

“Women First”

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Torah Portion: Beshalach Exodus 13:17-17:16

“On a Promise”

In our Torah portion we hear the story of a difficult crossing, our Hebrew ancestors will head into the unknown, crossing through the Red Sea, going forward trusting a promise. A promise from God given to Moses and then given to the people: God says: “You will be free. You will walk through the Red Sea on dry land” (Ex. 14:16). But to trust a promise isn’t easy. Given all their years of oppression and trauma, all that they have seen and experienced at the hands of their Egyptian masters, who would trust? Who can they trust?

Mitzrayim is a Hebrew word meaning ancient Egypt. It can also be translated as narrow or constricted, a place of distress. It was the place where the Hebrews were enslaved, but it may also be where we find ourselves—in a difficult time in life, be it from the effects of anti-Semitism, sexism, systemic racism, political divisions, #me too and traumatic memories, any loss or illness – any narrow place where we have less agency than we need.

We know there will be less glorious moments ahead, the Hebrews will rebel and wander. But not today! We will witness their liberation; together they will make a difficult crossing through the Red Sea. And God alone will save them.

I have never seen a miracle as magnificent as the parting of the Red Sea. But water can hold powerful truths. It’s 2008, I’m standing high on a bluff in Scotland, on the Isle of Iona, looking out at the

Atlantic Ocean, when approximately 50 yards out, a long stretch of water tightened, tensed, constricted, and the waves rolling in stopped at that point. The tension became so intense that the water rippled and bounced, as if simmering. Then slowly over 5 minutes or so, the tension eased, dissipated, the water calm again. Standing longer I noticed the waves that were once flowing in had turned direction and were now flowing out.

I think what I saw was the turning of the tide, a natural occurrence. But, the meaning of what I saw is what is a wonder to me. An adventure was offered and I grabbed on. It was the beginning of my spiritual turning of the tide that set me off on a journey that eventually led me here, to this place and to becoming a Jew.

I can imagine the Hebrews constricted between two opposing forces, the Red Sea at their back and facing the advancing Egyptian military. Stuck on the seashore, tense and anxious, not yet aware that their tide is about to turn.

It can be said in such moments of tension that we find out who we really are, what we are made of. The Hebrews? Here, they are fearful and when they are afraid, they complain: "What is this you have done to us to bring us out of Egypt? You bring us out here to die? (Ex 14:11-12).

Moses, who can be quick to anger, and will be again, here, I think finds out who he really is: Seeing through their complaints he hears their fear, he steps up to the moment. He comforts: "Don't be afraid," He calms: "Be still," He shores them up: "Stand firm." And he gives them a promise: "As you see the Egyptians today, you shall not see them again for all time. The Lord shall do battle for you, the Lord shall deliver you, today" (Ex 14:13-14).

But to trust a promise isn't easy, even if it's a promise from God.

Have you ever done something scary, trusting only a promise? Back to the Atlantic Ocean, this time, Virginia Beach, I'm nine years old stuck on the beach with my dad. It was a windy day, high surf. I wanted more than anything to get out to where my siblings and cousins were – they had braved the waves, but I was afraid. I was stuck on the seashore torn between fear and anxiety and a longing for adventure. My dad's promise: "I'll hold your hand, we'll dive through the waves together" is what finally broke the stalemate and propelled me, diving in. But we were unlucky; we picked the wrong wave! We lost our grip and the wave caught us up and twisted us around and slammed me face first into the sand. Getting up, I was knocked down again. Crawling up the beach, I was embarrassed, crying. My dad having gotten slammed too, tried to console me. But I was so angry, and I refused to try again.

A promise made; a promise broken. But it happens, doesn't it? We promise what we *hope* will happen, and God promises too. And sometimes we disappoint each other, sometimes God disappoints. But for me, that doesn't mean that the love has to go away, that doesn't mean that the hope goes away, that doesn't mean that God goes away.

It has been said that what happened in the Red Sea is the 11th plague – as if the 10 previous plagues were not enough to convince the Hebrews that God desired their freedom?

And what about Pharaoh? He needs yet another sign, another plague to convince him that he is up against a power greater than his own? Wasn't the killing of the first born, *his* first born enough? Pharaoh is a slave to slavery. He is unable to release his need to possess and control. What fuels this is his jealousy and fear, fear of losing it all. He will sacrifice anything and everything, even children. It is devastating to watch.

Into this chasm of depravity, oppression, and suffering, God makes a promise to the Hebrews. "Today, you will be delivered" (Ex 14:13). In essence, saying: "Your tide will turn, I will hold your hand; you will be free." And God delivers! A way opens.

To say the sea parted or divided is not quite right, no, it is not merely divided; the Hebrew word that is used here is translated as split – a violent word, like when a sharpened ax splits wood. And the Sea splits. And the waters are a wall to them on their right and their left. And they step in, as a people, as a forming nation, together, each one's liberation bound up with the other.

For me, the splitting of the Sea is God's love revealed. A love so full of possibility and adventure, and violent in powerful persuasion for the Hebrew's benefit, and for Pharaoh's.

And Miriam chanted for them: "Sing to the Lord, for God has triumphed gloriously; horse and driver God has hurled into the sea." And they dance and it is glorious!

But here again is the tension! The Israelites rejoice in Egypt's defeat, "We win!" As a nation they are happy that evil has been punished, and rightly so. But winning isn't enough, is it? There must be options other than winners and losers, us and them, right and left, right and wrong, don't you think? We must create ways to bridge the gaps between us, gaps that will become chasms if left alone.

We *can* navigate those difficult crossings and narrow ways to find peace, but it means reaching across political and religious divides; changing direction because of the climate crisis; talking openly about gender issues, gun violence; or simply crossing the street to meet a neighbor who is different from us, and sometimes it means reaching across the family dinner table. But it isn't easy! And at times it can come at a great cost. But it is necessary if we are to work to bring God's promise of freedom, love and hope into our world.

If God is One as we say in the *sh'ma*, then God's love is One, and if all of us are interdependent, all of us are One in this complex dilemma of being human, then God's love is both particular and universal at the same time. God loves us, God loves all. That's a *big love*. A love most needed in these divisive, narrow and difficult times.

"M'chomocha" they sing in the Song of the Sea! *"M'chomocha"* we sing here in this sanctuary!

Who is like you, O God!

May our voices rise and fill this space, and may we love, and may that love emanate from this place to all people who are hungering for a promise, who need a hand to hold onto.

Shabbat Shalom!