Will we honor the international rule of law and our signed treaties? Or will we continue in the direction of unilateral dominance, and arrogant disregard for the opinions of humankind? Are we on a journey of freedom, or becoming a Pharaoh over the world? It is not so easy to get out of Egypt.

We live in a time when our dream of America is facing dangerous new threats. Acts of terrorism have paralyzed the imagination of the people, and in fear, people look for a strong protector, security, control. In the last few years in America, we have seen imprisonment without trial or access to lawyers, surveillance without warrants or notification. Refugees have been arbitrarily detained and deported. It might be easy to blame the current President for the shrinking of our civil liberties—but what is more frightening is that the majority of American people have been willing to go along with it.

One of my own relatives, a woman I dearly love, said to me a while back, “I don’t want to have a conversation about civil liberties or the war in Iraq. I trust President Bush.” She is a sweet person who is comfortable letting someone else make the decisions. And she is not alone. How many of us are willing to give away a little bit of our freedom, are willing to let someone else take over, so we can feel safe and comfortable? It is not so easy to get out of Egypt.

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams also struggled with questions about freedom in his day. He witnessed the transformation of Germany into a Nazi regime. The Germans were facing difficult times. They had just lost a war and the economy was in a shambles. Hitler had answers. He didn’t seem like a monster at first. He was elected democratically. He promised jobs and a good climate for business. He didn’t start limiting freedoms until a terrorist attack left people feeling afraid, until the country was at war, and national security was at stake.

James Luther Adams asked the Americans of his day, and asks us as well, what makes us different from the Germans under the Nazis? The Nazi mentality, the Egypt mentality, is to silence our questions, to give over our conscience to someone else. To close our eyes and our minds so that we no longer measure justice against injustice, but trust others to handle it.

Forty-some years ago, there was a controversial psychology experiment about the nature of obedience. Participants, all Americans, were told that they were measuring learning capacity. They were instructed to administer an electric shock to someone they thought was another participant in the study. Whenever this person gave a wrong answer, they were asked to raise the level of the shock. In actuality, the other person was an actor who intentionally gave wrong answers, and then pretended to be suffering increasing pain and eventual unconsciousness. This actor begged the participant to stop the shocks. Even though many grew alarmed about inflicting severe injury to another person, sixty-five percent of participants continued to obey the directions.<sup>5</sup>

The Nuremburg trials after World War Two upheld the responsibility of individual conscience over the duty of obedience to government. Each person was held accountable for their actions. Each person has a moral obligation to stay awake.

It wasn't easy for Moses to convince the Pharaoh to let the slaves go free. But it also wasn't easy for Moses to convince *the slaves* that freedom was a good idea. Once they reached the desert, they threatened Moses, saying, "At least in Egypt we had food to eat! Why have you brought us out to the desert to die?" Americans believe in freedom, but it is not so easy to get out of Egypt. Deeply ingrained in us also are the Pharaoh and the slave. Egypt is familiar and safe, and in every age, we grumble about how much trouble it is to go into the desert.

The story of Exodus tells us that it took ten plagues for the Pharaoh to let the slaves in Egypt go free. One of those plagues was the plague of frogs. The river swarmed with frogs, they came up into the palace, the common houses, the bedchambers, the ovens, and even the bowls for kneading bread. Pharaoh said, "Get rid of these frogs and you can go!" But once the frogs were gone, he refused again. Each time a new plague struck, he said, "Stop the plague and you can go." But when the immediate trouble was over, he refused again. When he did let them go, he followed after to get them back. It took ten plagues for the slaves to get out of Egypt, and even then, the slaves *wanted* to go back. It is not so easy to get out of Egypt.

I had a dream in which I met the queen of England while I was out walking. In the dream, I said to her, "I'm from America, we don't believe in queens." And yet, I'm afraid we still do. We fought a revolution to get rid of the bonds of royalty, but we didn't quite let go. One of our favorite fairy tales is the story of Cinderella. The common kitchen girl becomes a princess. We hate royalty, but we still fall in love with the prince.

There is another story about frogs which fits here. I am told that if you try to put a live frog in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately leap out to save itself. But if you put a frog in a pot of cold water, you can slowly raise the temperature until it is boiling, and the frog will die without a struggle.<sup>6</sup> We are like that frog. We know we love our freedom. None of us would want to live under a Saddam Hussein or a Hitler. But if, bit by bit, our freedom is traded away, will we notice before we find ourselves in really hot water?

We have these two possibilities before us—tyranny and freedom—and every choice we make will strengthen one or the other. Are we wrestling with the hard questions, or are we turning over our conscience to someone else? Are we expanding knowledge and participation, or narrowing it? Are we concentrating power and wealth into fewer hands, or more? Are we trying to control others, or trying to make room for more voices to be heard? Are we heading out of Egypt, or back into the clutches of the Pharaoh?

I believe the dream of freedom is alive in each human heart. We may be distracted by our fears, or deceived by power, but we yearn for this freedom, this America, this Promised Land. Despite oppression, despite hardship, people for generations have been following that dream. Robert Kennedy said, "It is from

numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he [or she] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”<sup>7</sup>

The Passover story is a story of hope. Whether you believe in a God of miracles or not, *this* Passover God is a force for liberation. The Israelites in Egypt might have lingered forever in slavery. But God told Moses to tell Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” What is *most holy* is on the side of freedom. Moses didn’t have to lead the people out by himself. God led the people out.

There is a sacred power, within us, beyond us, which calls us out of slavery, compels us toward freedom. God is the impulse within us to leap out of the pot of hot water, to risk the desert. God is the hunger for freedom in our souls.

When I say *God*, this is what I mean by *God*—the one who calls us out of Egypt and into freedom. When I say *God bless America*, this is what I mean by *America*—in the words of Langston Hughes,

“O, let America be America again—  
the land that never has been yet—And yet must be—  
the land where every [one] is free.”

*God bless America.*

- <sup>1</sup> Copyright 2006 by Rev. Mykel Johnson and Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church. Permission to reprint must be requested from [office@a2u2.org](mailto:office@a2u2.org), and is usually granted.
- <sup>2</sup> An excerpt from Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again" 1938. The full poem can be found in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, published by Knopf, 1994, or on the internet in many sites.
- <sup>3</sup> p. 17.
- <sup>4</sup> On September 16, 2004, Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, speaking on the invasion, said, "I have indicated it was not in conformity with the UN charter. From our point of view, from the charter point of view, it was illegal." For an analysis of the U.N. position on the Iraq War, see the article at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_UN\\_Security\\_Council\\_and\\_the\\_Iraq\\_war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_UN_Security_Council_and_the_Iraq_war)
- <sup>5</sup> Stanley Milgram, professor at Yale, conducted these experiments in the early 60's.
- <sup>6</sup> E.W. Scripture, (1899) *The New Psychology*, pp. 300-301.
- <sup>7</sup> South Africa, 1966