



Leaving Slavery Behind: On Taking the First Step

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The scene is terrifying. God wreaks a series of harrowing plagues on the Egyptians, and the Israelite slaves finally leave the place of their suffering and degradation. At last admitting defeat at the hands of God, Pharaoh and the Egyptians let the Israelites go, and, stricken with fear over what God might do next, even urge them on. But now, as the Israelites approach the sea, Pharaoh and his minions have a change of heart and set out with a massive force in hot pursuit. The Torah ominously tells us that every chariot in Egypt is enlisted for battle. To make sure we understand that Pharaoh means business, and that the threat he represents is all too real, the text repeats the word “chariot” again and again (Exodus 14:6-9).



Overcome with fear, the Israelites turn on Moses with a vengeance, insisting that continued slavery in Egypt would have been better than being slaughtered in the wilderness. We feel the pathos of the moment: oppression in Egypt was horrific, but at least it was familiar. Leaving familiar circumstances, no matter how demeaning, is often hard, and sometimes excruciating. Now, liberated from the familiar, the Israelites are forced to confront the terror of uncertainty, and the seemingly very real possibility of imminent death.

Moses responds forcefully to their mix of dread and indignation: “Moses answered the

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people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord



will fight for you; you need only be still” (Exodus 14:13-14). Moses tries to reassure the newly emancipated slaves that they have gravely underestimated the power of God, who is on their side, and who will do battle on their behalf. All they need to do in this fateful moment, Moses informs them, is watch as God again saves them from their enemies.

What happens next is jarring, to say the least. God lets Moses have it: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why are you crying out to Me?! Tell the Israelites to go forward!’” (Exodus 14:15). Moses has just called upon the people to have faith in God, to rest assured that God will fulfill God’s promises, and God responds with... irritation and impatience?¹ What is wrong with what Moses has said? If we can understand the dynamics at play between God, Moses, and the Israelites in this moment, we will have gone a long way towards comprehending the way Jewish theology understands the nature of faith and human responsibility.

Think for a moment about a slave’s existence. Robbed of dignity and freedom, the slave has no agency, no capacity to shape her own fate. She does as she is told, lest she be beaten or dehumanized further. And although she works hard, she is passive, because in no sense is she the author of her own life. In order to go from slavery to freedom—in order to be truly transformed, in other words—the Israelites will need to discover, however slowly and painfully, that they have agency, that they can act in ways small and large to determine their own fate.

Angry, afraid, longing for the familiar, they cry out to God and lash out at Moses. In response, Moses unwittingly gives them instructions that undermine the very journey they are on. He tells them, in effect, “Be passive; sit back and watch what God does.” But being totally passive is not the way to re-assert their dignity. Strikingly, the phrase “stand firm”

¹ Moreover, as R. Hayyim Ibn Attar (d. 1696) points out, it isn’t clear in what direction the Israelites are supposed to move, with the pursuer behind them and the sea in front of them (Or Ha-Hayyim to Exodus 14: 15). Of course, another anomaly in the text is that we never hear anything explicit about Moses’ crying out, and yet God lambasts him for doing just that.



(*hityatzvu*) is used elsewhere in the Bible to suggest readiness for battle,² and what's more, in the previous chapter of Exodus, we had been told that the Israelites left Egypt armed.³ But here, rather than being urged to fight for themselves, either literally or figuratively, they are told to be still and to wait for God to act. Furthermore, Moses' admonition to "be still" (*tacharishun*) may well suggest not just that the Israelites be silent, but that they adopt a posture of passivity and inactivity.⁴

God rejects those instructions. "Moses," God says in effect, "Don't tell them to be passive. On the contrary, tell them to go forward. Otherwise, we will never get anywhere in teaching them to be free and helping them to restore their dignity. You can't leave Egypt—not really—until you discover that you can take responsibility for your life and affect your own fate."

Needless to say, the story of the Exodus is not primarily a story celebrating human effort and enterprise—it's a narrative of thunderous divine intervention, about a God who enters history to vanquish the forces of cruelty and barbarism. But that is precisely what makes God's words to

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Moses so powerful: even—and perhaps especially—in the midst of a story about divine power, the Torah works to make space for human initiative. Only if the Israelites find the courage to move forward will God save them. God's miracles are, in some fundamental sense, dependent upon prior human effort. As Jewish mystics are fond of saying, without a "stirring from below" there will be no "stirring from above."

² See, e.g., Jeremiah 46:4 and I Sam 17:16.

³ Exodus 13:18. But cf. Rashi's second explanation there.

⁴ Baruch Margalit, "The Day the Sun Did Not Stand Still: A New Look at Joshua x: 8-15," *Vetus Testamentum* 42 (1992), pp. 466-491. The relevant passage is on p. 474.



The Talmud records a remarkable debate about just what took place at the Sea of Reeds. R. Meir argues that, “When the Israelites stood by the Sea of Reeds, the tribes competed with

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one another, each one wanting to descend into the sea first. Then the tribe of Benjamin sprang forward and descended first.”

According to R. Meir, the Israelites were all eager to go forward; brimming with courage, they yearned to proceed into the

unknown. Benjamin was merely the first to take the plunge. But R. Judah, perhaps possessed of a more sober sense of human nature (and based on what we’ve just seen about the Israelites complaining to Moses, hewing closer to the biblical text), rejects R. Meir’s view out of hand. “That is not what happened,” he contends, but rather, “Each tribe in turn said, ‘I will not be the first to descend into the sea.’ This continued until Nachshon the son of Aminadav [the prince of the tribe of Judah] sprang forward and descended into the sea first.” Whereas R. Meir imagines myriads of Israelites filled with faith and ready to plow ahead, R. Judah imagines these same masses anxious and afraid, each one eager for someone else to take the first step. Nachshon is the one who rises to the occasion, taking initiative while others dally.

Nachshon’s lion-heartedness makes him a hero, the paradigm of a person willing to act on faith rather than succumbing to fear. It is because of Nachshon’s courage, the Talmud tells us, that he merits numbering David and the kings of Israel among his descendants (BT, Sotah 36b-37a). More, a midrash adds, it was because he “sanctified God’s name at the sea” that he was chosen by his peers to bring the first sacrifice to the newly dedicated tabernacle (Numbers Rabbah 13:7).

Even in an age in which God splits seas, the Torah places tremendous emphasis on human beings taking the first step. God will not save the Israelites unless and until they are willing



to go forward into the unknown. The sea will not split until someone is intrepid enough to proceed. It is only once the Israelites act, boldly and dauntlessly, that God's miraculous intervention sets in. In order for the Israelites to leave slavery behind—existentially, and not just politically—they must learn to take their fate into their own hands and thereby to rediscover their capacity to act and make an impact upon the world, and upon their lives within it.

Times have changed. In our own day, God does not split seas or accompany Israel in a cloud. God's presence is more subtle and elusive, God's involvement more mysterious. If, in a time when God's saving presence was manifest, people were nevertheless called upon to take matters into their own hands, all the more so are we required to do so now, in a time when God's presence is hidden, or even absent. What was necessary in biblical times, therefore, is all the more urgent today: people are called upon to refuse passivity as a religious posture. In the language of our Sages, "We do not rely on miracles" (BT, Shabbat 32a). Faith sometimes demands a willingness to let go but, even more often, it requires the courage to act.

Shabbat Shalom.

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