



## Torah Reflections on *Parashat Beshalah*

Exodus 13:17 – 17:16

January 29, 2008 12 Shevat 5768

Last week, our Torah portion found the Israelites in a narrow place, awaiting liberation. This week, we have the privilege of witnessing our ancestors on the other side of the sea. We are allowed a glimpse at the joyous celebration that is said to have commenced when they realized that they had crossed out of bondage and into freedom. Singing and dancing are part of the merry making; indeed this Sabbath is called “Shabbat Shira”—the Sabbath of Song, in recognition of the singing led by both Moses and Miriam.

The jubilant scene also includes musical instruments. We are told that there were drums and timbrels. Reading this text with great care, as generations of Jews have done, we are naturally drawn to ask questions. If you were rushing out of Egypt on a journey of unknown length, carrying everything on your back, would musical instruments be high on your list of “must bring” items? Yet, the Torah says they had drums with them. A teacher of Torah, unsatisfied with any traditional answers, asked a class of fifth graders this question. “Why do you suppose they were carrying drums?” One of the girls gave a memorable response: “Perhaps they were carrying food and other necessities. But their hearts were beating with such excitement that they sounded like drums.”

I love that answer. It acknowledges that sometimes everything we need is right inside us. My friend Betsy Teutsch, a Jewish artist, created a new Jewish ritual object in recognition of this week’s portion. She paints designs on tambourines. One of her most beautiful creations is a healing tambourine. On it, she calligraphs some healing verses from psalms as well as some decorative illumination.

Some of us have used these tambourines when we visit people in the hospital. We have played them and then left them as a reminder of a time of celebration, a symbol that difficult crossings *can* be made—one *can* get to the other side and dance! I have seen Betsy’s tambourines hung on a patient’s IV pole—a very efficient use of a piece of equipment. Of course, as our fifth grade commentator reminds us, you do not need an actual tambourine, and certainly not one hand painted by a professional artist, to symbolize the possibility of triumph at the end of difficult passages. Sometimes the beating of our hearts can be the musical instrument of choice!

As I think about Miriam and the women on the far shores of the sea, I realize that passages can be of different kinds. For many people, the passage being undertaken is one from sickness to health. They will, with faith and good fortune, soon be quite literally dancing and singing their joy on the other side—out of the sick bed

and back into life. Sometimes, however, the passage we face is the one from one stage of treatment or chronic illness to another, or from suffering at the end of life to the other shore, to death. It may be that the image of the women playing tambourines and dancing after their scary traversing of the sea is one that can provide a seed of hope for us in these crossings as well.

We can not always know what awaits us on the other side. We do know that these passages are often difficult, and fraught with emotion. Perhaps a tambourine (on our IV or in our imagination), or the voice of a friend, or our beating hearts and ever-returning breath, or the memory of others who have made the passage before us, can stand as witness to the idea that what awaits us on the other side may yet contain wonderful blessings of freedom and joy.

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