



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parashat Beshalach 5773

January 26, 2013

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parashah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Discuss it at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar* Torah.

Please take two minutes to share your thoughts on this piece by completing this [feedback form](#).

Introduction

Parashat Beshalach concludes the narrative of the redemption from Egypt with the definitive, dramatic destruction of Pharaoh and the Egyptians at the Red Sea. This scene, recounted daily in the morning and evening liturgy, is the paradigmatic moment of redemption in Jewish tradition. A look at some of the commentary on this event can help us explore the tensions we face in our own efforts to engage in activism that will bring redemption to our world.

With the Red Sea blocking their passage ahead and Pharaoh and his horsemen breathing down their necks in hot pursuit from behind, the Israelites cry out to Moses, who reassures them that God will protect them. God then responds rather impatiently to Moses, exclaiming, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward!"¹ Rashi, quoting the *midrash*, offers two contradictory perspectives on God's impatience:

Rashi on Exodus 14:15

Why do you cry out to me? This teaches us that Moses was standing and praying. The Holy Blessed One said to him, "This is no time to lengthen your prayer, when Israel is in distress." Another explanation of "Why do you cry out to me" is [that it is as if God said], "The matter depends on Me and not on you." As it says (Isaiah 45:11), "Will you question Me about My children and the work of My hands?"

רשי שמות יד:טו

מה תצעק אלי: למדנו שהיה משה עומד ומתפלל, אמר לו הקב"ה לא עת עתה להאריך בתפלה שישראל נתונין בצרה. דבר אחר מה תצעק אלי עלי הדבר תלוי ולא עליך, כמו שנאמר להלן (ישעיה מה יא) על בני ועל פועל ידי תצוני:

Guiding Questions:

- The first explanation seems to imply that Moses should stop praying and start acting to save the Israelites while the second explanation seems to imply that Moses should do nothing and let God take care of things. What approach to activism and redemption does each explanation represent?
- In your own life, when do you respond to suffering with prayer? When do you respond with action? When do you respond with inaction? Why?

¹ Exodus 14:15.

According to the Talmud, while Moses was engaged in prayer at the Red Sea, a struggle was taking place among the Israelites. The Talmud presents two divergent opinions on the nature of that struggle:

<p>Babylonian Talmud Sotah 36b-37a</p> <p>Rabbi Meir said: When the Israelites stood by the Red Sea, the tribes strove with one another. This one said, "I will go first into the sea." And this one said, "I will go first into the sea." The tribe of Benjamin jumped and descended into the sea first.</p> <p>Rabbi Yehudah said to him: That's not what happened. Rather, this tribe said, "I'm not going into the sea first." And another tribe said, "I'm not going into the sea first."</p> <p>Nachshon the son of Amminadav jumped and descended into the sea first.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי סוטה לו--לז.</p> <p>היה ר"מ אומר : כשעמדו ישראל על הים, היו שבטים מנצחים זה עם זה, זה אומר אני יורד תחלה לים וזה אומר אני יורד תחילה . . .</p> <p>אמר לו רבי יהודה : לא כך היה מעשה, אלא זה אומר אין אני יורד תחילה לים וזה אומר אין אני יורד תחילה לים, קפץ נחשון בן עמינדב וירד לים תחילה . . .</p>
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Guiding Questions:

- According to Rabbi Meir, what problem occurred at the Red Sea and how did the tribe of Benjamin solve it?
- According to Rabbi Yehudah, what problem occurred at the Red Sea and how did Nachshon solve it?
- What contemporary examples can you think of that illustrate the challenges in taking action described by this text?
- In your own life and activism, which interpretation of the scene at the Red Sea resonates the most? Why?

Both Rashi's commentary and the Talmud explore the role of the individual in taking action to respond to danger and suffering. The poet and essayist Adrienne Rich offers inspiration to be the individual who "jumps into the sea" and starts to bring about change:

"Dreams Before Waking" by Adrienne Rich²

What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other's despair into hope? --
You yourself must change it. --
what would it feel like to know
your country was changing? --
You yourself must change it. --
Though your life felt arduous
new and unmapped and strange
what would it mean to stand on the first
page of the end of despair?

Guiding Questions:

- In your own city or country, what is one issue on which you would like to take action in order to begin to turn despair into hope?
- What is standing in your way preventing you from acting? How can you overcome those obstacles so that you can "stand on the first page of the end of despair?"

² Adrienne Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems by Adrienne Rich*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986.



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Conclusion

As the texts above have illustrated, taking action to bring about redemption or “stand[ing] on the first page of the end of despair” can be daunting and complicated. We may wonder when to take action, what action to take, who should take it and how. May the tensions inherent in the redemption at the Red Sea inspire us to struggle with these questions as we commit ourselves to responding to Adrienne Rich’s call: “You yourself must change it.”

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