

Into the Sea
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Parshat Beshallah

As Pharaoh closed in, the Israelites raised their eyes to behold Mitzrayim coming after them, and, being very much afraid, they cried out to the Eternal. They also demanded of Moses, “Were there not graves enough in Mitzrayim? Have you brought us to die here in this wilderness? What have you done, bringing us out of Mitzrayim? We told you while we were still in Mitzrayim – Did we not? – to let us alone, to let us continue working for Egypt, that it would have been better to live, even as slaves, in Mitzrayim than to die here in the wilderness!” (Exodus 14:10-12)

These verses describe the four responses of the Israelites to the sight of Pharaoh’s armies approaching. Some (**being very much afraid**) were simply terrified, paralyzed by their fear, and did nothing. Some (**they cried out to the Eternal**) trusted in G*d to rescue them, and they prayed. Some (**Were there not graves enough in Mitzrayim?**) despaired and longed for a simple death back in Mitzrayim. And some (**We told you while we were still in Mitzrayim**) had been skeptical from the beginning and accused Moses with an “I told you so.”

And Moses responds to each of the four groups. “**Fear not,**” replied Moses to the people. “**Stand firm and you will see what the Eternal will do to rescue you today. You see the Mitzrim now, but you will never see them again. The Eternal will fight for you, but you must keep silent.**” (vv. 13-14)

To those who were so terribly afraid, Moses says, “**Fear not.**”

To those who would only pray, but not act, he says, “**Stand firm.**”

To those who would have longed for graves in Mitzrayim, he says, “**You will never see them again.**”

And to those who would rather live as slaves than die in freedom, he simply says, “Shut up!”

For none of these four reactions is sufficient; none will avail in bringing about the Israelites' rescue.

The Eternal said to Moses, "Why dost thou cry out to Me? Speak to the Israelites; tell them to move forward. Then raise thy staff and extend thine hand over the Sea; thou wilt thus split the sea, and the Israelites will cross on dry land." (vv. 15-16)

The sequence is interesting. G*d does not instruct Moses to split the sea so that the Israelites may move forward, but that the Israelites should move forward and only then that Moses should split the sea. And the sequence has given us a midrash.

We stood at the shore of the Border-Sea (reading, with only a slight vowel change, Yam-Sof rather than Yam-Suf). The sea was before us, the chariots of Mitzrayim were fast approaching from behind us, and we were hemmed in by mountains on our right and on our left. What were we to do?

Some said we should fight; better to die fighting for our freedom than to go back into slavery.

Some said we should scatter; the soldiers of Mitzrayim will never find us all, and some will survive.

Some said we should just surrender; better slavery in Mitzrayim than death at the shore of the sea.

*Some said we should pray; G*d has brought us this far and will not abandon us now.*

Then one man, Nahshon ben Aminadav, took action. He walked into the sea. With each step he took, the waters rose higher and higher around him.

The waters were up to his chest, and still he kept walking.

The waters were up to his chin, and still he kept walking.

The waters were up to his mouth, and still he kept walking.

The waters were up to his nose, and still he kept walking.

The waters were over his head, and still he kept walking.

He was entirely under water, unable to breathe, and still he kept walking!

*And then, in response to the absolute faith of one man, G*d granted us a miracle, the waters parted, and we all walked across on dry land!*

Shabbat Shalom.