

The Authors of Ourselves
Parashat Beshalach;
January 10, 2014

We are a society that values, that venerates, indeed which almost worships the idea of choice. Maybe it was inevitable that this impulse towards input would be carried towards such a conclusion. It is, perhaps, a quintessentially American turn in literature and art: letting an audience pick its own ending.

I don't know if this began in improvisational theater, but it has moved from mysteries to musicals, comic books to movies. We encounter the experience in such works as the originally incomplete *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, or in the Italian play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. I first encountered the idea, I think, in *Shear Madness*.

In a way, however, this is not only a modern move. As Jews, we are left a legacy of literature, and it has always been the case that as we inherit stories, we play a role in what we hear, and what we allow the impact of these tales to be in the reality of our lives.

One of the best examples I can think of comes from a famous midrash about this week's portion. Now, what is a midrash? It is a story about a story in the Bible. And so we start, as we must, with the portion itself.

We have just gotten out of Egypt, stunned with amazement from such a wondrous and unexpected turn of events. We are not sure what comes next, have no real sense of where we are going, cannot believe what is going on. And we come to the shores of the sea. Faced with a barrier, we pause, and try to catch our breath.

But there is a sound, and it is like thunder, but it is not thunder. And there is a flash, and it seems like lightning, but it is not lightning. It is the sound of hoofbeats, making the ground shake; it is the glint of the sun off the exposed weapons of angry steel. The Egyptians have changed their mind, and they are coming after us.

Caught between the waves and war, we have no idea what to do. So Moses rises, to reassure us all: "Have no fear!" he says. "Stand by, do nothing, and witness the deliverance which the Eternal will work for you today! For the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. God will battle for you! You just... sit tight."

And then? And then? Nothing happens. The next line in the text of the Torah depicts God responding to Moses by saying: "Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward!"

Now, crying out to Me is interpreted as Moses standing there, just praying for a miracle. OK, God, Your turn now. Do Your stuff!

But you've got to admit it: the Biblical response is kind of strange. It almost invites the invention of more detail. Because: Go forward? Where? How?

And it is here, in the midst of that pause, in the place where nothing seems to be happening, that we get the new story. The midrash. The reading in of what might have been.

In the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, we find the following story:

“Rabbi Judah says..” [and, by the way, the name of the rabbi is important here] “Rabbi Judah says: when the Israelites stood at the sea, one said: ‘I do not want to go down to the sea first,’ and the other said ‘I do not want to go down to the sea first.’ While they were standing there deliberating, Nachshon, the son of Amminadab jumped up first, and went down into the sea, and fell into the waves.”

The Midrash then provides any verse from Psalms which has anything to do with water or drowning as a proof-text, as if those unrelated poems had been written about this story instead. But what I think Nachshon said at this point was something like: blubb, blubb, blubb, because he did not know how to swim.

The Midrash goes on: “At the same time, Moses was standing and reciting long prayers before the Holy One.” [O God, wouldn't this be a good time to show up? God, they're getting closer, and I have no idea what to do!]

“Then the Holy One said: ‘Moses, my friend is sinking in the water, and the sea is closing in upon him; the enemy is pursuing, and you think this is the right time to *daven shacharit*? To say prayers?’ So Moses said: ‘Ruler of the world, what then can I do?’” [Basically: I’m open to suggestions here.] “And God said to Moses: ‘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.’”

Now, we usually stop the story here, but the next paragraph is, I think, part of the heart of the original point of the story. The midrash goes on to say: “Now what did Israel say at the sea? ‘The Eternal will reign for ever and ever.’ The Holy One therefore said: ‘He who was the cause of my being proclaimed king at the sea, him will I make king over Israel.’”

This is a very confusing conclusion. When I first read this story I didn’t get it at all! I had to be reminded of what the name was, of the rabbi who told the story. And then I had to be told that Nachshon... was from the tribe of Judah! Judah... from whom will eventually emerge a young man named David, destined to become king, and from whose descendants, according to our tradition, will someday come...the Messiah.

Originally, then, this story was about something kind of complicated. In ways which are, I am sure, more academic than you are interested in, it was about tribal rivalry, and partisan politics. It was an attack screed on a blue and white state pro-Judah media outlet. It was praised our hero and smeared

our enemy and was every bit as mean as what we hear on Fox or MSNBC about those with whom we disagree. Nasty stuff, cloaked in a great tale.

But it is a great tale. So much so that there is a lot there left for us to work with. Most of us, I think, would give this story a different ending, or even just leave it at an earlier one. Because wow, what a lesson that would be!

Let's say we read the whole thing this way: when the people just sat there, nothing happened. It is when one jumped in, when someone moved forward, when, then, Moses reached out... only then did the waters part, and the sea split. God helps those... who help themselves.

The lesson is so potent that there is a joke about it. You know the story of the big flood, and the man who prayed to be saved? First came a firetruck, when the street was still navigable...and reached out a ladder to the man. No, no, God will save me. Then came a boat, making its way on the flooded street. The response was the same. Then came a helicopter, dangling a ladder down from the sky. Confident of divine intervention on his behalf, the man drowns. Hurt, angry, and surprised, he confronts God in the afterlife: God, I prayer, I called for You, I believed in You, why didn't You save me? The response: Idiot! Who do you think sent... the truck, the boat and the helicopter?

This is the debate, in Jewish life, between those who act, and those who wait, between Zionists who say enough is enough, we must reenter history and take responsibility for our own fate and future, and the ultra-Orthodox who

think we were sworn to wait in an exile which would only come to an end through miraculous and supernatural means. God helps those... who help themselves.

There is much to say about the lesson itself. My larger point, tonight, is just that it is in our hands, how we hear the story. Essentially, we choose the ending we want.

And this is not just about the tales we are told, but the story of our lives. The last part – no, actually, even just the next part... is yet to be written. And we get to write it.

Every day, in every way, we have a choice. Not what happens to us, perhaps, but in how we see it. Not in action, always, but in reaction.

You know the adage about the person who said: "I used to cry because I had no shoes.... Until I met a man who had no feet."

It is in our hands, how we see ourselves... and how we see the places around us. We can be frozen or move forward, we can find fault or see promise, we can cower, or we can jump.

If an American is one who always expects choice... then, perhaps, a Jew is one who, despite all of our history, flying in the face of our own experience... a Jew is one who does not give up hope.

There is so much that is wrong with the world, with each other, with ourselves. If you are not outraged, you are not paying attention. But... There is so much goodness, in us, and around us as well. If you are always outraged, you are not paying attention either. For the promise, for the potential, for the goodness and greatness... I choose to see a *k'hilah kedosha*, a holy community. In my soul. In my life. And in those around me.

Shabbat Shalom.