

PARASHAT BESHALACH

SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

Exodus from slavery to song

In this week's Torah portion, Beshalach, we read about *kriyat yam suf*, the splitting of the sea, and listen to the song of Moses and the Israelites after they crossed the sea. This Shabbat is termed *Shabbat Shira* for *Shirat HaYam*, the Song of the Sea, read in this parasha.

The inconceivable miracle of the sea splitting was unexpected. As opposed to most of the plagues that God brought down onto the enslaving Egyptian nation, no prophetic announcement preceded the splitting of the sea, other than in the moments right before entering the sea. When the Children of Israel reached the seashore and discovered that the best of the Egyptian army was in quick pursuit, they felt despair. Realistically, the situation was indeed desperate. When the sea split and the Children of Israel ran in, the Egyptian army followed. It is hard to imagine the hopelessness that this newly released nation of slaves must have felt.

To their great shock, when the Israelites climbed up onto the opposite shore of the Red Sea, they saw that the Egyptian army was no longer pursuing them. The water that had split to allow the liberated slaves to cross the sea, fell down and drowned the callous masters. The Israelites stood on the shore and saw the remnants of the Egyptian army floating and washing up onto the shore. They had again won their freedom

– this time for real. And what was their reaction at such an incredible moment?

“Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and they spoke, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for very exalted is He; a horse and its rider He cast into the sea (Exodus 15: 1).

The song that erupted from their hearts was prophetic. The Divine revelation was so intense and palpable that our sages expressed their wonder by saying, “A maidservant saw on the sea what Isaiah and Ezekiel never saw” (Mechilta D’Rabbi Yishmael, Masechta D’Shira, 3). Isaiah and Ezekiel, two of the greatest prophets, who describe lofty Divine scenes, never reached the transcendency of the simplest Jew on the shores of the Red Sea.

It might be said that the miracle in the Song of the Sea is even greater than that of the splitting of the Red Sea. When the sea split, it was a miracle that only God could have performed. It was a one-time-only miracle in all of history, a dramatic change in the laws of nature. However, when the Children of Israel burst out in song, they experienced an internal metamorphosis. An external liberation from slavery would not have sufficed to be able to sing. That required an internal, fundamental liberation from the consciousness of a subjugated slave to that of someone proud and free.

The *Zohar* describes the period of slavery in Egypt as “the exile of speech.” The enslaved nation was unable to express its feelings in words; it cried out to God wordlessly. Even Moses had a serious speech impediment. When the Children of Israel burst out in song, it was a beautiful expression of the liberation they experienced. We mark the first day of Passover as the day of the Exodus from Egypt. Indeed, on this day, the nation walked out of Egypt. But truthfully, the internal liberation occurred seven days later, when the Israelites rose to heights of freedom that allowed for emotional expression through song.

The incredible parting of the Red Sea awakened the souls of these liberated slaves the awareness that there is a God Who can extricate a person from any hardship, and that they have a God on Whom they can lean and Whom they can trust. If hardship is to come – and everyone experiences hardship – a Jew knows that God is with them in every situation. This is the perpetual liberation from indifferent regularity, from constant and meaningless determinism. This is a move to a profound experience of freedom, to the experience of a person who knows their fate is determined by He Who controls all and Who benefits all – the Creator of the Universe. ■

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

DAVID WOLPE

What do you carry?

There is an old joke about a rich man who dies and stands before God. God asks, “I made you so wealthy, why did you give nothing to charity?” The man answers, “I will, I have many assets on earth, just let me give now!” The response from God thunders, “Up here, we only accept receipts.”

It is axiomatic that you cannot take anything with you when you die. But the reverse is not true – you can take the dead with you when you are alive. This finds both literal and metaphorical expression in this week's Torah portion when Moses locates and carries the bones of Joseph with him as the Israelites leave Egypt. The verse says Moses took the bones “with him” and the *Kli Yakar* comments that Joseph stayed with him, for while gold and silver passes away, the merit of this act endures.

Centuries before, at the end of Genesis, Joseph entreats his brothers to swear that when God remembers them to bring them to the Promised Land, “You shall carry my bones from here” (Gen. 50:25). Now we get a bit more detail. In Ex. 13:19, we read that Joseph “exacted an oath,” which in Hebrew is two words, *hashbe'a hishbia*. What does the doubling mean?

