

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Beshalach
January 30th, 2021 * 17th Shevat, 5781**

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Beshalach in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3262/jewish/Beshalach-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Soon after allowing the children of Israel to depart from Egypt, Pharaoh chases after them to force their return, and the Israelites find themselves trapped between Pharaoh's armies and the sea. G-d tells Moses to raise his staff over the water; the sea splits to allow the Israelites to pass through, and then closes over the pursuing Egyptians. Moses and the children of Israel sing a song of praise and gratitude to G-d.

In the desert the people suffer thirst and hunger, and repeatedly complain to Moses and Aaron. G-d miraculously sweetens the bitter waters of Marah, and later has Moses bring forth water from a rock by striking it with his staff. He causes manna to rain down from the heavens before dawn each morning, and quails to appear in the Israelite camp each evening.

The children of Israel are instructed to gather a double portion of manna on Friday, as none will descend on Shabbat, the divinely decreed day of rest. Some disobey and go to gather manna on the seventh day, but find nothing. Aaron preserves a small quantity of manna in a jar, as a testimony for future generations.

In Rephidim, the people are attacked by the Amalekites, who are defeated by Moses' prayers and an army raised by Joshua.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/626290/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah describes the fall of the Canaanite general Sisera and his armies, who were swept away by the Kishon River, and Deborah's ensuing song of thanks. This parallels this week's Torah portion which discusses the drowning of the Egyptian forces in the Red Sea and the subsequent songs led by Moses and Miriam.

Deborah the Prophetess was the leader and judge of the Israelites at a difficult time; the Israelites were being persecuted by King Jabin of Canaan and his general Sisera.

Deborah summoned Barak son of Abinoam and transmitted to him G-d's instruction: "Go and gather your men toward Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and Zebulun. And I shall draw to you, to the brook Kishon, Sisera, the chieftain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will give him into your hand." At Barak's request, Deborah accompanied him, and together they led the offensive.

Sisera was informed of the Israelites' mobilization and he gathered his forces and proceeded towards the Kishon River. Barak's army below and the heavens above waged battle against the Canaanites and utterly destroyed them. The river washed them all away; not one of the enemy survived.

The defeated general fled on foot and arrived at the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. She invited him in and offered to hide him. When he fell asleep, Jael took a tent-peg and knocked it through Sisera's temple.

The next chapter of the haftorah is the Song of Deborah, which describes the miraculous victory and thanks the One Above for His assistance.

Food For Thought

Looking Up (Beshallah 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l
<https://rabbisacks.org/beshallah-5781/>

The Israelites had crossed the Red Sea. The impossible had happened. The mightiest army in the ancient world – the Egyptians with their cutting-edge, horse-drawn chariots – had been defeated and drowned. The children of Israel were now free. But their relief was short-lived. Almost immediately they faced attack by the Amalekites, and they had to fight a battle, this time with no apparent miracles from God. They did so and won. This was a decisive turning point in history, not only for the Israelites but for Moses and his leadership of the people.

The contrast between before and after the Red Sea could not be more complete. Before, facing the approaching Egyptians, Moses said to the people: "Stand still and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today ... The Lord will fight for you; you need only be silent." (Ex. 14:13) In other words: do nothing. God will do it for you. And He did.

In the case of the Amalekites, however, Moses said to Joshua, "Choose men for us, and prepare for battle against Amalek." (Ex. 17:9) Joshua did so and the people waged war. This was the great transition: The Israelites moved from a situation in which the leader (with the help of God) did everything for the people, to one in which the leader empowered the people to act for themselves.

During the battle, the Torah focuses our attention on one detail. Moses climbs to the top of a hill overlooking the battlefield, with a staff in his hand:

As long as Moses held his hands up, the Israelites prevailed, but when he let his hands down, the Amalekites prevailed. When Moses' hands became weary, they took a stone and placed it under him, so that he would be able to sit on it. Aaron and Chur then held his hands, one on each side, and his hands remained steady until sunset. (Ex. 17:11-12)

What is going on here? The passage could be read in two ways: The staff in Moses' raised hand – the very staff which he used to perform mighty miracles in Egypt and at the sea – might be a sign that the Israelites' victory was a miraculous one. Alternatively, it might simply be a reminder to the Israelites that God was with them, giving them strength.

Very unusually – since the Mishnah in general is a book of law rather than biblical commentary – a Mishnah resolves the question:

Did the hands of Moses make or break [the course of the] war? Rather, the text implies that whenever the Israelites looked up and dedicated

their hearts to their Father in heaven, they prevailed, but otherwise they fell.[1]

The Mishnah is clear. Neither the staff nor Moses' upraised hands were performing a miracle. They were simply reminding the Israelites to look up to heaven and remember that God was with them. Their faith gave them the confidence and courage to win.

A fundamental principle of leadership is being taught here. A leader must empower the team. They cannot always do the work for the group; they must do it for themselves. But the leader must, at the same time, give them the absolute confidence that they can do it and succeed. The leader is responsible for their mood and morale. During battle, a captain must betray no sign of weakness, doubt or fear. That is not always easy, as we see in this week's episode. Moses' upraised hands "became weary." All leaders have their moments of exhaustion and at such times the leader needs support – even Moses needed the help of Aaron and Hur, who then helped him to maintain his position. In the end, though, his upraised hands were the sign the Israelites needed that God was giving them the strength to prevail, and they did.

