

Exodus

By Jennifer Krause

A few days ago my building super, Walter, stopped by my apartment. When the doorbell rang and he announced himself, I imagined that he was coming to fix something or maybe to bring me a package that had arrived while I was at work. But when I opened the door, he hadn't brought tools or an oversized FedEx envelope. Instead he was holding a set of keys out in front of him, like a fish he had just caught. They were the spare set that he keeps to my place. He didn't tell me right away that he was leaving, just said he had come to return the keys.

Walter told me that his family had gotten too big for the basement apartment that comes with the job. He has been working in the building for eleven years, ever since he came from Colombia. I have been living there for six of those eleven, and Walter was the person who showed me my apartment when I was looking for a place to live. He has been there at all hours of the day and night for the occasional maintenance crisis, but, more importantly, he has always given me the sense that he is looking out for me, which is a great mitzvah when you're living alone in Manhattan. It is hard to imagine the building without him.

Just before Walter came to return the keys, I was unpacking groceries and reflecting on a conversation I had just had with the manager of my neighborhood grocery store. Ali is a devout Muslim. He is from Bangladesh, has a wife and three children, and a Ph.D. in geography. He publishes and lectures in Bangladesh and this summer will make haj (a pilgrimage) to Mecca and Medina, a journey for which he has been preparing for twenty years. When he returns from his trip, he explained to me the other night as we stood around a bank of metal carts just opposite the ketchup aisle, he is going to publish another book encouraging Bangladeshi people to see Jews as friends, not enemies. "This is what Allah tells me I must do," he says. "I must love all people. I cannot hate people and love Allah. He knows what is in every heart."

I have been shopping in this same grocery store for years now, and Ali and I have always waved and said hello. But a few months ago we began talking. In the course of that first real conversation, I learned about Ali's religious convictions. I shared with him that I am a rabbi, and we have spoken at great length about the purpose of religion and the connections between Judaism and Islam, as well as the ways in which religion can be misused as a justification for violence. Every time we talk, I walk away having learned Torah from a man who quotes the Koran.

I share these stories because they are part of the puzzle of community. I am well aware that Walter and Ali are not people for whom I am responsible or who are responsible for me. They do not fall into the simple categories of family member, co-worker, or friend. We are from different backgrounds, different countries, and

we occupy different socio-economic spheres. We do not go to each other's homes for dinner or make plans to meet for coffee, and we probably never will. Our connections are site-specific and episodic. And yet I know that they are real because they make real claims on my heart.

In Parashat Bo, even as God continues to harden Pharaoh's heart, the Israelites begin their journey out of Egypt. The Torah tells us that over six hundred thousand of them packed up and headed out on foot, but that they were not the only ones travelling. We also learn that an *erev rav* - a mixed multitude - went with them (Exodus 12:38). We don't know exactly who comprised that *erev rav*, and of course the rabbis' reviews are mixed when it comes to characterizing this anonymous crew. Some see them as the riff-raff, a group of hangers-on and rabble-rousers ultimately responsible for the building of the golden calf. Others suggest that they were Egyptians who simply wanted to escape, wise people who shared the human impulse to be free. So while we may not know who the *erev rav* were, we do know that the Israelites were not the only ones who experienced the exodus. They set out on their journey to become who they were, yet to be with some other folks on important journeys of their own. And the connections were no less real for being temporary or coincidental.

About a year ago, a guy came to replace the door buzzer in my apartment. Walter was standing there with him when he rang the doorbell. He saw my mezuzah, pointed to it, and said, "Me, too. Barukh atah Adonai...." While he worked on removing the old buzzer, he told me that he had been born in the Ukraine, had immigrated to Israel with his family, and had fought in the 1948 Independence War. We talked for a while longer - actually he did most of the talking, explaining why he was an atheist and knew he could never believe in God. Nevertheless, when he left, he asked in Hebrew, "What blessing may I give you before I go?" Before I could answer, he prayed that I would find my *bashert* (suggesting his own son as a possibility!) and live a happy, healthy life.

After he left, I noticed that he had forgotten a bunch of different colored wires. I keep them in the tin with the quarters I use for doing laundry. They remind me that we are not only traveling with the people with whom we have chosen to travel, but with the ones who turn up along the way. The repairman, Walter, and Ali are part of my *erev rav* and I am a part of theirs. They are the people with whom I cross to the next shore - whatever or wherever it may be - when there is an opening and a path forward. When we get on the other side we may hang out for a while, but we will probably part company before too long. Walter moved across the river to New Jersey. In a few months, Ali will be off to Mecca. I don't know what's next for me, but I know I won't be going alone.