

Destiny in the Details

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In life's biggest moments, it is sometimes easy to lose track of the smallest details. I have been to more than one wedding where everything is beautifully set up, from the flowers to the catering to the band, but then when the couple being married reach the huppah, they realize that they had forgotten the kiddush cup for the *Sheva Berakhot*, or the pen for signing the ketubah.

However, when looking back on those big events, sometimes it is the tiny moments that resonate most. I remember the sickly-sweet taste of the Manischewitz wine that I drank after making kiddush at my bat mitzvah more than I remember reading from the Torah. I can tell you every feeling I had when I saw my husband for the first time on our wedding day, but the details of the ceremony are already blurry after only a few years.

Why are those small moments so poignant? It seems to be a strange question to ask at this climactic point of the Torah. This week's parashah, Beshallah, contains one of the Torah's biggest moments. The Israelites finally break free of the Egyptians, crossing the Red Sea on dry land while the Egyptians drown in the closing sea behind them. Jubilant in their triumph, they sing to God, led by Moses and Miriam. For a brief moment, they are united in their faith and in the glory of the moment.

However, earlier in the story, the people are less certain that they want to cross the Sea. Understandably, they are fearful, with the Egyptians behind them and a vast expanse of water in front of them. Moses, uncertain about what to do, cries out to God, and God reprimands him, saying, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell B'nai Yisrael to go forward!" In that moment, Moses jumps into action, as the Torah tells us:

Then Moshe held out his arm over the sea and Hashem drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split, and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ([Exod. 14: 21-22](#))

Certainly, this seems like that crossing the sea safely, while the Egyptians are trapped behind them, should be the most that the Israelites could ask for from God. The people are escaping the Egyptians, God is fulfilling the promise of redemption, Moses is powerful enough that the people trust him, if only for a moment. This is the grand moment, the one that we recall every day, multiple times, in our liturgy when we recite *Mi Kamokha*. Surely this should be enough. However, there is a beautiful midrash in *Shemot Rabbah* that imagines God paying attention to the smaller details as well:

"Rabbi Nehurai taught: a daughter of Israel passed in the sea with her son in her arms, and he cried. So she would reach out her hands and grab an apple or a pomegranate from the sea and give it to him, as it says, 'And He led them through the depths, as through a wilderness.' ([Psalms 106:9](#)) Just as they lacked for nothing in the wilderness, in the depths of the sea they lacked for nothing." (*Parashat Beshallah* 21:10)

Like those moments from my bat mitzvah and wedding, this scene is incredibly poignant. At this momentous occasion, the Israelites would seem unreasonable for expecting more from God than simply getting them across the sea safely. It's natural for children to be scared, just as it's natural for their parents to soothe them, but even though we sometimes describe God as a parent, it is striking that God attends to the passing distress of the young in the midst of

these dramatic events. After all, they will soon be back on dry land, safe from the Egyptians, truly free for the first time. However, the Rabbis imagine that God put fruits in the sea to comfort the children. It is the tiny detail that makes all the difference for the youngest of B'nai Yisrael.

Why does this small act of comfort matter? Because, as it turns out, those children are the ones who will grow up and then enter the Land to conquer it as part of the next generation. That transitional moment, which occurs in the book of Joshua, has the potential to be as terrifying as this one, but there, the people do not turn away from the challenge. Instead, they are eager to enter the Land, no matter how difficult it might be. Perhaps their faith is stronger because they do not remember slavery, but perhaps it is stronger because they remember that God took care of even the smallest details when they were tiny and vulnerable.

This midrash in *Shemot Rabbah* doesn't solve a problem in the text, or explain an ambiguity, as we tend to expect from this genre. Instead, it simply highlights God's compassion, which is so great that it extends even to something so small. *It is okay to focus on a detail in even the grandest of moments*, it tells us. In fact, that detail might be the most formative part of the whole experience.

Human memory is fallible, and we often lose the memories that we had most wanted to keep. However, the tiny glimmers that remain have the potential to shape not only our views of the past, but also the way we look towards the future.

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