In today's terminology, a leader needs emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman, best known for his work in this field, argues that one of the most important tasks of a leader is to shape and lift the mood of the team:

Great leaders move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When we try to explain why they are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: Great leadership works through the emotions.[2]

Groups have an emotional temperature. As individuals they can be happy or sad, agitated or calm, fearful or confident. But when they come together as a group, a process of attuning – "emotional contagion" – takes place, and they begin to share the same feeling. Scientists have shown experimentally how, within fifteen minutes of starting a conversation, two people begin to converge in the physiological markers of mood, such as pulse rate. "When three strangers sit facing each other in silence for a minute or two, the one who is most emotionally expressive transmits their mood to the other two – without speaking a single word." [3] The physiological basis of this process, known as mirroring, has been much studied in recent years, and observed even among primates. It is the basis of empathy, through which we enter into and share other people's feelings. This is the foundation for one of the most important roles of a leader. It is he or she who, more than others, determines the mood of the group. Goleman reports on several scientific studies showing how leaders play a key role in determining the group's shared emotions:

Leaders typically talked more than anyone else, and what they said was listened to more carefully ... But the impact on emotions goes beyond

what a leader says. In these studies, even when leaders were not talking, they were watched more carefully than anyone else in the group. When people raised a question for the group as a whole, they would keep their eyes on the leader to see his or her response. Indeed, group members generally see the leader's emotional reaction as the most valid response, and so model their own on it – particularly in an ambiguous situation, where various members react differently. In a sense, the leader sets the emotional standard.[4]

When it comes to leadership, even non-verbal cues are important. Leaders, at least in public, must project confidence even when they are inwardly full of doubts and hesitations. If they betray their private fears in word or gesture, they risk demoralising the group.

There is no more powerful example of this than the episode in which King David's son Absalom mounts a coup d'état against his father, proclaiming himself king in his place. David's troops put down the rebellion, in the course of which Absalom's hair gets tangled in a tree and he is stabbed to death by Joab, David's commander-in-chief.

When he hears this news, David is heartbroken. His son may have rebelled against him, but he is still his son and his death is devastating. David covers his face crying, "O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!" News of David's grief quickly spreads throughout the army, and they too – by emotional contagion – are overcome by mourning. Joab regards this as disastrous. The army have taken great risks to fight for David against his son. They cannot now lament their victory without creating confusion and fatefully undermining their morale:

Then Joab went into the house to the King and said, "Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines. You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead. Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the Lord that if you don't go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come on you from your youth till now." (2 Samuel 19:6-8)

King David does as Joab insists. He accepts that there is a time and place for grief, but not now, not here, and above all, not in public. Now is the time to thank the army for their courage in defence of the King.

A leader must sometimes silence their private emotions to protect the morale of those they lead. In the case of the battle against Amalek, the first battle the Israelites had to fight for themselves, Moses had a vital role to perform. He had to give the people confidence by getting them to look up.

In 1875 an amateur archaeologist, Marcelino de Sautuola, began excavating the ground in a cave in Altamira near the north coast of Spain. At first, he found little to interest him, but his curiosity was rekindled by a visit to the Paris exhibition of 1878 where a collection of Ice Age instruments and art objects was on display. Determined to see whether he could find equally ancient relics, he returned to the cave in 1879.

One day he took his nine-year-old daughter Maria with him. While he was searching through the rubble, she wandered deeper into the cave and to her amazement saw something on the wall above her. "Look, Papa, oxen," she said. They were, in fact, bison. She had made one of the great discoveries of prehistoric art of all time. The magnificent Altamira cave paintings, between 25,000 and 35,000 years old, were so unprecedented a finding that it took twenty-two years for their authenticity to be accepted. For four years Sautoula had been within a few feet of a monumental treasure, but he had missed it for one reason. He had forgotten to look up.

This is one of the enduring themes of Tanach: the importance of looking up. "Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things," says Isaiah (Is. 40:26). "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From there will my help come" said King David in Psalm 121. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Israelites that the Promised Land will not be like the flat plain of the Nile Delta where water is plentiful and in regular supply. It will be a land of hills and valleys, entirely dependent on unpredictable rain (Deut. 11:10-11). It will be a landscape that forces its inhabitants to look up. That is what Moses did for the people in their first battle. He taught them to look up.

No political, social or moral achievement is without formidable obstacles. There are vested interests to be confronted, attitudes to be changed, resistances to be overcome. The problems are immediate, the ultimate goal often frustratingly far away. Every collective undertaking is like leading a nation across the wilderness towards a destination that is always more distant than it seems when you look at the map.

Look down at the difficulties and you can give way to despair. The only way to sustain energies, individual or collective, is to turn our gaze up toward the far horizon of hope. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that his aim in philosophy was "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle". The fly is trapped in the bottle. It searches for a way out. Repeatedly it bangs its head against the glass until at last, exhausted, it dies. Yet the bottle has been open all the time. The one thing the fly forgets to do is look up. So, sometimes, do we.

