

Passing Over into Deserted Lands: Pesach as Mourning

By Dr Annette Miryam Boeckler

*In grateful memory of my friend Sue Gordon (1956-2010)
and my teacher cantor Marcel Lang (1956-2009).
Dedicated to their families and friends.*

Jewish festivals have — as so much in Judaism — many different meanings and aspects. Usually we interpret Pesach as the beginning of Jewish peoplehood and focus on our families and/or our congregations. Or we focus on Pesach's message of freedom from bondage. But as with liturgy generally, it is our situation that creates a festival's message, and so each year the same festival may feel slightly different.

Many of us will have been thrown back in our preparations for this season of liberation by our sudden sense of loss as we heard of the death of Sue Gordon. Halachically, of course, Pesach, like the other festivals, puts an end to a mourning period, but we cannot stop our feelings. This year we inevitably will feel a gap, and therefore I would like to show how it may be possible to accept this and integrate it into this year's Pesach. Let us discover a new aspect of the Pesach story: perhaps it can also teach us how to cope with loss in our lives.

The Hebrew word Pesach means “to pass over”. To mourn the loss of somebody means to pass over borders, to end up in a deserted area, trackless, lonely, strange.

Judaism, however, calls the same experience “Exodus”, or “new beginning”. After some exciting family stories in the first book of the Torah about the ancestors of humanity, Adam, Eve, Noah and his family, and about the ancestors of the Jewish people, Abraham and Sarah, Yizhak and Rivka and Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah, our ancestors experienced extremely hard times, which the Torah calls “Egypt”. On Pesach we commemorate the end of that suffering in Egypt.

Some years ago I discovered Rabbi Ruth Sohn's poem “The song of Miriam”, which fascinated me. Till then I had always looked on the bright sight of Pesach and had regarded freedom as an

ultimate positive situation, but this poem reminded me of the realities of life:

“I, Miriam, stand at the sea,
and turn
to face the desert
stretching endless and
still.
My eyes are dazzled
The sky brilliant blue
Sunburnt sands unyielding white.
My hands turn to dove wings.
My arms
reach
for the sky
and I want to sing
the song rising inside me.
My mouth open
I stop.
Where are the words?
Where the melody?
In a moment of panic
My eyes go blind.
Can I take a step
Without knowing a
destination?
Will I falter
Will I fall
Will the ground sink away from under
me?

The song still unformed –
How can I sing?

To take the first step –
to sing a new song –
is to close one's eyes
and dive
into unknown waters.
For a moment knowing nothing risking
all –
But then to discover
The waters are friendly
The ground is firm.

And the song –
the song rises again.
Out of my mouth
come words lifting the wind.
And I hear
for the first
the song
that has been in my heart
silent
unknown
even to me.”¹

*Ozi ve-zimrat yah
vayehi li yeshuah !
My strength and my song is God,
He is become my deliverance. (Ex 15:2)*

Ruth Sohn's poem opened my eyes to the situation which the Torah calls “freedom”, and I wondered if this was a place where I actually wanted to be. Would I have wanted to leave Egypt if I had lived in the times of our ancestors? Would I have wanted to pass over into this life-threatening place that Mehri Niknam describes as follows:

“A desert is not what most people in the West imagine it to be. It is not a place where Lawrence of Arabia comes riding a white steed. Desert is a wilderness. It is vast. A desert is so hot ..., when the sun rises to its peak in the desert it is so boiling hot that you feel it tightening your skin as it wrinkles it. And then when it is cold it isn't a pleasant coldness. It is so cold that it curdles the blood. And then you have the sand, which normally you think of as going to the seashore and paddling. Which is isn't. This sand is the grit that you feel under your teeth and it's so dry, so without moisture, without relief, that you feel your whole mouth is tightening, tightening, tightening, as if you can't breath any more because it is so dry.

“And yet when it rains, it isn't the pitter-patter of rain; it's a deluge. It's like

Noah's flood. You think, 'Oh my God, I'm going to die because of this, this gush of water that is coming, there is nothing to hang on to. The water's going to take me with it.' And so the feeling of life and death, of extremes, is very, very real, of this constant struggle to make some sort of balance and to be able to get on.

