

Parashat B'Shalach  
Shabbat Shirah  
Tu B'Shvat  
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It's a tense moment when this week's portion, B'shalach, opens. We've escaped from Egypt and are heading towards the desert. God tells Moses to turn around and make camp by the sea. God then hardens Pharaoh's heart (which, believe it or not, is not the difficult part of the story we're going to wrestle with) and the Egyptians saddle up their horses and chariots, grab their weapons and chase after us. There we are with the sea in front of us, and our enemies gaining on us from behind. We were sitting ducks. What were the Jews to do?

Well, true to form, first we faced our fear with sarcasm. We said to Moses, *"What? Not enough graves in Egypt so you took us out here to the wilderness to die and be buried?"*

Then we blamed him for all our problems. *"We told you to leave us alone and let us be slaves to Pharaoh! We knew trying to escape would only lead to our death. This is all your fault."*

Moses, the consummate leader, doesn't react to us. He just calmly tells us to relax and that everything will be ok. And then, out of our sight, he panics.

How do we know he panics if it was out of our sight? Because of the verse which comes next: "God said to Moses, 'Why are you crying to me? Tell the Israelites to move forward. Lift up your stick and hold it over the sea and split it so the people can walk into it on dry ground!'"

“Why are you crying to me?” God asks. Clearly, when we weren’t looking, Moses prayed to God for help. And this wouldn’t be the last time he does that. But it’s God’s answer that is unique, and that speaks volumes to us on this particular Shabbat.

Rashi reads God’s answer as: “Moses, why are you praying to me? Now is not the time for prayer. The people are in trouble. Don’t just stand there davening, do something!”

It’s a lesson worth repeating. People are in trouble, we are in trouble. Prayer is nice, God is telling us, but it’s not always the answer.

Prayer would not have enabled us to cross the sea. Prayer would not have planted our roots in the land of Israel. Prayer did not stop the toxic hatred between Jews and the walls of the Temple from falling. Prayer didn’t rebuild the Temple. Prayer didn’t establish thriving Diaspora communities. Prayer didn’t heal us from centuries of persecution. Prayer didn’t establish the State of Israel. Prayer didn’t desegregate the United States. Prayer won’t tighten gun control laws. Prayer won’t ease the political paralysis in this country. Prayer won’t bring peace in the Middle East.

Action. Deeds. Work. Risk. Sacrifice. Courage. These are the things that have changed the world and will change our lives -- inspired by prayer, most definitely -- but not reliant on prayer. Big difference.

It took us a long time to learn the lesson. Just days after we saw how our courage to step into the sea resulted in the sea’s parting, there we were

again complaining about the water. Weeks later we were complaining about the food. Don't just sit there and lament, we were taught. Do something.

Martin Luther King Jr., whose life we honored earlier this week, understood the lesson intuitively that prayer was about more than uttering words. After marching with Dr. King in Alabama in 1965 to protest racism and bigotry, while people all around jeered at them and spat on them, Rabbi Heschel wrote, "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

The purpose of prayer is not to ask for things, Heschel taught. "We don't pray in order to be saved. We pray in order to be worthy of being saved." Prayer shouldn't focus on our wishes. Instead, it's a moment when God's intentions ought to be reflected in us. If we are created in the image of God, if we, as the mystics teach, ARE the image of God, then we have to behave in ways that serve as reminders of God's presence. If we engage in acts of violence, if we speak words of hatred, if we are silent in the face of injustice, if we are indifferent to public endangerment, then we desecrate and diminish the divine presence in the world. Prayer is meant to reorient us to the sacred task of being human.

Some of Heschel's words and Dr. King's words were so similar that they could have been written by either one of them. Heschel wrote that "In a free society, some are guilty but all are responsible," reminding us of our obligation to implement laws that ensure the safety and freedom of all

members of society. Dr. King wrote that “To accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system.”

There's another poignant lesson about the dimensions of prayer that our portion teaches us, and it is this: the reward for the work of **doing** prayer is prayer itself.

Having courageously waded into the water and reached the other shore of the sea in safety, we then turned and offered one of the oldest and most famous songs in the Torah as a prayer of gratitude, The Song of the Sea. Its importance is underscored by its unique presentation in the Torah scroll, the special melody to which it's sung, and by the tradition to recite it daily as part of our morning prayers. Moreover, on the Shabbat when its read as part of the weekly Torah reading, which is it this week, the Shabbat is known as Shabbat Shirah, The Shabbat of Song. With an outpouring of emotion, the song celebrates the mighty acts of God in saving us from the Egyptians. In its time and place, one can easily sense its power and spirit as a response to the great relief of having crossed the waters and survived.

The Song of the Sea is actually a difficult piece of Torah. For all its passion and gratitude, it is a gory, violent prayer, rejoicing at the downfall of our enemies – with few details of their demise spared. I often wonder how people can say it (sing it!) so unselfconsciously. The Midrash shares that even God criticized the angels for singing in celebration when the Egyptians were drowning, saying “How can you sing when my children are dying?”

Aviva Zornberg, a masterful commentator on the Torah, offers another perspective on this text, one that deepens these lessons on prayer.

Zornberg suggests that if we look closely at the text, there's room to interpret that we sang the Song of the Sea not when we arrived safely on the other shore, but actually while we were still in the middle of the sea. In this light, the words are not words of celebration, but words of recognition of the sense of life and death surrounding us, hanging in the balance for each one in the crossing, Jew and Egyptian. And that there, but for the grace of God, go we. So, Zornberg explains, the song is not actually a ditty about God defeating our enemies or of gloating over their deaths. Rather, it's a song that human beings sing in the face of mortality.

If you imagine them singing it while making their way through the corridor of ferocious walls of water, which they know can collapse on them because they just did behind them on top of the Egyptians, then it becomes a different song, she says. "It's a song of human beings at the edge between life and death, celebrating life, but at the edge."

Rabbi Heschel, Martin Luther King Jr., victims of gun violence, Jews and Arabs, and all of us who care about the state of the earth and of humanity -- we know well what it is to live at the edge of life and death. Some know it literally, some ethically, some spiritually. What we have in common is how crucial it is that we raise our voices and our bodies in prayerful action not just when life feels good and strong and blessed, but also when life feels vulnerable, unjust and bleak.

What praying looks and feels like in those moments may be different from what we normally think of when we think of praying. It may take the form of attending a civil rights demonstration, voting for a more sensible approach to immigration reform, writing a new melody for a new ritual to

mark an ancient yearning or stepping into a raging sea. But praying in the face of darkness is what brings the gift of prayer as we traditionally know it. Facing the challenges of life with prayer and spirit is what inspires us to fill our Shabbat services with song, with light and with love.

Maybe that's why Tu B'Shvat, the New Year of the (fruit) Trees, takes place this time of year, when the winds still blow, the rains still pour (if we're lucky), and the snow still falls. Maybe this too teaches us that like a tree's sweet fruit and its seeds surrounded by a hard peel or shell, the promise of renewal and rebirth is contained deep within the very struggle for survival, the fight for justice, and the yearning for life.

On this Shabbat Shirah, this Shabbat of Song, may these lessons bring light to all your lives, and may they inspire you to pray with your legs along the path of justice and to raise your voices in song, today and every day.

