

I had a religious experience this past Thursday night at Citi Field. As with many moments of deliverance, it comes after a long delay, in this case a 2 hour rain delay before the game even began. With two out and two strikes on the last Phillies batter of the game in the top of the 9th, and the Mets reliever on the mound, tens of thousand of people surrounding me rose to their feet chanting a mantra: "Sweep! Sweep! Sweep!" Some even shouted, "Shutout sweep! Shutout sweep!" As the closer pitched the final strike and out and the game ended with the Mets' sweep, fans had two different reactions.

Plenty of people rushed out of the stadium, excited to take that energy on the road with them, and perhaps trying to beat the car and subway traffic. Others, like me, lingered, trying to hold on to the sweet taste of victory. The moment was over, but I still was not ready to go.

This is a great tension that inheres in moment of departure from something momentous. There is on the one hand, the desire to stay, and not let go of the thing we are leaving. On the other hand, we are eager to head out and see what adventures might await us ahead. How do we strike this balance?

Two departure stories, two whole books apart in the Torah, but only a year apart in our history as a people, provoke this question. They are each moments of departure from momentous occasions. At the plain sense level, they seem to show that Bnei Yisrael knew how to strike this balance. The way the Rabbis read the stories, though, Bnei Yisrael got it all wrong on both occasions. In their readings, I hope we will take a way a few cautionary words about the wrong ways to manage transitional moments.

Remember back to a foundational moment in our faith – the splitting and crossing of the Yam Suf. After singing on the far shore after seeing the Egyptians washed away and recognizing, at long last, our freedom, the Torah says:

שמות יד/כב: וַיֹּסֶע מֹשֶׁה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל מִדְבַּר שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא מָצְאוּ מַיִם:

"And Moshe led the people to journey forward from the Yam Suf..." (Ex. 14:22)

Only moments earlier the Torah had told us that at this pivotal moment, Bnei Yisrael believed in God and in Moshe God's servant, so now Moshe asserts his leadership and brings Bnei Yisrael forward to begin their journey to encounter God in the wilderness and travel to the Promised Land. But Rashi quotes a midrash which reads this moment negatively:

ויסע משה - הסיען בעל כרחם שעטרו מצרים סוסיהם בתכשיטי זהב וכסף ואבנים טובות, והיו ישראל מוצאין אותם בים... (רש"י שם)

"And Moshe led them forward - Moshe had to push them forward against their will. For the Egyptians had adorned their horses with jewelry of gold, silver, and precious stones, and Israel was collecting them from the sea..." (Rashi ibid.)

The reason the pasuk told us that Moshe led them was because he did so by force – Bnei Yisrael wanted to stick around and gloat, and collect spoils. They were neither rejoicing in the positive of the moment, nor ready to move on to the next stage. They were stuck in the less redeeming elements of the momentous occasion of their deliverance.

13 months, one Tabernacle, and one Revelation later, Bnei Yisrael got ready to take the next step to their destiny, departing Mt. Sinai for Eretz Kenaan. We read about their preparations in the last few weeks. This week, we get the cloud that guided them, the trumpets that heralded the journey, the song that accompanied the traveling of the camp, the mobilization of the camp, and finally the long, long-anticipated moment – the people's departure.

במדבר י'לג: ויסעו מהר יקוק דרך שלשת ימים וארון ברית יקוק נסע לפניהם דרך שלשת ימים לתור להם מנוחה:

"And they journeyed from the Mountain of the LORD three days, with the ark of the Covenant of the LORD traveling in front of them, a three day journey, to find rest." (Num. 10:33)

It sounds terrific, but the Rabbis again read with a critical eye:

תוספות שבת קטז: פורענות ראשונה ויסעו וא"ר חנינא שסרו מאחרי השם - ... כדאמר במדרש (ילמדנו) ויסעו שנסעו מהר סיני דרך שלשת ימים כתינוק היוצא מבית הספר שבורח לו והולך לו כך היו בורחים מהר סיני דרך שלשת ימים...

"... as appears in the Midrash (Yelamdenu): "They traveled" - they journeyed forth from Har Sinai a three day journey, like a child who goes forth from school, running free and fleeing, so did Bnei Yisrael run from Har Sinai a three days' journey away..." (Tosafot Shabbat 116a)

Once again, a great moment of leaving – marching forth as a nation with a Torah and the presence of God in our midst, and yet Bnei Yisrael seems to miss the magnitude of the moment, and see it as a chance to make a break for it, almost imagining that if we hightail out of Sinai fast enough, we won't get hit with any more responsibilities and mitzvot.

Why do Hazal take two moments which are so potentially positive and rereads them as moments of failure or shortcoming? We should've left Yam Suf to go forward; instead we stayed and had to be forced out. We

should've left Har Sinai with joy and excitement (or even stayed in the hopes of more revelation); instead we made a break for it.

At a simple textual level, I believe they are trying to justify all the bad behavior and complaining that follows to soon after these high moments. To "defend" our people, they help us understand that even those peak moments weren't so peak after all. We weren't so steeped in faith and praise at the splitting of the sea; we were just greedy for loot. We weren't so delighted with the masses of laws and Torah which we received at Sinai; we were overburdened.

But at a more sophisticated level, I think Chazal were trying to show us through Bnei Yisrael's misdeeds the real and likely challenges of transitional moments, moments of departure, in our lives – national and personal.

Why? Why did Bnei Yisrael loot the Egyptians gold horse crowns as soon as they finished the song of the sea, and have to be led by Moshe by force away from the Yam Suf? What happened to pushing forward to realize our destiny? And why did we flee from Har Sinai at the first possible opportunity, running from the covenantal relationship with the God who had given us our freedom? What happened to staying longer to bask in the glow of the newly received Torah?

Sometimes we come to a moment of conclusion, of completion, and of accomplishment, and we are on the brink of heading out to a new stage. There is so much feeling about what is ahead and what is behind. In many cases you'd think we want to rush forward into the next stage to carry forward everything we have built until now, or we want to revel in the present moment of completion and experience it in its fullest.

But that's often not what happens. We get caught up in looking for personal gain, or competitiveness, not satisfied with what we achieved but needing to outdo others, as Bnei Yisrael did over their Egyptian counterparts at the Sea. We are scared or avoidant of taking the next step to our independence after a moment of freedom and completion, so we hold back, looking for any excuse to stay in that old, static, safe place.

Or, almost the reverse, we rush off too fast. We're not able to hold on to the accomplishment or the moment. We can't allow ourselves to be proud of what we've done, or we feel overwhelmed, or perhaps even the sadness at leaving a place of accomplishment makes us resent it and want to flee from it.

Ultimately, the key may be to stay open to what we feel, and not to stray too far in any direction. If we dwell too long in the moment, we might ask ourselves – am I afraid of going forth from here? Is something holding me back? If it seems like we are itching to leave that moment of transition and completion too soon, perhaps

we should wonder if we left unresolved feelings about what we thought we had completed, or if we're viewing it in the best way.

Approaching the summer bring with it its own set of leavings. Besides heading for a road trip after a shutout sweep at home.

We leave school, we leave home for camp, we leave work for some vacation. Perhaps we finish a project. I'm thinking of a particular massive building project which is nearing its own completion. Perhaps in our own lives, we are saying goodbye to a relative, as we have laid to rest beloved relatives of a number of community members in the last week or two.

May we learn the lessons from Bnei Yisrael of their pinnacle moments and departures from them, not to focus on the wrong things, not to stay too long, and not to rush off too soon. It's in these moments of transition that our character is forged.