It is the task of a leader to empower, but it is also their task to inspire. That is what Moses did when, at the top of a hill, in full sight of the people, he raised his hands and his staff to heaven. When they saw this, the people knew they could prevail. "'Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit,'" said the

Prophet.' (Zechariah 4:6) Jewish history is a sustained set of variations on this theme.

A small people that, in the face of difficulty, continues to look up will win great victories and achieve great things. [1] Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8. [2] Daniel Goleman, *Primal Leadership*, (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press), 2002, 3. [3] *Ibid.*, 7. [4] *Ibid.*, 8.

If you would like to read about Tu Bishvat from Rabbi Sacks' z"l teachings, here is a link for you.

<https://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Tu-BiShvat-5781.pdf>

[Speaking of Exodus: Beshallah by David G. Roskies](http://www.jtsa.edu/speaking-of-exodus-beshallah)
<http://www.jtsa.edu/speaking-of-exodus-beshallah>

My mother, Vilna-born, spoke a very idiomatic Yiddish. When she wanted to convey how delicious something was she would say: "*ketsa-PIKH-is bi-DVASH.*" Although I studied Sefer Shemot in seventh grade, in a Yiddish day school, it wasn't until my first year as a member of Havurat Shalom, where we read, translated, and subjected the weekly parashah to open debate, that I was able to identify the source of this delicious expression: "The house of Israel named it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and it tasted *like wafers in honey*" ([Exod. 16:31](#)).

As a native Yiddish-speaker, I already knew that when something required enormous effort, you would say "*es kumt on vi kries yam-suf*, it's as hard as splitting the Sea of Reeds," which proves Rabbi Ishmael's adage that the Torah speaks in the language of human discourse. It also proves how much Torah is embedded in Jewish speech. The Torah can be a Tree of Life not only by means of study, public performance, and personal praxis—by adhering to the myriad commandments stated in the Torah and derived from the Torah—but also through its living echoes. The Torah comes alive in and through live speech. In our people's liberation from Egypt came the fullness of speech. Where before there was a tiny cast of Biblical characters, all of whom belonged to a single family or interacted with them; and where before there was a mass of slaves whose anguish was so inchoate that only God could hear them, our liberation from Egypt released a cacophony of voices, audible voices orchestrated into three distinct movements. There was speech intent upon changing the direction of history; speech that gave voice to the people's pent-up fears and suppressed desires; and (praised be the Lord) speech that was joyous and spontaneous. The first voice recorded in this week's Torah reading is that of the chief actor in its drama of miraculous intervention, namely God, speaking about the circuitous

route that Israel is to follow:

Lest the people regret it, when they see war,

And return to Egypt! (Exod. 13:17, trans. here and below by Everett Fox, which best reflects the oral quality of the Torah)

For God's deeds to be glorified through Pharaoh and his army, there must be buy-in from the community of the Children of Israel, as full partners in the covenantal promise. This spells trouble ahead.

The exit strategy from Egypt also includes one last-minute item of business. Moses remembers the promise that Joseph had exacted from his offspring, to have his bones reinterred in the Promised Land—the very last words that were uttered in the Book of Genesis: “God will take account, yes, account of you—so bring my bones up from here with you” (Exod. 13:19; echoing Gen. 50:25).

Then there is Pharaoh, about to exit the stage of sacred history forever, his servants and his army, all of whom are given speaking roles that make the Exodus one of the most thrilling pieces of historical writing on record. The moment Pharaoh hears about the roundabout route that the Children of Israel have taken, he will say “They are confused in the land! The wilderness has closed them in!” (Exod. 14:3). These words God will place in Pharaoh's mouth even as God prepares to harden Pharaoh's heart one last time; not only *his* heart, but also that of his servants, who exclaim, “What is this that we have done, that we have sent free Israel from serving us?” (Exod. 14: 5). So the chase is on, and the Children of Israel suddenly find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

And the Children of Israel cried out to YHWH,

They said to Moshe:

Is it because there are no graves in Egypt

That you have taken us out to die in the wilderness?

What is it that you have done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?

Is this not the very word that we spoke to you in Egypt,

saying: Let us alone, that we may serve Egypt!

Indeed, better for us serving Egypt

Than our dying in the wilderness! (Exod. 14:10–12)

This is an incantation of fear, a litany that repeats the name of Egypt obsessively, backing-and-forthing between questions and cries. Apparently, this is not the first time that the people have pushed back, insisting on their right not to be liberated from serfdom, not to be set free, not to risk all for the sake of an uncertain future. Only this time their fears are addressed directly to God in the presence of Moses, who answers them on cue:

Do not be afraid!

Stand fast and see

YHWH's deliverance which He will work for you today,

For as you see Egypt today, you will never see it again for the ages!

YHWH will make war for you, and you—be still! (Exod. 14:13)

Now is surely not the time for debate, or for tolerating protest. “Why do you cry out to me?” God asks Moses in exasperation. “Speak to the Children of Israel, and let them march forward!” Speaking in martial voice, God issues orders to his chief of staff and lays out the battle plan for the ultimate vindication of God’s glory on the world stage.

