

Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Parashat Beshalach
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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This past week there were two stabbings at New Rochelle High School. One of them died. Upon hearing the news I felt a familiar numbness form around me. The numbness forms like a thrown circuit breaker when my mind overloads at the suffering, the dangers of our world. But this numbness at these stabbings fell with the realization that in a few years my children will enroll at New Rochelle High School. This truth pierced my reality with sadness and fear, with panic and uncertainty.

The reactions in the community ranged all over the map: from a call for dialogue to angry recriminations; from a police presence at the school, to calls for new policies. Some reactions stemmed from a desire to constructively address the problem, others had racist overtones. Some displayed staggering naiveté, others a hardnosed sense of justice that lacked all compassion or mercy. In other words, the reactions of the New Rochelle community did not differ significantly from that of any community which suffers a trauma, which finds itself in a difficult place with the need to move forward to make a change.

This describes, somewhat perfectly, the position of the Ancient Israelites in our Torah portion this week, Beshalach. Having fled Egypt, God commands the Israelites to head to the Sea of Reeds. Upon reaching the shore, the Egyptian army comes galloping from behind. God obscures the Israelites with a cloud and darkness but they fear that, at any moment, the Egyptians will drive forward leaving them two options: die at the hands of their former masters or drown in the sea. The midrash, the collection of ancient rabbinical legends that elucidate the biblical text, explains that the Israelites reacted in four different ways to this trying moment, ways that mirror the recent reactions of the New Rochelle community.

The midrash says, “The members of the Tribes of Ruben, Shimon, and Issachar were in a state of panic and decided that they would throw themselves into the sea rather than face the Egyptians.” A first, and very natural reaction to impending doom, this faction of Israelites allowed fear ó fear above all else ó to strip them of all hope. With despair in their hearts, they thought it better to die in the sea than suffer at the hands of the Egyptians. Essentially, they thought, they could do nothing to address the problem. Moses responds to them by saying, “Do not fear! you will see God’s salvation, [have faith!]”. For too many of my neighbors in New Rochelle, all they feel is despair, a sort of hopeless rot that surrenders to the currents of the moment with no faith that a solution may exist. Moses’s answer applies as much today as it did back then: “Have faith. We can find a solution.”

The Midrash goes on, “The Tribes Zebulun, Benjamin, and Naftali were of the opinion that it was better to surrender and return to Egypt.” Rather than confront the challenge of the moment, rather than wade into an unknown future, this faction thought it better to simply leave the situation, move somewhere else. Perhaps they imagined that by leaving the shore of the sea, they could find peace elsewhere, even back in Egypt. But leaving does not solve problems. In leaving they might save their own necks, but the rest of the Israelites would perish, the community would

break apart. Quite rightly, Moses tells them, "You will never again return to Egypt," for returning would destroy the very reasons for living in community in the first place. After the stabbings some of my neighbors spoke about moving. Like Israelites looking to leave the threat at the shore of the sea, they want to flee New Rochelle for a school district that seems safer, perhaps Scarsdale or Chappaqua or Rye Brook. But many of us chose New Rochelle specifically because of the character of the town, the socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity that adds texture and color to the community. Moving out would not only mean missing out on that diversity, it would make New Rochelle, itself, less diverse. It would destroy the reason for living in New Rochelle in the first place.

The members of the Tribes of Judah and Joseph, teaches the Midrash, called out, "Let us go out to do battle against the Egyptians." Judaism advocates self-defense. If someone comes to kill us, we're commanded to kill them first. But a battle of desperate refugees against the most powerful army in the world would be a slaughter not a battle, would lead to rivers of blood and darkness. This course would have been plainly reactionary, driven by passion and prejudice rather than reason and faith in the future. Indeed, Moses counsels faith when tells them that there is no need to fight because, "God will fight for you." On various New Rochelle community Facebook groups, reactionary messages have been popping up. These messages spew hatred and bigotry, sometimes using coded language, sometimes using outright racism, the suggestions cast dispersion on whole categories of people. Reactionary response rooted in attitudes like this cannot endure, can only lead to rivers of blood and darkness.

According to the Midrash, the final group, the tribes of Dan, Gad, and Asher suggested that they run into the Egyptian camp and confuse them. This is the panic response, the throw anything and everything against a wall and see what sticks response. The spend lots of money and hours and emotion response. The response of confusion and fear. "No," answered Moshe. "Stay here and abandon this plan." In New Rochelle people proposed all sorts of schemes with no research, no dialogue, and proposed action only for action's sake. Nothing that could endure, that could actually address the issues.

In the end, the midrash teaches that one brave Israelite rose above the din walked purposefully into the water. Nachshon ben Aminadav, his heart filled with faith, his eyes set on the future, his mind empty of fear and panic, walked resolutely into the Sea of Reeds. The water rose around him, higher and higher. Once it passed his nose, the sea split and the Israelites marched through on dry ground. In New Rochelle, that clarity and wisdom is, not surprisingly, coming from the students themselves. One student interviewed by LoHud said, "Everybody in the community should be more together now, more concerned about each other." LoHud also reported that "the high school's senior class president, Ever Mack, got a nice ovation at the school board meeting when she called on the community to be respectful while working on its problems. She also called on leaders to avoid blunt "cookie-cutter" approaches."

And so, while my initial responses to the stabbings may be like the Israelites: despair or surrender, reactionary impulse or panicked action, I strive instead to be like Nachshon and the wise students of the high school who propose looking ahead calmly, proceeding resolutely, and having faith that, as one community, we can cross from this narrow space into a future filled with possibility.