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Speaking of Faith®
with Krista Tippett

Exodus and Passover: Cargo of Hidden Stories

TRANSCRIPT

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KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. This hour we'll delve into the Exodus story that Jewish tradition is commemorating in the eight days of Passover. Passover is also the setting for the New Testament Easter drama. With Avivah Zornberg, a scholar of rabbinic wisdom and the Torah, we'll find meaning in this text that Cecil B. DeMille and Disney never imagined. The Exodus has inspired many different peoples across history, and it contains profound, subtle lessons about the realities and the ironies of human freedom.

DR. AVIVAH ZORNBERG: What you have, for instance, on the Seder night, on Passover, is basically the commandment to tell the story of the Exodus, which doesn't mean reading the Bible. It's supposed to be just a kind of opener for more ideas and more attempts to tell the story in a way that will come closer to what can really affect us.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett. This hour, an engaging and provocative walk through the story of Exodus. Exodus is being commemorated now by Jews around the world in the eight days of Passover. Passover is also the backdrop of the Easter events of the Christian New Testament.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, "Exodus, Cargo of Hidden Stories."

The Exodus is an epic series of events that scholars locate in history during the reign of Pharaoh Ramses II in Egypt in the 13th century B.C.E. But this story has also taken on the power of myth, and myth, as the ancient Greek statesman Solon once said, is not about something that never happened but about something that happens over and over again.

My guest, Avivah Zornberg, is recognized as one of the world's most compelling interpreters of the Torah and rabbinic tradition, weaving ancient wisdom with the insights of poetry, modern literature, and psychology. She's written a book about Exodus called *The Particulars of Rapture*.

DR. ZORNBERG: *The Particulars of Rapture*, I had in mind the subtleties and complexities of all the many stories, like the stories that are hidden within the apparent grand narrative. There is the grand narrative, which can be told very simply, and you could say it's a kind of children's story, and then there are all the details, which really make the experience.

MS. TIPPETT: As Avivah Zornberg draws out the complexity of the Exodus drama, she turns to the rabbinic practice of *Midrash*, which means to seek out, to inquire. *Midrash* fills in the gaps in the ancient stories of Israel and searches imaginatively for new and different meanings in the texts in every generation.

As Exodus opens the ancient Israelites have become slaves in the land of Egypt where they once were favored guests. A new Pharaoh has come to power who is threatened by their large numbers. He orders midwives to kill their male babies at birth, but the midwives don't comply. Pharaoh's own daughter takes pity on an Israelite boy who was placed in a basket and sent down the Nile by his terrified mother. And so that boy, Moses, grows up a prince but he becomes an outcast and then a rebel leader. From the beginning, Moses is a complex and conflicted character, never a simple storybook hero.

I asked Avivah Zornberg to walk me through the important turning points of the Exodus story with all the tradition at her disposal, highlighting hidden themes, imagery, and word plays that are often lost in English translation.

DR. ZORNBERG: I think one of the significant aspects of Moses' identity is the fact that he belongs to two nations at once, that he has a kind of double identity. He is nursed by his mother but only on hire to the Egyptian princess. So it's not exactly a natural and unequivocal way of coming into the world.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. ZORNBERG: And then he's raised in Pharaoh's palace as a prince, as basically Pharaoh's grandson, the son of his daughter. And it's with that kind of very complex background that he goes out one day and notices, for the first time fully, the suffering of his brothers and

identifies them as his brothers. So that's a very significant moment. We're told he grew up, vayigdal, as if there are stages of maturing. There comes a certain moment where things open up, and he begins to realize how much these people are suffering and that they are, in fact, his brothers. And the next part of the story tells how he intervenes when an Egyptian is beating up one of his brothers. Intervenes again in another fight. So Moses turns out, from the very beginning, to be someone who is a very — has a very strong sense of justice. And he doesn't hold back.

MS. TIPPETT: Because he does then kill the Egyptian.

DR. ZORNBERG: He actually kills, yes. Later, again in *Midrashic* traditions, anger will be the one equivocal, perhaps negative, quality that is attributed to Moses. So that, from the beginning, as you say, he's not a simple character.

