



**Parashat Beshalach**

**'Til Your People Cross Over**

by Karen Erlichman on Saturday February 03, 2007

15 Sh'vat, 5767

Exodus 13:17-17:16, Tu B'Shvat

The Exodus story of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery and the parting of the Red Sea is probably one of the most well-known, quoted, mythologized, revered, discussed and debated stories in Jewish and religious history. Woven into the fabric of the Exodus story in Parashat Beshalach are other stories and lessons about faith, courage, leadership, celebration, gender, and the distinction between physical liberation and spiritual liberation.

For the Israelites, the road from slavery to liberation was not clear or easy; Divine Guidance walked before us and guided us, not on a direct visible route, but following a roundabout path. As with the Israelites, sometimes God guides us in mysterious and indirect ways, but we are called to trust and be faithful in HaShem.

*“V’Adonai holech lifnayhem yomam b’amud anan lanchotam haderech v’lailah b’amud eysh l’ha-ir lahem lalechet yomam v’lailah. / And God went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night.”* (Exodus 13:21-22)

There are moments in our lives when, like the Israelites following the pillar of cloud and fire out of Egypt, we are being guided even when we cannot see where we are being led. When we were liberated from *Mitzrayim*, from the narrowest place of oppression and suffering at the shores of the Red Sea, we were liberated as a tribe and as a community, without qualifications or exceptions. We were called to take a leap of faith and trust in Moses as our leader, as well as in HaShem, the Holy One of Many Names.

This story of liberation and faith has been claimed by countless communities as part of their journey out of their own “narrow place.” As lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer folks, we too are yearning for those stories that reveal and rejoice in our liberation struggle. Parashat Beshalach delivers such a story to us in a delightfully queer way, complete with musical score, ecstatic dance, dramatic language and powerful images.



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In Beshalach, Moses is referred to as *Moshe Avdu*, God's divine servant. Leadership calls us to be holy as well as industrious. The commitment and perseverance required to be a leader can be challenging at times. There are moments when leaders become complacent, annoyed or even fearful. And, like Moses, leaders often encounter skepticism within their own community. In our struggle for civil rights as queer Jews, we have been blessed by the presence and guidance of great leaders – people like Harvey Milk, Leslie Feinberg, and Joan Nestle – individuals who have challenged us with their industriousness and commitment, even when we might sometimes have been unable or unwilling to keep faith with their guidance.

Queer liberation, like the Exodus from Egypt, is a process that is internal and individual, as well as communal and collective. Whatever our individual journeys have been to discover our true queer selves, there is a transformation that occurs when we realize that we are not the only one. We are part of a larger subversive erotic, political, spiritual and cultural tribe. Individually and together we have stood at the shores of the Red Sea, with our demons at our back and the necessary leap forward that might swallow us up or carry us to a place we could never imagine.

The *Shirat Ha-Yam*, Song of the Sea, is an equally integral part of the liberation story of Beshalach. The Israelites sing a song of joy after being freed from slavery and delivered into a promised land. Moses' sister Miriam chants a song, "Sing to the Lord, for the Holy One has triumphed gloriously," (Exodus 15:21) as she and the other Israelite women dance and sing with their timbrels. Perhaps there is a link between this legend and women's music festivals, LGBT pride celebrations and raves? In our songs of praise as Jews and as LGBT people we especially give thanks for our crossing over, our transition, our arrival as our fully liberated selves.

But what is true spiritual and political liberation? How can we journey toward it when so often it feels beyond our grasp or imagination? We have moments of rejoicing in our progress, just as the Israelites did on the banks of the Red Sea. And yet, there are also intermittent and extended times of hopelessness and despair, as with the Israelites when they could find no drinkable water or food. In our search for liberation as LGBT folks, we too must keep our faith in the difficult moments, and eventually we will also be guided to freedom. Keeping faith is not a passive stance: we are in partnership with HaShem, and our work as cultural, political and spiritual activists is to be fully present on the journey "*im shamoah tishmah l'kol Adonai Elohecha v'hayashar b'eynav ta'aseh v'ha'azantah l'mitzvitav*, / listening diligently to God, doing what is upright in God's sight." (Exodus 15:26)

LGBT Jews can find great strength when we remember that our struggle for liberation is inextricably connected with the liberation of all peoples. The true elimination of homophobia and heterosexism requires that we recognize the plagues of racism, sexism, classism, elitism, xenophobia and other forms of oppression as inherently bound up with our own liberation struggle. We are not the first to make this journey, and we are not alone on it.



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