Joseph knew that his brothers would not live to see the redemption and so he was exacting an intergen-

erational promise – you and your descendants. For hundreds of years, throughout the servitude and oppression of Egypt, the Israelites would remember that the bones of Joseph waited for liberation as well.

From the act of fidelity to an ancient promise, three fundamental lessons of the Jewish tradition flow:

Intergenerational obligations. Judaism considers that Jews are born with responsibilities because they are Jews. The Rabbis often appealed to the idea that each soul stood at Sinai, so each of us actually assumed the obligations of Jewish life upon ourselves.

But on another level, we are all born into networks of responsibility. We feel the tug of family, community, country. We did not choose these but must make our accommodation with them. If we are fortunate in the circumstances of our birth, we view such ties as a privilege.

When Judaism enjoins us to teach our children, it reminds us that to be Jewish is both a command and an honor, and part of it is to ensure that the next generation remembers the sacrifices and celebrations of those who came before. The simultaneity of Jewish life means we live in the past and the present at once.

Memory. The midrash tells us that the location of Joseph's coffin was no longer known. But there is one name mentioned in both the descent to Egypt and again in the ascent – Serah bat Asher. The Rabbis

posit therefore that Serah survived the slavery of Egypt. Serah, as has been true with so many women in Jewish history, carried the memory with her. She told Moses where to look for Joseph's coffin.

Modeling what matters. The Israelites had gathered valuables from the Egyptians as a sort of recompense for centuries of unpaid labor. But the greatest among them was occupied not with gold and silver but in finding and retrieving the bones of Joseph. As the two caskets went side by side through the wilderness, the coffin of Joseph and the ark of the tablets, the Israelites would tell whoever asked, “The one who lies in this fulfilled the words that lie in that” (Mechilta, *Beshalah*).

One way to define ourselves is by asking what we carry. All of us carry a great deal through life – memories, aspirations, relationships, burdens, natural gifts. Some focus so intently on carrying material possessions that other things fall by the wayside.

To carry the bones of Joseph is the Torah's way of telling us that Moses carried the past of our people with him as they began the journey to Israel.

What do you carry? ■

The writer is Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and the author of David the Divided Heart. On Twitter: @rabbiwolpe.

JUDAISM 3.0
GOL KALEV

The essence of the Exodus

From Egypt and from Europe

The parting of the sea marks the completion of the Exodus from Egypt. But what is the essence of the Exodus?

Granted, it is about ending slavery and the physical migration from Egypt to Canaan, but as we learn from God's communication with Moses, those are primarily tools to achieve the ultimate essence of the Exodus: instilling godly consciousness – to the Israelites and to the nations

At the onset of the Exodus, God outlines the seven-item redemption program: I will *bring you out* from under the burdens of the Egyptians; I will *deliver you* from their bondage; I will *redeem you* with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments; I will *take you to Me* for a people, and I will be to you a God; *Ye shall know* that I am the LORD your God; I will *bring you in* unto the land, I will *give it you for a heritage*: I am the LORD.”

From this we can reverse back into understanding the nature of the Israelites' life in Egypt: They were both physically suffering, and in a mental bondage. But then we learn from God's plan that there was a deeper problem: They forgot that they were God's people. Perhaps it was unclear if their forefather's covenant was still in-effect. Ultimately, we learn from God's program that during those centuries in Egypt, “atheism” emerged, and hence, God instills knowledge that He is the Lord.

Like the Egyptian exodus, the European one is a powerful tool to instill Godly consciousness

God then turns to the migrational aspect of the program. We can ascertain from it that the Jacob-era intention to return to Canaan has evaporated into a dream. God's “Goshen Program” brings the Israelites back to their land. Yet mere infiltration into Canaan without sovereignty would be unsustainable. Hence, God creates global recognition that Israelites are the rightful heirs of their ancestral land, giving it to them “for a heritage.”

And so, after centuries in Egypt, the Israelites parted the sea, and Moses promised, “For the way you have seen the Egyptians today, you shall no longer continue to see them for eternity.” But then...

‘Once more there was an Egypt’

The Exodus from Egypt and the exodus from Europe 3,000 years later are so similar that biblical critics in the far future might argue that they were one and the same.