MS. TIPPETT: And then after this, he flees because he has committed this murder, and then, very soon after that, we have this famous story of the burning bush. I mean, Moses encounters the divine.
READER: A reading from Exodus:

"Now, Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, 'I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight. Why doesn't the bush burn up?'

"When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses.' He answered, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Do not come close. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.' 'I am,' He said, 'the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."
MS. TIPPETT: Tell me how you read that whole story of the burning bush and everything that you can read in that in the Hebrew and what you know from *Midrashic* tradition. I wonder if you'd just sort of open that up for us.

DR. ZORNBERG: It begins with Moses turning aside to see this wonder which is the bush that is burning in fire but not consumed. And so that first moment of turning aside from your straight path, it's a certain quality of the spirit that allows him to move away from the straight and narrow, as it were, from his own concerns, and simply to notice an anomaly in the world and to look for meaning in it. God engages him in dialogue at that point and basically tells him that the time has come for redemption and that He will descend now and save the people and Moses will be the intermediary between God and the people and also between God and Pharaoh. And I think the most striking thing in the narrative, and it's quite a long, drawn-out narrative, is that Moses consistently refuses to take on the mission.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. And, well, and he says, 'I'm not worthy.'

DR. ZORNBERG: 'I'm not worthy' and 'They're not going to believe me.' And whatever God says, he basically repudiates. It's the most extraordinary first meeting between God and a human being. It's not just that he's too modest to take on the role. He's skeptical about everything that God says. It's really almost what you would call chutzpah. It's just how does one talk to God like that? And it's interesting that, again, in the critiques that you find in the *Midrashic* tradition, he's not criticized so much for cheek against God as for slandering the people, for being dubious about the people's capacity to believe, to allow themselves to be redeemed. In the end, after a lot of to and fro between God and Moses, the *Midrash* says it takes seven days, until in the end, Moses says, 'Well, send by the hand of anyone You want to send by, so long as it's not me.' And, at this point, God gets angry, the text says, and says, 'Well, all right. We'll involve Aaron with you. Your brother Aaron will go with you.'

But the detail of God being angry with Moses, I think, is very significant because it seems — and this is what I would suggest — it seems that Moses, in a very intense way, is representing the problem that God faces in trying to redeem the people. It's not only a problem with Pharaoh, it's not only the persecutor. It's a problem with the people and with Moses that there's a kind of resistance, there's an unwillingness to open oneself up to an alternative reality. For Moses, it means that he can't speak. That's part of his protest. There's something wrong with his speech.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Slow of speech and slow of tongue, in one translation.

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. Heavy, the word he uses, heavy, kaved peh, heavy mouth. But the interesting thing is that that word, "heavy," is the word that the Torah text uses to describe Pharaoh's heart.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. It's that same word, is it?

DR. ZORNBERG: It's the same word. There are several words used of Pharaoh's heart. His heart is constantly hardened in the course of the 10 plagues. But one of them is this word, kaved, "heavy," which means, really, somehow resistant, impervious, closed off. And it seems

to me that that can't be by accident that you have the same word used.

MS. TIPPETT: That echo. Let's talk about also the very mysterious name of God when Moses encounters God in the burning bush. He says, 'Who should I tell them I saw?' And the name that comes back now, or the way it's often translated in English is, "I Am who I Am." I've also heard it translated, "I Am becoming who I Am becoming." How do you read what is said? And say it for me in Hebrew as well, if you would?

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. It's *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*, and literally it just means, I will be who I will be. And I think there's just no getting around it. Some of these translations are just mistranslations.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, yes. And they don't help, do they?

DR. ZORNBERG: They really don't because, actually, God is being evasive. God is saying, 'I'm not giving you a handle. You want a handle of some kind to hold on to, to say, "Now I've got him." That's a name.' And instead He answers, 'I Am the very principle of becoming, of allowing the possible to happen.'

MS. TIPPETT: Torah scholar Avivah Zornberg. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media.

