

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Bechallakh

When people ask me about the magic of the Bible, I have no problem responding that it must be there. No, I do not think that God wrote it and filed it with the U.S. Patent office and sold Moses licensing rights for publication. I do not believe that it is a text written by one hand and published at one time. It is a collection of stories. Some of these stories may be rooted in history, some in folklore ... but they span a great deal of time and come from a great many hands. Of this phenomenon, I am faithfully sure. So, where is the magic? Well, different religious traditions look to the book, all with the same integrity, and all walk away with radically different thoughts. Interestingly (at least to me), each tradition claims to expound the unchangeable irrefutable teaching from God. From denomination to denomination, each reads something different into and out of the text.

One of the linguistically oldest pieces of the Bible appears as part of this week's text. We call this passage, "The Song of the Sea." Israel is freed from Egypt, but Pharaoh has a change of heart (again), and decides to come after Moses and the people leaving his servitude. The poetry of this piece is magnificent, but leading up to it, as if choreographed on a Hollywood movie set, the people are upset, Moses Responds and then bursts into song. The penultimate lines to this song tell the story of Israel's fear and Moses' response. At one point he tells the people "Do not fear. Stand still, and see the salvation of God ... as you see Egypt today, you will see them never more." (Exodus 14:13) Please remember that the Torah is written without vowels, and that will allow some play here, but having read commentary from both Jewish and Christian sources, one has to scratch the head and query whether or not we are reading the same book.

Some theologies argue that this is a command from Moses. Israel is to stand and watch unafraid. It takes a lot of faith to stand, not run, to watch, and not fear. The lesson in many sermons I have read that root in this text deal with one's ability to have enough faith to trust that God will provide. One must note, however, that Dr. King argued that this was not religion. Rather, it was superstition. A very different school of thought argues that Moses was simply trying to do crowd control. According to the text and other interpretations, it is not Moses who parts the waters, standing on a rock screaming at God. Moses wasn't getting the job done, just standing still. The text argues that while he was praying for God to help, God responded, "Why are you crying to me for help? Lift up your rod and do something!" Rather, according to tradition, it is a relatively unknown character in the story who dives into the water, demonstrating absolute faith that where we act, miracles occur. For this guy, Nachshon, standing still and watching would bring nothing but the slaughter, as we read in the Mishnah, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what good am I? If not now, when?" Same story, salvation is the end result of both, yet, two very different takes on what it means to have faith.

For me, the value of this lesson is found in the verse's final words, "As you see Egypt today, you will see them never more." For whom is this salvation? Certainly, if the Egyptian army slaughters Israel at the shore, Moses is right, they will never see Egypt (or any place else) again. If we fail to survive at any point along the way, we will never see Egypt, again. We are, however, only a third of the way through the book. Knowing that, as Paul Harvey would say, there is, "the rest of the story," I presume from the beginning that Israel will get through this. Not only have we seen Egypt lots of times through the bible

and history, but the Alexandrian Jewish community was, at one point through the late Second Temple period (and during the period the book was canonized), the largest Jewish community that existed. Maybe the sages meant that they would never see the Egyptian army advancing on us again. We have seen that, as well. Perhaps Egypt is simply a metaphor for all aggressors, and that the lesson of the story is that it takes faith to overcome the onslaught. My struggle, though, is that not only do we see two very different understandings of faith outlined in the text, but we also know that there are many who claim to have faith, who use it to impose their will on all else. It was, after all, Pharaoh, the Incarnate God of Egypt who led the charge first to enslave Israel, and then to try and slaughter it at the shore, for its insolence in leaving. Just yesterday, a man proudly plead guilty for gunning down a physician who performed abortions, arguing to the court, "Someone had to stop him." The followers of Pharaoh also claimed to be faithful.

Maybe the sages give us this story simply to demonstrate that faith can be as dangerous as it can be healing. Herein, we have the three paradigms of faith in this world: the one that lets God do everything, the one that stands up to be counted, and the one that imposes their own view of God on everyone else. This paradigm repeats throughout history, and certainly exists in our world today. Which is to be our paradigm? Today, we are free, yet there are threats to our freedoms on assault daily. I submit that where we do nothing but pray, those who think they own God will continue to advance. Where we dive in, the waters part and our freedom remains secure. Our text demands, "Therefore choose life." Join me on the path through the water. Shabbat Shalom.