

עִמּוּד עָנָן עִמּוּד אֵשׁ

PILLAR OF CLOUD, PILLAR OF FIRE: EX 13,21-22

The Israelites left Rameses for Succoth, about six hundred thousand on the march – men, that is, not counting their families. A mixed crowd of people went with them, and flocks and herds, quantities of livestock.

And with the dough which they had brought from Egypt they baked unleavened cakes, because the dough had not risen, since they had been driven out of Egypt without time to linger or to prepare food for themselves.

The time that the Israelites spent in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And on the very day the four hundred and thirty years ended, all the armies of the Lord left Egypt. The night when the Lord kept vigil to bring them out of Egypt must be kept as a vigil in honour of the Lord by all Israelites, for all generations.

(Ex 12:37-42)

Israel, the unleavened bread, goes out of Egypt.

It is a true miracle. A miracle, because we manage to free ourselves from the sorrow that we have come to experience and that has become our 'home'. And we manage to leave the place where we have come to know our God, we have heard Him speak, we have seen His deeds. As a rule we would be bound to the places where we have met Him, to the words of the meeting, and we would not leave any more. On the contrary, here we can see the miracle of the power of the freedom offered us by God. The Israelites do not have to stay in Egypt in order to guard those places that have become holy, those houses that have become altars, nor to cherish in their hearts that Presence that revealed Itself while they were slaves: they leave.

They are not the custodians of the Presence; they are rather looked after by It. God is not in a place that would not be able to contain Him; He is 'the' place of the world, that is, the 'place' in which all the world can find its true meaning. He is not the God of a definite place, but the God of relationship, the God of His people's history. He is where His people is.

GOD WITH US

The text refers the exact number of those leaving Egypt. Before departing they counted up how many people were there, in order not to leave anybody behind. They were 70 when they went down to Egypt 430 years before; now they are six hundred thousand, not counting women, children and the Egyptians who had intermixed with them. Then the text adds:

...all the armies of the Lord left Egypt. (Ex 12:41)

The Jewish tradition teaches us that these ‘armies’ are the Heavenly powers, God’s angels, the Heavenly court accompanying God’s sanctuary. These armies leave Egypt together with the people of Israel. God and all His armies go out of Egypt together with the people leaving Egypt. Thus we come to know that for all the time that Israel stayed in Egypt, God had transferred His Heavenly court to Egypt: all the angels stayed in Egypt, ‘slaves’ with the slaves, ‘exiled’ with the exiled.

Israel leaves. God and all His armies leave too.

Wherever His people is, God is with them. We could even say: wherever a man who belongs to God is, there God is: when he is anguished, when he is sad, when he is battered, when he flees, when he is hungry, when he is naked, God will be with him. He will be naked, hungry, battered, homeless too.

From one of the first Lectios we can remember that God was in the basket where Moses was crying, and Pharaoh’s daughter saw Him together with the child.

Wherever sorrows and sadness are, there God is, suffering with His people.

Wherever the Israelites are bound in chains, the Š^ekînh, the Glory of God, is chained with them. It is written: ‘In all their sorrows, He is in sorrows too’.

These words refer to the sorrows of the community. From where do I gather that they can be referred to the individual too? It is written: ‘He calls to me and I answer him: / in distress I am at his side’ (Ps 91:15)

Wherever the Israelites were exiled, the Š^ekînh was exiled with them. The Israelites were exiled in Egypt, Edom, Elam, and the Š^ekînh was exiled with them. And if one day the Israelites manage to come back, the Š^ekînh will come back with them.

(Rabbi Ishmael’s Mekhiltà)

Do not forget that Israel is a figure of the Church, the new people, the people from which His lordship spreads out to all the world and to all times.

*He has put all things under His feet,
and made Him, as He is above all things, the Head of the Church;
which is His Body,
the fullness of Him who is filled, all in all.
(Ep 1:22-23)*

God commits Himself to His people, to the men and women that He has chosen, to each man and woman He has chosen, and there is no turning back.

