

Between Pharaoh's Army and the Sea:

"Normal" Subjugation or the Unknown?

By Rabbi Arthur Waskow*

The world is in super-crisis, standing where the ancient Israelites stood at the climax of Exodus: Ahead, a stormy Reed Sea and an Unknown Wilderness. Behind, the hoofbeats of Pharaoh's horse-chariot Army, offering submission as the price of normalcy.

It took an adventurous activist, to step one – two – a dozen --- steps into the water, up to his nose, on the verge of drowning, before the rush of waters broke, divided, and a path opened up from what had become a Taut Place to signal that the birthing into Unknown could begin. There are some prophetic voices today who will take the first steps into the Unknown to grow a new world of love and justice. Or will the Greed of some and the Fear of others return us to normalcy and subjugation?

The Problem: We face a double existential crisis, intertwined: Earth is under threat of mass extinctions and climate chaos arising from "Corporate Carbon Pharaohs" that bring plagues of fire, flood, famine and disease on large regions and small towns and neighborhoods.

And in the United States and around the world, movements have grown to overthrow democracy, Surrendering to Pharaoh's army, to corporate overlords who seek to cement their power by-subjugating communities by race, immigrant/refugee status, sex, gender, religion, kinds of work, and low income.

A Theory of Change: The dangers that we face are rooted in spiritual failings – Greed for Wealth and Power, plus Fear of the unknown. Faith communities ought to be, and sometimes are, the embodiment of a world where Greed and Fear are minimal, the values of Love and Justice are central.

And those values need to be actively carried into the world, not nurtured only at home or in a congregation. When great change has happened in America before, faith communities have gone into the streets and polling booths to make it happen. That is what the Prophetic Voice must inspire.

Actifests: Activist Festivals to Transform the Future:

The Shalom Center will respond to this super-crisis by activating activist festivals—"Actifests." We will focus on the Jewish festival cycle, while welcoming allies to our public celebrations aimed at transforming the broader society, and will share in theirs when we are welcomed to their own new Actifests:

For example:

Passover Seders in the Streets, confronting those “pharaohs” who are plaguing Earth by burning fossil fuels, and at the banks that keep these pharaohs afloat by lending them money.

Tisha B’Av: Adding to our grief about the ancient Temples our grief about the Destruction of Temple Earth. Escalating the rituals of shiva – sitting on the floor, clothing the Sefer Torah in black, to die-ins where the companies are scorching, boiling, broiling Earth.

Isaiah’s challenge on Yom Kippur: “The fast God seeks is to Feed the Hungry, Clothe the Naked, House the Homeless, Free Prisoners from their Handcuffs” -- not only chanted in congregations but chanted again during the Ten Days of Awe and Tshuvah at Congressional home offices: “End Hunger in America!” “House Every Homeless Person in America!” until the laws are passed and implemented.

“Share Sukkot, Green and Grow the Vote”:

Providing people with simple instructions for gathering at home offices of Senators or Congressmembers or state/ local officials, or of national offices or local branches of Chase Banks -- shaking the Four Species of branches and

fruit in the seven directions of the universe, with suggestions for using North American species if the activists wish.

Add new "*Hosha-Na Please Save Us*" prayers directed to the Breath of Life, addressing the need to save us from, the poisoning of our neighborhoods and the broiling of our planet. Connect with Get Out The Vote information.

Hanukkah, the festival of energy conservation as in "One day's oil serves eight days' needs:" Use it in every synagogue and havurah to organize a solar-energy co-op of the membership or the neighbors. Demand that your Federation lend money to every Jewish institutional building in your town to solarize itself, plus 25 low-income churches and mosques each year.

To B'Shvat: Not only hold a Seder in the evening, but next day visit your Senator to demand a fund of billions to reforest all Earth.

Purim: Purimspiels to answer the question, "What would Queen Esther do about XYZ?": A new crisis issue each year. Street theater aimed at the pompous prigs of anti-feminist modern Ahasuerus, vicious greedy Hamans who

poison whole neighborhoods with coal dust and oil fumes, feed whole cities with poisonous water from its own once-life-giving river, broil whole regions in 130 degrees Fahrenheit..

And then we come back and forward to Passover on the Festival spiral. Spiral because we learn each time around, learning from our past experience to rise into another curve. That will be especially true as we integrate the actifests into our lives.

We choose for The Shalom Center this “**actifest**” role to move and mobilize those who are fed up with celebrating the past while the present and the future dribble blood. We choose this path like a wise individual species or culture in the eco-system; like a wise piece of the jigsaw puzzle, shaping its own unique shape to fit with others in a Unity of bounty.

We choose this path to bring “spirituality” and “eco/social transformation” into a coherent sacred whole.

In an old and exhausted “normal,” the festival cycles of the Jewish people celebrated moments from the past, rooted in the earthy dance of Earth, Moon, Sun. Now they need also to tap into a root that calls forth transformation of the eco/social future.

What do we expect to happen from adopting the actifest commitment? We expect a new self-awareness of the American Jewish community, seeing itself in public calling for eco/social change. We see other Americans viewing us with greater understanding and respect, noting our prophetic voice -- not only in the percentages reported in exit polls from secret ballots, inside closed curtains of the voting booths -- but in the streets where our ceremonies and our politics merge in visibly powerful configurations.

We choose this path because in the Diaspora, the Festival cycle is the clearest way in which the Godwrestling Folk can make clear our prophetic vision in the seeing of all people. Can choose not bowing low to Pharaoh's Armies, but to walk through waters of Unknown, into the Wilderness.

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oof Wisconsin in Madison, served as legislative assistant to a US Congressperson, was a founding Resident Fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies for 15 years and a member of the faculty of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College for seven until he was fired for his outspoken views for Palestinian statehood (and more than 20 years later was granted RRC's premier honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters). He was a visiting professor of religion at Swarthmore and Vassar, and co-founded the National Havurah Committee, Rabbis for Human Rights/ North America (now Truah), and ALEPH: Alliance for Human Rights