

“Lent and Liberation: Finding your way home”  
(Psalm 51; Isaiah 1:16-18)

This is quite a momentous weekend. Friday was the first day of spring. Yesterday was Naurooz, the New Year in the Bahai, Zoroastrian and Persian traditions. Yesterday was also Rosh Chodesh Nisan, the first day of the new moon in the Jewish calendar. Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent. We have so many different ways to mark a time of renewal, of anticipation, of looking out for green shoots and cherry blossoms.

Calendar syncing didn't start in Silicon Valley; it is as old as our respective traditions. And the syncing of our calendars will take place again, in two weeks, with Passover and Easter falling on the same weekend. While the meaning of the two holidays is different, there are significant parallels between the preparation for Passover and the preparation for Easter.

Stanford graduate, Rabbi Evan Moffic, points out that Lent, the preparation for Easter, and the process of preparation for Passover are both inspired by the story of the Exodus. Christians count down to Easter for 40 days throughout Lent. These days mark the time that Jesus fasted in the desert after being baptized. This 40-day process of preparation for proclaiming the message of salvation has its parallel in the experience of the Israelites. Following the exodus from Egypt, Israelites lived in the wilderness for 40 years, also preparing, but this preparation was for entering the Promised Land, for receiving a new set of laws, for becoming a people.<sup>1</sup>

Both periods of preparation anticipate a rebirth—the rebirth of spring, the rebirth of humanity for Christians, the rebirth of a people for Jews.

Both of our traditions speak to liberation. One of the Hebrew names for Passover is *zman cherutenu*, the time of our freedom. Lent is a time of liberation from the accretions of our lives that distance people of faith from that which is essential. The fasting, self-denial and simplicity of Lent can be understood as a spiritual spring-cleaning, just as the preparation for Passover involves physically removing all leavening from the home. Both are a time for taking a spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Evan Moffic,  
<http://www.reformjudaism.org/blog/2014/03/20/how-lent-started-passover>

inventory and clearing out impediments to becoming close to our Creator.

For Jews, that clearing out is not theoretical. We are commanded to remove all *chametz*, all leavening, which translates into a lot of elbow grease. Purging the house of all crumbs and dirt, spring-cleaning takes on religious proportions. In the Chassidic tradition, *chametz* is understood to be that which puffs us up, so not only crumbs, but also egos need to be cleansed and purified. No doubt, it is possible to clean mindlessly; but the intention behind the obligation is to be mindful, to reflect. Similarly, for Christians, intentionally forfeiting a designated desire for Lent, is an occasion for reflection. Our religious traditions have created rituals of physical and spiritual cleaning to assist us in returning to a path that leads to reconciliation with God.

For some of us, the way we have strayed is incremental and nearly unconscious. But for some of us, there was a specific act, a distance we traveled from God that may make it seem nearly impossible to come close again. In Psalm 51, part of the Lenten liturgy, we have such an act. It is not often that we are given a context for a psalm, but here, we do. King David had observed Bathsheva after bathing and he desired her. That she was married did not dissuade him. He had the power to fulfill his desires. However, their consequences were not totally in his power. Bathsheva became pregnant. Trying to hide his sin, David attempted to have it appear that Uriah, her husband, was the father. But even before paternity tests, he failed. So David, the king, placed Uriah on the frontlines, so he would be killed in battle. David's trusted advisor, Nathan, rebuked the king and according to tradition, this psalm is David's cry for repentance.

The psalm begins "A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had come to Bathsheva."

"Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity  
and purify me of sin.  
Purge me with hyssop till I am pure  
Wash me till I am whiter than snow  
Fashion a pure heart  
Do not cast me out of Your presence or  
Take Your holy spirit away from me."

Like us, David seeks to know that he has been purified. It was through his body that he sinned; it is through his body that he seeks purification. It is

through his mouth, his lips, his words, his praise and his heart that his repentance is achieved. Listen to King David's words:

“O Eternal open my lips and let my mouth declare Your praise  
You do not want me to bring sacrifices.  
You do not deserve burnt offerings;  
True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit  
God You will not despise  
A contrite and crushed heart.”

This is not only a Lenten psalm. In Jewish tradition, Psalm 51 is called “The Chapter of Repentance.” Rabbenu Yonah explains that its contents are the foundations of the principles of atonement, and if one wishes to repent for his sins, its words are a fitting prayer.<sup>2</sup> As anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff used to teach, when it is our very bodies that effect the change, the transformation can be powerful and permanent.

Indeed, unlike David, who asks God to cleanse him, asking:

“Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity and purify me of sin.  
Purge me with hyssop till I am pure  
Wash me till I am whiter than snow,”

the prophet Isaiah insists that God wants **us** to do the washing, God wants our preparation to be the practice of living true. In this season, God wants us to be our own roto rooter.

