

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Matot and Masay

I attended a quality school district and graduated high school with honors. I continued my education and graduated from Tulane University and then the University of Arkansas School of Law. I practiced law for six plus years. I then went to rabbinical school, where I learned how little I ever knew about my native language: the language my educational resume declared me proficient. I learned more about English grammar studying Hebrew, than I ever learned studying English. And, for all of you nodding your head, silently affirming that I still am not a master of the language, I can honestly admit to “just not getting it sometimes.” So, it was with greater shock that it is a grammatical ambiguity in this week’s Hebrew Torah text that caught my eye. The text recounts the story of Israel’s 42 stops on its journey across the wilderness.

Most English translations take Numbers 33:1 and see the verbal form of “to go out” as a past tense accomplished fact: “*yatzoo* -- they went.” If the word “*yatzoo*” stood alone, that might be correct, but it is preceded by the word “*asher*.” The effect of the construct is more transitive and would better be rendered more as an ongoing present tense – a gerund (impressed?), “going.” So, literally, Israel experiences 42 stops, “Going out of Egypt.” What struck me as being odd was that they only left Egypt ... once. They may have stopped forty two times, but only the first was “leaving” Egypt. As worded, it is as if they left Egypt 42 times. In a modern day storyline, we see the same conundrum in the movie “Groundhog Day.” Bill Murray plays a character that relives one day countless times. Eventually he figures out that he needs to learn from the mistakes of the ... previous living of that day. Over the course of time, he goes from being an opportunistic chauvinistic pig into a man filled with empathy and compassion.

There is a Khasidic understanding of this text as a metaphor. How many times do we find ourselves walking through the same acts or thoughts time after time? The late comedian Richard Pryor made a poignant joke out of drug addiction. He told of a friend who he felt was addicted to cocaine. His friend responded, “I am not an addict, I have been using it for 17 years and can quit any time I want in fact, each time I finish taking it, I quit until I want it again.” We are constantly starting diets, recovery systems, money making opportunities, etc over and over again. In Hebrew, the word *Mitzrayim* (Egypt) relates to the word *Meitzorim* (boundaries). Throughout our tradition, the metaphor of Egypt reminds us of limitations, of bondage, of the shackles that hold us fast to the most difficult of struggles. Each year, as we celebrate Passover, we affirm that we were slaves in the land of Egypt. We continue to fight to free ourselves from the boundaries that keep us from health and peace. Every year, we struggle to free ourselves from Egypt. Sometimes, though, I fear that we take the story too literally and truly feel vindicated at the end of the *seder*. Having made it through the book, we have dealt our blow to oppression. For me, the work only begins when the book closes. The final words of the *seder*, “Next year in Jerusalem,” refer not to geography, but to the work we have to do to find ourselves with a greater sense of peace the next time we gather.

“Egypt” is all of the things that hold us back. The 42 stops along the way are the obstacles that we encounter each time we commit to making “this time” the time that we really leave them behind. We know that success and failure are separated by only one more attempt, but too often the sheer numbers of unsuccessful journeys into healing discourage us and hold us back. But, just as the *seder* ends with the hopeful command that next year could be “it,” the storyline that sees us leaving Egypt 42 times ends with our entry into Israel, the “Promised land.” Redemption is ours, if we can just be persistent enough to keep trying. We do the same *seder* over and over again, just as Bill Murray lived the same day over and over again. Our hope has to be that each time we gather, we do not feel destined to experience the

same result we did the year before. It is our obligation to take each experience, learn from it, and move forward toward overcoming the next hurdle along the way. And, just as in the movie where the main character moves further on the path from boorishness towards graciousness with each day of experience, so too each stop along our journey through the wilderness brings us further from Egypt and closer to the land of opportunity. Where we commit to learning and growing, there are no insurmountable obstacles on the path towards redemption. Even the pitfalls can teach us tremendous lessons that can change our world for the better. It is for this reason that our tradition teaches that whatever the destination, we never really arrive. We are always in a state of becoming, never finishing the process of growth, never able to get stuck in the holes that get in our way. May we see each other on the journey, however many times we meet again at the starting line, and may we help each other along the way. Shabbat Shalom.