Today we're tracing the subtleties and revelations contained in the story of Exodus that is remembered during Passover. Avivah Zornberg says this story does not, in simple terms, pit a hero against a villain. Her analysis is complex and psychological. Repeatedly, Moses asks the Pharaoh to let his people go. Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. God sends a cascade of 10 plagues, including frogs, hail and locusts on the Egyptians. After every plague has ended, the text says Pharaoh hardened his heart. Some translations say he stiffened his heart or made it strong-willed. And he continues to enslave the Israelites. But after the sixth plague, in which the Egyptian people are covered with boils, this description of Pharaoh's heart changes. Thereafter, according to the text, it is the Lord Himself who hardens the heart of Pharaoh. I asked Avivah Zornberg about this.

MS. TIPPETT: There is something quite remarkable that happens when you just start telling and retelling these stories which we know in many simplified forms, right? I mean, we know this story from movies and from songs. Let's talk about the Pharaoh himself that, for such a long time, as you say, he hardens his own heart. Then suddenly the text says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. What is that saying there about the nature of Pharaoh or the oppressor, if that's what he stands for, and also the nature of this God who is rescuing Israel?

DR. ZORNBERG: Well, it's really quite a theological problem, actually, which the *Midrash* pays a lot of attention to. And that is that if God hardens Pharaoh's heart, then, obviously, Pharaoh's not responsible anymore for his intransigence. Why should he be punished? And the classic direction to answer it has to do with reaching a point of no return, that one can make oneself obdurate and closed to all appeal from the outside world to such a point that, in fact, it's as if human autonomy ceases to act altogether. One no longer has the power to backtrack. And, from that point onwards, I think it's a kind of figure of speech, then, to say that God hardens his heart.

MS. TIPPETT: So say a person makes so many choices, which are harmful to others that, at some point, they will continue to make those kinds of choices?

DR. ZORNBERG: There seems to be no longer any free will. It makes me think of Macbeth who, after a certain point, he wonders at himself, why couldn't he answer amen to the guard calling out some blessing in his sleep? Why couldn't he do the thing that one would have thought any sensitive person would do? He's gone beyond the point of no return; he can't use religious language any longer. And I think with Pharaoh, there is the sense that, repeatedly, it's not just that he hardens his heart, but what that means in terms of relationships is that he simply doesn't hear. He doesn't hear. He doesn't hear what Moses is saying, he doesn't hear what God is saying. There's clearly an intention here. He makes himself as someone who can't hear. And that means that, actually, he doesn't even have to say no. This is something I find very striking, actually, that not very often does he outright refuse to let the people go. He basically sits there impassively and doesn't listen.

MS. TIPPETT: This language and this imagery of seeing is also striking. There are many echoes and many uses of that word, that God sees the suffering of the Israelites early on. Tell me about that word in this narrative. Is there something going on with that image?

DR. ZORNBERG: Yeah. I think it's a key word in the narrative, yes. One of the important first uses is where Moses goes out and sees the pain of his brothers, so that's a kind of seeing, it's an empathic seeing. And when God says out of the burning bush that 'I have really seen' — *rahora itseh*, it's an emphatic, double use of the word — 'I've really seen the pain of the people, and I've heard their cry.' And it's at that point where again, there's a sense as if, on God's level as well, in His dimension a barrier has been removed and what God is now sensitive to is pain. So to be able to see pain, I think, is a very important dimension of what makes redemption possible. Even seeing one's own pain. It seems that the people are rather apathetic even to their own pain. We don't hear them crying out until the end of the second chapter. Then we have four times over that they cry out. One of the first things that makes the people begin to move internally is the experience of being seen, a very intimate feeling that God is really seeing them and seeing them where they really live.

MS. TIPPETT: And we know that experience in human relationships — don't we? — of how transformative it is to be seen.

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. And the sense, then, of their own pain as experienced through the eyes of the other is the beginning of the people's redemption. Without an awareness of how wrong things are, nothing will ever change. So I think that's an extremely transformative moment.

MS. TIPPETT: There is something so dynamic and fluid in this text, in Exodus in particular, of growth and relationships and a passion. It feels like a stretch, maybe, to someone who's not steeped in the *Midrashic* text, but of a passion on both sides. And on both sides of that equation, there's kind of dawning self-knowledge and development. Is that fair to say that?

