

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Some might see this as demonstrating Moshe's growth as a leader. Taking into account the impact of slavery, Moshe (and God) initially take full responsibility for the Israelites. But knowing the challenges they will face ahead, Moshe starts to empower those he leads to be an intrinsic part of their own redemption story. But was this not an overly risky move on Moshe's part? What evidence is there that the Israelites were ready for such a challenge? At the Sea they were completely passive, and it worked! It would be more reasonable to think that this experience had just reinforced their slave-like passivity.

The answer comes from a story in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sotah 37a. Although they were told that God would do all the work, the Israelites were in fact *not* complete bystanders (or at least not all of them). A man by the name of Nachshon ben Aminadav made the first courageous steps into the Sea of Reeds, *before* God divided the waters. His faith and initiative, we are taught, are what triggered the miracle.

But what of the rest of the Israelites who just passively watched Nachshon? The great Lithuanian scholar, the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), provides some insight. He observes that in Exodus 14:22, after God parts the waters, the waters are referred to as being like a wall: "the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left." But the word for wall (חֹמָה) appears missing a vav, and can thus be read not as 'choma' but as 'chaima,' which means anger. The Vilna Gaon explains that this is to tell us that when the rest of the Israelites saw Nachshon make those first few steps, they were angry and disappointed in themselves that they had lacked the courage to do the same. Moshe knew that they wanted to a chance to redeem themselves, so when the Amalekites attacked, Moshe was, in essence, giving them their chance.

The Vilna Gaon here, shows great insight into the human psyche. When we witness acts of courage and leadership, our reaction can often be anger - anger at the brave leader who, by comparison, makes us look bad, and anger at ourselves for not seizing the moment. But as we can see in the Torah, and in life, opportunities for brave leadership abound. Just because we have been bystanders before does not mean that we are incapable of growth and change. Challenged by others and inspired by others, victims can indeed become warriors.

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## **TORAH SPARKS**

***Parashat Beshallah***

***Shabbat Shirah***

**January 27, 2018 | 11 Shevat 5778**

Annual | Exodus 13:17-17:16 (Etz Hayim p. 399-422; Hertz p. 265-281)  
 Triennial | Exodus 14:15-16:10 (Etz Hayim p. 403-416; Hertz p. 272-276)  
 Haftarah | Judges 4:4-5:31 (Etz Hayim p. 423-431; Hertz p. 281-287)

## **Dvar Torah**

**Yoni Stone**, *Conservative Yeshiva Student & Lishma Fellow*

In this week's parasha, the Exodus story reaches its climax. Following a multitude of plagues, culminating with the slaying of the firstborn, Pharaoh is finally persuaded to permit his team of slaves to leave. Moshe leads the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert, where they find themselves trapped between the waters of Yam Suf (the Sea of Reeds) and Pharaoh's pursuing army. At this point, literally poised between freedom and death, Moshe turns to the people and proclaims "Stand still and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today...The Lord will fight for you; you need only be silent" (Ex. 14: 13).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the (Orthodox) United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, contrasts this with Moshe's message at the end of the parasha, when the Israelites are attacked by the Amalekites. As they approach, Moshe says to Joshua, "Choose men for us, and prepare for battle against Amalek" (Ex. 17:9). In the first story, Moshe's message is simple: "God will save us." But in the second story, we must take up arms to defend ourselves. In the first, we are passive observers; in the second, we are active participants.

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

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# Dvar Haftarah

**Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

It is hard to think of the Tanakh (Bible) as a subversive book, but in some sense, it is just that. A quick look at the story of Deborah is an example. Deborah is a leader of the people, not just because she is wise, but in all of the ways that characterized the “shoftim” – judges, who were known for their military prowess as much as for their leadership ability. As a female character in the Tanakh, this is not to be taken for granted.

The Book of Judges follows a basic storyline – the people sin, troubles are brought upon them, whereupon the people cry out to God, and then God sends a charismatic leader to rescue them. In the episode found in our haftarah, the unexpected happens, challenging normative presumptions. The immediate threat to the people comes from the Canaanite king, Javin, and his general Sisera. Deborah is the leader of the people but the normative presumption is that a woman does not lead the people in battle, so she enlists Barak as her general. Barak, however, is reticent to take on the mantle of leadership without Deborah’s immediate backing: “If you will go with me, then I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” (4:8) Deborah’s response is telling: “Very well, I will go with you but (efes) there will be no glory for you in the course that you have taken, for the Lord will give Sisera over into the hands of a woman” (4:9) This “prophetic” statement alludes to an unexpected end to the story since it is expected that the “general” in charge of the battle will reap the fame. And it is not just that Barak will have to share the “fame” for the victory. He will have to share the victory itself since it is another woman, Yael, who would bear responsibility for slaying the enemy general.

A midrash on the unusual word “efes” captures the significance of this turn of events: Rabbi Reuven said: ‘[Read] Efes as a Greek word [meaning ‘let alone’.] Said Deborah to him: ‘Do you think that the glory of the song will be passed to you alone?’ He made himself secondary to her, as it says: ‘Then sang Deborah and Barak...’ (5:1) (Bereshit Rabbah 40:4 Theodore Albeck ed. p. 384) This midrash emphasizes a shared sense of power with Barak acknowledging his subservience to Deborah. This is an audacious reading in a male oriented world but seems well warranted by the plot of the story.

The story of Deborah then should be read as a paradigm rather than as a story to be read in a vacuum. The plot was intended to shake things up. It speaks of male-female power sharing, even in defiance of societal norms. Perhaps the Tanakh isn’t as conservative as we often think!

# Table Talk

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The Israelites leave Egypt, heading to the Land of Israel. They cross Yam Suf (the Reed Sea) to escape the Egyptians, sing a great song exalting God, and experience the uncertainties of life in the desert.

- 1) Now that the people have gone into the desert, how do they know where to go (13:21-22)? What does their guide look like and what is it a symbol of? What do you think that this visual reminder did for the people?
- 2) The events by the Reed Sea are not only intended to save the Israelites from the Egyptians. What is it supposed to do for the Egyptians? (14:4)
- 3) In the panic that ensues in the Israelite camp when the Egyptian army shows up while the sea is in front of them, several voices are heard. What kind of reactions are voiced by the people (14:10-14)? What does it teach us about the conversations that might have taken place prior to leaving?
- 4) A month after leaving Egypt the people complain to Moshe and Aaron ‘would we only have died in God’s hand in Egypt as we dwelled by the flesh pots, and ate food to satisfaction’ (16:3). Look at their words carefully. What was so wonderful about life in Egypt? What did they get from the flesh pots?
- 5) Our first introduction to Shabbat comes in connection to the Manna – the God-sent food that sustained them in the desert (16:19-30). The Manna may not be collected on Shabbat – so what will the people eat? How did this make Shabbat unique and why can they not do the same on any other day?

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