Compared to the rich dialogue that leads up to the event and the outpouring of song that follows thereupon, the splitting of the sea and the drowning of Pharaoh’s chariots and their riders is over almost before it begins. The whole miracle is recounted in a mere five verses of prose (Exod. 14:27–31). What is uppermost in the Torah’s retelling is not the event, but the meaning of the event, and how better to elaborate upon its meanings than through the speech of those who witnessed it? And since the entire community of the Children of Israel are now involved, from the exalted leaders to the stragglers, men, women and children, their collective response is what matters most.

To be sure, it is Moses who initiates the Song at the Sea (Exod. 15:1–19), but it is the people who sing along responsively, perhaps because the lyrics are already familiar to them from the “national songbook,” (as James Kugel hypothesizes [*How to Read the Bible*, 231]), which Miriam the prophetess immediately picks up on, leading the women in song and dance with a timbrel in her hand—a fitting climax to an Exodus story in which midwives, sisters, wives, and even Pharaoh’s daughter played such a prominent role. (This joyous moment in Jewish women’s history, as reimagined by Charlotte von Rothschild in 1842, is captured on the cover of volume six of *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization*.) However, in the Torah’s retelling, which must have been oral to begin with, no sooner do they enter the wilderness than their “grumbling” begins, and in line with the storyteller’s Rule of Three, this grumbling is repeated three times. In the Fox translation, each of these three “grumbings,” centered on the chronic lack of food and water, is clearly marked. What’s at stake is the people’s ability to hearken and obey.

He said:

*If you will hearken, yes hearken to the voice of YHWH your God,
and what is right in his eyes will do,
giving-ear to his commandments
and keeping all his laws (Exod. 15: 26)*

For the word of God to live it must be both oral and aural. It is not enough for there to be an authoritative voice issuing instructions and making predictions. The voice that speaks must be received by those who will hearken and give-ear, not as slaves who are forced to obey the edicts of their taskmasters, but as liberated men and women who saw the miracles that God wrought and responded in kind.

Speech is the truest register of how things really are, and, truly, the wounds of servitude have yet to heal; the doubts and fears have yet to be worked through. There is still a long way to go. Meanwhile their grumbling is forever etched in collective memory.

And he called the name of the place: Massa/Testing, and Meriva/Quarrelling, Because of the quarrelling of the Children of Israel, And because of their testing of YHWH, saying: Is YHWH among us or not? (Exod. 17:7)

That is the question, then as now. What matters most is not whether there is enough water to drink or meat to cook—though this thing called *manna* tastes just like wafers in honey—but whether the struggle to be free is the will of God. Is there an Addressee for our complaints, a Someone to hear our cries, a Partner to our dialogue?

Stay tuned for the Torah readings to come. (*David G. Roskies is the Sol and Evelyn Henking Chair in Yiddish Literature and Culture and Professor of Jewish Literature at JTS*)

Do Not Rely On a Miracle (Beshallah 5781) by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

[https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatBeShallah5781.pdf?](https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatBeShallah5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&hsmi=108029125&hsenc=p2ANqtz-8Rexy3yu29r28dN58sd_uvMcs2vmiuHglZyi_a-6UfQNsYotYWMgLyFXycj_oHAtoscP3jGRe4LKpA3ZJI16XpJQD7Rg&utm_content=108029125&utm_source=hs_email)

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To all outward appearances, Parashat BeShallah is the archetype of the revelation of God to humanity through awe-inspiring miracles. The natural processes are so completely overturned that there is no room for doubt as to who is the Master of the Universe. At the same time, the parashah's counter-narrative teaches us that divine miracle-making does not overcome the flawed character of human nature. BeShallah starts with perhaps the most important miracle in the Bible—certainly the most celebrated—the splitting of the Reed Sea. This wondrous event enabled the Israelites to successfully complete their escape from Egypt. The stunning miracle obliterated Pharaoh's army and the residual Egyptian capacity to re-enslave the Hebrews. If the Exodus or liberation is the core experience of Jewish history and religion, then the splitting of the sea is its climactic moment, so overwhelming that the Israelites' anxieties and hesitations fall away. Now they know that "God is in His Heaven, all's right with the world." 2

The thrill and the exultant song celebrating the event are so inspiring that the Rabbis inserted it into the daily liturgy. Shirat haYam, the song of the sea, is recited just before the Barekhu call to prayer. The reference to the sea split is reprised just before the central Amidah (standing, silent) prayers. On weekdays, this is the liturgical point when the worshippers address God directly, asking for

their fundamental needs to be met and for the national redemption be realized. This event “confirms” that prayers for redemption are not said in vain. “That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians... Israel saw the great power the Lord had displayed against the Egyptians. The people feared the Lord. They believed in God and in His servant, Moses” (Exodus 14:31).

The counter-narrative begins immediately. From the Reed Sea, Moses marches the Israelites into the wilderness of Shur. For three days, they find no water sources until they arrive at Marah where the water is bitter and undrinkable. Thereupon the people turn on Moses. At God’s instruction, Moses makes a quick miracle. He takes a branch from a tree which he throws into the spring and the water turns potable (Exodus 15:24-26).

