

**Headspace: Hermit Crabs** live in shells they carry around. They outgrow shell several times a lifetime and ditch the too-small shell to snuggle into a new one. So much learning is unlearning. Six years ago, I realized how many theology books I read by white *men* who never paid any social cost for their faith AND who never even bothered to acknowledge their privilege. I've thrown out easily a hundred of their books. A big part of my learning is unlearning, re-learning.

Caroline gave me a book by **Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg**. It's a book of Midrash on the book of Exodus. What is Midrash? Heb., interpretation. Midrash can refer to the collected writings of Rabbis commenting on Torah (differing, playful, imaginative, conflicting)...Midrash is also stories about the stories in Torah—stories that fill in the gaps, embellish, interrogate, wrestle with Torah in light of our present experience. On our pastor team, Caroline Kittle has done most work on Midrash. Today we'll do a little Midrash on key text in Exodus (Lydia)

Importance of Exodus: **Daniel Boyarin**, a Queer Orthodox Jewish scholar who says say at **Council Nicea** in 4<sup>th</sup> C.--[Nicene Creed] arguably the beginning of Western Christianity dominated by Europeans--an edict came down to **separate Easter** from **Passover**. [Passover celebrates emancipation from slavery in Exodus] Even though suffering-death of Jesus happened during Passover, Easter could not be celebrated at Passover, and Passover themes could not be applied to Easter. It was Council of Nicea's way of separating Christianity from Judaism. It also **decentered** European Christianity from the Exodus story. As if the Jesus story and the Moses story are separate stories: whereas Jesus story is Midrash on Exodus story.

De-emphasizing Exodus has served purposes of **White Supremacy**. Exodus is liberation theology. Liberation Theology is considered controversial, suspect in white dominated forms of Christianity. Most Black, Brown, Indigenous theologians would see that in the Exodus story, the power of Pharaoh in our day is White Supremacy, something most white Christians are blind to. In fact, white-washed Christianity doesn't even think to ask, "How are we like Pharaoh" and instead, quickly identifies with Israel. Reagan, who was part of rolling back civil rights, frequently referred to America as a "a city set on a hill" (Jesus term for Israel.)

Let's do some Midrash with this text from Exodus: *A long time after that, the King of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried; their shriek for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moanings, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and God knew.* (Exodus 2: 23-25)

**Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg** says three escalating words for crying used here: *anacha* (groaning) *za'aka* (cried) *shav'a* (shriek for help) followed by *na'aka* (moanings)—which seems to sum up the previous words. Followed in short order by God hears, God remembers, God sees, God knows. She says this text marks "**a sense of violent opening of the channels linking God and the world.**" Up to now, just catalog of brutal oppression. No voices of the oppressed are heard. It takes the death of the Pharaoh

and with it a glimmer of hope before the Hebrews are in touch with their pain enough to express it. It's like oppression brings with it a grinding dullness and it takes a glimmer of hope before you feel the pain enough to express it—openly, vocally. This surge of pain-vocalization is the beginning of redemption.

**Let's dig deeper: their shriek for help rose up to God.** If I were doing Midrash, I would tell of a time I heard a shriek for help that jolted me as Israelites shriek for help jolted God. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary next week, a time of reflection. Late wife and I deeply connected, born in neighboring hospitals a day apart. High School sweethearts. Came to UM together. Came to faith in Jesus together, did all our church-making together. She died in Oct 2012. Memorial Day that year I broke my ankle, Labor Day, she broke hers. Labor I was putting away some cups in cupboard when I heard a blood curdling shriek for help. Usually I'm super calm in a crisis. But this shriek jolted me, and I bolted to see where it had come from, screaming "Where are you?" She was in bathroom, she was on the floor her lower leg pointing in the wrong direction in agony, worse ankle break I'd ever seen. I knew I couldn't move her, called ambulance—as I'm driving behind it to the ER call my daughter Amy, totally lost my calm, sobbing. So rattled. Their shriek for help rattled God, jolted him into action.

