

accomplish this not by how loudly we sing or shout but how effectively we carry out God's teachings.

Much of the point of the Exodus—from God's point of view as puzzled out by the Torah—seems to be “that Egypt will come to know that I am YHWH.” The problem, of course, is that the Egyptians never learn. Nor do the Israelites, much of the time. God's plan, at least as far as we can understand it, seems as imperfect as the human beings needed to carry it out. This week's portion ends with a passage of complexity equal to the reality we know from experience. The Israelites are in battle now. They are doing the fighting and dying—though God mysteriously assists. When Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed. When he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. His hand grew heavy: so he sat on a rock while Aaron and Hur supported his hands until the sun set—and Israel was victorious.

The miracle, if such it was, is mysterious. The metaphor is clear. At the Red Sea, God had fought Israel's battles. Now Israel fights God's. And—since Amalek symbolizes evil in the world—“YHWH will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages.”

What could that mean? Does Amalek represent a demonic power equal to God's? If God wants that power defeated, why not hold up the hands of the forces of good? Isn't God up to the task? You cannot stop yourself from asking such questions. The Torah certainly asks them again and again. But you won't answer them—not with words, anyway. The answer is covenant. Do good; one day, redemption will come. “I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” Life will be so good then, the world so just and compassionate, that even the memory of a thing like Amalek will vanish.

In the meantime, there is suffering in the world, made worse by human injustice and ameliorated by human compassion. The need for covenant is clear. Beshallah has prepared us to hear and accept it with greater understanding.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (ז"ל) and Harold (ז"ל) Hassenfeld. A version of this commentary was first published in 2010.

This week's **דבר אחר** | *A Different Perspective* is an audio recording by the students of the H. L. Miller Cantorial School. Listen to them sing the opening verses of the Song at the Sea by visiting learn.jtsa.edu.

learn.jtsa.edu

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email, visit jtsa.edu/subscribe



TORAH FROM JTS

JTS
Community Learning

Parashat Beshallah 5775

פרשת בשלח תשע"ה



Innovation and Tradition

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

Rabbi David Hartman, in his book *A Heart of Many Rooms*, cites a midrash that draws a clear and (to my mind) profound connection between a major episode in this week's Torah portion and the Revelation at Sinai that follows next week.

Said R. Jose bar R. Hanina, “The Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to his/her particular capacity. . . Now if each and every person was enabled to taste the manna according to his/her particular capacity, how much more and more was each and every person enabled according to his/her particular capacity to hear the Divine Word.”

I'd like to suggest that from the first words of this week's portion to the last, we find lessons of direct relevance to issues of revelation and commandment, faith and covenant that have been on the minds of thoughtful Jews for centuries and remain matters of concern today.

Take the very beginning of the parashah. God did not lead the Israelites out of Egypt on the Way of the Land of the Philistines, though it was close by, lest the people have a change of heart (i.e., lose courage) at the sight of war and return to Egypt. This God, now as always, *accommodates* human needs, perceptions, and realities—even fears. The direct relation between divine strategy and human foibles is underlined by the similar sound of the two key words in the passage: God *naham* (led them) lest Israel *yinahem* (regret, change heart [Gen. 13:17]).

Maimonides and other Jewish philosophers had much to say about the notion of accommodation. It would be hard to think of a concept more crucial to understanding covenant and revelation. The very language of Torah accommodates human understanding—and the limits of such understanding—when it employs human metaphors in describing God: arms, fingers, hands—and voice. The Torah does the same when it tells vivid stories that communicate complex notions effectively to a diverse audience (the stories we read this week are a case in point). It struggles with the fact that both our reason and our imagination are bounded (and distorted) by extrapolation from human experience. God by definition surpasses

experience and extrapolation alike. Heschel taught that the most basic words of all to the Torah are perhaps the most difficult: “God said” and “The Lord spoke.” What could these words possibly mean?

Hence the Rabbis’ frequent resort to the explanatory principle, “Torah is written in human language.” Its words cannot capture the reality to which they point. The Torah cannot even point directly at the divine object of its thought much of the time. It must proceed in roundabout ways, just like the Israelites leaving Egypt.

