

## From Complain-ment to Fulfillment – Shabbat Beshalah, 5774

Rabbi Michael Safra

Before I start talking I want to ask you to take a second to look at the person next to you and say hello. And if you don't know the person, take a second to introduce yourself.

It's always good to say hello to people, but I hope the particular connection with today's Torah reading will become apparent in a few minutes.

As Jessie indicated earlier, Parashat Beshalach describes the departure of the Jews from Egypt and their absolute victory over the Egyptians at the Sea. It describes some of the Torah's most important miracles – the splitting of the Sea, the Manna from Heaven, water from a rock, the victory over Amalek. And yet there is another feature of the story, which predominates at every turn. My son Ethan was the *parasha* presenter for his second grade class yesterday, and wanting to parallel the Ten Commandments that we will encounter next week, he coined a phrase for Parashat Beshalach. It describes the “Five Complain-ments”.

Our people witnessed miracle after miracle and at every step they complained: “המבלי אין קברים במצרים, Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?” They cry out about the Egyptians chasing them and cross through the sea to safety. But soon they complain that the water is too bitter. Moses sweetens the water, but then they complain about the food. And when Manna rains down from the sky, they remember the meat they had in Egypt and complain again until God sends quail. And they travel a little further and complain about a lack of water ... and Moses hits the rock.

The Rabbis go further, as they imagine some of the people complaining to each other even as they walked through the path created by the walls of water on either side<sup>1</sup>: “We had mud in Egypt and now we have mud here; we had clay to make bricks and now we have no use for the clay in these puddles.” They got to the other side and some of the people started singing in gratitude with Moses and Miriam, but the complainers didn't understand because they couldn't stop thinking about the mud on their shoes.

It is reminiscent of the proverbial waiter in the kosher restaurant who asks his customers, “Is anything okay?”

As the Torah describes it, when the people left Egypt, God made a deliberate decision not to lead them on the direct path to the Promised Land, because the people weren't ready to be free; they didn't understand the responsibilities of freedom. And quite simply, they couldn't see. Sure, they saw the troubles ahead. But they didn't see the miracles; and they didn't have faith in God or themselves; and they didn't see their neighbors and understand their needs. They couldn't see beyond the *dalet amot*, the four cubits of their immediate surroundings. And so they complained.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus Rabbah 24:1.

Their lack of awareness is an interesting lesson for us as we prepare to celebrate Tu BiShevat this week, the new year for the trees, and we look out at the miserable cold weather and wonder why on earth we are celebrating trees that are not going to bloom for another two months. When we celebrate Tu BiShevat in the winter we are also implored to remember that what we see is not all that there is. We see the dead of winter but we have faith in the rebirth of spring. And we know that much of the process takes place on the inside and that the blossoms will appear very suddenly, almost when we don't expect them, and that will be a continuation of a process that we might not see – but we know it is happening.

When the people were about to leave Egypt, the Torah tells us that Moses took Joseph's bones with him because he remembered that Joseph's brothers had made a promise that they would someday bring Joseph's bones with them to the Promised Land. The Rabbis explain that Moses was the one who took the bones because he saw something that the rest of the people did not. Moses demonstrated his piety and wisdom because while the rest of our people saw an opportunity for looting Egypt, Moses saw an opportunity for a *mitzvah*.<sup>2</sup> It is written in the book of Proverbs, "חכם לב יקח מצות", A wise person accepts commandments."

I like that the Rabbis bring *mitzvah* language into this because it means that Moses didn't only see back in history to the promise that his ancestors had made. He also saw on the vertical plane and he understood the idea that freedom means responsibility, and he used the opportunity to connect himself to God through his acceptance of this first *mitzvah*. Of course this connection to God through *mitzvot* will be developed more fully next week when we read the story of Sinai. But in the beginning the people didn't see that and their lack of awareness for the commandments led them into the trap of Complains.

They also had a lack of awareness for one another. There is a curiosity in the text of the Fifth Complain-ment, when the people are thirsty and the Torah says, "וַיִּצְמְאוּ שָׁם הָעָם לַמַּיִם", the people were thirsty for water and they complained to Moses and said, "לָמָּה זֶה הָעֲלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם", Why did you bring us out of Egypt, "וְאֶת־בְּנֵי וְאֶת־מִקְנֵי בְּצִמְאָה", Was it to kill me and my children and my flock with thirst?" There's a sudden change from plural to singular. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his commentary in *Etz Hayim* writes that as long as things were glorious they were able to think in terms of "us", but as soon as times became tough they stopped thinking of "us" and began to think only about "me".

In order to find *shleimut*, in order to find personal fulfillment, we, too, must look beyond our own needs and attend to the needs of others. There is a wonderful idea in our legal literature, which is that even a poor person – even a person who receives money from communal funds – is required to participate in the *mitzvah* of *tzedakkah*. Even one who receives charity is required to give charity in order to attend to the needs of others.

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<sup>2</sup> Mekhilta Beshalah.

Martin Buber sees divinity in this mindset. In his book *I and Thou*, he suggests that God is not found above; and God is not found “in our hearts.” God is found in the *relationships* we have with other people, in our ability to understand and to see and to serve.

The Rabbis of the Talmud ask what is the earliest moment when it is light enough to recite the morning prayers? And the answer is that one may pray when it is just light enough that you can see a person from a distance of 4 cubits, about 6 feet, and make out the facial features enough to recognize him, משיראה את חברו רחוק ארבע אמות וכירנו.<sup>3</sup> Our prayer, our ability to connect to God, is contingent on our ability to recognize the people around us. And that’s why it is so important in the synagogue to look around and take the time to see the other people who are here and say hello.

On Shabbat Beshalach, Shabbat Shirah, when we celebrate our ancestors’ freedom from Egypt with song, I pray that we may be blessed with the ability to see. May we see past the rain and the cold in order to appreciate the miracles that are part of our everyday experience. May we accept our sacred responsibilities, the *mitzvot*, that they might enable us to see God’s presence in our lives. May we reach out to others – here and where the needs are even greater. May we be privileged to see beyond Complain-ment, that we may be blessed with lives of goodness and growth and fulfillment. Shabbat Shalom.

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<sup>3</sup> Talmud Berachot 9b.