

“Oy Vey!” Is Not a Strategy

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

January 26, 2014

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Two weeks ago I started a new adult religious education class on the Old Testament. We kicked things off with what may be my all time favorite story in the Bible: the Exodus. The Exodus narrative has everything. It has drama, action, tragedy, excitement, the triumph of the human spirit, and an overarching message of hope in the face of adversity.

The general details of the story are familiar to you, I am sure if you were raised in a Jewish or Christian tradition. If you weren't then you probably caught "The Ten Commandments" on TV some time – that is the exodus. Joseph became the steward of Egypt and as a result the Hebrews moved in. Over the generations they became the slaves to the native Egyptians. God, through his spokesman Moses, brings ten plagues against Egypt as punishment for not freeing the Hebrew slaves. Eventually Pharaoh relents and the Jewish people are off on a decades-long journey to the Promised Land. But as the Bible tells us, simply

being free from Pharaoh's lash does not mean the end of their oppression. There is much adversity that they face as they wander through the wilderness. One artist drew a great cartoon with the caption, "Finally Mrs. Moses had had enough" and it shows Moses wife asking the local tribesmen for directions to the Promised Land.

I doubt that actually happened, but there are plenty of references in the Bible that the Jewish people had had enough of this wandering around and not getting anywhere. Just about any time adversity came their way, one of their first reactions was, "Oh, woe is us! Why were we sent out of the land of Egypt only to encounter this suffering? You know life back there wasn't so bad. Maybe if we ask Pharaoh nicely he will forgive and forget, and we can return to the status quo." This causes a great deal of anger for God, and even more stress and frustration for Moses.

The text of course is trying to convey the short-sightedness of the Israelites who left Egypt. Moses and some of his leaders have the vision and the courage to keep going to the Promised Land even though they obviously don't know the direct route of how to get there. The Biblical author has little sympathy for these complaining Israelites. God proclaims that the generation that left Egypt will not see the Promised Land – their children and grandchildren will but not them. They are too

infected with a slave's mentality. Although I doubt it is written down in the Bible itself, one tenant of the law is "Thou shalt not go back to Egypt." Thou shalt not long for the days of passivity and oppression. You are called to be your own people and to stand up for yourself. It is a very empowering message and one that oppressed people looking for hope have turned to many times throughout history.

But you know, the more I read this narrative, the more sympathy I feel for those Israelites longing for Egypt. Yes it was terrible, they could not worship the God of their ancestors and they had to work for Pharaoh, but Egypt had one thing that neither the wilderness nor the Promised Land had going for it: it was known. They were familiar with what that life was like. Yes a little suffering in the wilderness and the length of the journey to the Promised Land probably tinged their perception of their experience as slaves in Egypt. It is only human nature to cling to the past, because we know what that experience is like far better than we can imagine what the Promised Land will be like.

The other reason I find myself more and more in sympathy with those complaining Israelites is that the exodus story isn't really initiated by them. It is a political, and perhaps cosmic, struggle between Moses and the Pharaoh, or between God and Pharaoh if you will. The Israelites follow Moses, but they didn't really have a say in how the

events of their freedom unfolded. They go along with God, they put lambs blood over their doors and leave Egypt without bringing their leaven. Most of the circumstances that lead to their freedom were outside of their control. It happened to them not because of them.

I think this is a subtle, yet important commentary on our life. We are not always in control of what happens to us as much as we would like to believe. This is certainly true in America, the land of opportunity, the self-made individual, where with hard work and ingenuity you can make anything of yourself. This is a myth that has been among us for a long time, but was articulated by people like Horatio Alger in the early twentieth century. It has continued from them until now, and this myth of the self-made individual persists in just about every self-help book and motivational guru you meet. We like to think that we can enact any change in our lives and that anything is possible and any child can grow up to be President. That is a very empowering myth. Yet like all myths, it is not literally true.

There are lots of things that happen to us that are not under our control. There are circumstances in our lives that no amount of money, or energy, or creativity could have avoided. I see this most often with people who have lost a loved one. There are times when we say something in anger to a friend or a relative; we still love them but we

all fight from time to time. Then they get the news that their parent or loved one has died, and this person realizes that the last words they spoke in this life to their beloved were of anger. These people are wracked with guilt and remorse over that fight. It is not uncommon for them to confess to feeling as if that fight caused or hastened this person's death. Even when they admit this, and acknowledge that it seems ludicrous from a rational point of view, it still feels that way. Eventually, as time goes by and healing occurs they come to realization that they are not omnipotent. Their words and actions did not actually kill this person they loved. It was an unfortunate coincidence; but correlation is not causation.

We all have this ingrained assumption that our actions affect the world in ways in which they just don't. Life happens to us, as it does for the Israelites who left Egypt, and there isn't anyone to praise or blame. It simply is. The corollary to this is that when bad things happen to us, or perhaps to other people too, we assume that they did something to deserve it. It is their fault. The book of Job explores this in great detail, and the answer eventually is God does what God wants to do and we as human beings don't really affect things as much as we like to think we do. While I am not so sure about the God part of that reasoning, it is true that sometimes bad things happen to us, just because. We hate that. We want a story, we want a reason, and if we don't get a reason

then we will make one up, like the myth of the self-made individual. Deborah Riegel would call that an “Oy Vey” moment.

