Jewish voices from the narrow places

Source Sheet by R. Nathan Martin

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Exodus 14:9-15

(9) the Egyptians gave chase to them, and all the chariot horses of Pharaoh, his horsemen, and his warriors overtook them encamped by the sea, near Pi-hahiroth, before Baalzephon. (10) As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the LORD. (11) And they said to Moses, “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? (12) Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness’?” (13) But Moses said to the people, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the LORD will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. (14) The LORD will battle for you; you hold your peace!” (15) Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.

The Power of Trust

And YHVH said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward!" The medieval commentators struggled with God's telling Moses "Why are you crying out to me?" What else is a Jew to do when they are struggling like this, just like Israel was at the Sea, if not to cry out to God, as our scripture says, "from the narrow places I called out to God. (Ps. 118)"...There are times which resemble moments of "prayer is blocked (Job 3:8)"...but there is a power that no adversary can block - this is the power of Trust (bitachon), when a Jew trusts in heavenly
compassion...which stands up against all challenges...that is why in the text God says to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward!" because Israel will reveal their trust in God and jump in the water with that security of trust which will bring about the splitting of the sea...There are two levels of trust (bitachon), one in refraining and one in action/doing. For the exodus and the plagues there was trust in refraining [and letting God enact miracles], but when the Israelites stood by the sea, when the sea was before them and the enemy behind, and snakes and scorpions to both sides, they needed supernatural help. In order to activate this, they needed the trust of movement and action. When Moses said "stand by (Ex. 14:13)" he was instructing the Israelites to stand and hold onto their faith and trust in God's salvation. (Excerpt from the teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe on Parshat Beshallah)

Responses to the crisis

Jerusalem Talmud Ta'anit 10b
Our ancestors split into four groups at the Sea. One said, "Let us fall into the Sea." One said, "Let us return to Egypt." One said, "Let us battle them." One said, "Let us cry out in prayer before them." To those who said, "Let us fall into the Sea," Moses declared, "Stand fast and see YHVH's deliverance." To those who said, "Let us return to Egypt," Moses declared, "fas as you see Egypt here today, you will never see it again for the ages." To those who said, "Let us battle them," Moses declared YHVH will make war for you." And to those who said, "Let us cry out in prayer before them," Moses declared, "And you--be still"

Moving forward

When dealing with adversity there are four different approaches: 1. Escapists 2. Conformists 3. Fighters 4. Believers. Would you believe that all four options are limited? The first time in history when a people were “stuck between a rock and a hard place” was when the Jewish people stood before the Reed Sea with the Egyptians pursuing them close behind. What to do? The people were divided into four groups: 1) Some said: “Let’s jump into the sea; it’s simply not worth the effort.” 2) Others argued with resignation: “We should return to Egypt where we lived for so many years. A known evil is better than an unknown one. True, we were enslaved, but anything is better than this place where we will either be killed by the Egyptians or drown in the sea. The challenges of life are just too overwhelming. Conformity, surrender, assimilation is the only realistic option.” 3) Yet another group felt: “Let us go to war with the Egyptians.” 4) And finally the religionists: stated: “Let us pray to G-d”
All were wrong. Not only escapism and conformity, but also battle and prayer are not complete options. Was life given to us so that we spend most of our time doing battle, involved in conflict and strife? And is prayer enough when faced with challenge? We are blessed with resources to deal with every challenge. So coupled with prayer we must do our utmost to rise to the occasion. What was the correct approach? “Move forward.” (Simon Jacobson, Meaningful Life Center Commentary)

Guided Meditation by Rabbi Alan Lew z”l
Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so. Identify something in your life you are confronted by now, perhaps something that demands a change, a leave-taking of you.

Al Tir'au - don't be afraid, don't panic. Don't act on your fear
Ur'u - See what is really there, not what you imagine
Ve-Taharishun - be still. Be at peace. Let whatever comes up be there, whatever wants to emerge into the silence. Notice your thoughts, your emotions, how your body feels. Notice if there is a message there, something at the edge of your attention.
Va-yisa'u - Get moving. Just get moving, go forward. Trust what you know to be true. Visualize your action.