DR. ZORNBERG: I think so. I think in the more kabbalistic kind of *Midrashic* tradition, there is definitely the sense of God being aroused by human beings, just as human beings are aroused by God. And the word arousal is a very important word about the relationship between God and human beings. But that it's mutual. That God is moved by human beings as well as the obvious other way around. I think one of the most important *Midrashic* sources that I know on this story, it's one that I really love, is the mirror story. It's a story that's told to prove how important women were to this whole redemption saga, and it's a story about the righteous women of that time.

MS. TIPPETT: Avivah Zornberg. Here's a version of that story from a primary *Midrashic* collection, *Tanhuma Pekudei*, edited in the fifth century.

READER: "You find that when Israel were in harsh labor in Egypt, Pharaoh decreed against them that they should not sleep at home nor have relations with their wives. Said Rabbi Shimeon bar Chalafta, 'What did the daughters of Israel do?' They would go down to draw water from the river, and God would prepare for them little fish in their buckets. And they would sell some of them, and cook some of them, and buy wine with the proceeds, and go to the field and feed their husbands. And when they had eaten and drunk, the women would take the mirrors and look into them with their husbands, and she would say, 'I am more comely than you,' and he would say, 'I am more comely than you.' And as a result, they would accustom themselves to desire, and they were fruitful and multiplied, and God took note of them immediately. Some of our sages said they bore two children at a time, others said they bore 12 at a time, and still others said 600,000.... And all these numbers from the mirrors. ... In the merit of those mirrors which they showed their husbands to accustom them to desire, from the midst of the harsh labor, they raised up all the hosts."

DR. ZORNBERG: She says to him, 'I'm more beautiful than you,' and he answers her, 'No, I'm more beautiful than you.' So there is some kind of dare going on here. There's some kind of game. As I understand it, it's a game in which she is challenging him to see his own beauty. If there's anything left in him at all of any kind of assertiveness, then how could he not somewhere swing back at her when she has said that to him? And the result is — and the *Midrash* is very unequivocal — the result is that they accustom themselves to desire, an extraordinary expression, as if desire is something that simply has disappeared from their repertoire.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. ZORNBERG: And I think there's a sense here that what she's got going here makes it possible for each couple to feel that they are capable of giving birth to all the many various possibilities.

MS. TIPPETT: And the possibility of freedom.

DR. ZORNBERG: Of freedom, of infiniteness, of unpredictability, which such multiple births suggests, and that it's all done with mirrors, the *Midrash* says, mischievously, it seems to me. And I have a whole theory about these mirrors. It seems to me that, when one looks in a mirror, one is basically always seeing a somewhat changed version of oneself, a distorted version of oneself. So it means that the mirror represents fantasy. But from the point of view of the *Midrash* and from the point of view of God, who supports the women's activities, it takes an act of this kind, a performative act of whimsy and imagination, not looking at things quite straight, in order to open things up.

MS. TIPPETT: Torah interpreter and teacher Avivah Zornberg. This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, more on the hidden themes of Exodus and why Passover values questions over certainties.

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I'm Krista Tippett. Stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett.

Today we're exploring the nuances and complexity of the story of the Exodus. Remembered in the eight days of Passover, it is also the backdrop of the New Testament Easter events. My guest, Avivah Zornberg, is a scholar of Torah and Talmud. She's been walking us through the narrative of the ancient Israelites' rebellion and liberation from slavery in Egypt. The word Passover refers to how the angel of death passed over Israelite households during the last 10 plagues sent by God on the Egyptians. The firstborn child of every Egyptian household died. Avivah Zornberg draws on the rich and ancient literature of rabbinic wisdom called Midrash to imaginatively explore the meaning of this text, even to probe the gaps in the story for its relevance today. The Torah itself commands telling this story to future generations. Avivah Zornberg has written that what really happened in ancient Egypt in fact becomes a less important question than how best to tell it for our time.

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. It's one of the extraordinary, recursive references in the story. Over and over again, God says to Moses, Moses says to the people, 'All this is happening so that you shall tell the story.'

