

Parshat Beshallach; Exodus 13:17-17:16

By Rabbi Denise Eger

The Children of Israel are finally on their way out from Egypt and servitude and slavery with the arrival of this week's portion- Beshallach. Our portion begins with a caution about the path that God would send them on. It says, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt. So God led the people round-about, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds." (Ex. 13:17-18).

According to commentary in the Plaut, Torah, "The Hebrew is a play on words with the earlier, 'lead them' (p. 478, URJ Press)." In the opening words of the portion it says that "God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines," (Ex. 13:17). The words used definitely play off one another and share the same root in Hebrew –**לָחַץ** – **לָחַץ**.

This is interesting coming after several chapters of Exodus in Parshat Vayera and Parshat Bo, the two preceding weeks when God hardened Pharaoh's heart. God leads and God confounds the journey and thus God keeps the hearts of the Israelite on the course toward Sinai— albeit a circuitous course. Though the heart is made steady the feet move in winding paths.

So too it was for Pharaoh. God led and God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh entrenched in his ways had to walk a very arduous path facing each of the plagues. There could have been a direct route to freedom for the Israelites- if Pharaoh had been compassionate and willing to submit to God's power and glory. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened and stubborn and the path to freedom for the Israelites was circuitous through ten difficult plagues. So too it was tortuous and difficult and roundabout for the Egyptians. Pharaoh had changed his mind on numerous occasions giving permission for the Israelites to leave and then negating that order.

This is again what we see this week. The route to freedom is neither a straight line nor straight from the heart. The Israelites must take a meandering path to avoid that which might frighten them or eat away at their resolve. Pharaoh's heart does an about face and he changes his mind again, this time pursuing the Israelites into the desert. "When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart about the people and said, 'What is this we have done, releasing Israel from our service?'" (Ex. 18:5). And so the Egyptians pursue to try to get the Israelites back. Their hearts changed and stiffened.

The decisions of the heart play an important role in our portion. Not just logic, but intuition, belief and faith all are located in heart felt sentiments. We also see that freedom is won not by a direct route but step by step—as the Israelites walked over long and winding distances.



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It is no different today. There are many in our society are that still have no equality or freedom. Gay men and lesbians in particular have faced a circuitous route to their liberation. One step forward two steps back. A win for equality in Arizona by stopping a constitutional amendment, but a loss in California when the governor vetoes the first marriage bill passed by both houses of legislature. It is good to keep in mind the Israelites long walk to freedom so as not to be discouraged. Just as in this week's portion there will be moments of fear when the Pharaohs of our time bear down and close in so too there will be miracles like the parting of the Red Sea when the population realizes that to deny anyone their civil rights takes our whole society down. I believe with my whole heart that the day is of miracles is soon upon us. Then when all who seek freedom have attained it we will truly sing with joy as the Children of Israel did, "Who is like You, Awesome and Holy and Doing wonders?"

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