

## Some Comments on Beshalach

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Shabbat Shira

שמות י"ד:י"א-י"ד ויאמרו אל-משה המבלי איו-קברים במצרים לקחתנו למוות במדבר מה-זאת עשית לנו להוציאנו ממצרים: הלא-נה הדבר אשר דברנו אליך במצרים לאמר גדל ממנו ונעבדה את-מצרים כי טוב לנו עבד את-מצרים ממדתו במדבר: ויאמר משה אל-העם אל-תיראו ותראו את-ישועת ה' אשר-יעשה לכם היום כי אשר ראיתם את-מצרים היום לא תספו לראתם עוד עד-עולם: ה' לקחם לכם ואתם תחישון:

**Exodus 14:11-14** *And they said to Moses, "Was it for a lack of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?'" But Moses said to the people, "Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the LORD will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The LORD will battle for you; and you, you hold your peace!"* No matter how many times we read this passage, it never fails to stun us. The people have just experienced their escape from Egypt after a series of ten debilitating blows against Pharaoh and the Egyptians. If our reading is correct, they left Egypt in the middle of the night, without eating their unleavened bread till the following day, and leaving their pre-departure meal still roasting on the spit. They have been liberated, but the journey has just begun and it is proving to be complicated. They make it to the shores of the Red Sea. Pharaoh gets word that they are somehow confounded in the desert, regrets that he let them go and orders his army to chase after them. The Israelites see the sea in front of them and the Egyptians behind them. In fear, they turn to Moses, and they utter what will become the first in an almost unending series of complaints, "You took us out of Egypt, a land where the entire culture revolves around death, to die here?!" Sarcastic, caustic, acidic, witty, even

funny, this is as much a complaint against Moses' leadership as it is regarding their predicament. The question initiates a recalibration of the relationship.\* But when we strip the sarcasm, a fundamental debate emerges: What's better, freedom with the risk of death, or slavery with its promise of security? Moses' antagonists argue that they would prefer to remain slaves if that meant staying alive. But the proposition of the Exodus, and by extension, the entire Torah, is that freedom with all of its risks, is better than slavery with all its supposed securities.

In the midrash the rabbis imagine the people divided into four groups. Some argue for going straight into the water, some argue for resistance, some opt for returning to Egypt and some engage in prayer. They are illustrating that communities in crisis are often pulled in several directions simultaneously. Critical moments call for vigorous debate.\*\* How effective was Moses' answer to them? Telling the people to "have no fear" and rely on God's salvation rather than to steel themselves for crossing the sea, leaves one asking, "Really? That's it?" When God says to Moses, *why are you crying out to Me? Speak to the Israelites and go forward!*" it is simultaneously a rebuke to Moses and a lesson in leadership. There is a time for prayer and a time for action. Now is a time for action. It is puzzling that the text never reports to us that Moses actually instructed the Israelites to go forward. Read it closely: God places a cloud between the Israelites and the Egyptians; Moses raises his hand over the sea; God causes a wind to blow, and the waters move aside. And then - *with or without Moses' prodding* - the people enter the sea bed. If Moses told them to go in, it is a great moment of leadership. If they went in on their own, it is a great moment of faith. Maybe it's both. *וי"ד:ל"א וירא ישראל את-הי"ד הגדלה אשר עשה ה' במצרים גי'רצו העם את-ה' ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו:*

\* Questions can rightly be seen as subversive. "Question Period" in parliamentary democracies is designed precisely to enable the opposition to challenge the authority of the governing party. At its best, it refines the leadership and allows for the potential of better policies. At their worst, they are demagogic and theatrical. Here it is left to the reader to contemplate whether this moment is to challenge Moses' leadership,

or to suggest an alternative policy, or simply to vent frustration.

\*\* Today, we take for granted Israel's declaration of independence. Right up until the last moment there was vigorous debate. When we recall the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, we neglect to highlight the fierce debates that preceded it.

