

Drash for Beshalach

By David LeBauer

This week's Torah portion tells of the Exodus from Egypt, and the string of miracles that helped along the way. Moses has roused the Israelites for a quick departure, with Pharaoh chasing close behind. The Israelites despair when they reach the sea, but Moses raises his staff and God parts the sea. The Israelites make it to safety and Pharaoh drowns with his army. Moses and Miriam lead song and dance to thank God for his help in this.

In researching this, I found plenty of religious and scientific scholars who have attempted to interpret the story and use miracles as evidence for divine intervention or as a historical series of events to explain. Whether by divine intervention or fortuitous phenomena, or whether the story is grounded in any historical reality, it is a great story.

But whether the story is divine, natural, or just a story, it is clearly useful - as demonstrated by its repeated use throughout history. What most impresses is the persistence and influence of the story itself. And the fact that it has been told verbatim as well as with interpretation, for thousands of years.

Every time it is told, it is interpreted differently. It has been told to understand oppression, to inspire rebellion and liberation. It has been told while Jews were oppressed by the Romans, Greeks, Crusaders, Cossacks and Nazis. And it has been told by African Americans facing slavery, Jim Crow, and a contemporary laws. Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King have been compared to Moses. And Moses is the most frequently mentioned prophet in the Quran. Over four decades of Seders, guided by a cornucopia of opinionated Haggadot, the story has been used as a lens through which to understand oppression and inequality around the world. I have gained an appreciation for such texts as sources of thoughtful contemplation. The variety of interpretations highlight that a single story can provide many insights, and even competing truths. This gives great freedom to the reader, and as a result I always look forward to reading whatever text is on hand at services.

So whether it is true or divine, the story is useful. For this reason I am proud to have passed it on. And I look forward to Emil telling this story tomorrow, and giving us his own interpretation. And I thank you all for joining our journey.