



*A Prophetic Voice in Jewish, Multireligious, and American Life*

## ***FORTY YEARS AGO: DEATH AND RESURRECTION***

Rabbi Arthur Waskow

Death and Resurrection? Christian theology, of course, centers on that rhythm. Traditional Jewish prayerbooks also praise the God Who "gives life to the dead," but most modern Jews have either deleted or bowdlerized or ignored that passage. Forty years ago, I was the kind of activist secular Jew who not only ignored that passage, but ignored the prayerbook altogether.

Yet precisely forty years ago I experienced a profound - and profoundly unexpected -- death-and-rebirth of my own self, deeply intertwined with the American agonies of that spring, that year.

On March 31, 1968, I was a secular activist and writer in the civil-rights and antiwar movements, a Fellow of the progressive/ radical Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. I lived in the Adams-Morgan neighborhood, then scruffy and bursting with political energy, not yet Yuppyland. I had just been nominated by a neighborhood caucus to be one member of an antiwar slate seeking election as DC's delegation to the Democratic National Convention scheduled for that August in Chicago.

That evening, my co-workers and I were thunderstruck by President Lyndon Johnson's TV speech announcing he would not seek another term, and instead would seek a serious peace in Vietnam. Suddenly it seemed our antiwar slate could win, the war could swiftly end.

Spontaneously, from around the city antiwar activists converged on Lafayette Park, across from the White House, to dance and sing in joy that the killing would stop. The police arrested one dancer, then fifteen minutes later de-arrested him and brought him back to the park. We felt as if the government had fallen.

There followed an Era of Good Feelings in American politics and society.

And then on April 4, Martin Luther King was murdered.

To me he was not just a distant charismatic speaker. I had spent nine years working day and night against racial injustice and the Vietnam War -- and one of those nights I spent in an unbearably hot back room at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964, helping to introduce members of the Credentials Committee to Dr. King. He had come hobbling on a broken leg, sweating his heart out, to urge them to seat the integrationist Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as the real Democrats from Mississippi, rather than the conventional all-white good ol' boys.

One by one by one by one, the Credential Committee members came out to listen to Dr. King explain again and again what life was like in Mississippi. They didn't want to hear what he was telling; they feared Lyndon Johnson's rage if they voted for the Freedom Democrats. So King worked and sweated, sweated and worked. Charisma? Forget it. Indeed, I had never seen anyone work so hard.

That was the King I mourned on April 5.

By noon on April 5, Washington was ablaze. It was touch and go whether 18th Street - four houses from my door - would join the flames. Just barely, our neighborhood's interracial ties held fast.

By April 6, there was a curfew. Thousands of Blacks were being herded into jail for breaking it. But the police did not care whether whites were on the streets. So for a week, my white co-workers and I brought food, medicine, doctors from the suburbs into the schools and churches of burnt-out downtown Washington.

And then came the afternoon of April 12. That night, Passover would begin. For me, it was worth doing because it echoed years of family and mentioned freedom. It was my only Jewish ritual, a bubble in time that had no connection with the rest of my life.

So I walked home to help prepare the Seder. On every corner, detachments of the U.S. Army. On 18th Street, a Jeep with a machine gun pointing up my block.

Somewhere within me, deeper than my brain or breathing, my blood began to chant: "This is Pharaoh's army, and I am walking home to do the

Seder."

"This is

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army,

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to do

the Seder.

This is

Pharaoh's

army ..."

King's last speech came back to me: "I am standing on the mountaintop, looking into the Promised Land. I may not reach there, but the people will." Even I, ignorant though I was, knew that was Moses talking.

And the songs came rushing back to me that we had sung in Atlantic City four years before with Fannie Lou Hamer of the Freedom Party: "Go tell it on the mountain, let my people go!" "Must be the people that Moses led, let my people go!"

Yes, this is Pharaoh's army, and I am walking home to do the Seder.

Not again, not ever again, a bubble in time. Not again, not ever again, a ritual recitation before the real life, the real meal, the real conversation.

For on that night, the Haggadah itself, the Telling of our slavery and our freedom, became the real conversation about our real life. The ritual foods, the bitterness of the bitter herb, the pressed-down bread of everyone's oppression, the wine of joy in struggle, became the real meal.

For the first time, we paused in the midst of the Telling itself, to connect the streets with the Seder. For the first time, we noticed the passage that says, "In

every generation, one rises up to become an oppressor"; the passage that says, "In every generation, every human being is obligated to say, we ourselves, not our forebears only, go forth from slavery to freedom."

In every generation. Including our own. Always before, we had chanted these passages and gone right on. Tonight we paused. Who and what is our oppressor? How and when shall we go forth to freedom?

