

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

‘Moshe received the Torah at Sinai], the children of Israel carried Yosef’s coffin alongside the Ark of the Covenant containing the Ten Commandments. When people would ask the Israelites: What is in those two chests?’ the Israelites would respond: “One contains the words of the revelation from God and the other is a coffin with a body in it.’ The nations, astounded that a corpse would be carried alongside the ark containing the Ten Commandments, responded: “What is so special about the one in that coffin that it is being carried next to God’s word?’ The Israelites answered: ‘The one in that coffin fulfilled in his life that which is written on God’s revealed tablets.’ (adapted from Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael Beshalah, Horowitz - Rabin ed. pp. 78-80). This midrash goes on to describe how Yosef, who is Yaakov’s son, observed not only each of the Ten Commandments but also a number of the other commandments in the Torah.

While this story is obviously historically fanciful and anachronistic, it warrants our attention because of its profound message. Yosef, according to this midrash, lived his life fulfilling the words of the Torah. His life was spent both standing up for his beliefs and thoughtfully carrying out the standards of his tradition with integrity. His faith was not simply lip service. He not only talked the talk. He walked the walk. He was a living, walking, talking Torah scroll. On account of his deep commitment, he merited after his death, to lead the children of Israel on their journey out of Egypt, right alongside the Ark of the Covenant.

This midrash, I think, is communicating on two levels. On the most basic level, it is saying that a person who abides by God’s Torah has the same sanctity as the Torah itself. They contain and transmit God’s word as much as any tablet or scroll. But on a deeper level, the midrash is also hinting at an equivalency between a dead body and a tablet or scroll. Our bodies are but dust and ashes. A Torah is but ink and animal hide. But when the source of holiness touches us - breathing life into us and giving us a living Torah - inanimate objects like stone, parchment, bone, sinew acquire a holiness that persists and must be honored.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Beshalah

Shabbat Shirah

January 19, 2019 | 13 Shevat 5779

Annual | Exodus 13:17-17:16 (Etz Hayim p. 399-422; Hertz p. 265-281)

Triennial | Exodus 14:26-17:16 (Etz Hayim p. 405-422; Hertz p. 269-281)

Haftarah | Judges 4:4-5:31 (Etz Hayim p. 423-431; Hertz p. 281-287)

D’var Torah: Those Holy Bones

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

As you might recall, Yosef, on his deathbed, charged his brothers with the responsibility for bringing his bones up with them when the children of Israel finally left Egypt. But generations after Yosef’s death, when the time came to get the bones and go, how were the children of Israel to find them?

According to the Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael, a midrash from the period of the Mishnah, nobody knew where Yosef was buried, except for one elderly woman, Serah bat Asher, who had miraculously survived from the time of Yosef. She told Moshe that Yosef’s bones were to be found at the bottom of the Nile River, where they had been hidden by the Egyptians. The Egyptians, says the midrash, knew about the deathbed promise made to Yosef. So they cleverly figured that if the children of Israel were unable to find the bones, they would never be able to leave Egypt.

So how did the children of Israel retrieve Yosef’s bones from the bottom of a vast and deep river? Moshe approached the Nile and called out: “Yosef son of Yaakov, the time of God’s promise to redeem His people

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has come. Yosef's coffin rose to the surface of the Nile and Moshe took it.

[After

D'var Haftarah: Is Gratitude Enough?

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Shirat Devorah, the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), is a paean to God, in thanks for the victory of Deborah and Barak over Jabin and his Canaanite army. Where chapter 4 describes the actual machinations of the battle, chapter 5, in poetic form, emphasizes God's role in the victory. This poem describes God's victorious role: "O Lord, when You came forth from Seir, when you strode from the fields of Edom, the earth heaved, the very heavens dripped rain, the clouds O they dripped water, mountains melted before the Lord, He of Sinai, before the Lord God of Israel..." (5:4-5 Alter translation)

As Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (Spain 11th-12th century) noted, these words most likely allude to God's role in the battles against Israel's enemies. (As quoted by Rabbi David Kimche) A modern commentator, Yaira Amit (Israel) associates the places mentioned in this verse with ancient memories of the wanderings of the children of Israel. (Shoftim, Mikra L'Yisrael, p. 97)

For others, these words resonate differently. Targum Yonatan, the Aramaic translation of the Prophets, inspired by the mention of these places in the last chapters of the Torah (See Deuteronomy 33:2), associated these verses with Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah: "And Your Torah which You (God) gave to Israel; when they transgressed it, the nations ruled over them and when they returned to it, they overcame their enemies... The mountain shuddered before God. This is Sinai. It gave off smoke like a furnace before the revelation of God to Israel." Based on this interpretation, Rashi explained: "What is this [idea] doing here? Thus, said Deborah: 'It is a bad thing to separate from the Torah and a good thing to cling to it, for the Torah was given in awe and strength, and this is why Israel was given over into the hands of its enemies for leaving it but when they again took upon themselves to busying themselves with it, they were saved.'"

This interpretation transformed this song of praise into a message consistent with one of the major themes of the book of Judges, namely, that the fate of the people is intimately linked with their connection with God and the Torah. Such a message becomes hard to bear after a while. Still, the Jewish tradition endlessly emphasizes it to remind us of the importance of association and identification with the messages of the tradition and the cost of abandoning them.

There is no doubt that people grow tired of parents, teachers, rabbis, and other authority figures harping on this message. But it seems to be the case, now as much as ever, that thankfulness and appreciation are not enough to inspire commitment. Seeing this verse both ways offers us the answer.

Parashat Beshalah Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

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

1. Shortly after the Children of Israel left Egypt, Pharaoh gives chase. When the people see Pharaoh and his army behind them, we are told that there are several reactions (14:10-14). They see the Egyptians and fear, they cry to God, and they say to Moshe that they could just as well have died in Egypt, and they claim that they told him to leave them alone and let them be slaves. How would you define each type of reaction? What would be the best way to respond to each of these voices?
2. To be saved from the Egyptians, the Israelites are instructed to travel forward, towards the sea and Moshe is told to raise his staff (14:14:15-16). How do you think the people felt about this manner of salvation? Why did God not save them without forcing them to actively go forward (a presumably dangerous move)?
3. After reaching safety and the Egyptian army was destroyed, the Children of Israel needed some closure to the experience they just had. Two reactions are recorded: Moshe leads the people in a long poem, and his sister Miriam leads the women in dancing and chanting one line. Which one would you have liked to join? Why?
4. As they head into the desert, soon after crossing the sea, the people walk for 3 days "and did not find water" (15:22). When we compare it to an incident later in the Parasha (17:1) we discover that there it states that "there was no water for the people to drink." Were both cases an objective lack of water? What does the lack of water, or the perceived lack of water, do to people in the state of the Children of Israel in the desert?
5. When the people ask for food, they receive Manna from heaven. The Manna arrives every day, but on Friday they are instructed to collect a double serving, while on Shabbat there will be no Manna to collect (16:4-36). Why do you think that God chose to give us a first taste of Shabbat in this manner?

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