

The Weekly Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rick Rheins
Parashat B'shalach 5780

First One In

This week's Torah portion, *B'shalach* (Exodus 13:17- 17:16) contains one of the most beloved passages, *Shirat haYam*, the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15). It is a poem that is stylistically written in the Torah as a brick wall of words symbolizing the waters piled up to allow our Israelite ancestors to escape Egyptian slavery and begin their long journey to the Promised Land of Israel. Included in the Song at the Sea are the lines of *Mi Khamokah*, the triumphant song sung by our ancestors and featured to this day at every morning and evening service. The tradition is to have a special musical Shabbat as we read this portion and at Temple Sinai we will have our Shabbat service enhanced with choirs of adults, teenagers and youngsters. Rabbi Susan will chant the sacred passage from the Torah using a special and time-honored trope.

But before the crossing of the sea and the songs of joy from Moses, Miriam and the all the Israelites, there was the moment of doubt. As our ancestors stood in front of those waters, they saw Pharaoh and his chariots closing in fast from behind threatening to kill the leaders of our people and force the others to return to slavery. Should they surrender or march on? And if they were to brave the waters, who would be the first?

In the Talmud (*Sotah* 36b- 37a), our sages debated what happened. Rabbi Meir taught that when they stood on the shore of the sea, the Israelite tribes competed with one another for the honor of going first: "I will descend

first into the sea!” And another would say, “I will be the first!” While they were arguing, the tribe of Benjamin leaped forward into the sea and led the crossing.

However, Rabbi Yehuda disagreed. He had a different story altogether: “Rather, this tribe was saying, ‘I will not be the first to descend into the sea!’ and the others said, ‘We will not be the first!’” Rabbi Yehuda taught that while all the tribes were arguing, giving reasons why they should not be the ones to test the waters, a young prince from the tribe of Judah, Nachshon ben Aminadav, leaped in.

As Nachson marched further, the waters crept higher and higher. All were afraid that we would drown so Moses began to pray at length. Finally, God called out to Moses, “My dear ones are drowning in the sea while you linger in prayer before Me?” Moses replied, “But Master of the Universe, what is it in my power to do?” God then told Moses, “Speak to the Children of Israel and let them journey forth! Lift up you staff and stretch out your arm (and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground! Exodus 14:15).”

Consider the wisdom of the Talmud including both stories, contradictory in nature and reflecting competing views of human nature. Rabbi Meir thought that each tribe would bravely compete for the honor of going first. Rabbi Yehuda considered the frailty of human character and thought that fear would overcome them. But there is something on which they both agree; namely, that when others are spending their time arguing and pontificating, it takes brave men and women of action to rise to the task and win the day.

Every generation faces challenges and some of those challenges seem insurmountable. Yes, we need to take time to reflect and research the best solutions. Yes, we should consult with experts and even form a committee to thoroughly vet the issues (God help me, I actually wrote that!). And yet, all the deliberation in the world is pointless unless we have the courage and determination to finally make our move and act.

At the heart of Judaism are *mitzvot*, sacred actions that make a difference in this world. Let each of us note that the spirit of Nachson ben Aminadav is a part of our Jewish legacy. Now, that is something to sing about!

Shabbat Shalom

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins