



Beshalach

Exodus 13:17 - 17:16

The transformation from a nation of slaves who are miraculously rescued from the Egyptian army, to a nation of fighters who can stand up to Amalek is amazing.

This week's Torah portion begins with the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt and ends with the war against Amalek. And war is a theme that runs through this week's portion in a very interesting way. The portion begins with an explanation of the road chosen to leave Egypt:

"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.'" (Exodus 13:17)

As the Children of Israel approach the Red Sea, God promises victory and salvation with these words: *"The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent"* (Exodus 14:14). And indeed, God does battle with the Egyptians as the Children of Israel look on. It is a miraculous victory indeed. The Red Sea splits and enables the entire camp of Israel to pass through with ease, unharmed. Just after they cross the sea, the waters return to their normal status and the Egyptians, the entire army, eager as they are to chase the Israelites, are caught up in the sea and drowned. An astounding victory indeed!

The two verses quoted above encompass two different sorts of battles – a physical battle between nations and a miraculous battle waged by God alone, harnessing the forces of nature to defeat an enemy as mortal human beings stand by and watch. God knew that the Nation of Israel in their downtrodden state, still with a slave mentality, would not be able to face an all-out war with the Philistines. Clearly, God would have stood by Israel's side and ensured their victory, but the victory would have also depended on the will of the Israelites to fight, and their ability to plan strategies and persist until the enemy was defeated. The Children of Israel were not ready for this sort of battle when they left Egypt and therefore, God wrought his own personal battle against the Egyptians.

At the end of the portion, however, we read about the attack of the Amalekites against the Israelites, while they are still weak and newly released from slavery. The Bible lashes out against the Amalekites for daring to war against Israel during such a vulnerable period and just after God had so clearly demonstrated He was Israel's protector. The Children of Israel are commanded to destroy every remnant of Amalek upon entry into the Land. (Deuteronomy 25:17-19)

But the Children of Israel actually do battle against Amalek and they prevail. The battle is an interesting one, indeed. On the one hand, Joshua is a general – he forms an army and leads the Israelites into battle. On the other hand, Moses raises his hands as a sign of faith in God and of confidence in His deliverance of Israel in this battle. The combination of a faith-based gesture and actual fighting wins the day and the Amalekites are defeated. For God has waged war against Amalek who has dared to come up against Him. (Exodus 17:16)

The transformation from a nation of slaves who are miraculously rescued from the Egyptian army, to a nation of fighters who can stand up to Amalek is amazing, and it is the parting of the Red Sea which actually sets the stage for the transformation. The Children of Israel witnessed God's victory over their former masters. This not only demonstrated the power of God but also brought about the total defeat of those who had held them as slaves. As a result, they are able to begin the process of leaving their slave mentality behind.

Furthermore, they sing the Song of the Sea – the beautiful song of praise to God which Moses and the Children of Israel sing just after the defeat of the Egyptians. Perhaps it is the actual song, that combination of powerful words and music, that acts as a catharsis for the Children of Israel, enabling them to express their immense gratitude to God and, at the same time, enabling them to internalize the fact that God is with them, that God will indeed protect them against whatever dangers come upon them in the future. And it is this internalization of faith and reliance upon God that