Less than three weeks later, the people arrive in the wilderness of Zin. They become hungry. Again they turn on Moses and Aaron. “If only we had died at the hand of the Lord in Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread.” Instead you two “have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger...” (Exodus 16:2-3). The Lord intervenes with a double barreled miracle. In the evening, flocks of quail cover the campground providing meat for the taking. In the morning, manna—bread from Heaven—floods the desert. People gather all the bread that they can eat. Henceforth, throughout the desert journey, this miracle food will descend daily except on Sabbath. 2

At the next campsite, Rephidim, there is no water. The people assail Moses. “Why did you take us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” At God’s instruction, Moses strikes a rock. Miraculously, water gushes forth for the whole assembly to drink. This fix works. The people drink their fill and are pacified.

This pattern persists to the very end of the desert trek. At Sinai, the people are overwhelmed with awe and fear of God. Yet when Moses delays coming down from the mountain, the people create a Golden Calf and dance around the idol chanting, “These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4). 4

On the way after Sinai, the people get bored with the manna. They revolt and complain that they miss all the delicious “cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic they enjoyed—at no charge!—in Egypt” (Numbers 11:5). God responds by giving them unlimited amounts of quail until they are sick of it (11:20).

The dead end of this roller coaster trek comes when the spies return from surveilling Canaan. 5 The people panic and they propose to return to Egypt at once. This mutiny is put down by another divine appearance and punishment. The pattern of miracles followed by relapses does not change until God acknowledges that the ex-slaves will never be able to function as free people. They must die in the desert. 6 Only the new generation, raised in freedom and

taught Torah by Moses and Aaron, is up to the challenge of winning a homeland and creating a free society.

As our parashah shows, even visible miracles have only a fleeting, surface effect. Why is this so? Because miracles are external experiences that do not change the underlying psychology of the people who witness them. When the miracle is unbelievably powerful—such as at the Red Sea—people are thunderstruck. They really do believe in God and Moses—momentarily. But three days later, the dazzle has faded. Then the slaves, unaccustomed to the hard work and responsibility taking of the life of freedom, grow tired. They are frightened that the dependable—if meager±slaves' provisions are not there.

Yielding to a miracle is like giving in to intimidation. Since the person did not really want to do it, the preferred alternative behavior reasserts itself as soon as one can get away with it. When the fear (or the thrill) instilled by a miracle fades, the ingrained tendencies or the habitual behavior patterns take over. The individuals go on **their** way, not the "coerced" divine way.

The deepest message in our parashah is in its opening declaration that Moses did not take the short route to Israel (i.e. the King's highway via the Land of the Philistines) because the Israelite slaves were not up to the challenges of fighting a war to win their freedom (Exodus 12:17). At that point, there were two choices before God. One, to remove human free will and turn the Israelites and ultimately all human beings into robots, perfectly fulfilling God's directions and not deterred by real-life considerations. Maimonides wrote that out of respect for human beings, God chooses the second option, to accept people as they are. Rather than changing human nature miraculously, the Torah accepts the realities of human nature and human limitations. **7** God enters with them into a covenantal relationship in which the Israelites are asked to raise the level of their moral performance above the society and culture around them, while moving toward an ultimately higher divine standard. **8**

The Bible's ultimate process is a movement away from visible miracles and public (heavenly) revelation toward a process of education and persuasion to get people to act properly. Increasingly, the historical outcomes are dependent on human behavior and the equilibrium of forces rather than on divine intervention. **9** By the time we reach the Talmud, the Rabbis tell us that the age of prophecy (direct messages from Heaven) and of visible miracles is over. Such miracles are too "coercive." God wants humans to use their reason and emotions and choose to do the right thing out of free will and choice. **10**

This shift in tactics explains the fate of idolatry among Jews. Idolatry persisted in the biblical age despite the Torah's full scale war on it. Even remarkable miracles such as Elijah's triumph over the prophets of Baal, won only temporary victories.

11 In the Rabbinic period when there were no such dramatic divine interventions, the Rabbis overcame idolatry completely by universally educating the people

with talmud Torah. They raised the people's level of cultural and philosophical sophistication and won the battle by transforming people's consciousness. If you will forgive the pun: Splitting the Reed Sea made a great splash, but immersion in the sea of talmudic learning transformed people for the better.

1 Talmud Pesachim 64b. The Talmud is referring to crowd control in the Holy Temple. I am generalizing the statement in this Dvar Torah to highlight the Divine policy shi from displaying miracles that dazzle the people into obedience, to education and psychological retraining to enlist people to freely follow. 2 Robert Browning, Pippa's Song, Act I. 3 No problem, a two day size portion descends every Friday. 4 See generally Exodus chapters 31-33. 5 See Numbers 13. 6 See chapter 14. 7 Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, Part 3, 32. 8 Entering the covenant and applying its standards to daily life and historical challenges is the substance of the next two parashiyot, Yitro and Mishpatim, and will be analyzed in the next two divrei Torah. 9 See the description of this development in Richard E. Friedman, The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery, (Little: Brown, 1995). 10 See Talmud Shabbat 88a, "Kafah aleihem har k'gigit" and Tosafot, s.v. moda'ah rabba l'oraita." 11 Compare Elijah's miraculous defeat of the Baal idolators (I Kings 18) with the later behavior of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel (chapters 20-21).

