

Parashat Beshalach: One Journey, One Heritage, One Song

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Dear Friends,

This Shabbat is called "Shabbat Shira". The parasha is Beshalach, the climax of which is Shirat Hayam (the song of praise after the Exodus), and the Haftarah is the Song of Devorah from the book of Judges. This Shabbat is also a celebration of the earth – Tu B'shvat.

This parasha is so tremendous, so grand, and contains so dramatic, poetic themes: Pharaoh's regret at releasing Bnei Yisrael, the pursuit in the desert, the drama at the shores of the Red Sea, the miraculous parting of the sea and the drowning of the Egyptian army; the well of pure water which appears in place of the brackish desert water, the manna, and the eternal and unforgettable battle to destroy Amalek.

All of these themes beckon; they beg interpretation, commentary and perpetual study. But this week I would like to focus instead on Yoseph's bones, which are calling to us from the depths of the Nile. They, too, have a poetic attraction.

While Bnei Yisrael were hurriedly packing their belongings, baking their unleavened dough and "borrowing" their neighbors' jewelry, Moshe was busy at the Nile, summoning Yoseph's coffin from where it lay buried in the deep waters.

"And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, "God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you." (Shmot 13:19)

The journey of Yoseph's coffin containing his bones that are brought on the exodus from Egypt is very odd, and it is often overlooked in the tremendous drama of the Exodus itself. Why were they brought out of Egypt? Why carry a coffin for forty years? In a few months Bnei Yisrael will be receiving another kind of chest- the Ark of the Covenant, a life-giving ark which they will carry as well, so why bother with the dead? And why bring Yoseph's bones and not those of his brothers? Perhaps each tribe should have carried the remains of its ancestor and founding father?

The 13th century commentator Hizkuni (Rabbi Hizkiya Ben Manoach) suggests that Yoseph had sworn his brothers to return him to the spot near Sh'chem from which he had been kidnapped. This lovely interpretation includes both a lesson in closure – putting residual anger and hatred to rest, and also in providing reassurance for those who have experienced abandonment in the past, that they will not be abandoned again.

Yoseph prophetically made sure to extract a promise from his brothers:

"...Yoseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.' So Yoseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here.'" (Bereishit 50:24)

Two hundred and ten years later, Moshe hastens to fulfill this promise and the prophecy. He had no doubt heard the legends of his great uncle's dreams and prophecies, and how – despite his big brothers – they all came true. It would therefore not be wise to ignore that dreamer's final vision and the oath that was made to him.

Another possible reason for bringing Yoseph's bones out of Egypt is that Yoseph is the only one of the brothers who did not have a tribe in his name, nor was his name to be given to any part of the Promised Land as his brothers' were. By bringing his bones to the Promised Land, the tribes were bringing his presence with them, as it were.

A different explanation is based on the notion that the entire Egyptian experience can be attributed to Yoseph – he is the one who tempted his family to come there. He could have sent them sustenance so that they could stay in Canaan. Instead, he is the instigator of their long and painful descent into the fleshpots of Egypt. Perhaps, then, bringing Yoseph's bones for burial in the Promised Land assures a clean break from his Egyptian legacy and the temptation of greener grass.

It is important to note that it is not God who asks for Yoseph's bones to be brought on the journey. It is also not God who asks that Yaakov be buried in the land of his forefathers. The obsession with graves is man's, not God's. God does not concern Himself with bones. Moshe does not demand to be buried in the Promised Land. He does not demand a grave at all. It is man, not God, who puts these heavy burdens on the shoulders of the generations to come.

Yaakov may have wanted to create a link to the Land for his offspring by being buried there; a kind of lighthouse that will remind them where they came from and where they will return to, even if they sink in the Egyptian mire for many years.

But what does Yoseph want? What is the reason for the burden of bones he has placed on Bnei Yisrael?

We do not know the answer, but the image of a People bearing two arks – a coffin and the Ark of the Covenant – commands our attention.

The Ark of the Covenant is an ark of life. It bears the commandments of the God of the four winds and of freedom. Yoseph's ark bears the very human concerns, the very careful planning and plotting. Yoseph represents these qualities. He cares for

his family, even to his own detriment. He dreams about them, he is his father's messenger, looking out for his brothers. Even his tattling on them and the warm welcome he prepares in Egypt are done out of concern and total devotion to his family's wellbeing.

Yoseph represents the kind of abundance that can be attained through careful planning. Not having experienced unequivocal Divine abundance, he brought the kind of blessing to his environment that is the result of responsible, levelheaded foresight. His less responsible shepherding brothers who rely entirely on the God of the heavens and much less on human responsibility end up needing his help. Yoseph did not tend sheep; he tended people. His did not dream of counting sheep, but of sheaves neatly stacked up in the field.

The difference between shepherds and farmers is a major theme throughout the Torah; the difference between complete trust and reliance on God's graces, and the role of human responsibility in determining our fate.

Yoseph, knowing his brothers' total inclination to behave as shepherds do, wants to make sure that the qualities he represents – order, planning and responsibility – go with Bnei Yisrael on their journey, to make sure they are fortified by these in times of need, out of concern for future generations.

We bear two arks on our journey. One is the ark of life which contains the deep lessons of the Torah, lessons which demand complete trust and devotion to God's graces. A believer will often say "God willing", meaning that no amount of planning, saving and thinking will be enough. This ark represents the shepherds. The second ark, the coffin of Yoseph the worrier, is that of planning and thinking about the future. This is the ark of responsibility, the ark of the herder of people. Two arks, one journey, one heritage, one song sung in three voices: The song of the earth, the human songs of praise, and the songs of the shepherds come together in beautiful harmony.

Shabbat Shalom and a happy Tu B'shvat,

Elisha