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. ZORNBERG: It's so upside-down, you might say, you know. Since it's happened, all right, tell the story. Make sure people remember it. But that's not the point. It's not telling the story so as to remember what happened. It happened so as to be the stimulus for a good story, for a meaningful story. And the stories will develop and change through time. And perhaps, in the end, you might find yourself telling a better story than what is actually written in the text. So long as there is some connection. So that what you have, for instance, on the Seder night, on Passover, is basically the commandment to tell the story of the Exodus, which doesn't mean reading the Bible. It means, you know, it isn't just opening up the Bible and reading. It's on the basis of this, what's called the *Haggadah*, the storytelling book, which has a text.

MS. TIPPETT: Kind of the order of service.

DR. ZORNBERG: There is a fixed text, but it's supposed to be just a kind of opener for the proliferation of more ideas and more attempts to tell the story in a way that will come closer to what can really affect us.

MS. TIPPETT: We haven't really gotten to the part of the story which is the focus of the Passover commemoration, which is, in fact, the moment after that last plague.

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. You mean the death of the firstborn?

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah, yeah.

DR. ZORNBERG: And that God passes over the Israelite houses as the firstborn in the Egyptian houses are dying. It's actually rather a terrible. One can just imagine the sounds, the crying. And I think there is really a feeling of pressure at that moment. This is not an ecstatic moment. The word that's used in the Hebrew text, here and in later retellings of the story in Deuteronomy, is *chipazon*. *Chipazon* means "panic haste." And you should eat the Paschal offering, the sacrifice that the Israelites were supposed to eat on that night, you shall eat it in haste, which is always a strange commandment. Ahead of time, you should prepare to eat it in haste. It's not the tempo. It's the — the people are being told ahead of time that the way in which you will experience this will be pressured, there'll be a sense of pressure. The Egyptians will be rushing you out of Egypt. But most of all, what's called the haste of God himself, a sense of history, a sense of the redemption as something that God is making happen rather faster than people can really assimilate it. Things are happening very fast at that moment, and people are almost not capable of registering what is really going on, as one often is not at critical moments of experience, cataclysmic moments.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, and this is a cataclysmic moment. I mean, this is a moment at which people are dying.

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. And people are not sure themselves what their fate is going to be. I think that kind of fear is with the people for a long way into the journey. It's clear that they don't stop being afraid of Egypt. Even as they approach the Red Sea, and they look around, and there, of course, there's Egypt following them.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. And, I mean, again, in the story, of course, the Egyptians go through this horrible experience. But I believe it says that God hardens Pharaoh's heart one more time so that they don't just let the Israelites go, they pursue them.

DR. ZORNBERG: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. It's madness.

MS. TIPPETT: What is the *Midrash* about the drama and the violence of those final scenes before the liberation, which is so celebrated?

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. Well, there is one very striking *Midrash* that tries to account for the Egyptian madness, really, in running after them, actually, and pursuing them after they have basically thrown them out of the country. And, of course, this is all in the persona of Pharaoh. He is Egypt. He says, 'What is this we have done?' in letting them go. It's as if he now thinks letting them go was a crazy idea. What had seemed to be the most sane decision of his life, a few days later, he decides was completely irrational. And the Midrash puts it very provocatively and says something like this, that Pharaoh feels that as long as he had the Israelites in his power and God was sending him messages — that's a very — it's interesting euphemism for the plagues — that somehow he had some kind of very dramatic, intense relationship with God. He had a feeling that God needed him, that he was important. But now that the people are gone and life has gone back to normal, the sense of drama has gone and life is actually quite boring. Now, that sounds very trivial, but there is a sense that Pharaoh has strangely enjoyed being in the eye of the storm.

MS. TIPPETT: There are world leaders like that.

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes, yes.

MS. TIPPETT: So that's a familiar kind of figure from history, isn't it?