The pillar of fire and clouds
is the sign that God committed Himself to His people:
He has listened to them,
He has watched them,

He has raised His powerful arm,
He has made them go out of Egypt,
and now He is leading them towards the Promised Land.

God goes out of Egypt with His armies,
He used to be a slave with His enslaved people,
and now He is a pilgrim with His journeying people.

God dwells in the midst of His people,
and goes wherever His people may go.

In the Scriptures there is another occurrence of this experience, in the Book of Ezekiel:

the glory of God leaves the Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed by the Babylonians,
and stays on the Mount of Olives,
from which she watches the line of exiled Jews
and queues with them.

Ezekiel will see Him once again along the rivers of Babylon,
deported exactly as His people is.

The winged creatures then raised their wings and the wheels moved with them, with the glory of God of Israel over them, above. And the glory of the Lord rose from the centre of the city and halted on the mountain to the east of the city.

Then the spirit lifted me up and took me, in vision, in the spirit of God, to the exiles in Chaldaea...

(Ezk 11:22-24)

God is the ‘God-with-us’.

This means that we can grasp something of Him
from what we are and from what happens to us.

We can learn about Him from the history that He ‘writes’ with us.

What happens to us,
the ways we follow,
our toils and successes along the way,
being built up as a people,
the courage to go on,
all that tells us about Him and His greatness.

Moses said to the Lord: “Suppose the Egyptians hear about his – for by Your power You brought these people out of their country – and tell the people living in this country. They have heard that You, Lord, are with this people, and that You, Lord, show Yourself to them face to face; that Your cloud stands over them and that You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. If You kill this people now as though it were one man, then the nations who have heard about You will say, ‘The Lord was not able to bring this people into the country which He had

sworn to give them, and so He has slaughtered them in the desert.' No, my Lord! Now is the time to assert Your power as You promised when You said earlier..."
(Nb 14:13-17)

All that entails journeying in hope and responsibility:
we are the 'place' where all that God can do for man can be met.
What greatness! And how great a joy!
It is indeed necessary to go out of Egypt,
out of each and every house of slavery,
and to start following Him,
with no setbacks,
for our sake and for the sake of all those who are still waiting to see,
to know,
to believe.

CLOUDS AND FIRE

*The Lord preceded them,
by day in a pillar of cloud to show them the way,
and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light,
so that they could march by day and by night.
The pillar of cloud never left its place ahead of the people during the day,
nor the pillar of fire during the night.
(Ex 13:21-22)*

Cloud during the day,
fire at night.
They are either journeying in a luminous darkness
or in a night light.
It is never full day,
it is never pitch darkness either:
this semi-darkness or, alternatively, semi-light,
is the place where we can make use of our liberty.
It is the place where we can take decisions, run risks,
perceive, entrust ourselves,
with courage and hope.
It is the place where we can walk as free men.

One does not need to know the way and maybe his destination;
but he has to be free. Otherwise he will not be able to walk.
One has to be free to be able to walk,
free to go step by step,
free to follow the way,

free to accept all its burdens and to face the consequences.
While we are walking at night we can see the pillar of fire,
setting a limit to darkness
and encouraging our steps.

While we are walking during the day we can see the cloud,
pointing to something else that we are not able to see at the moment,
pointing to a 'horizon' which is farther away than our dreams.

And we must walk accepting our limited sight,
but believing that God can see the right way.
What is important is not to know the way,
but not to lose sight of that light, of that cloud
which knows the way.

GUIDE AND REFUGE, WAY AND DWELLING

*He spread out a cloud to cover them,
and fire to light up the night.
(Ps 105:39)*

Burning bush, fire enveloping the poor and needy.
Pillar of fire, guide along the way of those who are His.
Pillar of cloud, preserver of the life of His people.

*Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path.
(Ps 119:105)*

The Word lights up the way, it shows it, it makes it safe.
Like a servant bent over the path to prevent his master from stumbling,
and from being late.

