

Leaving

by Judy Lev

I have been making mud bricks with tourists six times a week. The tourists—Jews, Christians and Hindus, young and old, believers and atheists—dirty their hands in a batter of straw, water and mud, while imagining, with my encouragement, Egyptian slavery. After Brick-building 101 I lead each group to a shaded overlook with a table covered with branches of hyssop. From there, the tourists see the modest gray-green hyssop bushes hugging the gray limestone rocks of Neot Kedumim, The Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel. “Take a sprig of hyssop,” I say, quoting Moses in chapter twelve, verse twenty-two of the *Book of Exodus*, “and dip it in the blood that is in the basin.”

Each tourist picks up a sprig of hyssop and dips it in the plastic cup on the table filled with red food coloring.

“Take the hyssop and touch the lintel and the two side posts of your door,” I continue, and ask them to paint with the hyssop, its fuzzy little absorbent gray-green leaves as paintbrush, the wooden beam of the overlook. Thus, hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors at Neot Kedumim re-live the night God, dressed as the Angel of Death, passed over the houses of the Children of Israel during His mission to smite only the Egyptians. I enjoy this hands-on activity that makes the experience of leaving Egyptian slavery come to life. Doing it six times a week lifts my self-esteem from the gutter.

On the night of deliverance, 1998, my family is celebrating Passover at home with close friends. The smell of homemade chicken soup fills the house with memories of my Hungarian grandmother and her hard *kneidlach*. My *kneidlach* are soft, made from an Osem mix. Miriam helped me make the *charoet* yesterday, using my mother’s recipe. Just as the apple, walnut and sweet wine concoction symbolizes the mortar that bound the bricks made by the Israelite slaves, so 3,200 years later our *charoet* binds one generation to the next.

My husband leads the Seder. He commands from one end of the oblong folding table and I sit opposite him, close to the kitchen. His Kiddush, sung in a strong voice as usual, does not disappoint. After the Kiddush, my husband tells everyone to stand up and place one hand on the Seder Plate. At the count of three, eleven Jews raise the Seder plate over the middle of the table as though it were a large parchment. While elevating it so, it elevates us into the realm of mythic meal. Together we sing *Ha Lachma*, Behold the Matza. "This is the bread our ancestors ate as slaves in Egypt. In the past we were slaves, next year we will be free."

My husband tells us to lower the plate and sit down. He instructs us all to sing The Four Questions, since the youngest child present is fifteen. The Four Questions are actually one with four answers: *Why is this night different from all other nights?* By the end of the fourth answer, despite my love for some of the people around the table and my delight that we as a family are hosting a Seder, another question intrudes: Why do I stay with my in-house Pharaoh?

For years I have been writing a story in my head called "Pine." In the story my husband and I get into the family car, he commanding the driver's seat and me passively travelling in the passenger's seat. We are going for a hike in the woods. After thirty minutes of driving in silence he turns off the motor, stopping the car before we reach the trail. *Get out*, he says, and I do. Then he gets out and starts walking towards the trail. I follow him. He turns around and asks me why I am following him. *I thought we were taking a walk together*, I say. *Suit yourself*, he says, and continues walking ahead of me. We walk on the trail for ten minutes in silence until we come to a clearing and he says, *Stand against that pine tree, your back to the tree*. I do as I'm told, believing that one day he will love me if I obey. He walks away, then turns around to face me. This is the beginning of the story I have been afraid to transcribe.

After The Four Questions my husband invites everyone to read a part of the Haggadah. I am relieved he is being inclusive. One recurring phrase from the text derails my focus from the rest. Over and over we are told that God took the Children of Israel out of Egypt *with a strong hand and an outstretched arm*.

The first time we went on a date, my future husband walked to the driver's seat of my VW bug and stretched his arm over the car, his meaty cupped hand facing heaven. I loved this gesture. After his putting his hand on my head during *Bonnie and Clyde*, this second gesture cinched my decision to marry him. I needed someone to take control, because I was twenty-four and afraid I might sleep with hordes of men for the rest of my life and never have children, a family, Friday night dinners with candles, Kiddush, challah, the works. This man was perfect for me: handsome like an idealized 1950's kibbutznik, emotionally withdrawn and controlling with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. We shared the same immigrant status and spoke English. He could save me from myself, or so I thought in 1970.

It's time for the meal now. I serve the gefilte fish, kneidlach soup, roast chicken, tzimmes, green beans and salad. Before dessert we whiz through the second part of the Haggadah. Our goal is to get to the songs before everyone's too tired to sing. After "Next Year in Jerusalem," I serve an almond cake made with twelve egg whites and suggest a change. "Let's sing 'Chad Gadya' first." This is the last song in the Haggadah, a playful Aramaic song about killing. Israeli singer Chava Alberstein has turned the song into a political protest with dark insistent beats. I especially like her last verse:

I changed myself this year.
Once I was a lamb and a quiet kid.
Today I am an insatiable wolf.
I have been a dove and a gazelle.
Today I don't know who I am.

She asks, "How long will the circle of hate/terror continue?"

My husband's eyes fill with yellow wrath when I suggest a change. *He* is in charge of the Seder. How dare I interfere and make a request. Who are you, he glares? A disobedient dog? A naughty two-year-old? "Who asked you?"

