

The High Price of Freedom

By Phyllis Chesler

Why don't battered women leave, and why don't men and women leave abusive, even dangerous workplaces? Why don't more people flee sadistic and criminal families? In short, why don't slaves and those who are most grievously oppressed simply run away?

Battered women know that they'll probably be killed when they leave, and when they do kill their batterers in self-defense, they know that they'll be jailed for a very long time. Many employees do not leave their low-paid dead-end jobs for the same reason that most high-paid employees, both women and men, do not quit when they are sexually harassed or raped or routinely humiliated—because they need the money. They also know that they may get re-victimized and blackballed if they complain.

One pays a high price for remaining in place—but freedom exacts an even higher price. When you're enslaved, you think, "Well, it could always be worse," or "Others have Masters who are more terrible," and "At least I have enough food to survive." One's capacity for hope becomes diminished; one settles for "what is."

As we learned in an earlier Parasha, in Vaera, slavery/captivity "shortens" one's spirit, afflicts one with "kotzer ruach," a "shortness" of imagination. All thoughts of freedom or of liberation are dismissed—anyone, like Moshe, who dares talk of liberation is mad, cruel, bent on endangering an enslaved people even further.

Thus, what happens in our current Parasha, Beshallach, even after God has visited the tenth plague (the killing of the first-born) on all Egyptians and Pharaoh has "sent" us away—certainly long before God parts the sea for Israel—the

slaves have already begun complaining. The B'nai Yisrael are terrified by Pharaoh's 600 chariots in hot pursuit and say to Moshe, "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you've taken us out to die in the wilderness?"

Even after the sea has parted for us and then covered Pharaoh and his soldiers, even after both Moshe and Miriam sing songs of gratitude and joy to God—there we go again. We are thirsty and there is no water. That which we find at Marah is "bitter." Britain's Chief Rabbi, Efraim Mirvis, suggests that the *people* are "bitter," and everything they taste is therefore also "bitter." Oh, my God! Even camped where there are twelve springs of water and seventy date palm trees—my people remember the "pots of meat and bread" in Egypt and accuse Moshe of bringing them out only to die of starvation in the desert.

Here's the thing. We're no longer in Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden; we've been thrown out to labor on our own, to survive "by the sweat of our brow," to face all manner of adversity. Eve gives birth in pain—the act of Creation is painful, not easy. Creating freedom, creating a people—harder still. It's a process that may take millennia. It might be a forever task.

How, exactly, are we meant to leave Mizrayim? Do we ever really leave? Because each year we are back again right there.

About nine years ago, I wrote, but did not publish, some thoughts on "Leaving Egypt in Haste." I had in mind, as I still do, perhaps even more so now as rabid, toxic incidents of Jew hatred all over America as well as globally and on the internet compels me to think of where can I—where can all Jews and our allies flee *this* time? Other than the moon, where is it safe for Jews?

We could not have left Egypt on our own. Can we do so now? Is Israel itself ever safe? Is the lesson that we must be prepared to fight Evil eternally? And now, we have what Jews

have not had for a very long time: A sovereign state, a Defense Force... Here's a bit of what I formerly wrote:

We left Egypt in haste—and this is written in haste.

How can I leave Egypt? I am in the midst of dealing with an unexpected development related to my work. I have serious deadlines. How can I possibly leave?

Leave Egypt? My doctors are all here. Just today I have two doctor appointments. I'm wrestling with an eye infection. I have pages to edit. Where am I going?

How is it possible for me to leave Egypt? And so, the question becomes: How can I leave my body which, as one gets older (a blessing, considering the alternative), increasingly becomes another kind of Egypt. Can I undertake a long walk in the wilderness on my walker? Do I have enough suitcases just for my meds?

How can I ever leave my son, my family, my friends?

Grandchildren are coming. Family is arriving. There is a Pesach table to set...

But History is waiting. A nation is being born. A people are about to be freed.

Prithee pause for just a moment. I have not even mentioned the extraordinary women who've, in addition to God, Moshe, and Aharon (Moshe's brother), also made the story possible: Yocheved (Moshe's mother), Miriam (Moshe's sister), Shifra and Puah (the civilly disobedient midwives), Zippora (Moshe's Midianite wife, who saves his life), Batya (Pharaoh's daughter who adopts Moshe). When we read Beshallah, we also read the haftarah about the prophet and judge Deborah, "the fiery woman." And we must not forget Yael, the Kenite woman who slays Sisera, the King of Canaan, a people who had been oppressing the Israelites for twenty years. He's another

version of Pharaoh.



I wish you, one and all, a safe journey across the stormy sea;
a safe landing on the other side; onions and garlic and savory
meats in your desert manna; and an ultimate and eventual
redemption.

Next year, in Jerusalem!

First published in [Phyllis' Newsletter](#)