

At the Edge of the Red Sea

In Exodus 14:15-16 the Lord speaks to Moses in the midst of a terrifying scene: Having escaped from Egypt, the Hebrew refugees find themselves trapped on the shore of the Red Sea: an expanse of water on one side and, on the other, Egyptian chariots in pursuit with murderous intent. In their terror the people cry out to the Lord and even accuse Moses of leading them to their deaths (v.11). Now, in verses 15-16, God intervenes...

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your rod, and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground." (14.15-16)

The sages of Israel, so attuned to the subtleties of the biblical text, noticed something odd about these two verses. Before reading on, see if you can spot it for yourself...

Wouldn't you expect God to command Moses to split the sea *before* telling the Israelites to go forward into it? Yet, the text has the order of the two steps reversed. What can be made of this?

According to one creative interpretation: some of the Israelites lacked faith at the edge of the sea. Yet God asks that they show their faith by marching into the sea even before the waters have parted. Some commentators suggest a back-and-forth discussion among the tribes of Israelites, which we might imagine like this:

"I'm not going first into the sea; you go."

"No way, I'm not going, you go first!"

By contrast, another creative version has the tribes competing for the privilege of being the first to take the plunge:

"I'll go first."

"No, I want to be first!"

How do you imagine the scene? Can you relate it to a moment in your own life when you were called to 'take the plunge' in an unknown and potentially perilous situation? How did you feel, react, behave? Did you 'go first'?

Another midrash (interpretative story) takes an even stronger view, saying that the people were doubly rebellious at the sea. Why double? Psalm 106:7 contains a repetition [evident in the Hebrew text]:

"But [they] rebelled at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds."

If the first moment of rebellion was the hesitation to go forward into the water, what was the second? The second, say some commentators, was to complain about the mud as they were walking through the parted waters!

This interpretation relies on the use of the Hebrew word for mud (*homer*) found in Habakkuk (3:15). The Jewish interpreters of old knew their Scriptures intimately and manoeuvred through the texts freely, creatively, insightfully and prayerfully. In this way they came to conclude: miracles in themselves don't bring people to faith. (Jesus himself shared this view, reluctant to be labelled as a wonder-worker.) Just like the Israelites' petty grumblings amidst the miracle of the Red Sea, so can we be blind to the divine presence in our lives, held back by our fears or distracted by the 'mud on our shoes.'

The attitude of 'counting blessings,' making 'gratitude lists' and practicing affirmation as a lifestyle behaviour are all ways to attune our hearts and minds to God's liberating presence. Review your own practices in this light. Are you quick to notice blessings or burdens? Are you more likely to praise or complain? •

Sources: Bialik & Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (New York, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996). Scripture: JPS.

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