Sadly our church has been faced with our own series of Oy Vey moments. For the past few years our membership has bounced up and down, not too high in either direction. However some of the leading givers in the church have gotten older and their life circumstances have changed. These folks have been very generous to First Unitarian Church over the years, and unfortunately their numbers have been too few. As time has gone on, in many cases they passed away. In other cases they may have moved or had a son or daughter take over their finances. For whatever the reason, they have had to cut back on their giving to the church. This is perfectly understandable. However the past three or four years has seen a kind of perfect storm where a number of these large donations have dried up, and we have been faced with difficult decisions in cutting staff so that we can live within our financial means.

In reflecting on her own “Oy Vey” moment in the airplane, Deborah Riegel writes, “for most of us, it doesn’t take a literal nosedive for us to experience an ‘Oy Vey’ moment. It can come when we realize that an old relationship isn’t working any longer, or that our schedules seem to be managing us rather than the other way around, or even that

we've run out of steam to tackle the next personal or professional goal. But 'Oy Vey' isn't a strategy – it's an indication that an intervention is in order? What kind? Sometimes it's crisp, clear, practical direction we need, as in, 'Here's what to do, and here's how to do it.' ... And other times, all we really need is a simple, powerful question to help us tap into our rich reserves of inner wisdom – questions like, 'What do I want?' 'What's working?' and 'What do I need in order to move forward?'"

Riegel is talking about two kinds of change. The first kind she says is crisp, clear and practical. This is known as “technical change.” Technical change, while not necessarily easy to do, is at least easy to understand. One knows the problem, and knows the solution. The change is just a matter of doing it. I often think of examples from our building, although there are plenty of others. My favorite is: there is a leak in the roof, or better yet, a leak in one of our many roofs. The problem is fairly easy to understand, some of the details can get technical if you wish, but a leaky roof is a fairly straight forward problem. Furthermore the solution is pretty obvious too – get someone to fix said roof or put a new one on. Having the resources to enact the solution can be a challenge; roofs are expensive and a good contractor is hard to find. But most of the time the way forward is, conceptually at least, pretty clear.

However there is another kind of change that is more murky and less obvious. This is called “adaptive change.” Adaptive change is something that goes beyond a technical fix. An adaptive change is just that; the circumstances of life that are beyond our control have altered. We as an organization need to change in order to adapt to the new reality. If you have ever read the book “Who Moved My Cheese?” by Spencer Johnson, you know about adaptive change. In essence this is the sort of change that faced the Israelites when they were told, “Look we have to go. Don’t bother bringing your leaven, we are off and out of here to some place God will reveal to us.” You might know that your circumstances have changed, you might understand that change and maybe even accept that you are living in a new normal, but where to go, how to live, what will happen, these questions remain open ended. As Riegel says sometimes all you have are your questions. Whereas we come to technical change with an attitude of “Let’s solve the problem” we have to come to adaptive change with a much more humble heart. Rather than seeing things as problems to be solved we have to shift into “What can we learn?” If we must adapt, then we need an attitude of curiosity that holds open many possibilities. Not all of those possibilities are good, and not all of them are bad – but they are different than what we have known, and that in itself is no fun.

For the past few years we have reacted to having less money as a technical problem. You have less money then you raise more money; done and done. Thus budgets that the congregation has seen have reflected this technical change approach. However the new staffing plan is different. It presents not a solution to a problem, but a way of adapting to a changed set of circumstances. We could simply throw up our hands and shout “Oy Vey!” And that might actually be healthy for awhile. I know I have felt like that at times. But Oy Vey isn’t a strategy; it isn’t a real response to our changed circumstances. This new plan is.

Well as the Bible tells us, the Israelites didn’t react too well to their adaptive change of wandering through the wilderness. I think it is a little too easy to judge them and their attitude. After all, we the readers know how story turns out; they didn’t. We know that there is a Promised Land that eventually they get to. They didn’t. The Israelites didn’t know that around one of those bends, over the next sand dune perhaps, was a place far better than the Egypt they knew. But getting to that Promised Land required of them some imagination, some perseverance, and a slowness to judge and blame. The generation that left Egypt couldn’t let the past go. They carried the Pharaoh and pyramids and all of that with them into the wilderness and would have done so into that new Promised Land so that it looked a felt a lot like Egypt; because Egypt was all they knew.

I think that too is a lesson for us. The past has wonderful lessons to teach us. Our past is something we should be rightly proud of. However, if we are not careful, if we are quick to judge, narrow in our thinking, and give up on the journey too soon, then the past can be like an albatross around our neck. Adaptive change is difficult. It is painful in the short term. There is grief work for us to do. I would deny no one that time. But letting things go can also be good for us if it means we now focus on the most important aspects of being a church. We can let go of the things that maybe distract us, or derail us. We can focus more on our mission and less on preserving a particular vision of an institution. We can focus on how we make a difference in the lives of people out there in our community, now unburdened by “the way we have always done things.” Less can be more.

My friends, I invite you to take a journey with me. We don't know where we are headed in precise detail. But leave your leaven behind – something tells me you won't need it. There is an exciting, and yes at time scary future ahead. But the unknown invites new possibilities to be born. Come, let us journey together with courage, hope, and love. Amen Blessed Be.