“Among mortals it is the disciples who carries the lamp for his master, but we can read the following statement as far as God is concerned: ‘The Lord preceded them by day’.¹

Among mortals, it is the slave who washes his master, but we can read the following statement as far as God is concerned: ‘I bathed you in water’.²

Among mortals, it is the slave who gives garments to his master, but we can read the following statement as far as God is concerned: ‘I gave you embroidered dresses’.³

¹ Ex 13:21.

² Ezk 16:9.

Among mortals, it is the slave who gives sandals to his master, but we can read the following statement as far as God is concerned: 'I gave you fine leather shoes'.⁴

Among mortals, it is the slave who carries his master, but we can read the following statement as far as God is concerned: 'I carried you away on eagle's wings'.⁵

Among mortals, it is the master who sleeps, while the slave keeps watch out of the tent, but God is the guardian of Israel, because it is written: 'He neither sleeps nor slumbers, the Guardian of Israel'.⁶ (...)

Hence: 'There is nobody who is like You among gods; nobody who can perform deeds similar to Yours'.⁷

The Word is light.

To walk in this light means to grasp what life is about,
to give names to things, to events, in conformity with that light and with nothing else.
It means to acknowledge salvation inhabiting our lives,
to discover their meaning in that light,
to discover Love's Providence taking care of us
and making us become better men and women,
in the image and likeness of God.

And the pillar of cloud too is the place where God speaks from,
not so that we may know the way,
but so that we can walk along it with confidence.

*He spoke with them in the pillar of fire,
they obeyed His decrees, the Law He gave them.
(Ps 99:7)*

His Word comes to stay, to dwell with us.

*And the Lord showed Himself at the Tent in a pillar of cloud;
the pillar of cloud stood at the door of the Tent.
(Dt 31:15)*

This word is accessible:
we find it on the threshold of the dwelling,
dwelling in the tent next to our own,
guardian and protection,
safe refuge.

³ Ezk 16:10.

⁴ Ezk 16:10.

⁵ Ex 19:4.

⁶ Ps 121:4.

⁷ Midrash Rabbah – Exodus 25:6.

We must walk behind this pillar,
in its presence,
respond to its movements,
move when it moves.

This pillar is the measure according to which we can assess our journey:
it is not an experience turning to the past, turning to what it is leaving behind;
it is not an economic forecast predicting disaster from the very start;
it is not an evaluation of the number of the ranks, discouraging to leave;
on the contrary, it is a Word who speaks and who puts Itself at the head of a group of slaves in order to make of them a new people.

The pillar of fire and of cloud is represented in the Easter Vigil thanks to the liturgy of the Easter Candle. This is the night when we celebrate Our Lord Jesus Christ's Passover from death to life. This event shows us the way: it is the seal of God's commitment to man.

*Therefore on this sacred night, receive, O holy Father, the evening sacrifice of this sacrifice,
which Thy holy Church by the hands of her ministers presents to Thee
in the solemn offering of this wax candle made out of the labour of bees.
And now we know the excellence of this pillar,
which the bright fire lights for the honour of God.
Which fire, though now divided, suffers no loss from the communication of its light.
Because it is fed by the melted wax,
which the mother bee wrought
for the substance of this precious lamp.
We beseech Thee therefore, O Lord, that this candle,
consecrated to the honour of Thy name,
may continue burning to dissipate the darkness this night.
And being accepted as a sweet savour,
may be united with the celestial lights.
Let the morning star find it alight,
that star which never sets:
Christ Thy Son, who came back from hell,
and shone with brightness on mankind,
and who liveth and reigneth for ever and ever.
Amen.*

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER

1) I suggest that you ponder – both personally and as a community – over the decisive step to pass from guarding what is holy to being guarded by the Holy One. Personal choices, as well as the Institute's, must be informed by 'following', a following taking us away from what we know, from places and words which moulded our personality in the past but which we have to leave behind, in order for God to be free to work within us. It is important, indeed extremely important, to conform our choices to a dynamic kind of belonging, a belonging to a relationship which makes us new, free all the time, and all the time enables us to walk.

We are not the ones guarding God; it is God who guards us. We are not the ones devoting our time to Him; it is Him who devote His time to us. We are not the ones giving life to Him; it is Him who gives life to us. He is the first, and we come second. This order should never be overturned.