Everyone at the table looks at each other with embarrassed silence.

By now, in the late 1990s, I have become familiar with several sayings from the Talmud that deal with *malbin panim*, a concept that literally means making a person turn white. These aphorisms address the issue of insulting or belittling a person in public. One is: “He who insults or belittles a person in public, it is as if he has shed that person’s blood.” Since shedding blood is a euphemism for killing, insulting a person in public is placed on the same level as murder. Another saying goes: “Better a man throw himself into a blazing furnace than insult a friend in public.”

After my husband’s attack, I feel small and ashamed. These are familiar feelings, for this is not the first time he has attacked me in public. But something on this night *is* different from all other nights. As I survey the stunned faces of my friends and family around the table, I understand what is different: This is the last time I will be insulted.

I am leaving Egypt.

In the story that unwinds in my head, after I’m standing with my back against the tree, my husband takes out his small black gun from the back of his jeans, near his right hip. He points it at me; I hold my breath. *Please don’t shoot*, I plead. He shoots—click—aiming at my head. Nothing comes out but a limp plastic sound. He shoots again—click—aiming at my chest. He continues shooting, aiming at my waist—click—my pelvis—click—knees and feet. Click. Click. Click. When he finishes playing this game, he puts the gun back into his pants, turns around and strolls to the car. I exhale a sigh of relief that the marital terror is not lethal, walk away from the pine and slide into the passenger’s seat. As we drive home in silence, I know I must unfasten my grip on inane hope, as well as its twin—fear of separation.

Tonight, when my husband insults me in front of our family and friends, I do not throw Elijah’s full cup of wine in his face or flip the table over. I do not shout at him to leave the house, to get out of my life, to leave me alone, to leave, leave, leave. I am not a demonstrative woman and I avoid making scenes, other than those with Rachel and Ya’akov at the cistern. Rather, I let my own emotional pain simmer inside. I knead it and intellectualize it until the kneading and intellectualizing make me crazy and helpless. Alone, I cry on my pillow and then write a poem.

Tonight, though, I do not writhe in emotional pain. The part of me that for so many years needed to feel abused and abandoned, emotionally ignored as I had

been as a child, that part which I once thought was all of me, but was not, that part which was still a slave to longing for some romantic unconditional mother love, withered. After twenty-six years of marriage it is dead.

My husband can continue shooting words and glances at me like bullets, but he can no longer paralyze me from acting. Like the Children of Israel, I am free to leave. I am no longer guilty of being a survivor, no longer a slave to my old ways.

Tonight, I see options. I can walk away from pining. I can take myself out of this cruel, debilitating, belittling game. My choice is to let go or suffocate. All this I realize as our guests sing *Adir Hu, God of Might, God of Right, who will build His house soon and quickly, soon and in our own day.*

Three days after the Seder, I announce to my husband that I am leaving. He protests. Let him. He refuses to leave, so I will take the step. He thinks I am still locked into our silent sick pact of not abandoning each other, but I am free. He calls me at work and makes promises, agrees to mediation, to even move his beloved TV to the back room so it won't dominate our lives, but I have made up my mind. I recall the woman I met in the corner grocery store who I hadn't seen in years. She was sixty-five and looked younger and chipper than ever. When I asked her what had happened that made her so happy and youthful—Diet? Exercise? Love?—she said, "I left my husband."

In June I find a three-room rental apartment a three-minute walk from our home. It will be available August first. I am not leaving my children, I tell myself in order to act. I am just moving across the street. There I will find *sheket nafshi*, peace of mind. After twenty-six years of living in my husband's long shadow I am emotionally spent. The children can live with me if they want. They are over sixteen and can decide for themselves.

I tell my husband this is not a divorce. The family will still meet at the family home for Friday night dinners, I announce, insistent and deluded. (Years later, Miriam will tell me, "You might as well have moved to Tennessee. You left your children.")

On August first, in a suffocating dry heat, I move into the apartment across the street, taking only my clothes and a paper cut my mother gave my husband and me for our first anniversary. Around the perimeter of the paper cut of an old man looking

to heaven is a translation from Psalm 137: *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.*

From my apartment across the street from my children, reading these words as I lie alone on my Simmons Hide-A-Bed, I think about the punishment for forgetting my past: The writing hand decaying, the tongue stuck, unable to form speech. A lockdown of communication.

I will not let that happen to me. I will not forget my past, but I *will* re-envision it. I will take control and not allow it to control me forever. For, even after only three days of peace of mind, every bone in my body understands that the Angel of Death can be the cruel messenger for a new life.

Judy Lev, originally from Cleveland, OH, lives and writes in Haifa, Israel. After earning a BA from the University of Michigan in 1967, she moved to Jerusalem. Her writing has appeared in *Consequence Magazine*, *Kenyon Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Creative Nonfiction* and *Michigan Quarterly Review*, among other journals and college textbooks. *Brain, Child* nominated her for a Pushcart Prize in 2013. She holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Goucher College and an MA in fiction from The Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in Creative Writing at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. “Leaving” is a chapter from her unpublished memoir, *Our Names Do Not Appear*.