

This Week in Torah *B'shalach*

I watched a tender moment the other day. A father opened the door for his teenage daughter and as she passed by, he gently caressed her back. As she passed by, I sensed a smile from underneath her mask. He responded with a smile and a simple nod. One might not have noticed this as anything. Someone else might have seen it as if the father was guiding her in to the space. But those whose “love language” is touch would understand that this was an act of reassurance and presence more than anything else. The image from the Shepherd’s psalm [Psalm 23]; “...Your rod and staff—they comfort me...” Door open to invite in, hand on the back to reassure protection. There in a doorway was the symbolic totality of a parent’s love.

Here is my take on the imagery-- A rod is what a leader would use as they lead from in front as if to imply “follow me.” But a staff is a shepherd’s tool that prods the sheep to move along. Certainly, many of us as parents can relate to this. Parents teaching and guiding; parents encouraging and prodding. But traditional Jewish theology has shied away from a transcendent deity concept. Rather God is WITH us—the good, the bad and the ugly moments of life. There is no place without the Divine presence. In our prayer book, we read a poem from the 12th century Spanish sage Judah HaLevi: “where might I go to find You, Exalted Hidden One? Yet, where would I not go to find You, Ever-present, Eternal One? My heart cries out to You; please draw me near. The moment I reach out for You, I find You reaching in for me.” The complexity of transcendence of God’s nature and intimate Presence of God at the same time is the theological cornerstone of Chasidic Judaism. “...Your rod and staff—they comfort me...” is the completeness of God’s presence in our lives!

Yet, at first glance in this week’s *parasha*, one may not see it. Like a bystander observing the exchange between parent and teen, the act of redemption is that in which the sea splits and the people go forward. Powerful and majestic as that moment is—the transcendence is such that God creates the moment as the people walk through—just like a parent who holds the door open for a daughter as she enters. But truth is that there is more there than what is on the surface. Examine the text--In Exodus 14:19, we read: “The angel of God, who had been going ahead of the Israelite army, now moved

and followed behind them; and the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up a place behind them..." At a primary glance, it appears that it is God's messenger who is protecting the people; moving from leading them forward to moving to their rear to protect them from the Egyptians. But 18th century Chasidic sage Rabbi Levi Yitzchak sees it with a deeper nuance. He understood that God is encapsulated in the totality of the moment, orchestrating and protecting at the same moment through the use of angels. He wrote: "As Israel merits such Divine favor, God is inclined to *chesed*/kindness. The Israelites are like the highest ranks of angels. The angel before them is the presence of the Divine essence—with God above them. And accordingly, the angel behind them is standing there from God. God is above them all. The Israelites are surrounded by Divine favor as they go forward and Divine protection if they should look back." Levi Yitzhak has God as the fulcrum of this narrative; causing and guiding as well as reassuring.

The door of liberation was opened by God and as the children of Israel walked thru, God shifts the Divine attention as if God is placing a hand so gently on their backs, reassuring them of the Divine presence. They are not alone.... And God will do for them but also be with them.