

Parashat Beshallakh 5781

This Shabbat's Parashah, Beshallakh has two major scenes in it, connected with each other. First is the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, *Yam Suf* (in Hebrew) followed immediately by the Song of the Sea (*Shirat HaYam* in Hebrew). Another intrinsic element to all of this is that these events are the beginning of our becoming a people, the people of Israel. There are different names for the Jewish people in the Bible – *B'nei Yisrael* (literally the children of Israel) or *Am Yisrael* (the people of Israel). We have largely stuck to our identity as a people for most of our history. Is that because we were forced to, i.e. because the host countries in which we have lived as a minority have usually not allowed us to assimilate, or is it because we have positively identified as Jews for all that time? I would guess that it is a combination of both of those factors.

The Jewish people that identify most strongly with the Jewish religion tend to not want to assimilate – so it doesn't matter whether the host country is accepting or not. The Jews who identify most strongly with the Jewish people, but not necessarily with the Jewish religion, are more likely to have moved to Israel where you can live a full Jewish life without feeling the necessity to practice Judaism formally. Of course, so much of Judaism is part of the culture of Israel – the holidays are national holidays as well as religious holidays, the foods are Jewish foods whether they are associated with particular times of year or not. The uncertain part of the overall outlook for the Jewish people in the United States is those Jews who are not so devoted to the Jewish religion and traditions as to not want to assimilate and those who do not strongly identify with Jewish peoplehood as to want to preserve their Jewish identity rather than try to assimilate.

The history of the Jewish people in the United States has been the most benevolent in all of our diaspora existence so far. There were peak times in other host nations and Jewish life thrived in many places (and probably in most places) where we were at least for periods of time. Though the holocaust decimated the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe and Germany, nevertheless before that there were great centers of Jewish learning, Torah, and Jewish culture in all those countries. The Arab nations tended to be less anti-Semitic than the Christian countries until the re-establishment of the State of Israel. One more relevant fact for the mix is that a large proportion of the Jews of Germany in the 1920s and 30s were quite assimilated and identified themselves at least as much as Germans as they identified themselves as Jews. Again there, we

found the same dichotomy of Jews who identified so strongly with Judaism that they had no desire to assimilate and those that identified so strongly with the Jewish people as a people that they were part of the Zionist movement to return to our ancient homeland.

I was read a sermon by Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove from Manhattan in which he mentions the State of the Union address given in January 1941 by FDR in which FDR speaks of the four freedoms that are essential for a good society and strong moral order. The four freedoms he mentioned were Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion, Freedom from want and Freedom from fear. You can see how fundamental those freedoms are to ideals of life here in the United States. You can also see that those freedoms are challenged in some periods of American history more than others and not necessarily guaranteed or given for some people as much as for others. There are people who are very poor in this country who certainly don't have freedom from want. There are people who suffer from bigotry who are not free from fear. Freedom of speech has been threatened for the last number of years by the attacks on the press and journalism. There's more anti-Semitism that's openly expressed these days than there has been in a very long time here. But anti-Semitism cannot be the major force that motivates people to live Jewish lives. If it is, as soon as it diminishes, assuming that it will, people will be quick to abandon their Jewishly identified lives and return to trying to assimilate. The key really seems to be for non-Orthodox Jews, trying to balance a commitment to Jewish life without turning one's back on contemporary life. Unfortunately, many people look at contemporary life and see it as not all that appealing and look to various forms of fundamentalism to find meaning. Conservative Judaism has always been the movement that attempts to find a balance between the contemporary world and our traditions. In the last thirty years Conservative Judaism has gone from being the dominant Jewish denomination in the U.S. to being the fastest shrinking – losing people to both the more fundamentalist Orthodox Jews who often turn their back on the contemporary world and the Reform movement which turns away more from our traditions. I don't have a quick fix response to all of this, but I do think that on the Shabbat in which we read the Parasha that marks the true beginning of Jewish peoplehood, it's relevant to keep these issues in our awareness.

It's worth noting that throughout our history in the diaspora, the love for the land of Israel and the hope to return to our ancient homeland was always central to our identity. We find that desire expressed through prayers and elsewhere. We find it near the end of the Passover seder where we say, "Next Year in Jerusalem" (*Lashana haba'a biYerushalayim*). When we say these

words, they are not meant to imply that we hope to take a trip next year to Jerusalem around Passover time. They express the longing to return permanently to our homeland. They express a perspective that our lives in the diaspora are temporary, even if “temporary” means hundreds, or even thousands, of years. Our history shows that once the Zionist movement began and people were actually returning to the land of Israel, more Jews went to the United States from Poland and Russia than went to *eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel). True, life in those early days of Zionism was much more difficult in *eretz Yisrael* than in the United States and it required a certain degree of idealism to make that commitment. However, even though far more Jews emigrated to the United States than made *Aliyah* to *eretz Yisrael*, nevertheless, today, the Jewish population in Israel is the largest in the world – significantly larger than in the United States due to the large degree of assimilation here. What the future holds for us here (or anywhere for that matter) is unclear. Recognizing the reality of what Jewish life is like in the United States, the most that we can do is try to remain committed to building and maintaining as vibrant a Jewish culture here as we can.

Shabbat Shalom