

Liberation and Renewal

Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Once again we come back to that time of year when Jews celebrate Passover -- the liberation of the ancient Hebrews from bondage in Egypt -- and Christians celebrate Easter -- the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. For Jews, the celebration of Passover is among the most important holidays of the year because it commemorates the central events which created the Jewish people. For Christians, Easter is the most important celebration of their religious year because it celebrates the core event underlying Christian belief, resurrection of the Son of God.

From the perspective of Unitarian Universalism, however, these holidays need to be viewed a bit differently. After all, few UUs actively practice a traditional form of Judaism and few, if any, UUs believe in the literal resurrection, let alone the divinity of Jesus. So if most of us can't celebrate Passover or Easter as practicing Jews or Christians do, does that mean these celebrations have no meaning for us? I don't think so. Whatever UUism has become, it's roots are sunk deep in the Judeo-Christian heritage. So I think it's important for us to seek out whatever meaning we can from the stories and symbols of both Passover and Easter.

For me, this process is greatly helped by thinking mythically. While many modern people have come to view myth as something essentially false, nothing could actually be further from the truth. In reality, as Joseph Campbell says, myths are about things that never were, but always are. Not factual truths, but eternal verities. Neither historically accurate accounts of the past nor pure fantasy and make-believe. Myths contain symbolic and archetypal truths about the human experience and offer valuable insights about our own lives and how to deal with all the perennial challenges of being human. When viewed through the lens of myth, the stories of both Passover and Easter offer a host of valuable insights.

Of course, the stories of these two holidays deal with many spiritual concerns. That said, it's clear that liberation -- the process of being freed from oppression -- is central to the symbolism of Passover, while renewal -- the regeneration of life -- is core to the meaning of Easter.

Since it's the more ancient holiday -- and the one connected with my own religious background -- I'm starting with Passover. In thinking of the Exodus story archetypally, we first need to reflect on the place in which the story is set, the land of Egypt. One of the more interesting aspects of the Passover story is the name of this place in Hebrew, which is Mitzrayim. The traditional derivation of the word Mitzrayim means "narrow places" or "constricted places."

Symbolically speaking, any state of oppression, any diminishing of human dignity, any loss of group or personal identity is a place of constriction, an Egypt. What oppressed group has not experienced a sense of diminished hope and aspiration in the face of tyranny and prejudice? From a personal perspective, any state of existence in which we

are alienated or exiled from our true selves is also an Egypt. Who among us has not found him or herself in such a narrow, constricted place -- a place seemingly without options -- at some time in our lives?

Then we have the two central characters in the Passover story: Pharaoh and Moses. The first is the enslaver and the second the redeemer from bondage. One figure represents a consciousness which seeks to oppress and control, while the other symbolizes the human urge toward freedom and self-determination. The despot and the liberator. It's not surprising that Black slaves called Abraham Lincoln their Moses, nor that modern-day Egyptians referred to Hosni Mubarak as a contemporary Pharaoh.

These two archetypal figures can also be seen from the perspective of the development of personal consciousness, for each of us possess some of the qualities of both of these figures. We might think of them as our Inner Pharaoh and Inner Moses. The Inner Pharaoh represents the aspect of us that keeps us enslaved to old beliefs, old ways of being; who keeps us from feeling truly free to claim our individuality, our personal and collective power. And who does not feel a stirring deep in our hearts when manifest our inner liberator and finally claim the freedom and autonomy that it our birthright?

Perhaps this is why the story of the liberation of the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt has provided inspiration for so many individuals and peoples seeking freedom, including African Americans, women, and gays. Most recently, this story is being re-visioned to support the work of those seeking to free the Earth from the bondage of human exploitation.

Another powerful teaching of the Passover story is the idea that freedom isn't free, but rather requires the courage to leave old familiar ways behind us, to be willing to set off into the unfamiliar, the confusing, and the unknown. We can see this illustrated in the story of the arrival at the Red Sea, when the Israelites looked behind them to see the army of Pharaoh racing to attack them. Confronted with the first real threat to their new-found freedom, they decided slavery was preferable to the dangers and uncertainties of freedom. We are reminded here that the struggle for freedom requires taking risks and finding the courage to face the fear of reprisal from all the powerful forces that seek to enslave.