The Past is Hard To Leave Behind by Rabbi Mary Zamore

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/past-hard-leave-behind>

During the pandemic, many of us have turned to our comfort foods as we self-isolate. We bake bread and cookies, make mac and cheese, and cook vats of soup. We long for the past, a seemingly safer time, and seek it in a bite of food. The week's Torah portion, B'shalach, records the dramatic conclusion of the Exodus from Egypt. As the Israelites come to the Sea of Reeds, Moses follows God's directions, lifts his rod, and the waters split, allowing the Israelites to escape on dry land. The waters then close upon the pursuing Egyptians. The Torah explains,

“And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Eternal had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Eternal; they had faith in the Eternal and in God's servant Moses” (Ex. 14:31).

However, this faith is fragile, soon to be tested after the celebratory Song at the Sea, which provides the name for this Shabbat Shirah.

Three days later while traveling in the wilderness, the Israelites grumble to Moses that there is no potable water. The Eternal commands Moses to throw a piece of wood into the bitter water of Marah, making it drinkable (Ex. 15: 22-25). After passing through an oasis, the Israelites' contentment quickly dissipates again as they journey into the wilderness. One month after leaving Egypt, the Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron:

“If only we had died by the hand of the Eternal in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have

brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death" (Ex. 16:3).

Answering their cry of hunger, God tells Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion..." (Ex. 16:4).

As the text continues, this bread, manna, "like coriander seed, white, and it tasted like wafers in honey," (Ex. 16:31), arrives in the morning with its flesh counterpoint quail appearing at night. Providing needed sustenance, manna was also God's pedagogic tool, teaching the Israelites to rely on God. The Exodus did not merely release our ancient ancestors from servitude; this liberty is to be a purposeful freedom, wedding the Israelites to God, God's laws, and the Promised Land. The Israelites ate manna for the 40 years they wandered in the desert (Ex. 16:35), making them completely dependent on God, their Sustainer. Yet, the lessons embodied in the manna extended beyond mere nutrition or recognizing God as the source of that food. There were also rules dictating when and how one collected the manna: e.g., just one portion per person, no hoarding, and collect a double portion before Shabbat. God explains, "...I will test them to see whether they will follow my instructions or not" (Ex. 15:25).

Yet, the punishment for breaking the rules was not withdrawal of nourishment. Instead, the portions of manna miraculously adjusted to each person's needs, leftovers rotted, and those who tried to collect manna on Shabbat found none (Ex. 16:16-30). While the Israelites were slow to recognize God's steadfast sustaining power and were stubborn regarding following the rules, God provided the manna no matter the Israelites' reticence, while using behavioral techniques to reinforce obedience.

While not actually threatening their ability to survive, God made every meal a test of the Israelites' trust. As it is taught in Maggid of Mezrich's name, "The manna was a test of every individual to see whether or not they really feared God, because it is a greater test of reverence when one is not concerned over sustenance than if one is poor and believes in God" (Itturei Torah, Vol. III, 133). If the Israelites could master the rules with stomachs full and a stable food supply, their faith would be more secure.

Set in the second year of the Exodus, there is a parallel manna text in the book of Numbers, providing this vivid description:

"The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.... There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look at!'" (Number 11:4-6)

While some of the details are incongruent with the Exodus text, in Numbers, the Israelites again voice longing for the land of their enslavement. At a moment of frustration, they crave the five foods they associate with Egypt.

The Talmud and Rabbinic texts explore the taste, texture, and cooking methods of manna, including this comment on the five Egyptian comfort foods:

“Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi [were disputing the meaning], one said: They found in the manna the taste of every kind of food, but not the taste of these five; the other said: Of all kinds of food they felt both taste and substance, but of these the taste only without the substance.” (BT, Yoma 75a)

The rabbis imagine that manna changed to the dietary whims of the diner, replicating every food desired. Yet, God limited the menu to remove or restrict the experience of the five foods that connected them to Egypt. Manna provided this additional educational opportunity to retrain the Israelites, to teach them faith in God, to follow God’s laws, and to face toward Israel.

Next week’s Torah portion includes the giving of the Ten Commandments, starting many chapters of law giving and receiving. Additionally, as we, the Israelites’ descendants, know too well, there will be millennia of ordeals ahead.

Although it is natural when times are tough to look for comfort in what one already knows, even when it is a seat of servitude, the Israelites are inclined to look back on Egypt with false nostalgia. When discomforted, the Israelites must look to God, their present, and their future, and let go of Egypt.

That surrendering of the past is a continual process, starting with the first taste of manna. (*Rabbi Mary L. Zamore (she/her) is the executive director of the Women’s Rabbinic Network.*)

One more article that I want to share ...