"And the other thing of course is that the desert is a very, very lonely place. It is lonely because it is so empty. It is empty except the shadow in the day and the shade in the night. There is nothing else that one can see or touch. And yet because of this emptiness it becomes so full because the sense is that although all is vastness, in there is just me — a tiny, tiny me in the middle, and yet this vastness is filled with me. So you get these two opposing feelings: that I am everything and yet I am nothing."²

So are you prepared to pass over with our ancestors into the desert, as the Haggadah says: "In every generation all individuals should regard themselves as if they personally had come out of Egypt?"

This year, Kol Nefesh Masorti is experiencing such a Pesach, because passing over into a desert is a metaphor for mourning and loss.

A guidebook about mourning³ says: Mourning is to wander in the desert. Without having wanted or having planned it, we find ourselves in a trackless, lonely place. We ended up in an area in which we are alone. We are different from anything ever before in our lives, on our own. Even more: we encounter ourselves in an intensity and exclusiveness, we never knew before. The longer we walk, the less we see any beginning or end. We only see desert, vast emptiness, loneliness. We don't know how long this time in the desert will last.

Mourners experience their lives, especially in the beginning of the mourning period, as desert stories. The proximity of people, however well-intentioned, cannot save them from feeling lonely, and many mourners prefer to be alone.

Our ancestors in the desert felt not only weak and lonely, but also angry and aggressive. They wildly complained. Sometimes they even longed for Egypt's

onions and cucumbers (Num 11:5). Although they got the *man* and quails, it wasn't what they wanted. Changing their identity from being Egyptian Hebrews into becoming the people of Israel, they needed to experience these chaotic desert times to develop their new identity. The same applies for mourners. Such a desert-time is the necessary interval between our past lives and future possibilities.⁴ The desert belongs to the essence of mourning. At the beginning of the desert wandering we don't know the end or the goal. We don't even know if this way has an end at all, because a mourner stands, as no one else, on the border of life. Only much later, after the desert wandering has

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ended, will one know if one has developed new strength in this time. Only later, in retrospect, the desert wanderings can be explained and understood and will become meaningful. As long as we are in the desert this is not perceptible, not decided yet. The desert time gets its energy from this tension, to pass away in this desert of loneliness, anger and guilt or to pass over to develop a new identity. The desert always is both: life-threatening as well as identity-generating. The desert wandering is a necessary time, but not meant to be our permanent home. We hope that there is an end and that we will discover a new land, new life, despite what lies behind us.

We certainly will need some guidance in this desert. And we will get some. The desert is the place of Sinai and of encounters with God and with oneself. As Rabbi Lionel Blue confessed: "Eventually I got to like no-man's-land. And God must have liked it too, because he was more present to me there than in any place of pious pilgrimage. I learnt a lot about love in no-man's land — not cupboard-love but

the real sort — and it lasted longer than any other kind. ... I don't think you can get very far without paying one a visit, whether you call it a desert or wasteland or no-man's-land. Where else do you learn to see the truth without illusion, and give role-playing a rest? Where else can you get in touch with your own religion — not other people's? Where else do you love the truth for its own sake, and God too, because he is truth?"⁵

Maybe this year's Pesach will be harder for some of us than last year's, but it bears a chance to be full of meaning, as we focus on Pesach as a means to help us to mourn, to pass over into the desert, to receive Torah and new life, a renewed identity. Maybe this year we will understand the message of the Mazzot as "bread of affliction", and maybe we will understand better the symbolism of the kittel, worn by the leader of the seder.

But as we know: Israel's desert wandering took 40 years. Although a mourning period is a bit shorter, it, too, will take a lot of time. Desert wanderings take time and they require a lot of patience with ourselves and with others. But the struggle is worth it, as we are promised a new identity, born out of the strength, trust, guidance and love that we experienced during this time in the desert. It is worth it to leave Egypt, therefore let's have the courage to regard ourselves as if we personally have come out of Egypt. Although we in Kol Nefesh ended up here without having been asked, let us have the courage this Pesach to make our own decision to dare to wander in the desert.

¹Ruth Sohn, quoted in T. Cohn Eskenazi, A.L. Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, New York, 2008, p. 406.

²Mehri Niknam, quoted in *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship vol II: Prayers for the Pilgrim Festivals*, edited by the Assembly of Rabbis of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, London, 1995, p. 703.

³The following is based on M. Schibilsky, *Trauerwege: Beratung fuer helfende Berufe*, Duesseldorf, 4th ed 1994, p. 116-118.

⁴The following is again based on Schibilsky.

⁵Lionel Blue, *My Affair with Christianity*, London, 1998, p. 94.