This makes covenant, a divine-human partnership for the betterment of God’s world, *our* world, both necessary and difficult. The Torah describes but cannot make sense of the fact that God has given less-than-perfect human beings a degree of freedom and control over history and even over nature. We are not automatons. God is not a puppeteer. The Torah insists that God is involved in history—never more so than at the Exodus described in Beshallah—but that this involvement remains (at least from our point of view, which is the point of view from which the Torah sees things) episodic, unpredictable, incomplete. God requires human beings, Israelites in this paradigmatic case, in all our imperfection, and with all our capacities, to make the world more just and compassionate. The required combination of divine and human action and initiative is demonstrated in our parashah time after time.

For example: God worries that the Israelites will panic when they see war and return to Egypt. Yet we learn in the very next verse that the Israelites left Egypt “armed.” They will of course panic any number of times in this parashah, and those that follow—not least because the way on which God leads the Israelites places them directly in the line of battle. At the Red Sea, God fights their battles for them. In another crucial pun, Moses tells them not to fear (*al tira’u*) but instead stand fast and see (*re’u*). A famous midrash noted that the salvation at the sea required the Israelites to walk into its giant billowing waves. Put another way: God leads with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, but the Israelites must do the walking—and they need human guides to show the exact way through the wilderness, human warriors to protect them as they go, human wisdom to govern them, human judges to discern right from wrong. Cloud and fire are visible but ambiguous, necessary but not sufficient. God’s direction is like that.

That is why *tradition* is so crucial to this path: the fact that each generation need not invent things for itself, but can carry forward a project it inherits. Each must innovate in order to carry the project forward—but it must also remain loyal to that project rather than substitute others that are totally of its own devising. The combination of creativity and obligation in each generation’s relation to the past directly parallels the combination of individual freedom and collective obligation built into the covenant itself. Both pairs are necessary to covenant. Hartman, following R. Jose, found

this teaching in the story of the manna. I think the Torah teaches it beautifully in two other passages in Beshallah as well.

The first—my personal favorite in the parashah—comes at the outset. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him when the Israelites left Egypt, because Joseph had sworn to the Israelites (way back when), saying, “God will surely take notice of you (i.e., recall your plight); then you shall carry up my bones from here with you.” We read that injunction several weeks back, at the close of the book of Genesis. Now, at the very moment of Exodus, the Israelites not only see God’s promise to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob fulfilled, but get to *join* in such fulfillment of promises across the generations—to experience it from the inside, we might say, as actor and not just recipient-by doing what their ancestors had promised that they, the ancestors’ descendants, would do. The act is all the more powerful because it concerns burial: the deed that none of us can perform on our own behalf and must rely on others (children and community) to do for us.

Covenant requires human beings who have earned the right to make promises by keeping them. It requires individuals faithful to the traditions of their communities—and able to keep faith with those traditions by carrying them forward, picking them up and moving them. It requires individuals who act not only out of present needs or visions but in relation to a past and future.

The other locus of this lesson about tradition in our parashah is the declaration at the start of the Song at the Sea: “This is my God and I will glorify Him, my father’s God and I will exult Him.” Our connection with God is shaped and nurtured by loving bonds to our parents. The rabbis long ago made the point that though God is of course the same in every generation, the meaning of God to my parents, the conceptions they held of God, will not be the same as mine. How much more is this the case when the gap between generations stretches over millennia? The Mekhilta found a variety of lessons in the Torah’s words about parents and children glorifying God, all of them relevant to the covenant about to be made at Sinai.

R. Ishmael says: “And is it possible for a person of flesh and blood to add glory to the Creator? It simply means: I shall be beautiful before God in observing the commandments.” We exalt God by the quality of our deeds.

Abba Saul says: “O be like God! Just as God is gracious and merciful, so be thou also gracious and merciful.” This is the heart of the divine-human partnership. We raise God higher, as it were, by doing God’s will in the world.

R. Jose says: “I shall proclaim the glories and the praise of God by whose word the world came into being, before all the nations of the world.” We exalt God by increasing the sway of God’s name; presumably we