

TELLING STORIES IN THE FIRST-PERSON PLURAL

By **Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld**

PRESIDENT, HEBREW COLLEGE

When my son was about 3 years old, we visited my great aunt. She was 102 at the time, the oldest person my son had ever met. He sat quietly at my side for a while, watching her cautiously from across the room, and then, with more than a trace of wonder in his voice, he whispered in my ear, “Was she actually in *Mitzrayim*?”

Mitzrayim – the ancient land of Egypt where our ancestors were slaves to Pharaoh. Where, as we recite at the Passover seder each year, we were slaves to Pharaoh: *avadim hayinu*. And the Holy One brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

This, in some way, is our story of stories. We tell it in the first-person plural so that we and our children learn to take it personally. At the seder, we don't just tell the story; we eat it, quite literally internalizing it to make it our own. By the age of 3, our son had already tasted enough matzah and dipped enough parsley in saltwater tears to have metabolized the story of our people's Exodus from Egypt not as a distant legend but as intimate family lore. Here he was, meeting our oldest living relative. Maybe she actually remembered what it was like to be a slave, to face the forbidding Reed Sea (also known as the Red Sea), and to experience freedom for the first time.

As his mother, I, too, had been hearing the story of our Exodus from Egypt for as long as I could remember. It was a story that had long since left the page and entered my life in important and sometimes unexpected ways. I remember as a teenager going to my mother, upset about a situation that felt desperate to me at the time. “Imagine,” she said, “just think how the Israelites must have felt standing at the Reed Sea with the Egyptian army closing in behind them. If they had hope, so can you!”

I don't remember if, as a distraught teenager, I fully appreciated this perspective at the time – I doubt it! But it was a gift my mother gave me many times over – the ability to hold this and other stories close. To know that I was not alone. The stories we tell again and again become part of us, and we, in turn, become part of them. They accompany us, anchor us, comfort, cajole, and even command us: “You shall not oppress the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You know the heart of the stranger.”



Years later, when my son was a teenager and battling a serious illness, the story of the Exodus was with me again, this time not so much as prose but as prayer. Adrift in the fear of that uncertain time, the only prayer I could muster was my older brother's meditation on our daily liturgical recitation from the Song at the Sea: “The God of Exodus throws open the door of the Reed Sea for every human being trapped in desperate straits. The secret which we conceal from each other but which this prayer seeks to expose is that each one of us at times finds ourselves standing trapped at the sea with the pounding of horse hooves behind us ... How the opening occurs is not explained. Sometimes it does not even look like an opening. We bring it about through our own efforts, but it comes upon us by surprise and beyond our control.”

I don't remember how I responded when my son asked me whether his great-great-aunt had actually been in Mitzrayim. But I hope I whispered back, “Yes, she was. We were all there. And we all went forth together. We are all going forth together still.”