



Around the Shabbat Table
Parashat BeShallah 5762
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Shalom!

Introduction

This week the Torah portion of Beshallah is read in our synagogues. Beshallah is the parasha in which we read of the actual exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, and the celebration at the Sea led by Moses and Miriam.

While the Torah's telling of the exodus is quite fascinating, so are the rabbinic comments (midrashim) that it inspired. For example, the rabbis take note of text of Exodus 14:15, in which God says to Moses

"Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the Sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march..."

The great Biblical commentator, Rashi (11th century, France) suggests that this verse indicates that

"The Holy Blessed One said to Moses, 'Now is not the time to prolong prayer, when Israel is placed in distress.'"

In other words, God is telling Moses "Don't stop and pray--do something to help the people!"

A second teaching of the rabbis tells us that, as our ancestors stood at the Sea, the tribes argued about the crossing of the Sea. No tribe wanted to take the risk of being the first to enter the Sea. As the argument progressed, along came Nachshon ben Aminadav, the leader of the tribe of Judah. He entered the Sea, and only then was the Sea split to allow the people's escape. Nachshon thus became the first of our people to jump to freedom.

Finally, a midrashic teaching quotes the text in Exodus 14:22 -- "The children of Israel went through the Sea upon dry land." This text seems to contain a contradiction: If they went "through the sea," then it could not have been "upon dry land!" The rabbis resolve this contradiction by teaching that it was only when the people entered the Sea, and were up to their noses in water, that the Sea split so that they could pass.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

1. What is the common thread among the three rabbinic comments?
2. When facing a challenge, what is the role of prayer? What is the role of action? How do the two responses (prayer and actions) relate to each other?

Some Texts to Wrestle With

The Rabbis taught: it happened that a certain student descended before the ark (in those days the reader's pulpit was lower than the crowd) in front of Rabbi Eliezer; he was excessively brief in his recitation of the prayer service. They (the crowd) complained, "How brief this one is!" R. Eliezer said to them: "He is nowhere near as brief as Moses, our teacher, as it is written, 'O God, please cure her'." [this was the prayer he uttered for the healing of his sister Miriam] (Berachot 34a)

It is not study that is fundamental, but deeds (Mishnah Avot)

Towards an Action Agenda

There are many challenges in our world that require an action orientation. Each of us can take on the characteristics of a Nachshon, jumping into tough situations and working to help resolve them. Here are some ideas for first steps for you and your family to become the Nachshons of your community:

Volunteer Opportunities in the Jewish community through UJA Federation and its agencies:

http://www.ujafedny.org/Get_Involved/Volunteering/Community_Service.htm

Volunteer and social action training of the Reform movement:

<http://rac.org/confprog/confprog.html>

Commission on Social Action and Public Policy of the Conservative Movement:

http://uscj.org/item19_95.html

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact us at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

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