

## Parshat B'Shallakh

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Our Parashah for this week is the familiar telling of God working through Moses to split the sea for the Israelites to safely escape from Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Upon a successful escape, the Israelites celebrate the faith they have in God through “The Song at the Sea (Shirat ha-Yam)”. However, after just three days in the wilderness, the Israelites are hungry, quick to lose their faith, and start questioning God again. God delivers manna (bread) each day reminding them that He is the ultimate warrior, protector, and healer.

For me, this really parallels with the events last week as our country inaugurated President Biden, and Amanda Gorman recited “The Hill We Climb” as our Song at the Sea. And it leads me to wonder where we will turn our attention to now.

Will we remember the celebration and call to rise up to join the fight for justice or will we forget and turn back to our individual everyday lives? As the Lord said to Moses “How long will you(r men) refuse to obey My commandments and My teachings?” As the text describes, “When the Israelites were leaving Egypt in triumph and the future looked glorious, they thought in terms of ‘us’ all of us together. But when times become hard and there is not enough to eat and drink, they stop saying ‘us’ and began to speak of ‘me and my children’.” We need to remember this messaging for we are all in this together as one humanity. But in our recent past, it’s been too easy for our country to blame the “other” for lack of resources and focus on ourselves and those like us.

While it feels we’ve traveled a long way, there is more to do. We are in a hard and uncomfortable time. Most of us are striving to survive through COVID and our main focus is keeping ourselves safe and well. But we are also exploring how we can come together through our work with the Nehemiah Center. And this work is becoming uncomfortable. For we are asked to challenge our assumptions, our biases, perhaps even our family’s teachings and beliefs. We are asked to look at situations differently, from a point of privilege, when often it doesn’t feel like we are those with privilege. We are asked to look at systems - school systems, justice systems, health systems, HR systems for example, that

so many of us have benefited from when so many others in our country have suffered unfair negative consequences in those systems.

While it may seem we are unable to change the systems alone and nothing ever changes anyway, we may want to retreat back to our comfortable land as the Israelites did when they were in the wilderness, but I hope we can be brave warriors, like the God in the Song who is pictured hurling horse and rider into the sea for the cause of justice. I hope we can forge ahead even when it seems impossible, knowing we have God on our side leading the way to strengthen us when we may need it especially in our fight to combat racism and heal our country. I hope we can live out what Amanda Gorman called for:

“We lay down our arms

so we can reach out our arms

to one another.”

As God through Moses stretched out his arm, I hope we can reach out to one another too. Not just to our friends and families and others in this shul, but to others in our communities that may have different perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences. Can we find the bridges that lead us to walk across the sea together or will we get left behind? Can we find the common humanity that bring us together to plant a new seed that will flourish for future generations? How will we do this?

I believe that we can only control our own behavior and our own reactions. Through our own actions others respond. We each have our own blind spots but through conversation, listening to others, reflecting on our own experiences, and broadening perspectives, we can learn more about what others experience and what may be needed in the moment. Let's learn from our ancestors and not be so quick to judge, so quick to lose faith. Instead, when faced with challenges, difficult times, different perspectives, let us take a pause and respond with thoughtful inquiry, seeking to understand what's needed in the moment. Let us proceed with an outstretched arm so we can all move forward through this wilderness, this new beginning, together.

It is especially fitting this time of year as we recognize Tu B'Shevat, "the new year of the trees" to plant these seeds of new hope. For as the popular Chinese

proverb says: “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.” For the best time to address racial inequality was 400 years ago, or perhaps 40 years ago, the next best time is now.

The choice is ours but luckily we have the Torah to help show us a path forward. With hope, hard work, and outstretched arms, hopefully others will join us in this fight for justice.

Shabbat shalom!