

**Taking That Critical First Step**  
***Parashat B'shallach***  
**January 30, 2021**  
**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

When I was growing up, my father worked at the **Gulf Oil Company** refinery in South Philadelphia. He started working there in the 1930s, and except for the years that he served in the U.S. Army during World War II, he worked there his entire career. It was a good job, paying good wages.

Once or twice during my childhood, there was what I think was called **Family Day** at the refinery -- a day on which employees could bring their families to tour the place. For a young child it was absolutely fascinating. I saw the docks where crude oil -- the thick, viscous substance that is extracted from beneath the surface of the earth -- was brought into the refinery, and we toured the extensive set of distilleries where that crude oil was broken up into different substances, such as kerosene, light oil, heavy oil, and gasoline. And we saw where and how those substances left the factory.

Over the years, that refinery changed hands, as the fortunes of the corporations in the oil business rose and fell. For example, Gulf Oil was taken over by Chevron. But the refinery continued to function, and continued, I believe, to be the largest such refinery on the East Coast.

Imagine my surprise when I heard the news the other day that General Motors (GM), one of the largest producers of automobiles in this country, has just pledged to produce only zero emission vehicles by the year 2035.

Now, that refinery in South Philadelphia produced a wide variety of products, but **gasoline** was certainly predominant among them. And to think that those pipes leading out of the refinery were not going to continue to be supplying gasoline to thousands and thousands of new cars -- it just boggles the mind. Could this really be true?

It's worth marvelling at how far our society has come in appreciating the dangers of climate change, and in developing technically and economically viable clean



technologies, when a major maker of vehicles with carbon-producing combustion engines makes a commitment like this.

Now, of course, this isn't the end of the climate change problem. Vehicles aren't the only source of pollution. GM's shift doesn't mean all other companies will take the same route -- although coincidentally, just a few months ago, General Electric (GE) announced that it will no longer be manufacturing coal-fired power plants. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/09/22/climate-clock-week/>.) Plenty of carbon will be spewed into the atmosphere in the next 15 years before 2035, and plenty more afterwards too.

But it's useful to pause and to recognize the significance of this moment.

For those of us who feel **existential dread** about the future of our planet, who are concerned about the devastation that has already been caused by climate change and that is poised to get much worse over the next decade, it's worth reflecting on what led to this moment.

It brings to mind -- to me, at least -- a scene in today's parashah.

The Israelites have fled from Egypt. They've gotten as far as the Sea of Reeds. There they are on the shores of the sea, when Pharaoh and his army catch up with them. It's clear that there's no escape. To the left, to the right, and behind them Pharaoh's army are approaching. In front of them is the great Sea of Reeds. They are caught, as we say, between a rock and a hard place. (I'd put it this way: they're caught between their oppressive masters on three sides and a natural, implacable wall of water before them.)

What is their response? Well, the first thing they do is to cry out to God. (*Vayitza'aku*) They cry out -- which rabbinic interpreters understand to mean, they prayed. After all, God brought them out of Egypt: he's the one that must deep down inside they must have been hoping would get them through this new crisis.

But almost immediately they do something else. These are, after all, people who, up until a few days before, were slaves. They're used to taking orders; they're used to complaining about their masters. They're not used to thinking for themselves. So, what do they do?

They complain. They complain to Moses. “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us out here to die in the Wilderness?” You can almost hear the whining in that question, and how irritating it must have been for Moses to hear it.

*We told you so! It would have been better to stay back in Egypt!*

But Moses persists. He says: **Calm down. Sit tight. Stay put. Be quiet. God will save us.**

It’s a very comforting message. And given that we’ve encountered this story many, many times, and we know it as the story of the splitting of the Red Sea (or the Sea of Reeds), the story in which the people walk forward into the sea and reach the other side, while the waters close in on their enemies, we might think that the very next text tells us exactly that.

But that’s not what happens. Instead, God surprisingly **rebukes** Moses and the people for crying out to him. He rebukes implicitly Moses for his pacifying words. Instead, he tells Moses to tell the Children of Israel to “get going”!

Fascinating. After all, how did God and Moses free the Israelites from Egyptian slavery? Through **signs and wonders**. It is reasonable that the people expected another sign or wonder to happen right then and there. And, as we know, signs and wonders do lie ahead. But at this moment in time, God seems to imply: *you’ve got to play a role in this*. **You have to take the first step.**

In fact, looking back over the previous chapters, we see that even then and there, human initiative was necessary. It was necessary for Moses and Aaron to go before Pharaoh. And the people had to prepare for the Exodus by acquiring a lamb, slaughtering it and daubing its blood on their doorposts.

Here, the message seems to be very clear. Nothing is going to happen without the people taking the first step.

Now, we don’t see that first step described in the text of the Torah, but the Midrash, sensing its absence, supplies it. It teaches us that the Children of Israel were clustered at the edge of the water as Pharaoh and his army were approaching, and at first no one was willing to go into the water.

Until finally, one Israelite, someone by the Name of **Nachshon**, decided to do it. He decides to walk into the water. He walks in up to his knees, telling people to

follow him. Nothing happens. He walks in up to his waist. Again, nothing happens. He goes in up to his neck. Nothing happens. He walks further, up to his nose, and cried out in the words of Psalm 69:2: “הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי אֱלֹהִים כִּי בָאוּ מַיִם עַד-נֶפְשִׁי:” -- Deliver me, O God, for the waters have reached my soul!” (Ancient peoples believed that the soul left the body through the nose.)

Then, only then, suddenly, the waters parted, and Nachshon and the other Israelites were able to walk through to safety.

This story is powerful. It’s always inspired me. The message is simple: sometimes **someone has to take the initiative and take the first step**. When he or she does, things get simpler for everyone very soon thereafter.

We may remember the story of the splitting of the Red Sea as the story of yet another miracle by God. But the text and the midrash seem to suggest something different: when existential crises arise, we need to take the first step. As God says to the Israelites: *Mah titzak elai; daber el bnei yisrael v’yisau*. Don’t kvetch if you’re upset -- **do something** about it.

We’ve just finished celebrating Tu Bishvat. It’s a wonderful minor holiday in our tradition. We eat fruits of different types, and we celebrate the natural world. It’s a reminder of our dependence on the earth.

That earth is fragile. It requires us to take steps to protect it. To guard it from harm.

Yes, we should appreciate its natural beauty; yes, we should look in awe at its grandeur, but it’s not enough to appreciate it, or even to deplore its devastation by humans. We need to be partners with God. We need to get up and go and take action to protect those amazing wonders.

That announcement by GM didn’t come on its own. Only after an announcement of that kind can we appreciate the efforts of scientists and engineers and environmental activists and political leaders over decades to move the needle.

Up until now, their efforts may have seemed in vain. It may have seemed an impossible goal to transform our nation’s dependence on fossil fuels. Now, suddenly, we see a glimpse of a world in which it isn’t impossible.

We each have a role to play in that transformation. Let's be reminded of the message that God taught Moses on the banks of the Red Sea -- namely, that freedom doesn't come on its own. The world doesn't get better on its own. May each of us find our own way of partnering with God to make the world a little bit more complete -- each of us in our own way.

Shabbat shalom.