



Parashat Beshalach
Love Beyond Possession

by Tucker Lieberman on Friday February 06, 2009

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Exodus 13:17 - 17:16

Parashat Beshalach illustrates an enduring love that overcomes a vile dehumanization. It contains the Torah's most dramatic moment of redemption and faith: through Moses, God causes the sea to part, forming a channel of dry land over which the Israelites leap from slavery to freedom. This miracle is a manifestation of God's love for his people. Yet in this Exodus we also come face-to-face with human evil: the spectre of slavery and the unrepentant oppressor.

Clearly we want to be more like God than like Pharaoh, but the reality is that we are more likely to share Pharaoh's human flaws than to be able to emulate divine love. If we read *Beshalach* with an aim toward living out, in our own lives, its love and radical liberation, we must first look inside and ask ourselves—what do we really know about love, after all?

Embattled by ten plagues that decimated his land's productivity and culminated in the death of his own son, Pharaoh finally seems ready to accept the supremacy of the God of Israel. He releases the Israelites from bondage. The slaves rush out with their livestock, sling raw dough over their backs, and march toward the horizon.

Then, as *Parashat Beshalach* opens, something begins to change. In the first verse, God airs his suspicion that the Israelites will change their minds and want to return to the familiarity and relative security of Egyptian slavery. While this proves true (the Israelites will spend much of the journey to the promised land complaining about hunger, thirst, and uncertainty) it is also a strange comment for God to make, because God already knows that Pharaoh will change his mind first. God is setting the stage on both sides: hardening Pharaoh's heart and plotting an easy course for the Israelites to allow them to save their energy for Pharaoh. God carefully engineers a confrontation between the chosen people and the king who enslaved them, and he has already envisioned the climax. Pharaoh and God are warring over the Israelites: Pharaoh for their bodies, God for their hearts and minds.

We all have a lustful, objectifying, arrogant Pharaonic potential that casts a shadow over our relationships. It is the desire to possess and the fear of losing. Even when we know it is not possible to own or control other human beings, we still feel these urges. Some of us go through



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this initiation in adolescence, while others learn it later in life. It is the dark side of the aptly named “crush.” The crush’s tangle of groundless optimism and dread of inadequacy centers on our own self-image, and in this battlefield of narcissism flickers the mere beginning of recognition of the other person as she actually is. The crush could turn into love. More likely, it will combust or fizzle out. This is how Pharaoh relates to the Israelites because he does not understand his own identity as king once he is no longer brandishing his sceptre over his slaves.

How does the Godlike love for the Israelites contrast with the Pharaonic desire for the same people? In this *parashah*, God speaks to Moses on numerous occasions to request that he convey commandments to the Israelites. God instructs Moses to change course to trick Pharaoh into believing the Israelites are lost and vulnerable; to lift his staff so the sea parts for the Israelites, and again so the water crashes back over their pursuers; to toss a stick in water so that it becomes potable; to produce more drinking water by striking a rock with the same staff that once spoiled the Egyptians’ water source; to predict the mysterious arrival of quail and an edible seedlike substance called manna; and to forbid the gathering of manna on the sabbath. God also announces that he will protect the Israelites from disease (as long as they obey his commandments) and that he will ensure the destruction of their military enemy Amalek. God’s love manifests, therefore, as a care plan. This plan includes short-term survival with food, water, and weapons and also involves the long-term cultivation of the social leadership of Moses and Aaron, the battle command of Joshua, the faith of the downtrodden and the newly liberated, and the national identity constituted by a covenant with God.

How do the Israelites respond to God’s care plan? Mostly, of course, they complain. They are used to responding to orders inspired by the passionate tyranny of Pharaoh and they are not yet confident that God has a better plan. (No wonder God prefers to talk privately with Moses!) When everything occurs as Moses promises, they still want to return to Pharaoh’s abuse. They are familiar with Pharaoh’s fatally crushing desire to control their every move and thought, and somehow that seems less threatening than God’s inscrutable hope for their freedom and his insistence on their spiritual development.

In our own relationships with each other, it is frighteningly easy to become like Pharaoh. There is a narcissistic little dictator that stomps all over the wounded heart and frequently needs to be put to bed, lest we become the very evil we are running away from. On the other hand, we receive a lesson in human limitation when we aspire to become like God leading a nation to freedom. During the Exodus, God saw the future, worked miracles, and provided for the needs of generations. We don’t have such clear, simple knowledge or power with which to infuse our loving care for each other.

What, then, if anything, can we infer about human love from this radical moment of deliverance? *Beshalach* can teach us to encourage each other on our journeys. We need such encouragement especially when we are not ready to accept necessary changes. Limited as we



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are, it is difficult to see how we need to grow and how others need to grow; yet trying to ascertain the needs of ourselves and others, and then encouraging the pursuit of those needs, is part of a non-possessive love that demonstrates true caring.

The love we share in the spirit of liberty is a powerful force that can burst through rigid social structures and institutions that regulate how we relate to each other. Even in queer communities we often encounter such regulation: each sexual and gender sub-identity with its own label, its own parameters of sexual attractiveness, and its own strong opinions about how to dress, talk, act, think, or worship. When we truly love, we move beyond these labels. We are no longer just workers, relatives, spouses, congregants, or gays in a particular time and culture. We are healers, beings whose love changes everything about our world and our future. Beshalach teaches us that it is important to plan for each other's material and psychological needs, as God did for us, yet it also reminds us that we are not locked into a single survival strategy because, after all, there is more than one path we can take in life. Our loving task is to help each other, even through moments of trial and periods of scarcity, find the paths of greatest enrichment and shine light into the world.



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