**14:31** *And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the LORD had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD; they had faith in the LORD and His servant Moses.* This verse functions as a coda, the culmination of the Exodus story. The people have had so many other occasions to witness God's power, but it is after the events at the sea that they trust in God and in Moses. Following this verse we have the Song of the Sea. In the Torah scroll, the calligraphy signals to us that we are entering a new zone. We are, as it were, taking a figurative leap with our ancestors in that moment of faith. The scroll is asking us to linger on this scene; we are called to attention while it is chanted and asked to rise. This verse is included in the daily prayers leading up to the recitation of the Song of the Sea. And several quotes from the Song of the Sea are found leading up to the recitation of the Amida in both the morning and evening prayers. The editors of the siddur wanted to invoke this moment to shape our own faith lives. By quoting these verses, they transported us back in time to the Red Sea at the pinnacle of our ancestors' faith. We take our three steps back and our three steps forward entering the holiest zone of prayer, while also recalling the moment we were finally free, the moment we had total faith and trust, as we stood on the other side of the Red Sea. The past pulsates in the present. We summon that faith to gird us as we start the day and comfort us as we conclude it. The Siddur lingers on that theme and engages us to reenact it in our imagination. The Torah though, moves on. It is stunning to read just three days (and three verses after the Song) that the people complained to Moses, as it says here:

ט"ו: כ"ב-כ"ג כ"ה נִסְעָה מִן־סוּרֵף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל־  
 מִדְּבַר־שׁוּר וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת־יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר וְלֹא־מָצְאוּ מַיִם: וַיָּבֹאוּ  
 מַרְתָּה וְלֹא יָבִיאוּ לְשִׁתּוֹת מַיִם מִמֶּרְהָ **כִּי מְרִיִם הֵם** עַל־כֵּן קָרָא־  
 שְׁמָהּ מְרָה: וַיִּלְכוּ הָעָם עַל־מִשְׁהָ לֵּאמֹר מַה־נִּשְׁתָּה: וַיִּצְעַק אֶל־  
 ה' וַיִּזְרְהוּ ה' עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶל־הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שָׁם לָזֶה  
 חֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשָׁם נִקְרָא:

**15:22-25** *Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because they (the waters) were bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people*

*grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test.* The Red Sea is the great boundary of the Torah. Behind them is death. Ahead of them is life. Behind them is slavery. Ahead of them is freedom. Behind them is God's miraculous deliverance and ahead of them is the daily grind of living with deprivations and challenges until they are home. It only took three days for the euphoria to dissipate. They are thirsty. The water in front of them is undrinkable. They complain. What do we learn from this? Faith is fragile. A faith built on euphoria will dissolve. Faith is built from little moments found in day to day challenges of life and punctuated by the peak moments of epoch making events. Disheartened, their euphoria shattered, they grumble. Some commentators point out that there is a painful ambiguity in the text. A plain reading would have us understand that the *waters were bitter*. But a plausible alternative reading is that they couldn't drink from the waters **כִּי מְרִיִם הֵם** because *they - the Israelites - were bitter!* And why would *they* be bitter? Because they are in the desert. Because they really do not know where they are going. Because they are facing difficult realities. Because they are just discovering that getting out of Egypt may have been the easy part. Responsibility is the hard part. Moses beseeches God. God shows him a tree. Moses throws it into the water and the water becomes drinkable. Characteristically, the rabbis debate what kind of tree it was. R. Joshua: a willow. R. Elazar Hamoda'i: an olive. R. Joshua b. Korha: a shrub. Yet others made the imaginative leap and said that God showed Moses words of Torah which are likened to the Tree of Life. Their point? Torah may not magically sweeten the bitter waters, but the wisdom of Torah enables us to frame the challenges of life in a way that comforts and strengthens us. Torah gives us the structures, (ie. ritual, community, lifecycle and the rhythm of the calendar, Shabbat and Holidays) to help us navigate tumult and disruption. It grounds us. It truly "sweetens" our lives and gives us the possibility of joy! Shabbat Shalom!

**THIS WEEK'S PARASHA SHEET IS SPONSORED BY  
 GITTEL FOOTERMAN IN MEMORY OF HER MOTHER, MOLLIE GRUMAN Z'L  
 ON THE OCCASION OF HER YAHRZEIT**