2) God is with His people wherever they are. It would be wise to give praise and thanks to God by going through our own 'exoduses', by calling to mind the gestures and words which guided us, the luminous darkness and the night light thanks to which we came to know the way of salvation. And to give thanks for all that.

3) God is bound in chains, hungry, naked, fleeing, with the man who is bound in chains, hungry, naked, fleeing. Nowadays the parable of the shepherd and king who identifies himself with the little ones (Mt 25) is very topical. It urgently poses some questions to us about our life in the world, as He is where we are. Which commitments of ours – both personal ones and the commitments of our community – should be reconsidered, re-discovered, for them to become the visible and accessible sign of a God who is in the midst of His people, a God close to us?

EXCURSUS

THE T^EFÎLLÎN

And on that day you will explain to your son, 'This is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt'.

This will serve as a sign on your hand would serve, or a reminder on your forehead, and in that way the Law of the Lord will be ever on your lips: for with a mighty hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. You shall observe this law at its appointed time, year by year. (...)

This will serve as a sign on your hand would serve, or a headband on your forehead, for by the strength of His hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.
(Ex 13:8-10, 16)

A traditional interpretation of the word *š^emôṭ*, 'the Names', that is, the Hebrew title of the Book of Exodus, states that this word is made up of the initials of:

Šabbāṭ, Saturday;

Mîlâh, Circumcision;

T^efillîn, Tefillin.

Thanks to the *Šabbāṭ*, Jewish men place their relation to the world under God's will.

Thanks to the *Mîlâh*, Jewish men place what is born under God's will.

Thanks to the *T^efillîn*, Jewish men place their body under God's will.

The Torah defines these three precepts as **אוֹת**, 'ôṭ, 'signs':

a 'sign for the future', for eternity, , **אוֹת לְעֹלָם**, 'ôṭ l^e 'ôlām, is the *Šabbāṭ* in Ex 31:17;

a 'sign of the covenant', **אוֹת בְּרִית**, 'ôṭ b^e rîṭ, is circumcision in Gn 17:11;

and the *T^efillîn* are a 'sign' for the hand and for the eyes, in Dt 6:8.

Three precepts, three commandments, that here become the 'signs' of freedom, and form the word 'liberation'.

There is something rather curious about this continuous intermingling of liberation and observance of the commandments, of freedom and rituals to be performed, of the end of slavery and birth of belonging.

Here freedom is a gift and God is in charge of it solely. Therefore, freedom must be guarded or, better, it must be made concrete through actual gestures. We need to be mindful of it; we need to renew it in our hearts and lives through appropriate gestures and words; we need to recount our experiences of freedom... so that these signs and words may remind us of who we are, where we come from, what has been done for us, in such a gratuitous and wonderful way.

The Exodus speaks of 'sign' and 'memorial'.

The rabbinical tradition teaches that the former refers to the future, while the latter refers to the past. The Exodus from Egypt is not only a memory of the past, but also a sign of hope for the future: in the same way as God managed to free His people in the past by His mighty arm, so He is and will be the author of any process of liberation and salvation, both for His people and for the whole of mankind.

‘As a sign’: the Exodus from Egypt will be for you as a sign on your arm and as a memorial above your eyes, meaning that these passages [dealing with the liberation from Egypt] must be tied on the head and on the arm.
(Rashi)

WHAT THE T^EFILLÎN ARE



The Tefillin, also called ‘Phylacteries’ from Ancient Greek ‘phylacterion’ (form of *phylássein*, φυλάσσειν meaning ‘to guard, protect’), are a set of small black leather boxes. The Scriptures call them טוֹטְפוֹת, *tôṭāfôṭ*, a term which can be rendered as ‘pendants’. The term *T^efillîn* comes from the Talmud, dealing with them extensively.

They are entirely hand-made; their manufacture lasts a year, and numerous rules and precepts must be observed in the process.