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. Yes. The worst thing is not being in the limelight, is not being right there where it's all happening, even if you're suffering. That's the mentality, of course, that leads to destruction, to total destruction. It's almost like a trance. And they go, and they willfully, basically, throw themselves into the sea. And I think there is a strong sense of insanity about that last move. The sea has opened up, but who in his right mind would trust that? And then there is that terrible description of how the army with all the cavalry, of how they are simply tossed in the waves and die. It's a very graphic description.

MS. TIPPETT: Avivah Zornberg. Here's a selection from that passage in Exodus.

READER: "The Egyptians came in pursuit after them into the sea, all of the Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and horsemen. At the morning watch, the Lord looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He locked the wheels of their chariots so that they moved forward with difficulty. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Hold out your arm over the sea that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen.' Moses held out his arm over the sea and, at daybreak, the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the Lord hurled the Egyptians into the sea. The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen. Pharaoh's entire army that followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. They said, 'I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.'"

DR. ZORNBERG: I think, again, this "Song of Praise" that the Israelites sing after it's all over, it seems, if one looks closely at the text, I think one can find room for understanding a *Midrashic* view of this which suggests that they sing not at the end when they're safe, but actually while they're still in the middle of the sea. And this song is some words of expression, not just of jubilation, but of the human situation of being in the middle, of being full of fear, the sense of life and death in the balance, seeing what can happen to human beings all around them. And that there, but for the grace of God, go I. And so the song is not — again, it's not a simple — it's not a simple ditty. It's a song that human beings sing in the face of mortality.

MS. TIPPETT: This is a long passage, which is known as "Moses' Song," I believe, is that right?

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. He leads it, yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes. You imagine it as after they have come out and the Egyptians have been drowned.

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. I think that would be the natural imagining. But if one looks closely at the text, one can see that it says, you know, as they were walking in the midst of the sea on dry land. So if one imagines it as people still in that rather menacing corridor, which they know can collapse because it just has behind them, then the song becomes a different song. And it's a song of human beings at the edge between death and life, celebrating life, but at the edge.

MS. TIPPETT: Torah and Talmud scholar Avivah Zornberg. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media.

The Exodus epic continues beyond Moses' parting of the Red Sea, but the story of that miraculous release is the focus of Passover. The liberation theme of Exodus has inspired people of all kinds throughout history as well as new movements within Judaism. There are Haggadahs, or orders of service, for feminist Passovers, Passovers shared with African-Americans, even Passover reflections on how the Exodus story applies to the contemporary situation of Israel and of the Palestinian people. The dramatic Exodus narratives of Moses and

the Pharaoh and the Ten Commandments have also lent themselves to popular entertainment and have been treated widely in movies, plays, and song. I asked Avivah Zornberg what is missing for her in popularized versions of the Exodus story.

DR. ZORNBERG: Well, I think, again, it's the question of the particulars of rapture. In other words, I'm always looking for the particulars.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. *The Particulars of Rapture* is the title that you gave to your book about Exodus, so I wanted to ask you what you meant by that title. So, good.

DR. ZORNBERG: All right, so we'll try to touch on both. It seems to me that it's a kind of storybook story, that Cecil B. DeMille story, in which there are the bad guys and the good guys, and the bad guys get it. You know, they get their comeuppance, and the good guys rejoice. And, somehow, it doesn't seem to me to be a story for adults. What you find in the *Midrashic* versions, many multiple narratives, is an emphasis on the complexity of the Israelite experience and the fact that, immediately they land on the other side, they begin to complain and sin, essentially to doubt the whole story of redemption. In other words, nothing is absolute. And the fact that the Israelites are witnessing the deaths of the Egyptians, that is something, according to a very famous and beautiful Midrash, that means that the angels in heaven are not allowed to sing a song of praise. God stops them singing because 'the creatures of My hand, the work of My hands, are dying in the sea. How can you be singing a song of praise?' Ms. TIPPETT: And God is speaking of the Egyptians.

DR. ZORNBERG: He's speaking of the Egyptians, at least in certain versions of the *Midrash*. In other versions, He's speaking of the Israelites, who are also on the edge. So there is a sense here of the pathos of the human condition. And the Israelites are very aware of that. Their song and their dance — the women play a special role, again, in this story; they sing separately — has to do with the kind of faith that is required to live in a condition in which rapture doesn't usually come unalloyed. It comes with a sadness and a tension involved in it. So "the particulars of rapture," that wonderful line from a poem by Wallace Stevens, I had in mind the subtleties and the complexities of all the many stories, like the stories that are hidden within the apparent grand narrative.

