



© 2008 Rabbi Matthew L. Berkowitz. *The Lovell Haaadah* (Plate 19)

Like Psalm 114, which is calligraphed in this illumination, this visual essay is filled with movement: Hills dance like gazelles and lambs. The sea parts of creation dances at as the Israelites pass through on the sandy seabed. All the joy of impending freedom after some four hundred and thirty years of enslavement. Darkness is over and light mixed with vibrant colors animates the moment. Midrashim offer various opinions regarding exactly how the waters parted; this rendering follows the literal text from Exodus 14:29, והמים להם חמה מימינם ומשמאלם “The waters were like a wall for them [the Israelites] to their right and to their left.” The vertical transition from sea to hills to sky evokes the themes of creation and separation simultaneously. Indeed, the parting of the Reed Sea is a moment of awe, radical uncertainty, and endless potential.

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



Beshallah 5779

בשלה תשע"ט



A Wall “To the Right of Them, and To the Left”

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

This is the second in a series of commentaries linking Parashat Hashavua, the weekly Torah portion, with parashat hashavua, a Modern Hebrew idiom for the event or story that dominates the week's news.

For many years my favorite line in Parashat Beshallah—the section of Torah that I studied at age 11 while learning to chant with proper musical notation from the scroll—was the Israelites’ sarcastic complaint to Moses when they found themselves trapped between Pharaoh’s army advancing from behind them, and the sea blocking their way forward.

What? There weren’t enough graves in Egypt, so you took us out to die in the wilderness? (Exod. 14:11)

At this point in my life, and in the life of our country and the world, I’ve come to appreciate the import and urgency of the directive from God that immediately follows Moses’s assurance to the skeptical Israelites that they would soon “see salvation from the Lord.”

“What are you crying to me for?” God says to Moses. “Tell the children of Israel to get moving!” (v. 15)

Movement is the very opposite of what is happening in Washington, DC—and dominating the nation’s headlines—this week. As I write this piece on Wednesday morning, the longest government shutdown in history drags on without resolution. Hundreds of thousands of government employees are homebound. Anxiety grows about their ability to pay mortgages and food bills without the paychecks that are owed to them, and about the ability of the government to carry out vital functions without them. Small businesses around the country that serve the out-of-work employees are increasingly empty or shuttered. Federal trials have been postponed. Countless activities large and small in countless fields and every part of the country have been affected. The president wants his wall: the whole wall

and nothing but the wall. Democrats will not agree to hold legislation on this or any other issue, or the normal operations of government, hostage to his demand.

What should one do in the face of this and other blockages in the direction one thinks society should move?

The Torah lets us know that the Children of Israel were hardly united in their response to the crisis moments that preceded and followed their long-awaited Exodus from Egypt. Sarcasm at the sea was the least of it. Safely arrived on the other side, the waters having formed a wall “to the right of them, and to the left,” (14:29) they immediately complained about the taste of the water (15:23–24)—a pattern that persisted long into the journey through the wilderness.

Rabbinic interpreters suggest more details about Israelite discord. Rabbenu Bahya, a medieval commentator, cites a rabbinic midrash on Exod. 14:10 that finds *four* Israelite factions present before the march into the sea. The first group didn’t desire salvation; the second wanted to return to Egypt; the third wanted to fight against the Egyptians; the fourth cried out to God. Interpreting the verse, “Why are you crying out to Me?” (14:15), Bahya writes, “The word ‘Me’ means that this matter is not dependent on Me, but on Israel.” The Torah wants its readers to know that sometimes God does answer prayers and sway the course of history—but one cannot count on that outcome. The Israelites presumably cried out to God many times during their 400-year sojourn in Egypt to no avail. While awaiting God’s help, we must do all we can to secure salvation. That means exercising justice, compassion, and—if necessary—engaging in self-defense. “There is a time to pray succinctly and a time to pray lengthily,” said the commentator Ba’al Haturim. This was “not a time to pray at all. Rather, ‘Tell the Israelites to go forward.’”

The greatest source of encouragement to be derived from the sad tales of government paralysis is the huge growth in political activism. Individuals and groups who previously had left politics to others have now chosen in large numbers to enter the fray. 70 percent of the House members who took their seats this month had never before held public office. Only 6 of those 41 individuals had ever run for office previously.

Companies large and small are aiding workers furloughed by the shutdown and funding programs that would otherwise cease.

Women marched by the tens of thousands right after the presidential inauguration in 2017 and are organizing—not without controversy—to march again next weekend.

Clergy of all faiths have traveled to the border with Mexico in order to witness the human suffering taking place there, testify about it to their congregations, and organize relief efforts.

Immigrants released while they await delayed hearings on their refugee status are being cared for by volunteers. Scientists are taking it upon themselves to translate the awesome and terrifying technicalities of global warming to citizens not sure what or whom to believe about the future of the planet.

Some politicians—admittedly few in number—are risking their political futures to speak truth instead of the party line.

This is inspiring. For over half a century now I’ve been chanting, in the traditional melody composed especially for these words, the Torah’s joyful report that the Israelites “walked on dry land in the midst of the sea, and the waters were to them like a wall, on their right and on their left” (14:29). The verse will call other thoughts than salvation to mind this week of government shutdown and stalemate over the president’s wall. Other emotions than joy course through our country. But the contrast between walls only underlines the lesson this week’s Torah portion holds for any human community, in any country, in any political situation. Obstacles loom to the right and to the left. Redemption beckons from both sides too. There is never enough justice being performed in the world, or enough compassion. There is not enough love to go around. God turns to us to provide these things. It is always time for Children of Israel—and all other children of God too—to get moving.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”l).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Israel’s Departure

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Rabbi Judah said to Rabbi Meir: one tribe said, “I will not be the first to go into the sea”; and another tribe said, “I will not be the first to go into the sea.” While they were standing there deliberating, Nahshon the son of Aminadav of the tribe of Judah sprang forward and was the first to go down into the sea. Because it was Nahshon who came forward, Judah obtained royal dominion in Israel: “The sea saw him and fled” (Psalm 114:3). —Mekhilta Derabbi Yishmael, Beshallah, Mas. Devayehi 5)