

When Redemption Comes at Night

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We are afraid of the dark. The psalmist gives words to this fear of darkness and night:

תהלים קלט:יא

אך-חשך יִשׁוּפְנִי וְלִילָה-אֹר
בְּעֶדְנִי.

Psalm 139:11

Surely the darkness shall envelop me, and the light about me shall be night.

Nighttime can be scary. Things that seem easy and doable during the daytime, can be overwhelming—even paralyzing—at night.

We usually picture the Israelites crossing the Reed Sea as a daytime activity. Most of our visual *midrashim* from books and movies show brightly lit walls of blue water on either side of a nation trudging, determined through mud, sometimes singing joyfully along the way. But the biblical text, which we read on the seventh day

of Pesah, tells us that this miraculous sea crossing took place at night.

שמות יד:כא

וַיֹּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ עַל-הַיָּם וַיֹּלֶךְ
ה' אֶת-הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים עֹזָה כָּל-
הַלֵּילָה וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת-הַיָּם לְחָרָבָה
וַיִּבְקְעוּ הַמַּיִם:

Exodus 14:21

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and God led the sea with the strong east wind all night, and made the sea into dry land and the waters split.

Set at night, the story becomes more intense, more ominous. When the people see the Egyptians approaching, they begin to panic. They turn on Moses, suddenly certain that this whole journey was a bad idea in the first place. It wasn't so bad back there in Egypt after all. At least we were alive. At least we were safe.

Knowing that this scene takes

place at night makes the people's sudden panic more relatable. Who hasn't had the experience of regretting at night a decision that seemed so simple in the daytime? In the middle of the night we find ourselves wondering, why did I need to have a baby after all? Wasn't I perfectly happy before? Or: What made me think I was ready for this big promotion? Why did we decide to buy or sell that house? Why did I think I was ready for a big move like this one? How will I be able to handle this new responsibility? At night we ask ourselves: What made me think freedom was worth this journey? Wasn't I happy back in Egypt?

In the night, we doubt and panic. And yet, it was during the nighttime that the Israelites were able to get up and leave Egypt (Deuteronomy 16:1), and it is at night that they must be brave enough to step into the sea.

Nights can be scary, but they are

important. The story of the Exodus teaches us to value our nights, as much as we value our days. In the Magid section of the Haggadah, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah wonders why we refer to the Exodus in every Ma'ariv service. Ben Zoma answers with a verse. The text, originally from Mishnah Berakhot (1:5), quotes from Deuteronomy. “The days of your life”, the Mishnah tells us, refers to the daytime, but the addition of the word “כָּל”, all indicates the inclusion of the nights too. If we want to do something all the days of our lives, we cannot ignore the nights. After all, half of our lives will be lived at night. This *mishnah* reminds us that what we do with our night matters.

When someone asks us, “What do you do?” we almost always answer with a description of our daytime activities. But the answer for nights could be very different. Many of us live very different lives at night. We are with different people. We set different priorities. We feel differently. Ben Zoma’s insight that “all of the days of your life” includes the nights reminds us to value this time and strive to make the most of it, just as we would do with our days.

The journey of the Israelites echoes this message. We read in Exodus:

שמות יג:כא

וַה' הָלַךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן
לְנִחָתָם הַדֶּרֶךְ וּלְלַיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ
לְהָאִיר לָהֶם לְלֶכֶת יוֹמָם וּלְלַיְלָה:

Exodus 13:21

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way and at night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel day and night.

Nights can be scary, but they are important.

The Israelites traveled by day and by night. The journey toward redemption and the promised land is a twenty-four hour endeavor. But the verses teach us more than just that the Israelites traveled at night, it teaches us that God was always with them. When night fell, and

the wilderness grew dark and scary, God lit the way.

On the night of the splitting of the sea, God went before the people in a pillar of fire. Nahshon, the man who our *midrash* tells us was the first to step into the sea, was not walking into completely black waters. He was guided by the light of the pillar of fire God had sent to lead the way.

Today, we don’t always have a pillar of fire leading us, reminding us of God’s love and direction. Sometimes our nights feel dark and scary. Sometimes we do have to step into dark waters alone.

Remember the Exodus “all the days of your life.” At night, when panic sets in, remember the Exodus, and remember that God was with the people even at night. Today, we don’t have pillars of fire, but we have Torah. We have this story. When we remember the Exodus at night, we remember that God will be with us too.

Mah nishtanah ha-layla ha-zeh?

What makes this night different?

The next time night is scary and you think of turning back; the next time night feels lonely or unimportant, remember the Exodus, invite God into the darkness—and take that first step into the sea. ◇