

## Dvar Torah Parshat Beshallach 2015

Shabbat Shalom,

Because of the 7th day of PESAH, this is the third time I have had a chance to speak about Parshat Beshallach. In one I referenced Paul Muldoon's work on poetry, and how the Shira creates meaning from its actual structure on the page/or parchment, built as bricks ( L'veynim), creating an antiphonal call and response, typical of ancient Egyptian war poetry.

Another year I referenced Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Aaron Razel the Israeli singer as a way to think about Pesah as a dreamy time out of time experience that leads us to the ever renewing and miraculous quality of our existence. We are meant to submerge in the holy and will ourselves to swim to the top of the wave.

On **this** Shabbat I want to examine some aspects of the parsha which I think are relevant to our ongoing discussions at Kol Sasson on the nature of authority.

I. First is this pasuk:

V 14:6. He made ready his chariot and took his people with him. He took 600 chosen chariots and all the chariots of Egypt and captains over all of them. “

We should note that in this place the word for Pharaoh's heart is “levav” just like in the veahavta.

Rashi says. Hu B'Atzmo He himself. And then goes on...

Hate disrupts protocol as it is stated: He made ready his chariot” Hadn't he plenty of slaves? But hate disrupts protocol.

Rashi's source in the mechilta reads:

Mechilta: He did it with his own hand. Kings usually stand by, while others prepare their chariots and harness it. Whereas Pharaoh the wicked prepared and harnessed his own chariot. As soon as his courtiers saw what he was doing they followed suit.

For Pharaoh, at least, authority comes from his ability to inspire his troops to act at his will, an extension of his own personal sentiments and passions as the leader. As he hates the Israelites, so his troops are motivated by his actions to hate them and pursue them as well. Authority is personal for Pharaoh. When we think about some of the crises in the world today, we can see this type of cruel authority in motion.

Bereshit Rabbah continues:

Said R. Shimon bar Yochai” Love disrupts protocol and hate disrupts protocol. Love disrupts protocol as it is stated: Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass. Surely he had a number of servants? But love disrupts protocol. Hate disrupts protocol as it is stated : Balaam rose early in the morning and saddled his ass. Surely he had any number of servants? But hate disrupts protocol. Love disrupts protocol as it is stated: Joseph made ready his chariot and went up to meet Israel. Hadn’t Joseph any number of servants? But love disrupts protocol.... Said R. Shimon bar Yochai: Let one saddling cancel out the other....Let Joseph’s making ready for his father cancel out Pharaoh’s making ready to pursue Israel...

The midrash wonderfully juxtaposes four Biblical stories. Abraham and Joseph counterbalance Pharaoh and Balaam. The forces of loving counteract curses and warfare. God’s authority to command Abraham is based on Abraham’s willingness to show his love through obedience. But like Pharaoh, who inspires his troops with hatred we want to find some place where God shows people what authority which springs from love actually is.

How does the Torah think about love. On the human level there is Isaac, the first person to love someone in the Torah. He is also wandering around in the wilderness when he finds Rivka and takes her into the protective tent of his mother. Poor Michal is said to love David, defying her father to save him. But certainly the first place any of us might look to explore what Love means in the Torah is Devarim.

When God commands us to listen and then love with all our hearts, souls and minds, meaning, thought, lives and resources, is this an expression of God's authority? And for me, the biggest question we must ask is: how can God command love? How can you compel an emotion?

In order to answer these questions about love, I think we have to look at the second part of the parsha. I would call this section "Grumbling and testing." The people are "vayilonu" for the first—and not the last—time. They are thirsty and hungry and somewhat lost. God leads them, provides light signals by day and night, provides sweet water and makes manna rain down miraculously, enough for every day and a double portion for Shabbat. What does the text say is the reason that God does all of this?

v. 15:24-25:"And the people grumbled against Moses, saying "What shall we drink?" So he cried out to the Lord and the Lord showed him a piece of wood ( **Vayorehu**) he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule and there He put them to the test. He said: if you will heed the Lord your God diligently doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians for I the Lord am your healer. "

It seems that God is doing these things to establish authority over the people. water for obedience.

This line in Shmot looks as if it has been lifted directly from Devarim and placed here, especially with the use of words like “Shma”

The commentaries, build a case for God’s authority from here.

Rashbam says *vayorehu* means “not showed him but taught him” He began to train them that they must accept the rules He would teach them and He would fulfill their needs. What was the Fixed rule that He made for them? Heeding the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight giving ear to His commandments and keeping all his laws.”

Rashbam suggests that God is training the people bit by bit to accept authority and listen to the commandments.

Rashi says: There he made for them a fixed rule, means “At Marah He gave them some of the sections of the Torah to occupy themselves with: The Shabbat, red heifer and establishment of a judicial system. . . and “if you will heed” mean” accepting the obligation. “Doing” This refers to doing what the laws say. “Giving ear” listening for the precise details.

Rashi assumes that God establishes authority right away as a teacher to the people, imaging the curriculum that God gives them from the outset to study and discern the laws. Rambam, too, says that love of God comes from intellectual contemplation and conviction. which means that when God presents the laws to be learned by the Israelites at this moment, God is giving them the pathway to love and obey.

Ramban says that *vayorehu* means to teach too, but his approach is more like an Outward Bound Educator. God taught Moses about this special kind of wood that can turn brackish water to sweet water. God had to “teach Moses where to find the tree

because it did not grow in this particular location, or perhaps God made it appear miraculously.”

Moses educated them about the laws of the desert, to bear hunger and thirst, and to part about them to the Lord rather than complain, as well as rules to live by; to LOVE each other, to follow the counsel of the elders, to behave modestly in their tents and to deal peacefully with those who come into the camp to sell things. The experience with the water is to educate them to survive and become a more civilized society, rather than a simple show of force by God to get them to obey.

Ramban wonders why God does not follow the same tack as in Shmot 12:3 where God commands outright the practices of the Pesah?

Ramban surmises that God’s purpose was ...

to get them used to obeying commandments and to find out whether they would accept them **willingly and joyfully...**” He suggests that this is the moment where God wants to see motivation, affect, emotion and what later came to be known as simcha shel mitzvah.

Ultimately, Ramban says:

these are not precisely laws to be observed. They are more in the category of sensible rules that they will need to follow while traversing the wilderness “ a parched land with no water in it “ Deut 8:15. These are the practices they would need to follow until they arrived at a settled land. ( 16:35)

Why is God leading and extending a hand , splitting the sea, arranging light sources by day and night as a compass and sending food and water. It is to establish authority in a **certain kind of way**. God shows love and attentiveness to the people. It is more than a raw show of powerful miracles to force obedience. God proactively gives the people

structure, practices, dispositions that will have a civilizing effect on them and enable them to survive in the wilderness. When God asks for attentiveness, God is asking for an openness within the people to transform themselves physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. And this seems to be contained within God's displays of intuitive protection. This feels closer to a full understanding of what AHAVA means in the Torah.

The veahava wants us to attune ourselves fully to the ways in which our actions and our characters can become aligned. We are asked to listen and love as individuals, as leaders of families, but also as a total community. It is this love which God seeks in the first birthing moments of the nation who have just been scrubbed off from the salt waters of their new lives.

Authority is built from the core of relationship and grows and develops as the relationship grows and survives challenges. It is this authority which I think we are meant to create within ourselves, our families communities and leaders.

I want to take a moment to welcome my friend and colleague Judy Elkins and also to say that I hope to see many of you at my house this afternoon at 3 for a shiur with Rabbi Jeffrey Fox.