For centuries, the Jews have been mentally enslaved in Europe, developing ghetto traits that are unnatural to them. (About 90% of Jews lived in Europe during most of this time). They were suffering from chronic European opposition that manifested in antisemitism. They, too, began to lose their faith, perhaps unsure if their covenant with God was still intact. The intention



HERZL IMMORTALIZED in Dimona. (Wikimedia Commons)

to return evaporated into a dream, which itself became sanctified and a tenet of exile Judaism (Judaism 2.0).

And then God sent Theodor Herzl, and deployed the same seven-item redemption program he used in Egypt: He brought the Jews out the burdens of Europe, delivered them from their bondage, took them for a people and instilled godly consciousness. Indeed, the vast majority of Israeli Jews – observant and secular alike – are believers. He then brought them back into the land and gave it to them as heritage, secured in international law and by now, globally recognized.

The language is different because the cultural context is different. Back in Moses's time it is described

overtly as God's actions through Moses, while in Herzl's time it is described as Herzl's actions and is left to the reader (or Herzl interpreters) to decide how Herzl came up with Zionism. Herzl – perhaps the second most humble person in Jewish history – does not say “God sent me.” But he does sprinkle subtle hints, such as recounting Vienna's Chief Rabbi Dr. Moritz Gudemann urging him at the onset of the European exodus: “Remain as you are. Perhaps you are the one God called.”

Like the Exodus from Egypt, the one from Europe is not merely about the geographical migration to Palestine, nor just about emancipation from the enslavement of European antisemitism. Those are primarily tools to achieve that same third objective. No wonder Herzl insinuated that the exodus from Europe should be added to the Passover Haggadah: “Once more there was an Egypt”. Just like the Exodus from Egypt, the one from Europe is a powerful tool to instill godly consciousness upon generations upon generations of Jews.

Indeed, just as the one from Egypt, the exodus from Europe is about the transformation of Judaism. Hence, the contemporary idea of post-Zionism is akin to the idea that Judaism ended with the Exodus from Egypt. Spoiler alert: The Torah and biblical Judaism (Judaism 1.0) continue to develop way past the Exodus, and so does Zionism (Judaism 3.0). ■

The writer is the author of the upcoming book Judaism 3.0. For details, go to Judaism-Zionism.com. For his geopolitical articles: EuropeAndJerusalem.com. For his commentaries on the weekly Torah portion: ParashaAndHerzl.com

Judaism 3.0 gives us new tools to understand our past

The astonishing similarities between the Exodus from Egypt and the exodus from Europe gifts our generation with unprecedented tools to understand the Torah and various aspects of Jewish history.

The Holocaust give us tool to better understand the destruction of the Temple, and the growing nuanced movement of Israel-bashing gives us tools to better understand previous iteration of European opposition to Judaism, including 20th-century antisemitism.

For example, in early 2021, a new blood-libel has been spreading: “Israel vaccinates its people, and lets the Palestinians die of COVID.” Ironically, this comes from the same people who view the Palestinian Authority as a sovereign government and refer it as “the State of Palestine.” This split-screen propaganda sheds light on older versions: Jews rejoicing in Passover eating matzot, and dead Christian children by the rivers. Then and now, the two sides of the screen portrayed truths. The hate lied in the causality. The death of Christian children was not caused by Jews eating matzot prepared with their blood, and the high number of COVID cases among Palestinians

was not caused by Israel vaccinating its citizens.

Our generation can also better understand the biblical movement to go back to Egypt. We can learn from contemporary movements in America and Israel to philosophically “go back to Europe.” The antisemitic ploy about Jews and COVID made it across the ocean into America's holiest of holies as a well-respected senator made exactly this argument in Congress!

The senator, a good friend of Israel and of the Jews, adapting old European dogmas, gives us greater ability to understand the 10 spies, whose actions led to God's sentencing the Israelites to 40 years in the desert. Those were highly respected leaders of the community – presidents of 10 tribes. There is no evidence that they meant harm to the Israelites – they were friends of Israel. They just failed to internalize the values of the Moses Revolution. In applying old Egyptian dogmatic thinking, they failed to recognize that Judaism has transformed.

Similarly, post-Zionism in our early days of Judaism 3.0 gives our generation unique insight to the logic of Danan, Aviram and other leaders of the post-Judaism movement in the early days of Judaism 1.0. – G.K.