[At 87, Activist Rabbi Arthur Waskow Is Still Protesting — And Still Getting Arrested](https://www.jta.org/2021/01/26/united-states/at-87-activist-rabbi-arthur-waskow-is-still-protesting-and-still-getting-arrested?utm_source=JTA_Maropost&utm_campaign=JTA_DB&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-26850-45437)
by Ben Harris

[https://www.jta.org/2021/01/26/united-states/at-87-activist-rabbi-arthur-waskow-is-still-protesting-and-still-getting-arrested?](https://www.jta.org/2021/01/26/united-states/at-87-activist-rabbi-arthur-waskow-is-still-protesting-and-still-getting-arrested?utm_source=JTA_Maropost&utm_campaign=JTA_DB&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-26850-45437)

[utm_source=JTA_Maropost&utm_campaign=JTA_DB&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-26850-45437](https://www.jta.org/2021/01/26/united-states/at-87-activist-rabbi-arthur-waskow-is-still-protesting-and-still-getting-arrested?utm_source=JTA_Maropost&utm_campaign=JTA_DB&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-26850-45437)

On the day after the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Rabbi Arthur Waskow gingerly mounted a small wooden stage at Philadelphia’s Independence Mall to address dozens of activists concerned that Donald Trump was trying to halt the counting of legally cast ballots.

At 87, the activist rabbi, who has been at the forefront of Jewish social justice struggles for more than a half-century, is in an elevated risk category for the

coronavirus, and he wore a mask and kept his distance as he waited his turn to address the crowd.

When he did, he invoked Moses gathering the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai and the Jewish tradition which says that not only were the Israelites then alive present to receive the Torah, but all subsequent generations yet to be born were there as well.

“What he was saying was, this moment is so important that it will affect the future forever,” Waskow recalled later. “And he was right about Sinai — not only for the Jews, but for Christianity, for Islam and for people who now would say they were secular. And I think this election was core for the United States of America and even for the planet. It will affect the future for hundreds, maybe thousands of years.”

For months as the pandemic raged, Waskow had barely left his home in Philadelphia’s Mount Airy neighborhood — save for doctor’s appointments and demonstrations. And it’s not hard to see why Waskow considers the two on fairly equal footing when it comes to his overall well-being.

Not since Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King in Selma in 1965 has an American rabbi been as indelibly associated with the fight for justice as Waskow. Since his creation in 1969 of the “Freedom Seder,” a version of the Passover Haggadah that introduced contemporary liberation struggles into the ancient story of the Israelite escape from Egyptian bondage, Waskow has been among the leading voices bringing Jewish spiritual wisdom to bear on the progressive political agenda. And neither age nor a global pandemic has diminished his ardor for the fight.

In September, Waskow published “Dancing in God’s Earthquake,” the latest in a catalog of more than two dozen books, several of which have become Jewish classics. The new work runs through the litany of issues that have animated Waskow for decades — feminism, economic injustice and, most pressingly of late, climate change — all refracted through the lens of Waskow’s innovative readings of Jewish text and tradition. Two other books are in the works, even as Waskow keeps up a years-long commentary on the issues of the day delivered by email, often at a rate of several communications per week.

Nor has advancing age led Waskow to grow averse to getting himself arrested, which he has done more than two dozen times — he’s lost the exact count — since his first time while protesting a segregated amusement park in his hometown of Baltimore in the 1960s. In 2019, Waskow was arrested outside an Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in Philadelphia while protesting the Trump administration’s treatment of migrant women. He had been arrested in the same location, for the same reason, the previous summer.

Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, a fellow Philadelphia activist rabbi and the founder of the social justice training program at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College,

recalled an incident a decade ago when he and Waskow were protesting the Keystone pipeline at the federal building in Philadelphia. Liebling was arrested after jumping over a barricade in an effort to block the doors, but Waskow, then in his late 70s, couldn't make it over.

"Arthur laid down on the floor and tried to wriggle under the barricade to block the door," Liebling said. "He wasn't going to be stopped."

Waskow was destined for activism from an early age. Both his parents were politically engaged — his father was a labor organizer who had headed the Baltimore teachers union and his mother registered Black voters in the Maryland city's neighborhood. Both were active with Americans for Democratic Action. His grandfather was a precinct organizer for Eugene Debs, the legendary unionist who ran for president five times as a socialist between 1900 and 1920.

"That was in my bloodstream," Waskow said.

After earning a doctorate in history from the University of Wisconsin, Waskow went to work on disarmament and civil rights for Robert Kastenmeier, an influential longtime member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Later he became a fellow at the progressive think tank the Institute for Policy Studies. In 1970, he testified for the defense at the trial of the Chicago 7.

The trial was the first time that Waskow had worn a yarmulke in a nonreligious setting — the judge tried to have him remove it, but relented at the prosecutor's urging. At the time, Waskow "was still wrestling with what this weird and powerful 'Jewish thing' meant in my life," as he would write later. Though he had always observed Passover, Judaism had failed to seriously capture his attention until well into adulthood.

That changed on an April evening in 1968 as Waskow headed home to prepare for the Passover Seder. Federal troops were out in force to quell riots sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. just days before, and seeing a machine gun pointed at his block in the Adams Morgan section of Washington, D.C., Waskow had an intuition that it was Pharaoh's army occupying his neighborhood.

That insight inspired Waskow to write the "Freedom Seder," which referred to King and Mahatma Gandhi as "prophets" and introduced quotes from a range of modern thinkers alongside the traditional text, including Thomas Jefferson, Nat Turner and Eldridge Cleaver. The Orthodox Rabbinical Alliance of America denounced the work as "most offensive" for making radical changes to the Haggadah without rabbinic authority and quoting alleged anti-Semites.