There is the grand narrative which can be told very simply, and you could say it's a kind of children's story, and then there are all the details, which really make the experience, even the details that one isn't totally aware of oneself and which emerge sometimes only on retelling. Ms. TIPPETT: The great theme of the Exodus — and this story has been used by other people in other situations also. African-Americans, slaves were very inspired, and in the civil rights movement, were very inspired by this Exodus story. There's liberation theology. It's been empowering for all kinds of people in all kinds of bondage. But tell me, when you think about the theme of human freedom, human liberation. I mean, what are the layers of the message that this narrative tells about that experience?

DR. ZORNBERG: Well, I think one of the important issues is one we've touched on, and that is the need for those who have to be liberated to achieve in themselves some sense of the possibility of change. I think there comes a situation in totalitarian regimes of all kinds in which there is what Vaclav Havel, the Czech leader, calls in one of his books, a kind of automatism, in which everyone somewhere becomes the system. People don't just accept their role, they almost become that role. There are no choices involved anymore.

Nadezhda Mandelstam writes about the Russian situation under communism also as one in which no one believed that there could possibly be any change, nothing would ever change again. And this is not only those who are imposing the regime but also those who suffered under it. So it seems to me that the story of the Exodus is one in which, in a quieter way, but I think in a very real way, one of the most important themes for liberation is the need for a process of growth within the persecuted if they are to have a history.

MS. TIPPETT: Torah interpreter and teacher Avivah Zornberg. We're talking about the meaning of the Exodus story as Jews around the world observe the eight days of Passover. Passover begins in a Jewish home with preparations for the Seder, a meal that employs ritual food and conversation to recall the ancient Israelites' liberation from slavery. At the Seder meal, children are invited to ask four established questions, variations on one central question: Why is this night different from all other nights? These questions are meant to set an appropriate tone of inquiry and wonderment.

MS. TIPPETT: I want to ask you how being steeped in this story as you are and all the traditions around it and having given it so much thought and study, I wonder just if you could talk a little bit about how that informs your experience of the Passover ritual.

DR. ZORNBERG: Well, I think of the rituals, then the first rather heavy ritual is the cleaning before Passover, which is not spring cleaning, although one often takes the opportunity to do that as well. But it's really the idea of getting rid of any *hametz*. *Hametz* is leavened bread. On the Passover one can't have any leavened bread. Not only may not one eat it, but it can't exist within one's house. And so one works quite hard to scrub away anything that has even a taste of hametz in it. And symbolically, well, all kinds of things have been made of this. But, basically, the idea somewhere seems to be that there are elements within us which make it very hard for us to grow and to open up.

MS. TIPPETT: Following on what you just said about the deepest meaning of freedom and this story.

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. Personally, I think about such things. I think about those things that are not so easy to scrub away, and, perhaps just by enacting this physical work, that one becomes more focused on what needs attention in order to clear passages. So that's one of the issues. I think the other one, the other very beautiful ritual, is the whole Seder night ritual, which, simply, it's a fiesta of telling stories

and asking questions. Or perhaps I should put it the other way around, the central role of asking questions. If you have little children around, then that's a gift because they should naturally be full of questions. And we do things to provoke their questions — put strange things on the table, like bitter herbs, so that they will ask and then we can talk about the bitterness of the slavery. But, of course, in the way of things, little children get older and they know the answer already, and so they will ask more sophisticated questions, hopefully. And the questions never end. One of the very famous parts of the Seder night is the part about the four sons, the four different kinds of children who have different ways of approaching this problem of questioning, ranging from the wise son to the one who doesn't know how to ask at all. And, obviously, we don't think very much of that. Someone who simply doesn't know how to ask a question, that's a problem in terms of autonomy, in terms of freedom.

MS. TIPPETT: I think not knowing how to ask a question is far more serious than not having an answer. Right?