To my astonishment, these questions burned like a volcano within me, erupting like the volcano in my city.

Years later, I learned that Dr. King had been planning to take part that night in his first Passover Seder, with his co-worker Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He had passed over to a different promised land, but he was present not only in my family Seder but in thousands of Jewish homes that Seder night. You might say -- resurrected.

Shortly after, our slate of delegates, chaired by a young Black minister in the Kingian mold named Channing Phillips, pledged itself to support Bobby Kennedy for President. We were elected. When Bobby's body joined the other dead, we nominated Reverend Phillips as DC's favorite son - the first Black ever nominated for President in any major-party convention.

And yet, in Chicago that summer, under Mayor Daley's baleful cops, all my identities burned out. Street radical, progressive Democrat, activist scholar, all gone. Only the unexpected volcano of Passover, of Judaism, survived.

That fall, I dug out my old Haggadah, the one I had been given when I turned 13, the one with Saul Raskin's luscious drawings of the maidens who saved Moses from the river, the one that stirred my body each spring, those teen-age years. Into its archaic English renderings of Exodus and Psalms, I intertwined passages from King and Thoreau, Ginsberg and Gandhi, the Warsaw Ghetto and a Russian rabbi named Tamaret -- wove them all into a new Telling of the tale of freedom. Where the old Haggadah had a silly argument about how many plagues had really afflicted Egypt, I substituted a serious quandary: Were blood and killing a necessary part of liberation, or could the nonviolence of King and Gandhi bring a deeper transformation?

I had written half a dozen books -- on military strategy, disarmament, race relations, American politics -- but this was different: this book was writing me. I had no idea whether it made any sense to do this; I knew only that I could

not stop. When I had finished, I called around to find a Washington rabbi who might be sympathetic. I asked him -- Harold White -- to read my draft: was this a crazed obsession or a good idea?

Two days later, he called me: "I love it, Waskow. It's a midrash on the haggadah. You've taken the story into our own hands, as the rabbis said God wanted the fleeing slaves themselves to do. Do you know that midrash? The one where God refuses to split the Red Sea until the Jews have gone into the water, up to their noses, on the edge of drowning?"

Long pause. "Umm, what's a midrash?" said I.

"Oho!" said he, and even over the phone I could feel the excitement rise. "The rabbis would take the ancient text, and read it in new ways. On this one, where the Torah says the people 'went into the sea on the dry land,' the rabbis ask, 'Which was it? How could it be both sea and dry land?' And they answer that the people went in while it was still sea; only then did it become dry land.

"You see? -- the people had to act. The rabbis took the text into their own hands because they wanted the people to take history into their own hands. The text at first glance seems to leave the act to God; but the rabbis reread this oddity of text to mean the people acted.

"That's midrash. Want to read some?"

So I borrowed a volume of this "midrash," and I fell in love. A whole new language that my heart had searched for all these years, a whole new language I had never known existed. A language of transformation-through-renewal, a language that drew on an ancient language to make it deeply new. A language of serious play that could, with a wink, turn reality in a new direction and claim it was simply uncovering a meaning that was already there. A language of puns, serious and funny puns that took as cosmic teaching the clang of words and phrases with each other.

And this, the rabbi taught me, was what my new Haggadah was already: a midrash on the ancient text that turned it in a new direction. What neither he nor I expected was that as I was reinterpreting the text, the text was reinterpreting me. Turning me in a new direction, making a new me that was a midrash on the old "I."

On April 4, 1969, the first anniversary of Dr. King's death and the third night of

Passover, 800 Jews and Christians, Black and white, gathered in the basement of Channing Phillips' church to celebrate the Freedom Seder that had erupted in me.

That is how my deadened Jewish soul was reborn out of the death of Martin Luther King. Now when I praise the God Who "gives life to the dead," I mean it.

Forty years later. Now the question is about the death and rebirth of an American vision: the transformation of our society.

Forty is an iconic number in biblical tradition: forty days of rain as the Flood began, forty years of wandering in the Wilderness, forty days of fasting for Moses (and then Jesus) on the mountaintop, forty days of Lent.

Rabbi Jeff Roth teaches that this iconic "forty" is rooted in the forty weeks of pregnancy.  
Each forty, a pregnant pause.

>From 1968 to 2008: forty years of pregnant pause after King's death, Kennedy's death, the hopes of an America reborn killed off in Memphis and Los Angeles and Chicago.

Is the pregnancy completed? On the night before King died, he said that he was standing on the mountaintop, looking across the river toward the Promised Land; that he might not cross over, but the people would.

Forty years later, are we prepared to give birth? To cross the Jordan not to utopia but to a new, unpromised place?

With blessings of shalom, salaam, peace -- Arthur

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