**Deeper still** in Midrash. "***Their shriek for help rose up to God and God heard their moanings.***" Rabbi Akiva, born shortly after Rabbi Jesus died, has a midrash on this. A story about the story. Rabbi Akiva said "na'ka," (moanings) is the voice of nechenal' (word play with na'kah) and it means the voice of the **suffocated**. Furthermore, Rabbi Akiva in midrash said **Pharaoh's police would strangle the Israelites**, and their bodies would be buried in the walls of the buildings built by their own hands.

What a grim horror. Often building projects of Pharaohs have horrors in the shadows. Like our Border Wall, with kids separated from their parents living in cages. For those with ears to hear, Scripture is not just comfort; it also causes us to sit with grim horrors. This Midrash about Pharaoh's police suffocating the Hebrews and burying them in the Egyptian walls built by slave labor, causes us to **sit with** horror of oppression on the oppressed—in ways that Black and Brown and Indigenous People are forced to sit with stories of horror throughout their lives.

Direct line between Pharaoh's police force suffocating Israelites and police violence against Black and Brown bodies today.

Now let's do our own Midrash: "***their shriek for help rose up to God***" **Bishop Elect Darrell Goodwin**, spoke to us about BLM Protests as an **Uprising**, his preferred term. I grew up in Detroit, most segregated city in US at time. I lived through the 1967 riots as they were called in White Detroit. Unaware that among Black Detroiters, rising up against the police force of Pharaoh, the riots were known as the Uprising [2017, Michigan Chronicle].

In Exodus, this is the beginning of redemption: their shriek for help rose up to God who heard their moanings (cry of the suffocated) Yes, redemption begins with the uprising of the oppressed and those who stand with them, like Moses, who traded his unearned advantages as member of Pharaoh's household for his allegiance to the Israelites.

Maybe put a finer point on it: Exodus says redemption began with the oppressed crying out, and not with God. Their shrieking moved God, activated God, and this sparked what Avivah Sonberg calls “**a violent opening of the channels linking God and the world.**”

Hmmmm. When Jesus healed people, he said, “**Your faith has made you well.**” Maybe a time or two he said, God healed you. Never I healed you. But most often “Your faith has made you well” He ascribed agency to the oppressed in their liberation. What an empowering thing to hear. *Your faith has made you well* is a kind of **midrash** on the redemption story of Exodus.

What if we saw the rising up of Jesus in this light? The resurrection would not be a move of religious supremacy: Shizzam! My Jesus is more powerful than your Mohammed, Your Buddha, Your Vishnah, Your Philosophers. What if, instead, we saw his rising up as an **enacted Midrash**: part of a much longer story of the shriek for help and the *na’ka*, the moanings, the voice of the suffocating rising up to God.

We could write our own resurrection midrash **to fill in the gaps** of the gospels—which don’t depict the very moment of uprising. Maybe the resurrection of Jesus could be understood as the last throes of his suffering as the dead Jesus groans, and what begins as whimpering moaning intensifies into shrieks for help, until his voice is channeling all the screaming, all the wailing, shrieking and howling of all of the oppressed over the ages until God hears, God remembers, God looks upon, God knows. And maybe the point of this is that we hear, we remember, we look upon, we know, we act.

Starting a new monthly virtual group: Facing White Supremacy in our Families and Ourselves. Meet monthly for an hour, we will read a book that started as a series of podcasts by Laylah Saad: *Me and White Supremacy*. Audio format: 12 minutes. Email me [ken@a2blue.org](mailto:ken@a2blue.org)

Prayer for everyone doing the spiritual work of dismantling White Supremacy in themselves so we can dismantle it in society:

*Spirit of God, disrupt, dismantle and deliver us from the demonic power of White Supremacy, even as Jesus, delivered the Garasene Demoniac from a legion of devils in his day—restoring him to his right mind and sending him back into to his community to bear witness. Restore us to our right minds in our day. Cause us to unlearn what the Pharaohs of this world have taught us not to question, so we can bear witness in our families, among our friends, and neighbors and co-workers, what the Lord has done in and for us. Amen*