Listen to Isaiah's words:

“Wash yourselves clean  
Cease to do evil:  
Learn to do good  
Devote yourselves to justice:  
Aid the wronged,  
Uphold the rights of the orphan;  
Defend the cause of the widow.” (Is. 1:16:17)

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbenu Yonah, Shaarei Teshuvah 1:23

We wash ourselves clean by building a just society. Eastern Christians call the process of cleaning out during Lent, *theosis*, which St. Athanasius describes as "becoming by grace what God is by nature,"<sup>3</sup> I call this process that both Jews and Christians undergo at this time of year, "Finding your way home." For isn't it about returning from all the paths and wanderings that have unintentionally consumed us, directed by neon flashing signs rather than a steady light of truth? Isn't it a time to reconsider where we place our effort and what is worthy of our dreams? Isn't it a time to call together our dearest family and friends to remind us of what matters? Isn't this preparation of cleansing ourselves and cleansing our abode a process of finding our way home?

For me, this year, this preparation has been a literal as well as physical process. Shortly after Passover last year we moved into an apartment while our home underwent significant construction. We moved back a few weeks ago and while our regular dishes, pots and pans are in cabinets, our Passover dishes are still in storage. Finding our way home has entailed city codes and construction delays, seeing blueprints turn into buildings, watching a vision of a lovely home come into being. And last week, it meant a small party to celebrate the team of architects, designers, contractors and craftsmen whose inspiration and integrity, hands and heart brought it all into being.

But last week also gave new meaning to finding your way home.

A year ago November, I attended a conference to celebrate a book I had been involved in writing. It was a book several years in the making, with abundant and loving collaboration of chaplain colleagues across the country. The conference, at the Princeton Theological Seminary, was devoted to presentations and discussion on the state of college and university chaplaincy in the twenty-first century. During one lovely afternoon, we had the pleasure of participating in a book-signing, and we, the contributors, delighted in personalizing our thoughts for each intended recipient. Knowing that this was to be on the agenda, my beloved coworker, the Reverend Joanne Sanders, and asked me to bring her back a copy and have our friends and colleagues sign it. This I did.

Some months later, Joanne was driving back from Seattle. She stopped at a café in Eureka and came out to discover that her car had been broken into. Her book bag had been stolen, presumably by someone hoping for a computer. But instead of technology, the thief got only theology. Instead of a shiny new

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.churchyear.net/lent.html>

MacBook, the thief got the Good Book. It was a hassle, obviously, but Joanne drove home and didn't think more of it.

Then, last week, I was discussing the college chaplaincy book with our new Dean for Religious Life, Rev. Professor Jane Shaw. She asked if she could borrow a copy. I figured I'd buy her a copy, so I went on to Amazon and ordered the book from a California bookseller in Chico, since I reasoned it would get here quicker.

It did. The book arrived on Friday.

I opened the first page... and was confused.

There, inside the cover, was the name "Joanne Sanders." In my handwriting.

I flipped to the chapter I had inscribed to Joanne... and my inscription was there.

Our friend Sharon's inscription was there.

Our friend Gail's inscription was there.

The book I held in my hands was the exact same book I had bought—twice now!—and brought back from Princeton.

For a moment, I wondered if Joanne had downsized her library and gotten rid of the book. But then I remembered the theft.

And then I marveled: what are the odds that I would buy that book??? How did it get from Eureka to Chico? If we were to contact the bookseller, could we catch the thief?

How mysterious are the ways of the Eternal One—and online bookselling—that Joanne once again has this book in her library. How mysterious are the ways of the Eternal One, that the lost return home...

During the Passover Seder, before dinner, as part of the ritual, the leader of the Seder hides a half sheet of matzah, unleavened bread. But that dinner ends in a very particular way. The children of those gathered around the table search for that hidden matzah, called the *Afikomen*, Greek for "dessert". When they find it, they ransom it from the leader. Now, some speculate that this is a way to

keep the kids a) interested b)out of trouble or c) honing their negotiation skills. But I prefer the interpretation of one of my teachers, the late Reb David Zeller, who said, “Children find the *Afikomen* and bring it to us because children return the lost parts of ourselves to us.

Perhaps some of you knew him. David was a beloved rabbi and musician who lived for many years in Menlo Park and taught transpersonal psychology prior to moving to Israel. But before that, following a spiritual quest in India, he was the equivalent of a resident fellow in my experimental college during the time I was an undergraduate. David was the most learned Jew on campus, so I prevailed upon him to teach a class in Jewish ethics, and thus he became my first teacher of Torah. At the end of that seminar, both he and I decided to become rabbis.

In this season of finding our way home, let me close by sharing a chant Reb David Zeller recorded shortly after the year that we studied together.

Return again, Return again  
Return to the land of your soul  
Return to what you are  
Return to where you are  
Return to who you are  
Born and reborn again<sup>4</sup>

As Christians prepare for Easter, as Jews prepare for Passover, I wish for you many happy returns. I wish you the rebirth of spring. May you find your way home and may you find it filled with love and light.

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<sup>4</sup> From Rabbi David Zeller, “The Path of the Heart”