



Torah Reflections on *Parshat Beshallah*

Exodus 13:17-17:16

13 Shevat 5769

February 7, 2009

“Then the Eternal said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.’” (*Exodus 14:15*)

At the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites cry out to God, hesitating as they watch the Egyptians advancing. They express their fears and question Moses’ wisdom. Moses reassures the masses and admonishes them for their doubts. God informs the people that they must take responsibility, go forward, and save themselves. By going toward the sea, they take a leap of faith, opening themselves up to new possibilities; perhaps drawing on God’s saving power.

The journey out of Egypt is not an easy one. It is one of loss of the stable and tight community in Egypt and the confines of the Israelites’ narrow life. This is why Egypt is called *Mitzrayim*, the narrow or tight place. As the Israelites stood at the Sea of Reeds, away from the narrowness of their lives, they faced an opportunity of freedom and growth, shadowed with anticipation and fear of a new way of life. A leap of faith awaited them.

Life is constantly about change and new beginnings. On our journey out of the narrow places in our lives, we have the opportunity for transformation and growth. This seems to be most apparent in times of illness, grief, or a major life transition. And yet when life hands us difficulties, disappointments, and pain, we have a chance to open up to the places where we find deeper meaning in life, and even a parting of our own Sea of Reeds, an unexpected miracle.

A life transition or illness calls us to utilize our strength, our faith, and our courage to take a deliberate step forward and then another and another...through the Sea of Reeds to the other side. We need to consciously leave behind our comfortable way of looking at the world through our conditioned responses and move on to the uncertainty and excitement of new freedom and possibility.

When my daughter, Arielle, was born blind, my husband and I began a period of uncertainty and grief. We knew we had challenges to face, but the pain narrowed our focus as we drew tighter into ourselves. We felt constricted talking about her blindness and about our fears and concerns for the future. As we slowly started to communicate about what was happening to us, we decided that we needed to take a leap of faith, to move forward and to more actively incorporate the wisdom, rituals, and insights from our Jewish tradition.

One afternoon, when our daughter was a few months old, we decided to bring our community of family and friends together, to share both our sorrows and our hopes. We knew we needed to begin the healing process by letting go of our expectations about this child and to welcome her for who she was and not for what we had hoped she would be. Mostly, we each had to open our heart from its brokenness and narrowness and discover new ways toward wholeness and connectedness.

In the presence of loved ones, we described some areas of disappointment and loss and stated out loud what we hoped to learn in their place. We also invited everyone to share some thoughts, words, or feelings. Each one, with tears and laughter, expressed their sorrows and hopes, each feeling a sense of healing and connection. My husband and I now knew that we were not alone. We closed the ceremony with our rabbi leading us in the recitation of the *kaddish*. This ancient prayer declared that we were choosing to let go of the old expectations, opening ourselves to visualizing the birth of new possibilities.

This gathering, ceremonially, began a very strong healing process for our family. We came to understand our narrow and limited way of thinking and dreaming about our children, as well as the healing effects of community, ceremonies, and the ancient rituals of our faith. We became aware of how the healing tools within Judaism can transform our difficulties and bring more meaning and opportunity for growth and change. But first – we had to take a leap of faith. We had to open our hearts and souls to God, ourselves, and our community.

A leap of faith is possible when one has the vision or the support to look beyond the narrow confines, to retell the continuing story in a meaningful way. As a leader, Moses expresses his vision of the future when he says, “*for the Egyptians you see today you will never see again.*” (Exodus 14:13). At our ceremony, my husband and I stated our hopes and dreams while visualizing the potential opportunities that awaited us. We felt uncertain, often stumbling forward, yet praying that God was quietly, invisibly, secretly guiding our steps. In time, we began to appreciate God’s wonders through our non-visual senses, the warmth of Shabbat candles and the smell of the aromatic spices during *havdalah*. As new parents to this child, we learned not to make judgments with our eyes, but by the love in our hearts. Furthermore, we now had the opportunity to show others that taking a different path need not be feared.

Arielle is now an independent, successful college student who has brought us and our community great joy and wisdom. Through the caring of our community, our strong faith in God, and the integration of Jewish ritual, ceremony, and traditions in our lives, we, too, have taken a leap of faith, crossed the Sea of Reeds, and are dancing with timbrels in our hands.

In your times of transition
of illness, grief, or disappointment,
may you courageously begin to take the first steps
out of your narrow spaces,
drawing strength from your community,
visualizing the gifts of a new way of being in the world,
made meaningful through your trust and your faith.

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