

***Kvetching* and Complaining vs Criticizing and Protesting**

The highlight of this week's Torah portion, *B'shalach*, is the singing of ***shirat ha-yam***, the song at the sea (Exodus, chapter 15). It was first sung by our ancestors as they celebrated their miraculous escape from Egyptian slavery. This joyous and poignant passage is uniquely written in the Torah to resemble a wall as a way to illustrate the importance of the message and to evoke wonder and interest by all who will see it when we hold the Torah aloft. This passage also has been woven into our daily liturgy in order to remind us and reinforce the centrality of our story of freedom.

But what happened after this song of freedom? The celebration is followed immediately with grumbles and complaints against Moses because the people could not find sweet water to drink (Ex. 15:24). So God inspired Moses to use an old folk remedy that turned the bitter waters into sweet, drinkable water.

And once they had enough water, the people then began to complain that they didn't have enough food to eat. So, God rained *manna* from heaven to satisfy their hunger (Ex. 16:3ff).

Since the people were quick to complain just days after their miraculous freedom, it isn't much of a surprise that throughout the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness that our Israelite ancestors were not shy about voicing their unhappiness. *Nu*, what's changed?!

And yet, it is important to note that often (but not always) their complaints were quite legitimate. The Torah does not take the people to task for expressing their concerns that there wasn't enough water or food. Indeed, standing up for the vital needs of the community is *mitzvah*, a sacred duty. There are vast differences between petty *kvetching* and courageous acts of protest. To see oppression and injustice and say nothing is to be complicit in the wrong doing. To stand in solidarity with those who are the most vulnerable in society is in keeping with the highest of our Jewish values.

How fitting it is that this weekend is filled with observances to honor the memory and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In face of institutionalized

racism, Dr. King rallied people to peaceful, non-violent protest. Men and women marched in the streets, often at great personal peril, in order to shame this nation to confess and end racial discrimination. Rabbis, most prominently Reform Rabbis, marched hand in hand with Dr. King, singing "We shall overcome," and signaling an unstoppable determination to fight against the bigoted Jim Crow laws, segregation, and the culture of prejudice.

When Dr. King spoke about his dream of freedom, he evoked the image of our Israelite ancestors. On April 3, 1968 he said:

Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the Promised Land. . . .

And that's all this whole thing is about. We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying -- We are saying that we are God's children. And that we are God's children, we don't have to live like we are forced to live. . . .

Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.

And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over.
And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I
want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the
Promised Land!

And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not
fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the
Lord.

Less than 24 hours after he spoke these words, King was assassinated by
James Earl Ray.

To protest injustice is a noble calling; it is the calling of the Torah, our
Biblical prophets, and in the heart and soul of every Jew. This Shabbat, as
we sing the words of freedom that inspired our ancestors, let us add a
special tribute to those, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who fought for
freedom. In this era of social divisiveness, let us stand strong and protest
forcefully against racism, bigotry, anti-Semitism, and prejudice of every
form.

Shabbat Shalom

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