

of them, and then they will turn back to Egypt.” So God made the people take a round-about way, the way of the wilderness of the Reed Sea. (Exod. 13:17–18)

How are we to understand God’s strategy? To what extent did God’s plan benefit the newly freed Israelites? What was God’s fear and great concern?

Rashi illuminates the phrase, “the people might change their minds.” He explains, “[God was concerned] lest the people begin to harbor thoughts about their departure, and they let their hearts be swayed and regret their decision.” Masterfully, Rashi places himself in the sandals of the newly freed Israelites. Human nature is at once capricious and predictable. When one sets out on a life-changing experience or journey, it is natural to second-guess oneself. This was no different for the Israelites. Faced with the prospect of battling their way to the Land of Israel, in all likelihood the Israelites would run, not walk, back to their Egyptian taskmasters. Amos Hakham, the Israeli Bible scholar, complements Rashi’s explanation by elaborating on the divine psychology behind God’s strategy. Hakham points out in his commentary, *Da’at HaMiqra*, that the reason Torah tells us that the Children of Israel were “armed” as they came up from Egypt is “to show that God’s fear concerning the people changing their minds at the sight of war was a result of their depressed emotional and physical state.” Hakham explains that the Israelites were a people enslaved, used to a life of oppression. And so, the people did not fear war because of a dearth of arms; rather, it was a lack of gumption and bravery. Accordingly, God lengthened the journey through to Israel so as to embolden their spirit as a free people (Amos Hakham, *Da’at HaMiqra*, 238).

Human nature and divine care work in harmony. God realizes the fragile state of these former slaves. Thinking back to liminal moments in one’s life, the biblical narrative suddenly resonates in the heart. We often become enslaved to routine patterns in our lives; and we often crave solely that which we know. We long for our comfort zones. One need only think back to making a decision as to which college to attend, deciding on an appropriate career path after university, or choosing a life partner to summon feelings of anxiety and unease. We often second-guess ourselves. Such second-guessing typically makes us weak kneed, and compels us to return to the safety of the known. Yet, the lesson taught in this week’s parashah is one of trusting ourselves and God. We must journey forward. And it is often the journey that is the longest and most difficult that strengthens us and allows us to ultimately reach the Promised Land.

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PARASHAH COMMENTARY

This week’s commentary was written by Rabbi Ute Steyer, research and program manager of the Center for Pastoral Education and adjunct lecturer in Pastoral Theology, JTS.

Living Practice: Not “How” but “Why”

“Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, ‘The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.’” (Exod. 13:17)

In this week’s parashah, God decides to lead the people via a detour instead of the more direct way along the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. The book of Exodus gives the reason that the people might be overcome by fear when confronted with hardships and turn back. A midrash in Exodus Rabbah (20:11) tells us why that might be: the northern route was littered with bleached bones of a group of Israelites from the tribe of Ephraim, who had attempted to leave Egypt 30 years earlier and failed. If the Israelites were to see those bones, they would surely lose confidence in the endeavor and turn back, therefore it would be better to lead the people “*derekh yam su*” via the Sea of Reeds. Conveniently, although not mentioned, by selecting this route, the people would have no choice but to continue: with the miracle of the splitting of the sea and the subsequent return of the waters that drown Pharaoh’s chariots, the way back to Egypt would be cut off. Once on the other side, all that the Israelites could do would be to grumble and complain (“we should never have left”), but literally “turning back” would be impossible, since everybody knew that the waters of the Sea of Reeds had closed again and passage back to Egypt was cut off.

Of course, we know that the Israelites were not that idealistic people who just waited to follow Moses and live a life dedicated to serving God. But sometimes we forget and believe that the generations before us were somehow “more Jewish,” and modernity is a slippery slope that slowly but surely will destroy the Jewish people. We know that the text of the Torah is full of examples of Israelites who did not live up to expectations. So too, here: God knew already how much grumbling to expect in the years to come. Clearly, God was a good judge of character. We even find an indication of that in the text (verse 18):

וַיֹּסֶב אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעָם דֶּרֶךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יַם סוּף וַחֲמֹשִׁים עָלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

“But God led the people about, by the way of the wilderness by the Red Sea; and the children of Israel went up armed out of the land of Egypt.”

How one understands this depends on the interpretation of the word *hamushim*, which is translated into English as “armed,” and which makes complete sense in the

context of the narrative. This is also the interpretation that Rashi offers, but he adds a characteristic *davar acher* (alternative reading), in which he says that *hamushim* can also be interpreted literally as “one in five.” He says that only “one in five” Israelites went out to follow Moses in the Exodus, and that four out of five Israelites in Egypt did not want to leave: “Another interpretation: אֶחָד מִחֲמִשָּׁה means ‘divided by five,’ [meaning] that one out of five (אֶחָד מִחֲמִשָּׁה Israelites) went out, and four fifths [lit., parts of the people] died during the three days of darkness.”

