

Parshat Beshalach

Judaism is Like An Onion

Moshe Taragin

Az Yashir – the epic “song at the sea” is suffused with classic and evocative phrases. Many of these expressions are familiar to us from our daily Shacharit recital of this section toward the end of pesukei d’zimrah. By contrast, the concluding phrase of this section is a very succinct and straightforward phrase- certainly less poetic and less colorful than earlier phrases. Having sung about Divine intervention and the defeat of our hated but feared enemies, we ultimately declared the four words “Hashem yimloch l’olam va’ed”, affirming our acceptance of Divine Authority.

The Midrash recounts a conversation in which G-d notes the profound significance of this four-word declaration. Moshe wonders about G-d’s unending interest or focus upon the Jews and their needs. G-d replies that His “attraction” to Jews stems from our pronouncement of the four-word concluding phrase. This announcement was so ‘gratifying’ to G-d precisely because it was so direct and unadorned. At this stage of history, close to 2500 years after Creation, a community of Man finally accepted Divine authority. For two and half millennia Man lived in theological chaos, unable to discern his creator, establish a moral baseline nor accept Heavenly authority. Finally, at this stage, having been liberated from Egypt, the Jews were first- first to embrace Divine authority and introduce G-d into the human experience. This simple unembellished declaration is a ground-breaking milestone in religious history.

What makes this verse- uttered at the banks of the swirling sea- so iconic? After all, a few weeks later the Jews would stand beneath the “mountain of religion” and heartily embrace Torah and mitzvot by exclaiming ‘na’aseh v’nishmah’? Shouldn’t the Sinai announcement attract greater Divine attention? Presumably, the enthusiastic

embrace of mitzvot far supersedes any announcements at the sea! Their gratitude and embrace of Divine authority at the sea is noteworthy, but why does it serve as such a milestone and such a pivot of our relationship with G-d?

In truth, this four-word phrase comprises an important 'layer' of Jewish identity. Judaism isn't a one-dimensional belief system but incorporates various tiers of belief and commitment. We all strive for a comprehensive system incorporating all the elements of Judaism, but we certainly acknowledge the value of even partial Jewish identity. Essentially, Jewish belief can be broken down into three elements – each of which can be associated with an important date along the timeline from 15 Nissan to 6 Sivan. On the 15th of Nissan, as we left Egypt and were liberated from 210 years of slavery, we coalesced as a nation. A week later we crossed the ocean, sang to G-d and designated Him as supreme authority. Six weeks later, we stood at the mountain of Sinai embracing Torah and submitting to Divine commandments. Complete Jewish identity demands adherence to each of these historical events and their respective religious modules. A complete Jew possess a profound sense of Jewish history and nationhood, accepts Divine authority, and translates that acceptance into mitzvah observance and Torah commitment. A full Jew advances along the 'timeline' from Jewish nationhood, toward embracing Divine authority, toward submission to commandments and Torah. In fact, the Sinai experience incorporates all three components of Jewish identity.

Unfortunately, many Jews- especially in the modern world of the secular city- no longer exhibit classic mitzvah observance. Sadly, for various reasons, many Jews have abandoned the commitments of Har Sinai. Some fully religious Jews view this abandonment as complete betrayal; how can Jewish identity exist in the absence of a life of Torah and mitzvot? However, in reality, Judaism is not an "all or nothing proposition". Many Jews, despite their lack of halachik adherence, none the less, still recognize G-d as Creator and as ultimate Authority. Their under-performance of mitzvot may be attributed to laziness, selfishness or philosophical questioning but in many cases their underlying acknowledgment of Divine authority is a

stout and powerful 'rivet' of their lives. They may have walked away from the events of 6 Sivan at Har Sinai but they are very much still standing at the ocean banks declaring, in their own way "Hashem yimloch l'olam va'ed".

Though these types of Jews exist across the globe, they are especially prominent in Israel where they constitute the majority of the non-religious society who are referred to "chiloni"- many of whom still bear an underlying embrace of Divine authority. Their Shabbat experience is a perfect microcosm of a Judaism which accepts Divine authority without translating this concept into absolute halachik fidelity. Many 'chiloni' Jews will religiously attend classic Shabbat prayers and even conduct Shabbat meals but will not maintain halachik shabbat conduct in a consistent fashion. We certainly aspire to more – in ourselves and all Jews, but we should not trivialize the value of this powerful form of Jewish identity. It may not encompass all layers of religious identity and this approach may abandon the declarations of Sinai, but this form of Jewish character is still a remnant of the seaside declaration in our parsha.

Just as many Jews have abandoned Har Sinai, many have also abandoned the declaration of Divine authority. Many Jews do not live with a continuous presence of G-d in their lives. Even those who admit G-d into their lives do not regard Him as an unconditional Authority. Yet, many Jews who retain a very nebulous sense of G-d still possess a powerful sense of Jewish mission. They live with a compelling sense that we are a select (if not chosen people) who are responsible to uphold moral conscience in our world. So many secular Jews have been instrumental in advancing human welfare and social equality in the modern era. The belief in "tikkun ha'olam" has positioned many Jews at the forefront of fields which have radically improved the human experience. This sense of moral responsibility, even when it is severed from a Divine mandate, is still a residue of our founding fathers and their program for humanity. Our ancestors lived deeply moral lives in a morass of immorality and introduced humanity to a G-d Who cared about human welfare and Who desired the improvement of the human condition. So many Jews, bereft of Sinai submission, and disinterested in the ocean

embrace of Divine authority still orient their Jewish lives around these ancient Jewish missions. Though these lifestyles represent a pale version of Judaism, the values themselves should be accredited and the manner in which Jewish identity is reinforced should be acknowledged. Judaism, like an onion, has many, many layers.