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes, absolutely. For me, it's — there's no question. And I think in the Jewish tradition, there's a sense that everything gets moving as a result of a problem, a question. That's what arouses. As soon as you've got even — if you want to call it a complaint, even if it's a rather querulous question, it's still better than no question because it pushes at the limits of the sort of silent conspiracy of the way things have to be. So there is the wise son, and there is the wicked son. And the wicked son asks a very disruptive question, and there's no great enthusiasm about his question. But it's still, in the hierarchy of things, it's probably better than the one who doesn't know how to ask at all. And what you have to do with the one who doesn't know how to ask is, and it's put very beautifully, *v'at p'tach lo*, you, feminine, it's put in the feminine form, you open up for him. You try to stimulate him. You know, you put things in such a way that perhaps that will wake him up. So the emphasis, I think, the whole direction is on opening up.

MS. TIPPETT: And on using these religious traditions and stories to wake people up also. Right?

DR. ZORNBERG: The stories remain very powerful as written. And then there is all the amazing cargo of hidden stories that emerges in the *Midrashic* tradition. And then there is the invitation to the participants to tell their own stories and to ask their own questions and to elaborate further. So there is this sense of infinite elaboration.

MS. TIPPETT: Does this tradition of posing questions — I know that it makes perfect sense in the Jewish religious sensibility — but is there something about the Passover story itself that lends itself to taking that approach to retelling it and remembering it every year?

DR. ZORNBERG: Well, I think, you can say the question is an expression of desire. If there is a question, then there is a possibility of movement onwards. And when it comes to the themes of liberty and freedom, then I think questioning is really what motivates, what gets things moving. The strong sense that I don't know everything, you know, that there are things here that I need to know and don't know. And even if one doesn't get a good answer, as you said, simply the activity of framing the question, that already moves one away from a kind of consensus situation.

MS. TIPPETT: Plants a longing, doesn't it?

DR. ZORNBERG: Yes. It's a longing. It's the individual again. The individual who expresses himself in that form, herself. And it's a sense, also, of the relationship between the generations. And in a sense, there is always that gap between the generations. The parents, as it were, stand for something. They seem to know it all. And the children are the ones who ask the questions. And the children have their problems, they have their criticisms. And this is the moment of freedom.

MS. TIPPETT: Avivah Zornberg's book about Exodus is called *The Particulars of Rapture*. She's also written a book of reflection on *Genesis, The Beginning of Desire*. In closing, here is a reading from the Passover Haggadah, "The Open Door," by the late Italian writer Primo Levi.

READER: "Tell me, how is this night different from all other nights? How, tell me, is this Passover different from other Passovers? Light the lamp, open the door wide so the pilgrim can come in, Gentile or Jew; Under the rags perhaps the prophet is concealed. Let him enter and sit down with us; Let him listen, drink, sing and celebrate Passover; Let him consume the bread of affliction, the Paschal Lamb, sweet mortar and bitter herbs. This is the night of differences in which you lean your elbow on the table, since the forbidden becomes prescribed, evil is translated into good. We spent the night recounting far-off events full of wonder, and because of all the wine, the mountains will skip like rams. Tonight they will exchange questions: The wise, the godless, the simple-minded and the child. And time reverses its course, today flowing back into yesterday, like a river enclosed at its mouth. Each of us has been a slave in Egypt, soaked straw and clay with sweat, and crossed the sea dry-footed. You too, stranger. This year in fear and shame, next year in virtue and justice."

MS. TIPPETT: Contact us at speakingoffaith.org and tell us what you think. Our companion site offers behind the scenes audio of my interview with Avivah Zornberg and an audio slide show of woodcuts from a newly discovered Holocaust-era Passover Haggadah.

Our podcast includes an mp3 of each week's show and now we're adding exclusive content beginning with audio excerpts from my new book, *Speaking of Faith*. For years listeners have asked me how I came to care about large questions of meaning and how my conversations across traditions shape my understanding of religion and human life and in the world. This book is my response and it's in bookstores now. You can learn more at speakingoffaith.org.

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