Rashi draws this idea from Shemot Rabbah, which he quotes in his commentary on Exodus 10:22. “Because there were among the Israelites in that generation wicked people who did not want to leave [Egypt]. They died during the three days of darkness.” The midrash actually says that there were those among the Israelites people who had achieved privileged positions with respected names in Egyptian society. Hence four-fifths of the Israelites chose not to follow Moses—in other words, the absolute majority. If Rashi and the midrash are right, they put their fingers on something we all too often overlook: the Israelites of the Bible, like Jews today and throughout history, are not necessarily an idealistic and fiercely nationalistic tribe. The majority was and is happy and content to live in its respective mainstream cultures and to build successful lives—Egyptian, Persian, Spanish, German, or American. Over the course of history, some Jews have assimilated into their majority cultures, while others have found ways of remaining connected to the Jewish people.

And yes, only one-fifth of the people chose to follow Moses—but Rashi also tells us that they were accompanied by a “mixed multitude,” as mentioned in Exodus 12:38. That multitude consisted of people of different ethnic origins who decided to follow the Israelites and who eventually became part of the nation of Israel and received the commandments at Sinai.

So, can we then simply lean back and say, “okay, we lose some and we gain some”? After all, most people pursue similar ethical values. Why shouldn’t one be able to choose which spiritual path to follow or none at all? Remarkably, the [Pew Research Center survey of US Jews](#) published in 2013, which has triggered much debate, tells us that 94 percent of those polled say that they are proud to be Jewish, even though only some 20 percent say they identify as Jewishly observant. The majority identify as Jewish based on culture and ethnicity, or Judaism as a civilization. Mordecai Kaplan would have been proud. When asked what is important in being Jewish, 74 percent answered remembering the Holocaust, 69 percent leading a moral life, 56 percent social justice, and 49 percent intellectual curiosity. But one need not be Jewish in order to be dedicated to social justice, remember the Holocaust, lead a moral life, or be intellectually curious.

Instead of asking *how* to remain Jewish (a question much discussed in the wake of the Pew report), we should ask *why*. This question wasn’t asked through most of Jewish history, but with modern society’s emphasis on choice, it is a crucial precursor to any discussion about the “how.”

A traditional answer to “why remain Jewish” would be “*asher bahar banu mikol ha’amim*” (because You have chosen us from amongst the nations)—but chosenness is a difficult concept for contemporary society, to both Jews and non-Jews alike, without sounding elitist and racist. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks therefore suggested “the dignity of difference” as the “why.” Throughout history, Jews have opposed at-

tempts to impose singularity, and defended the right to be different—something the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes as universalizing particularity in his book *Difficult Freedom*. The right to be different, the right to hold on to one’s particularity in conversation with the universal, is the foundation for acceptance and democracy. The values of a democratic society, such as leading a moral life and fighting for social justice, are important for both Jews and non-Jews alike. But experience shows that idealism and charisma can only create dedication for a cause up to a certain point. If these values are not rooted in something deeper, enthusiasm will wane, and a cause will be abandoned for something else. For generations of Jews, a commitment to causes was rooted in an understanding that such causes are intrinsic Jewish mitzvot as well as expressions of spirituality. If theological beliefs and practical actions are linked, they have the potential of becoming what Michael Fishbane, in his book *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*, calls “fissures” that can disrupt our daily routines and awaken us to the presence of the transcendent.

This notion is not radically new; it can be found in our classical texts. In Leviticus, we read repeatedly, “*va’asitem otam*” (you shall do them), referring to the commandments, meaning that one should put one’s beliefs into practice. The Meshech Chochma, in his commentary on Bemidbar 15:40, argues that this can also be read as “*va’asitem aтем*” (you shall be transformed).

The moments of rapture that Fishbane calls “fissures” awaken us from the daily routines of life, ritual, and mitzvot, and occasionally create new moments of reborn mindfulness. Here Judaism offers a way of engaging with tradition that leads to a form of ethical and spiritual self-cultivation, and in which an ancient tradition is transformed into “meditative reflection and reflective action” (*Sacred Attunement*). Then, this Jewish tradition becomes living practice with relevance beyond Jews and the Jewish community—a perfect example of Levinas’s notion of universalizing particularity.

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A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

Determination and Redemption

Parashat Beshallah witnesses triumphant redemption. Freed by the wonders of God and the leadership of Moses, the Israelites leave their Egyptian surroundings en route to the Promised Land of Israel. And while one would expect God to have mercy on these newly liberated children, guiding them along the shortest route possible, the parashah opens with a curious statement:

And it came to pass that when Pharaoh sent the people on their way, God did not lead them through the land of Philistines because that is near, for God said, “the people might change their minds when they see war in front