

Bishalach, 5774 -- "Leaps of Faith in Action: The Red Sea, Tu B'shvat, and the early Zionists"

Jews do not wait for faith and spiritual inspiration to motivate action -- neither ritually nor ethically.

Underlying this approach are 4 things:

1. our acceptance of mitzvot and other positive actions as duty-bound for us as Jews. They are our part of the bargain in our covenant with God.
2. our recognition that moments of inspiration are infrequent
3. our belief that positive actions must be all-the-time, consistent activities
4. our ability to take the leap of faith that faith, belief and understanding will come through our actions -- *Na'aseh v'Nishma*

Some of our greatest actions as a people have come, and continue to come, at moments when hope and faith are at their nadir. We persevere in action even when we are most depleted and disconnected from our spiritual source. It's quite amazing. 2 events that are central to our consciousness this week as a Jewish people, and another that is not far from it, are excellent examples of our resolve to positively act even in the most despairing moments. These actions, wholly unexpectedly, change our condition radically for the better.

- Jumping into the forbidding Red Sea
- Celebrating Tu B'shvat in the midst of winter
- Remembering the efforts of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and other early Zionists, to recreate a Jewish homeland in far-away desert and marsh after two millenia of exile.

Beshalach -- Just think about the scene. We're Israelites surrounded on all sides by either bellicose Egyptian soldiers or the Red Sea. The plagues of last week are a distant memory as we stare down the end of our future -- either drowning in the sea or being slaughtered. We still wonder why this God didn't show up for 230 years. To

us, staring at the sea, God is a deadbeat God who teases us with a short, promising stay, but who's about to disappear once again, leaving us not enslaved but dead.

We take the leap into the sea, preferring to drown rather than be killed. It's the right thing to do, to maintain our last fragments of dignity to the bitter end. Yet, as we enter the sea, it begins to dry up and we walk across the dry sea bed to the other side. Stunned to silence, we look back at the waters covering up the Egyptians, as a few others, stunned to celebration, begin to sing.

It is only then that we hear about the man, Nachshon, who took the first leap into the sea. He's a man on Moses' side since day one. He believes unfailingly that God will save us. Most of us are just trying to do the right thing by not giving the Egyptians the pleasure of ending our lives.

Now, safe on the other side of the Red Sea, we look to where our actions, modelling that of Nachshon -- albeit not with his same faith -- have taken us. To a completely unanticipated and auspicious result. We are not only out of slavery in Egypt, but we are no longer threatened by Pharaoh and his armies.

This week, we are also preparing to celebrate the New Year of Trees, Tu B'shvat, when the trees are still as bare as a baby's bottom. We see no evidence of their impending rebirth, nor did my great-grandfather, without question, in the middle of a Lithuanian winter. Our minds are inside, our bodies relishing well-heated rooms, not really thinking much about trees or the resplendent, miraculous blooming of spring. It's still cold winter-time both here -- and, to a much lesser extent, in Israel -- but we prepare to celebrate the trees and the rest of nature anyways. And so will Jews in Sweden, Canada, England and even further north. In act of mitzvah, we must thank God for the blessings of trees and nature, even though we don't feel the blessings at the moment.

Again, positive actions may bring unanticipated results. I bet that, by Friday, the day after Tu B'shvat, whether it is 6 degrees or 60, raining, shining, or snowing, if we think about Tu B'Shvat, we will have turned the corner past winter to think excitedly about the impending rebirth of spring. Spring will have begun in our souls.

At our best, we Jews act consistently, undeterred by limited or diminished faith. As we celebrate Tu B'shvat and the impending blossoming of the spring in Israel, we also should remember the remarkable actions of the early Zionists and the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which generated the belief and self-confidence that we could restore our national homeland. The JNF, slowly but steadily, purchased land to help create a haven for Jews, where they would be safe from the persecutions of the Diaspora. God and faith were not part of the calculus of these early Zionists pioneers. The actions of the JNF and the early Zionists making desert bloom, transforming marsh into useable land, and building settlements throughout the Gallilee, Sharon Plain and Negev, reinvigorated the faith of Jews around the world -- faith that our partnership with God was still alive, that we, and the land of our past and our dreams, remained part of the divine plan. That faith drove broader Zionist activity which resulted, ultimately, in the formation of the State of Israel in 1948, an event beyond the imagination and agenda of the early Zionists.

This week, as, in the midst of winter, we jump into the Red Sea and celebrate the rebirth of nature both here and in the land of Israel, we must appreciate the gift of our mitzvot. They demand that we act positively, even when we don't feel like it, are despairing, and feel empty in our belief. When we execute the mitzvot of our tradition, good things result, often in the most unanticipated of ways, as we see in these three examples.

We each have so many personal examples of this reality. The time we feel that our visits to our dimented grandmother do no good either for her or for us, and then generate the

most wondrous smile of love and recognition on her face. The time that we sit painfully in services, feeling disconnected spiritually, yet are recognized for the meaning of our presence through handshakes, hugs, and warm conversation during kiddush. The time that we make a small contribution to an organization fighting a seemingly intractable disease, and then see the survivors still living and thriving a decade later.

We take action, even in despair, because we are a people of duty and commitment, and good things come. This is part of our story as a people, part of our great success and contribution to humanity, and something that we need to continue to model to the world as Jews.

One additional note: We should sing the Song of the Sea more often, not just when parashat B'shalach comes around. After all, it's in our liturgy every morning. On Shabbat, we sing a small bit of it, in a tune evocative of gospel and the whole notion of God's salvation of us even when there seems to be little hope. There's a tune familiar to some which we can add to the beginning of the song. The more singing of the Song of the Sea, the better. It rekindles a moment of great unity for our people, gives us the goose bumps of connection to God, restores our belief in possibilities and reminds us of the existence of the remarkable in our lives.