I can certainly identify with the symbolism of the Passover story, of the struggle between Pharaoh and Moses, in the my own life during the time I wrestled in my mid-twenties with my sexual orientation as a gay person. The oppressive power of the family and culture -- and the inner voice that would prefer to repress my sexual nature to avoid confrontation with that power -- was enormous. And to this day, I remember the *unbelievable* sense of *liberation* the day I finally decided that nothing was as important as embracing who I was.

One of the teachings I particularly remember from the Haggadah, the text used during the Passover Seder, is that every person is obligated to think of him or herself being redeemed from bondage in Egypt. In other words, we are expected to think of the story of the Exodus as an event that is still unfolding, that the work of liberation remains unfinished. We are also reminded that each of us has a role to play in the process of liberation, both of ourselves and others.

If the struggle for liberation is the central theme celebrated at Passover, the yearning for renewal lies at the core of Easter. While revisioning the Exodus story may offer some challenges for Unitarian Universalists, finding a meaningful way of appreciating the Easter story confronts us with some serious theological dilemmas. For starters, UUs do not consider Jesus to be the Son of God, a uniquely divine being who was sacrificed for the redemption of a fallen humankind. In our effort yo UUs embrace Jesus' vision of universal love and compassion, we focus on his life and teachings rather than his death and resurrection.

While I think there is great value in looking at Jesus as an historical teacher and religious reformer, I also know that much of the story of Easter -- like much of the rest of the story of Jesus -- is actually mythically inspired. Stories of divine figures very much like Jesus were commonplace all around the ancient Mediterranean. They often spoke of virgin births and miraculous nativities, as well as sacrificial deaths and rebirths or resurrections. Dionysus, Osiris, Adonis, Mithras, and Tammuz were but a few of these dying-and-rising gods. Indeed, most of the supernatural, miraculous aspects of the Christian Gospels have parallels in these pagan traditions. The similarity between these stories and the Gospels was a source considerable embarrassment and frustration to many of the leaders of the early church.

Comparative mythologists, like Joseph Campbell, tell us that these stories of gods who die and are reborn symbolize the cycles of earthly fertility and decay. From this perspective, these dying-and-rising gods are like seeds which are sown in autumn, lie dormant during the winter, germinate in the spring, grow into fullness during the summer, and are harvested in the autumn'

The ancients drew spiritual parallels from the cyclical rise and fall of vegetation through the progression of the seasons to the human experience of life and death. In doing so, they fashioned beliefs about the perennial fertility and creativity of the human spirit, as well as about some aspect of human consciousness that never dies. The stories of these ancient divinities also incorporated teachings about the inevitability of suffering and death, as well as about the life's endless ability to renew itself.

These ancient pagans -- together with a group of early Christians known as the Gnostics -- understood the mythic nature of the stories they were telling. Unlike the rest of the early Christians, they recognized that the death and rebirth portrayed in the stories of their gods was meant to teach us about our own process of dying and being reborn, our own capacity to renew the life within us. In response, the Christian hierarchy ultimately suppressed the pagan teachings and declared the Gnostics to be heretics.

Happily for us, we can separate the historical teacher and revolutionary named Jesus from the mythological god who dies and is reborn eternally. This mythic Jesus offers us a powerful symbol of the miracle of life endlessly renewing itself. In embracing this vision of Jesus, we, too, can honor Easter as a joyous celebration of that renewal of life.

Both Passover and Easter are hopeful holidays, each in its own way asking us to ponder the capacity of the human spirit to grow and evolve. Passover reminds us that

the struggle for freedom and autonomy is worth the effort, that we can overcome tyranny and oppression. Easter teaches us that life draws its abundance from a eternal, boundless source, a source which is accessible to all who seek it. In the spirit of both Passover and Easter, I pray that the twin blessings of liberation and renewal may come to us, to all the peoples of the world, and to the Earth which sustains all living things.

Blessed be. Amen.