

PARSHAT BESHALACH
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Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California tells the following story: Among the many Israelites who left Egypt were two men: Shlomo and Buz. Slaves never look up, they only look down. And as slaves for their entire lives, Shlomo and Buz had grown so accustomed to looking down they could no longer lift their eyes. When Moses brought the Israelites across the Reed Sea, they all witnessed a great miracle: the sea parted and they escaped from slavery. They came to know that G-d had a purpose in the nation's history. But not Shlomo and Buz. Shlomo asked Buz, "What do you see?" "I see mud," Buz responded. "I see mud too. What's all this about freedom? We had mud in Egypt; we have mud here!"

Both Shlomo and Buz were unable to witness the amazing wonders that shaped the Israelite people as a nation. They missed the miracle of their escape. The sea split before them, but they didn't see it. All they could do was see mud.

There are times in our lives when we are truly stuck in the mud. We can't see the forest for the trees or the safety of the sea on the other side of the shore in the middle of the mud in which we currently find ourselves. We lose the ability to see the bigger picture. In our Torah reading this morning we are told that the Children of Israel passed through the Reed Sea on dry land but the Egyptians, their chariots and horses, were buried beneath the sea. When we look closely at the story, the Torah tells us that as the Egyptians chased the Israelites into the sea, "G-d locked the wheels of their chariots so they moved forward with difficulty." I think what happened is they got caught in the mud and couldn't move forward. But if that is the case, how did the Israelites make it through the sea? According to a Midrash there were ten miracles that occurred as the sea divided and the Israelites passed through it, including "the soil underfoot was dry, but it changed into clay when the Egyptians stepped upon it." It was into that clay, that mud, that the chariots got bogged down and eventually could move no further as the torrents of water came down upon them.

So what did the Israelites see? Did they experience the miracle of the dry land upon which they walked or were they more like Shlomo and Buz who could only see mud? To these individuals it made no difference whether it was the mud of Egypt or the mud which somehow allowed them to be rescued at the Reed Sea. All they could do was complain about their present predicament.

We have all felt like we were caught in mud, drowning in the sea. At that point we feel stuck, worthless, and confused. We want to move forward, we know we have to, but we can't. Very often these feelings evolve into anxiety and fear which overwhelms us. But, maybe being stuck isn't the problem. It is how we perceive it. Are we able to see the light at the end of the tunnel, the dry land on the other side of the sea? Are we able to appreciate a bigger picture even as there are challenges around us at that moment?

My colleague, Rabbi Irwin Kula, published a book entitled *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life* in 2006. Eleven years later many of the statements he makes, the truths

he enunciates, and the complexities of life that he analyzes, are as current as the day he wrote them. Rabbi Kula writes: “The world at large and American society in particular are polarized by opposing, hard-held answers to controversial issues: abortion and capital punishment; who may or may not marry; even how the world is created, to name just a few.”

Rabbi Kula continues: “We’ve forgotten that as mere mortals we are meant to search as much as to find... We are finite creatures. How could we possibly have access to what is infinite; some all-encompassing Truth about the world or even our True selves? The fact is that there is no issue, large or small that we can understand fully. When we think we’ve found the final truth we are a little less alive, a little less awake, and the world itself is diminished.”

Rabbi Kula, throughout the course of his book, looks at real life events on the journey of each individual life. He reminds us that life does not flow in straight paths, it moves in a crooked fashion. Life itself is messy and, often, while we would like to have easy answers to all of our problems and complex situations, they will not come. We are left with the messiness and the responsibility to make some sort of meaning out of it.

Towards the end of his book, rather than finding answers to all the difficult and complex situations in life, he writes: “There is no surrendering our differences. There’s no absorbing embrace that removes distinctions. What’s enlivening is not what is similar about us, but what is different. What is life-affirming is the ever-expanding uniqueness of our selves and the uniqueness of others. What’s important is that we share an interest in each other’s strangeness; that we’re one with our diversity.”

In our country at this time, people believe that one answer solves every problem. In truth, there is no one answer to any human endeavor. There are many answers which need to be evaluated and judged on their own merit and on a scale of whether they are good for society and the community at-large. So often we get stuck in the messiness of life, in the mud of the sea, so that we are not able to see beyond that moment, beyond the specific issue, to search for a greater good, to understand both people and events in a different manner, to contemplate that there are answers other than ours to which we must listen and pay attention.

Recently, Eric Fingerut, the President and CEO of Hillel International, who served in both the Ohio Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives, wrote about American society. He states: “As the years pass since I last served, it is clear to me that the most lasting moments of personal growth and satisfaction were when I got to know someone who came from a very different background and perspective than me, and when I built a relationship of mutual respect with that colleague. There is such joy in these moments of intellectual pursuit and personal connection.”

The problem today is that we listen to only those who agree with us, we read only news which substantiates our point of view, we watch only the TV and cable programs which castigate others and affirm our opinions, we associate only with those who make sense to our way of thinking.

Jewish tradition is filled with debates. There is no page of Talmud that does bring disagreements among the Rabbis. But there is also a sense of the importance of listening to one another, to show a modicum of respect for one another, and to intellectually challenge one another. We need that type of debate today especially as there are some very important issues in our society. Is there only one answer to the issue of immigration to this country? Should we not be concerned both with the security that is essential for our society and the Jewish understanding of being kind and welcoming to the stranger? How is it possible that we can only see one point of view and not another? This is only one of many arguments, disagreements, contentious debates, and complex situations in which not only we find ourselves in this country, and are also present throughout the world.

In Pirkei Avot we are taught: “A controversy for heaven’s sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for heaven’s sake will not endure.” The first refers to the debates of Hillel and Shammai, the second to the rebellion of Korah and his associates. Too often we demonize the other and make them like Korah willing to tear down society for their own purposes. We need to learn to have a discussion, a disagreement, an argument for the sake of heaven. We need it in our Jewish community where we must learn to respect one another and our divergent point-of-views, and we need it in an American society which has become so totally polarized that it is impossible to talk politics with another person without voices rising and tempers boiling. These are serious times and the need to respect one another, to listen to one another and their point of view, is ever more critical.

Too often we get stuck in the mud and can’t look beyond the present moment. We are unable to see the blessings that surround us, whether it is the freedom and democracy of this country, or the beauties of Jewish tradition and the Jewish people. Unless we can see beyond the moment, we will never move beyond the specific issue. Instead we will continue to get stuck in the mud, to live in the messiness of life, and become unable to create a community and a society of caring and compassion and a people who are on a common journey. We dare not get stuck in the mud and miss what is around us on the dry land at the end of the sea.

We live in challenging times, but we dare not give up hope or faith. Let us do our little part to be respectful of others, to engage in constructive argumentation for the sake of heaven in an appropriate manner, so that we can move forward, even in the most contentious and difficult of times, to a greater good, to a more compassionate and respectful society, and to a better world.