

**“FINDING YOURSELF AT THE RED SEA PLACE”**

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And so we say: Hazak, Hazak, V'Neet-cha-zayk.

Be strong! Be strong! And let us strengthen one another.

You know, we say those words whenever we Jews complete our reading of one of the Torah's books. Today, we have read from Va-yechi – the final parashah of Genesis.

If ever there were a need to enhearten one another with this ancient admonition “to be strong,” it is now as we liturgically traverse the border of Genesis with our ancestors entering into the drama that awaits them in Exodus.

Not that Genesis has been a carefree picnic. There was trauma and change beyond description. We began with “In the beginning” and then revisited the compelling story of those remarkable and timeless matriarchs and patriarchs. We have finally witnessed Joseph's destiny in full-flower as the agent of God's saving will in time of famine.

But don't you hear an approaching storm, thunder on the horizon, as Joseph, at his death, directs, “don't leave my bones here. Take me home when the exile ends.”

Yes, Exodus will present enormous challenges and painful choices. Timing will be critical. Some decisions will be altogether beyond the people. Others will rest squarely on the willingness of a single human being to face down impossible odds.

This time, post-Katrina, invites us to look ahead to one such occasion in Exodus. Thirty-three hundred years ago, when we came out of Egyptian bondage, all went very well until we approached the Sea.

Word spread quickly from behind our ranks that troops were approaching. Pharaoh had changed his mind and was sending his charioteers to return us to slavery. And yet, from in front, we could already feel the unmistakable breezes and smell the water. There was no feasible choice: death by drowning or death by slavery.

The Rabbis pondered this fierce dilemma, knowing full well that the Torah discloses the solution: the Red Sea divided as a great miracle of divine intervention in history and human destiny. But that didn't solve the mystery as far as the Rabbis were concerned. What happened in that last second that made the Sea divide and allowed our people to cross on dry land? In the Midrash, the Rabbis spun a tale that attempted to explain it. According to the Midrash, the first one to jump into the sea was the head of the Tribe of Judah and his name was Nahshon ben Aminadov. Yes, the Midrash, not the Torah, discloses the name of the individual, this heroic and courageous man, who in the face of death or slavery chose to go forward, come what may. According to the Midrash, it was only after God saw that Nahshon ben Aminadov was willing to proceed and to go forward in an act of faith that the Sea divided and a safe way was offered for the people of God.

Years ago, I came across a poem I treasure, and this is how it goes –

When you come to the Red Sea place  
 in your life,  
 When in spite of all you can do  
 There is no way back, there is no way  
 ‘round,  
 There is no other way but through...  
 Then trust in the Lord with a faith  
 supreme  
 ‘Till the night and the storms are gone.  
 He will still the winds.  
 He will part the waves when He says to  
 your soul,  
 ‘Go on!’

I don’t know who authored that poem, but I sure do like it. Just think of all those Red Sea places to which life can bring us. Think about the Red Sea places you’ve already encountered in your life. Wouldn’t you call this moment a Red Sea place in our post-Katrina world? I would!

Given the choice between returning to Egyptian slavery and a leap of faith forward into the sea, hopeful that somehow God would provide for a future, the Midrash tells us a fellow named Nahshon ben Aminadov jumped into the water. Sooner or later, when there seems to be absolutely no way through, we will be brought to such a perplexing and confusing and extremely trying juncture in our lives. The Red Sea place, at least in our minds, is the equivalent of running at full speed into a stone wall that defies our movement forward.

I was thinking, how often in life, what seems like the end proves only to be the very beginning. For instance, John Bunyan, author of Pilgrims’ Progress, wrote that great masterpiece from a prison dungeon. That certainly wasn’t a likely setting for one of the great works of English literature. John Milton had no way of knowing that out of his seemingly futile struggle during 22 years of blindness would come his great works, Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. A little closer to home, I understand that it was only when Tuberculosis stopped him right in his tracks that Eugene O’Neill began to write his very first play.

Genius and inspiring accomplishment are far more likely to spring from desperation and sorrow than from the comforts of privilege and ease. I will speak in a short while of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s magnificent new biography of Abraham Lincoln. Suffice to say this Shabbas that she traces his greatness and unequalled service to our notion of Lincoln’s ambition. At 23 years of age, Lincoln wrote:

Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition...I  
 can say for one that I have no other [ambition] so

great at that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed.

And so, through a bleak childhood, his laborious efforts to self-educate himself, his political losses, a severe depression that all but prompted suicide, except that (as he put it), “he had done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived.” Lincoln’s indomitable sense of purpose drove him to jump when he came to the Red Sea place.

I have also learned that perhaps the single greatest preacher and religious leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a minister by the name of Harry Emerson Fosdick. In his autobiography, Dr. Fosdick told of an experience that happened to him soon after his graduation from Theological Seminary. He wrote –

In my young manhood I had a critical nervous breakdown. It was the most terrifying wilderness I ever traveled through. I dreadfully wanted to commit suicide, but instead I made some of the most vital discoveries of my life. My little book, The Meaning of Prayer would never have been written without that experience. I found God in a desert. Why is it that some of life’s most revealing insights come to us, not from life’s loveliness, but from life’s difficulties? As a small boy said, “Why are all the vitamins in the spinach and not in the ice cream where they ought to be?”

That image of 600,000 of our people approaching the banks of the Red Sea with Pharaoh’s troops and Charioteers in hot pursuit remains in my mind. And so does the picture I have of Nahshon ben Aminadov as he looked behind him and as he looked ahead, plunging into those cold and threatening waters. But only when he made that plunge, according to Rabbis, and God saw it, did the sea divide.

Contemplating this awesome Midrash, I thought of Dr. Victor Frankl, the famous logotherapist and holocaust survivor. He left us this insightful observation:

When a person finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering, he is unique...No one can relieve him of his suffering. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.

Now, let me address you – and the community in which we live under FEMA roofs, in hotel rooms, in trailers, with relations, in the upstairs that didn't flood, or in another city and state waiting, praying for a chance to come home.

Let me be very plain and to the point. I believe with all my heart that when you and I find ourselves standing at the Red Sea place, we are not there by ourselves. God is with us as a Friend and as a help; as one who will encourage, enhearten, strengthen, and enable us to traverse the obstacle that blocks our passage. We are not left defenseless in this life. In the dark of every night, at every Red Sea place, there is God! Your creator has not created the kind of world where everything works out just dandy and where bad things don't happen to good people and where every life necessarily has a happy ending.

But whatever you are facing, yours is a God who will never desert you, even as our ancestors were not left alone there on the shores of the Red Sea.

So we say it once again as a prayer, as a poem, as a creed affirming our faith when life is dark and threatening:

When you come to the Red Sea place  
     in your life,  
 When in spite of all you can do  
 There is no way back, there is no way  
     'round,  
 There is no other way but through...  
 Then trust in the Lord with a faith  
     Supreme  
 'Till the night and the storms are gone.  
 He will still the winds.  
 He will part the waves when he says to  
     your soul,  
 'Go on!'

Amen