"There's no question, it was chutzpadik," Waskow said, using a Yiddish expression that roughly means audacious. "I think it turned out to be holy chutzpah."

Waskow had no real standing at the time to rewrite a classic of the Jewish canon, but he nevertheless found a ready audience. The following year, on the anniversary of King's death, the Haggadah was used as a guide for a Seder in the

basement of a Black church in Washington. Hundreds were in attendance and the event was broadcast live on the radio.

The "Freedom Seder" would be the first of many works Waskow would pen that reimagined Jewish tradition to speak more directly to contemporary concerns, initiating a movement that many Jews now take for granted. Passover Seders integrating the oppression of Uyghurs in China or the genocide in Darfur hardly raise eyebrows today. Nor is it uncommon to see rabbis in prayer shawls blowing shofars and being arrested at demonstrations. But in 1968, the idea that Passover had something to say about the American political situation was a revelation. Waskow continued in this vein with his 1982 work "Seasons of Our Joy," a New Age guide to the Jewish holidays (New Age became "modern" in subsequent editions). Written in the DIY spirit of "The Jewish Catalog," the book reintroduced the earth-based, agricultural roots of the Jewish holidays decades before Jewish farmers and environmental activists would make such linkages seem obvious. In 1982, when hundreds of Palestinians were massacred by Israel-aligned Christian Phalangists at Sabra and Shatila, Waskow was at a retreat center near Baltimore for Rosh Hashanah. Waskow took the front-page article on the killings from the Philadelphia Inquirer and chanted it as the haftarah at the morning service.

The following year, Waskow founded the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, initially to address the threat of nuclear weapons through a Jewish lens. Over time, the organization came to focus on other concerns, including Middle East peace, interfaith relations and climate change.

"He was almost a lone voice for a long time, really trying to bring Jewish values to the political situation," Liebling said. "Heschel certainly had done this, and there were two or three other rabbis who did that well — Everett Gendler, some more. But they weren't as radical as Arthur."

Being a radical is something of a badge of honor for Waskow, who still gets a childlike gleam in his eye describing himself as a revolutionary. His decision to seek rabbinic ordination in 1995, when he was 62 and already teaching at the Reconstructionist seminary, was born of his recognition that the rabbinate was a revolutionary institution, a linchpin of the transformation of ancient Judaism from a faith based on temple rites to one of learning and prayer.

Judging by appearances, Waskow seems uniquely suited to the role of religious revolutionary. A burly man with a wispy white beard and an instinct for impassioned oratory, Waskow brings to mind the biblical prophets. A book he authored with his formerly estranged brother, Howard, relates how Arthur inspired fear as a younger man. And though his gait has slowed and he relies on a cane for balance, Waskow remains physically imposing. Photos of him at demonstrations in recent years show his capacity for summoning righteous fury in the face of injustice remains largely undiminished.

“People have said that I have softened him,” said Rabbi Phyllis Berman, Waskow’s wife of 34 years. “And I think that I have. And he has also toughened me. So both things are true. He said to me very recently, in a very precious exchange, that I don’t take any shit from him anymore. And I think I probably did for a long time. He is a frightening man when he’s angry. But I’ve learned to stand in the face of it in a much, much more profound way.”

Berman and Waskow met at a conference in 1982, some months after she read “Seasons of Our Joy” and sent Waskow a love letter, which he never answered. (It had been lost in the mail.) Berman confronted Waskow over the lapse and the two struck up a friendship. Four years later they were married and each took on a new middle name — Ocean — inspired by their shared love of the sea.

Oceans, or the rising levels thereof, are much on Waskow’s mind these days as he pours his energies into fighting climate change. Waskow devotes the first chapter of “Dancing in God’s Earthquake” to retelling the Garden of Eden story through an ecological lens before moving on to a range of suggested responses, from solar co-ops to increased carpooling to avoiding industrial meat.

In December, he published an article in Tikkun pushing his co-op idea, an initiative that Waskow believes not only can accelerate the switch to renewable energy sources but also, by emphasizing local cooperation, avoid the risk that a massive Washington environmental initiative would fall prey to America’s cultural divide. The noted environmental activist Bill McKibben gave it a shoutout in his New Yorker column.

But as urgent as Waskow believes climate change to be, he hopes his legacy will be a deeper shift in Jewish theology — and by extension in the Jewish psyche. Waskow believes that modernity has presented Judaism with a challenge on par with the one faced by the ancient rabbis following the destruction of the Temple. That challenge, reflected in the cascading crises now facing humanity, will require a profound transformation in religious thought — from one centered on serving God as a ruler or king to a more ecological worldview that sees all of creation as part of an interbreathing whole.

“Modernity did to us what Rome, and before Rome Egypt and Babylon, did,” Waskow said. “And the question is now, has modernity gotten so powerful, and so uncaring, and so uncontrollable, it’s going to wreck the whole joint before we can create an effective response. Or can we create an effective response? And that’s what I’ve been trying to do.”

Yahrtzeits

Elaine Klughaupt remembers Stan’s father Charles Klughaupt (Elchonon) Thursday February 4th (Shevat 22).

