

Parashat Beshalach: The Dynamics of Crossing the Red Sea

Dear Friends,

We have arrived at the Red Sea!

We have completed the first week of the forty years of wandering. In this week we have seen it all: moments of terror and of redemption, moments of terrible despair and of exultant happiness. There was tremendous thirst and hunger. There was longing and there was craving for the fleshpots of Egypt. There were huge miracles and small ones. The magical manna appeared, and even water came forth from a rock.

And, of course, there was the Song of the Sea which burst forth when we understood that the slavery was finally over and that our enslavers had drown in the depths.

This is why this Shabbat is called “Shabbat Shira”. It is named for the Song of the Sea sung by Moshe, Miriam, and B’nei Yisrael. It is also named for the victory song of Devorah the prophetess which we read in the Haftorah. (Reminder: the parasha is always read from the Torah and the Haftorah from the Prophets.)

Parashat Beshalach invites us to experience something extraordinary; something that does not occur much in life, but when it does, it is engraved in our consciousness: the sea opens up before us and we cross through it blissfully and confidently. None of our worries can reach us. We are light footed, whereas the pursuing Egyptians drag heavily. We forge forward and they sink in the mud. And then we take a final leap, climb onto the opposite shore, and all of our problems drown. We sense that we will never meet them again!

Can such an experience be summoned? Or perhaps it is entirely due to the grace of God, over which we can have no control?

As usual, both options are possible simultaneously.

The moments in which supreme happiness occurs are moments of grace with which we are somewhat familiar. But how does one cause them to happen?

The “Red Sea moments” are subtle ones in which something wondrous occurs within us: we become light and connected in an extraordinary way to the power of life that is present within us. This power is always there, but requires a unique level of awareness to be felt.

Then there is the Egyptian army which is heavy both materially and spiritually: **“And I will stiffen the hearts of the Egyptians so that they go in after them; and I will make Pharaoh and all his warriors, his chariots and his horsemen heavy.”** (Sh’mot 14:17)

Where we are connected, Pharaoh is disconnected - from himself, from the divine within him. Pharaoh is consumed with hatred, anger, and the desire for revenge. Hatred and anger never end well. Neither does the desire to rule another.

How do we connect to the power of life?

Where is it located?

How can we summon “another level of consciousness” which enables this connection to happen?

In my humble opinion, the power of life is within us at all times. However, the word “within” is a bit misleading, because the power is not to be found in a particular part of the body such as the heart, the brain, or the kidneys. And yet it is within us! It is “there” even before we are created and it will be “there” after we are gone. Our bodies are simply a dynamic and temporary external covering for this power. It carries it onwards, expresses itself, dances itself, and fulfills itself in the world. Clearly, this power is not “ours”. If anything, we belong to it. The power and our existence both belong to life itself.

The Egyptian calvary represent all that is opposed to the power of life. It is the physical power of the body, the external “I” - I will rule, I will navigate, I will decide. It is the small, immature, pharaoh-like, narrow me.

B’nei Yisrael crossing the Red Sea are life itself, the Egyptian army are the thoughts which cause heaviness, misguidance, difficulty, and small-minded calculations.

Most of the time Pharaoh’s army controls us. We are governed by myriad bothersome thoughts all the time! These thoughts are like background noise that is so familiar, permanent, and irritating, that we no longer notice its existence most of the time. Sometimes, in moments of exceptional grace, a ray of vitality-bearing sunshine breaks through and the noise temporarily recedes. Sometimes it is for a few minutes, sometimes for hours, and sometimes for a day or two. It rarely lasts longer than that. In those moments the path ahead of us through the sea is clearly evident, after years of waiting on the shore, viewing the other side from afar. And then we, like Bnei Yisrael, can finally go **“into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall the right and on the left.”** (14:22)

True, these moments of grace are momentary. Grace (chessed) means the receipt of a gift which we did nothing to earn. The problem is that it also means we have no control over it.

However, as we said, it can be noticed and acknowledged.

The key here is to know that Egyptian slavery is mainly a result of our own thoughts. It looks and feels very real, but it can only be so if we give it permission through our thoughts.

Harry Potter fans are familiar with the Dementors. These dark and demonic creatures suck life energy out of their culprits. They leave their victims emptied and despairing. When Dementors - like the Egyptian army - draw near, our heart, head, and entire body fill with a sense of bottomless despair. Our most difficult thoughts surface within us, weaken us, and offer us up to be destroyed. **“And they said to Moses, ‘Was it for want 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?’”** (14:11-12) Negative thoughts sap whatever strength we have left within us.

The only magic which works against Dementors is a Patronus. You don't have to be a student at Hogwarts to learn how to use it. Instead of doing what we usually do - being swallowed up in the pit of despair and fear and returning to Egypt with our tail between our legs - we consciously remember a very happy experience; an experience in which our happiness was irrepressible. And then we take out our magic wand (in Moshe's case it was his staff; in ours, our imagination) and focus on that extraordinarily happy experience and fill ourselves with it. And then we can sense a Patronus emerging - a silvery, magical hologram of an animal (a metaphor for vitality) which is entirely light and happy. Dementors cannot withstand this, and they disappear.

We are able to summon this “Patronus” because the happiness already exists within us. It just has to be remembered.

You are welcome to try this at home. In moments in which Pharaoh's army is encroaching, i.e. those moments in which we feel emptied of our vitality and strength, when we feel a coldness and heaviness of heart and body; the kind that slows the wheels of our life down and finds us sinking deep into the mud - this is the time to remember that a hostile takeover of our thoughts has occurred, that is all. There is no point in doing battle with them - they are wily and deceptive, and cause us to believe they are entirely real. All we have to do in this situation is summon great vitality and reconnect to life itself, to everything that is the opposite of tyrannical thought. We will know we have succeeded if happiness, lightness, and easy optimism fills us. This is the sign that we have reconnected to the power of life which flows within us. Pharaoh's army will simply disappear into the sea of thoughts.

And then a mighty song will burst forth, the voice of the inner vitality which exists within us always.

Shabbat Shalom,
Shabbat Shira,

Elisha