Long straps of black leather are tied to the base of the Tefillin, so that they may be tightened to the arm and the head. The strap of the arm-tefillah must be long: it must be wrapped seven times around the lower arm; then its remainder is wound three times around the middle finger, according to an ancient tradition.

In many Jewish communities, while the strap is being fastened to the middle finger of the weaker hand, a passage from the prophet Hosea is recited:

*I shall betroth you to myself for ever,
I shall betroth you
in uprightness and justice,
and faithful love and tenderness.
Yes, I shall betroth you to myself in loyalty
and in the knowledge of the Lord.
(Hos 2:21-22)*

The arm-tefillah is tightened on the **יָד יְשׁוּבָה** *yād kēhâh*, the weaker arm, that is, the left one (or the right one for left-handers), so that it faces the heart, the seat of emotions, to signify: ‘He was the One who gave you the strength...’ (Dt 8:18).

The Exodus from Egypt could take place because God’s hand intervened and worked wonders, while man’s hand had been weak. In our weakness we can remember all that God did for His people and all that He will keep on doing. The arm-tefillah is placed adjacent to the heart to signify the Lord’s love for His people.

The arm-tefillah must be put on first: it represents action and work. The head-tefillah comes second, as it represents thought. First comes the will to obey the commandments, then the ability to grasp them.

The second tefillah is placed on the head, the seat of intellect, but not on the forehead. It is tightened so that it must rest over the brain, on the middle of the head just above the forehead, so that no parts of it rest below the hairline.



The head-tefillah has four separate compartments where Biblical texts must be inserted. The Tefillin parchment scrolls placed inside the boxes are written with a pen from a hen in vegetable indelible ink. The parchment is wrapped up and tied with strings made of cow-tail.

The four Biblical passages are those which refer to this precept:

Ex 13:1-10: the commandment to remember the liberation from Egypt;

Ex 13:11-16: the commandment to teach these precepts to one's children;

Dt 6:1-13: the *šema' yisrā'ēl*, the statement that God is One;

Dt 11:13-21; the reward for observing the commandments.

The arm-tefillah, the one adjacent to the heart, has one, single compartment. And one single parchment scroll contains all the four passages: love is one. In fact, within the head, within the mind, there can be different opinions and views. But as far as action is concerned, unity must prevail.

On both sides of the head-tefillin, the Hebrew letter *shin* (ש) is moulded. The knot of the head-tefillin strap forms the letter *dalet* (ד) (known as the square-knot), while the strap that is passed through the arm-tefillin is formed into a knot in the shape of the letter *yud* (י). These three letters spell *Shaddai* (יְדַי), one of the names of God.

The tefillin must not be worn before one is thirteen years of age. During *Bar Mišwâh*, the boy puts on the tefillin first, on Thursday; then on the Sabbath he reads the *Parašâh*, that is that section of the Moses' Torah which is read weekly on Sabbaths.



BOUND TO THE TORAH

The basic meaning of the Tefillin is union and attachment to God, so much so that they are compared to the whole Torah: the purpose of the Torah is union with God; and the purpose of the Tefillin is union with God too. It means to be bound to

God through His Word; to enwrap oneself in it; to let it mould one's thoughts as well as actions, one's mind and heart; to let it support the gestures and choices that lead to union with God. By tightening the Tefillin, man is bound to God.

Head, heart, arm, hand: to fasten the words of the Torah to these organs of one's body symbolically expresses the will to serve God with each and every thought, with each and every feeling, with each and every action.

The rabbinical tradition teaches that the Tefillin are a kind of Torah; it is as if he who wears the Tefillin were reading the Torah. This is the reason why those who study the Torah are not bound to wear them.

This precept that we find in the text of the Exodus, at the very moment of departure, expresses the idea that the Exodus is possible only because it is generated by the Word of God. But it must be acknowledged and obeyed in faith. It is a trustworthy word, a genuine word, a word that fulfils what it proclaims, a word that creates the world, renews it, frees it, saves it.

But the opposite is true too, ie the Exodus from Egypt is also the reason of submission to the Torah: it is thanks to that experience that we can believe, now and always, now and always we can build ourselves up, having it as our foundation.