

Beshalach: Tu-B'Shvat & Shabbat Shira

- Nisson Shulman.

The lesson of Beshalach, Tu Bishvat and Shabbat Shira: ALTHOUGH it was near, or BECAUSE it was near. The long hard way instead of the short easy way, from Egypt, and through history. Purifying our people in the crucible of hardship. The test of ease and luxury, versus the test of poverty.

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(based on a thought written by Louis Rabinowitz, z"l, Sparks from the Anvil)

Tuesday is the Fifteenth of Shevat, a time of thanksgiving for the good fruits of Israel. It is also Shabbat Shira, when we read and remember the great song of our people at the Red Sea crossing.

Let us go back for a moment to that time when our ancestors stood on the shores of the sea, with relief, thanksgiving, and song in their hearts. Here they were, out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of the jaws of the sea, but not yet out of trouble! Not yet in the Promised Land!

The shortest way from Egypt to Israel is the straight-line route along the coastal road past Gaza. By car today this trip would take less than a day, in those days by foot it took about eleven days.

But it was not to be. To the consternation, dismay, if not the stupefaction of the liberated people, instead of turning North, Moses led the people East by the roundabout way of the wilderness, as the Torah says, *ki karov hu* although it was near. The short way, perhaps eleven days on foot, or the long way? The long way for them was 40 years!

Now the word *ki*, two letters in the Hebrew language, can have, say our Rabbis, different meanings. Two of them are exact opposites! *Ki* can mean because and it can also mean although. So the verse *ki karov hu* can be translated in two ways: we did not take the short route although it was near. Or we can translate; we didn't go that way because it was near. Which is correct?

Most commentators take the obvious meaning, God didn't lead us the coast way ALTHOUGH it was short, because, as the text says, the warlike Philistines were in the way and we might lose heart if we saw battle too soon. It would seem impossible, in this context, to translate it the other way, BECAUSE it was near. Yet that is just how the Rabbis in the MIDRASH do understand it! They insist that the very nearness of the road was the greatest disadvantage! Just because it was near, God didn't let them go that way! Why?

The Midrash explains. "The Holy One blessed be He said: "If I lead them by the easy way, each will immediately seize a field or vineyard and never be connected with Torah. I will lead them instead by the wilderness. They will eat the Manna and drink the water of the miraculous well that followed them everywhere. And Torah will become part of their inner being."

What does this teach? That the path of least resistance wasn't good for our people; hardship and

suffering would bring out the best in them, and so we needed the hard and long road.

What an insight into the human soul this is! There are solid virtues in adversity; the struggle to overcome hardship develops maturity and wisdom and brings out unused qualities from deep beneath the surface of the personality. The line of most resistance often brings out the best in a person. The line of least resistance permits a person to remain shallow, in the words of the Midrash "unconnected with Torah".

We know the story of our parents or grandparents who came to this country fleeing pogroms or economic hardship, and how hard were the times they faced. We know of many who came during and after the war, and the horrors they experienced. Settling was all the harder because it meant learning a new language and finding their way in a strange culture.

They all came by the Wilderness Road. And often that gave them great strength of character, determination, sense of achievement, personal worth, and above all, great loyalty to our people, to our faith. They made good. And in the process a great deal of latent goodness, charitable impulse and strength of personality were expressed.

Now if we should ask these people, "For whom did you toil"? They would usually answer, "For children and grandchildren. I didn't want them to go through what I endured. Let them have what I never had".

And often, you know, that children or grandchildren of such people, surrounded by every luxury, are distressed, weak, and lack the very qualities that have distinguished their parents or grandparents; maturity, idealism, satisfaction, and loyalty to our faith and our people.

The problem is perplexing, because if parents insist that the child endures the same hardships they themselves suffered, then not only was their own toil and sacrifice without purpose, but the children may resent it all the more, thinking that these tests are unnecessary. Yet if denied the opportunity to develop these qualities, they will be deprived and our people will suffer. And so there is a much harder task ahead for these parents, to make education substitute for life's hardships. Because it is a great tragedy to see parents who have become menchen by going the long hard way, and children who have become spoiled because of their easy way.

What applies to individuals, applies with equal, perhaps even greater force, to our Jewish nation. This is emphasized by our Torah passage, the Midrash, the Talmud, and our history.

For Moses, speaking of the Exodus and desert wandering declared clearly, that God did this lemaan anotcha ulemaan nasotcha "to test you, and through the tests to elevate you"! That is why the prophet Yirmiyahu spoke of the time in the desert as the ideal time, a time of faith and grandeur and love, the "bridal time" of our people lechtech acharai bamidbar, beeretz lo zerua, because we followed God to the wilderness.

The Talmud also teaches this lesson, emphasizing that the most precious gifts God gave us, Torah, Israel and the world to come can only be won through great sacrifice. So it is with all precious gifts. We love our children, but a great deal of this love develops through the years that

we raise them and the hardships this requires. We earn our daily bread by the sweat of our faces, and that is why bread has a special beracha, and wine too, because both are symbols of man's efforts, changing the wheat into bread and the grapes into wine only by a long and arduous process. And of course our sages teach that the greatest purpose of Mitzvot is to purify us in the crucible of hardship, Lo nitnu mitzvot elah letzoref bahen et habriot.

History has born out this truth again and again. No people have had such a long and weary wilderness wandering as we did in 2000 years of exile. And no people have shown a more resolute determination to accomplish journey's end. We all know that we have passed the test of hardship much better than the test of ease and luxury. The reason is not because of stubbornness and perversity, but rather because through hardship the best in the Jewish soul rises to the surface. The easy way leaves it dormant. The Talmud attests that the mitzvot for which Jews were ready to sacrifice their lives like Pesach and Brit are more universally observed till this day than the easier ones.

In our national journey, we are not completely home yet. Much more sacrifice will be necessary, much more to be endured before peace comes to Israel and freedom to all people.

But there is a promise made by the great prophet Joel: vaachaltem ochel vesaveu, vhalaltem et shem Elokechem; that in the time of Mashiach a new condition will prevail; that "we will eat and be satisfied and enjoy every luxury, and nevertheless continue to praise God and to serve him!" In that future time, all the nobility and virtue of our people will continue to motivate and govern our lives, even in the lap of luxury.

Today, the fifteenth of Shevat, Tu Bishvat, is symbolic of this lesson; a holiday of eating the good fruit of Israel, lasova, to great satisfaction, but in the spirit of thanksgiving to God and service to Him; in the spirit of hallelu Hashem. May God bless all of us together in the coming year and years, so that we enjoy fruitful years of plenty, in the spirit of praise and service to God and to our people, AMEN.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)
