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MY  
GRANDFATHER'S  
BLESSINGS

*Stories of Strength,  
Refuge, and Belonging*

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## THE REAL STORY

WHEN I WAS small, my extended family felt that my parents' lack of religious practice was scandalous. One year I was invited to a Seder at the home of one of my relatives who felt that I should be exposed to the ways of my religion.

The Seder is the elaborate ritual dinner that celebrates the holiday of Passover. My first Seder was not a good experience. The prayers and readings of the Passover story were in Hebrew, a language I did not understand. It went on for many hours, and no one was allowed to eat until the last amen. I had been expected to sit patiently without explanations through all of this. By the time the chicken soup was served, it was nine o'clock and I was in tears.

"I'm never going there again," I told my grandfather. "I hate Passover. I hate that stupid story."

"Ah, Neshume-le," he said with a sigh, and then he told me his own version of the Passover story. It goes like this:

Thousands and thousands of years ago the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt. Like slaves everywhere, they suffered greatly and they had a dream of freedom. Their leader, Moses, spoke to God about this dream and the terrible suffering and God encouraged him to go to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and tell him to let the Jewish people go. Not surprisingly, Pharaoh refused.

Discouraged, Moses went back to God for help. Faced with the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, God sends suffering, in the form of a plague on the land of Egypt. "Suffering has great power to soften

the heart," said my grandfather. But the Pharaoh still refused to free his slaves.

God sends another plague. And another. But the Pharaoh had hardened his heart to both the suffering of the Jews and the suffering of the Egyptians. He makes promises to Moses and goes back on them. Finally God sends the angel of death to take the first-born son of every Egyptian family. This is too much even for the hard heart of the Pharaoh, and he tells Moses that the Jews are free to go.

"Is that the end of the story, Grandpa?" I asked. "No," he said gently, "actually it is only the beginning." I was pleased. The Seder had been so long that I was certain that the story was longer than this. "What happened next?" I asked. He smiled at my impatience. "Well, Moses brings the news of their freedom to the rest," he told me. "Are they very happy, Grandpa?"

"No, Neshume-le, they are not. They told Moses that they did not want to go. They asked many questions. Where are we going? Who will feed us? Where will we sleep? Moses was deeply surprised. He could not answer any of these questions and he did not know what to do. How could he tell God that after all that He had done to make freedom possible, the people did not want to go?"

I was surprised, too. "But they were suffering, Grandpa. Why didn't they want to go?" My grandfather looked sad. "They knew how to suffer," he told me. "They had done it for a long time and they were used to it. They did not know how to be free.

"But when Moses went back to God to tell Him what had happened, God was not surprised at all. He said to Moses, 'Tell the people that I, Myself, will lead them out of Egypt to the Promised Land.' Now," my grandfather said, "this is a very rare thing. Usually God sends others, a Seraph or an Archangel or a Messenger to carry out His Will. But this He will do Himself. Moses tells this to

the people and very begrudgingly they leave their homes and go out into the desert. There is no food there, there is no water. And they live there for forty years."

I was shocked. "But what about the Promised Land, Grandpa? Wasn't it true?"

"Yes, it was true, Neshume-le, but the choice people have to make is never between slavery and freedom. We will always have to choose between slavery and the unknown."

"But how can they live without food and water?" I asked in distress.

"They have God, Neshume-le," my grandfather said softly. "Every morning God rains Manna down from heaven and the people eat it. By noon it has evaporated. Every night they shelter beneath the great wing of His presence. Day after day they worry and doubt and day after day God is there. After forty years, even the most doubting of them had learned that God can be trusted. And then they come to the Promised Land."

I sat for awhile thinking of this story, my mind full of pictures. One of them was an image of a long ragged line of people, moving out from the land where they had lived for generations into the darkness and emptiness of the desert, with all their bundles of belongings, their dogs and their cats and their crying children. And at the head of this procession of complaining, worrying, and doubting people is God Himself, in the form of a Pillar of Fire.

"Why does God come Himself, Grandpa?"

"Ah, Neshume-le, many people have puzzled over this question and have thought many different things. What I think is that the struggle toward freedom is too important for God to leave to others. And this is so because only the people who become free can serve God's holy purposes and restore the world. Only those who

are not enslaved by something else can follow the goodness in them."

It was almost twenty-five years before I went to another Seder. This time, the service was in English. We all participated by reading parts of the Seder ritual assigned to us by our host. The part I was asked to read contained an obscure command from God. It states that in each generation it is a parent's obligation to tell their children the Passover story and specifies how this is to be done. "And thou shall relate it to thy children in that day, saying, 'This is done on account of that which the Lord did unto me, when I came forth out of Egypt.'"

This phrase is repeated two or three times over in the ritual. Each time I read it aloud, I wondered what it could mean. Why should God insist that something that happened thousands of years ago be personalized in this way? But reading it aloud for the third time, I suddenly realized the truth in it. The story my grandfather had told me did not happen thousands of years in the past. It is happening now. It is the story of every patient I have ever treated, every person I have ever known. It is my own story.

The slavery that keeps us from following our goodness is an inner slavery. We are trapped by ideas of worthlessness and lack of self-esteem, by desire or greed or ignorance. Enslaved by notions of victimhood or entitlement. It is a story about the fear of change about clinging to places and behaviors that are small and harmful because letting go of them will mean facing something unknown. I heard again my grandfather's words: "The choice is never between slavery and freedom; we must always choose between slavery and the unknown."

Freedom is as frightening now as it was thousands of years ago. It will always require a willingness to sacrifice what is most familiar for what is most true. To be free we may need to act from integrity, on trust, sometimes for a long time. Few of us will reach our promised land in a day. But perhaps the most important part of the story is that God does not delegate this task. Whenever anyone moves toward freedom, God Himself is there.

It has been said that sometimes we need a story more than food in order to live. For generation after generation in the ritual of the Seder, first the soul is fed by this story. Then we eat the chicken soup.

Few of us are truly free. Money, fame, power, sexuality, admiration, youth; whatever we are attached to will enslave us, and often we serve these masters unaware. Many of the things that enslave us will limit our ability to live fully and deeply. They will cause us to suffer needlessly. The promised land may be many things to many people. For some it is perfect health and for others freedom from hunger or fear, or discrimination, or injustice. But perhaps on the deepest level the promised land is the same for us all, the capacity to know and live by the innate goodness in us, to serve and belong to one another and to life.