

Freedom to Complain: Thoughts on Parashat Beshallah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Beshallah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and saw the destruction of their Egyptian enemy, they were elated. The Torah tells us that they revered the Lord and had faith in Him and in Moses His servant. They sang a magnificent song praising God for granting them a miraculous redemption.

After having described this stunning spiritual high, we would expect the Torah to then relate wonderful things about the newly liberated Israelites. Yet the passages immediately following the Song of Moses are filled with one grievance after another: the Israelites complain that the water is bitter, that they want meat, that they would rather have died in Egypt than be in the wilderness. When they complained that there was no water to drink, Moses was driven to despair. He called out to God: "What shall I do for this people; they are almost ready to stone me!"

What happened to their faith in the Lord and in Moses His servant? How could the people have fallen so low in such a short time? Why were they constantly complaining?

I think we should understand these passages as an important POSITIVE stage in the development of the children of Israel. When they were slaves in Egypt, they could not complain! And if they did complain, they had no expectation that Pharaoh would listen to them. In servitude, the Israelites had to eat and drink whatever was given to them, like it or not. If they were unhappy with the menu, that was too bad for them. There was no recourse to governmental authorities for an improvement in the situation. On the contrary, Pharaoh was an arbitrary despot who had total power over them--he could order the murder of their children, he could force them to make bricks even without his providing the necessary ingredients for brick-making. He was ruthless and unapproachable.

After the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, something important happened. For the first time, they felt they could complain! They felt that they had rights. They felt that their leader was obligated to respond to them and satisfy their needs. Slaves could not do this! Moses learned that leadership over free people was not dictatorship; he was answerable to the public.

If the Torah describes the constant complaining of the Israelites and the bitter frustrations of Moses, it is describing a new phase in the history of Israel--the first stages of freedom. Instead of viewing these passages as demonstrating Israel's lack of faith, we ought to see in these passages the emerging sense of self-respect and independence of the former slaves.

A vibrant and free society is characterized by rights and responsibilities, by complaints and compliance, by responsive leadership. Upon attaining freedom, the Israelites complained and demanded that their leader deliver on his campaign promises. The former slaves learned quickly to appreciate their freedom, to demand their rights, to assert their grievances, and to expect their leader to respond effectively.

As people develop a more sophisticated understanding of freedom, they move beyond complaining and demanding. They start to realize that they themselves must assume responsibility to make things better. They come to see that "leaders" and "constituents" have mutual responsibilities, and that each person needs to do his/her share. True freedom must entail a sense of empowerment, prodding each person to exert him/herself to resolve the problems of self, family, community, and society as a whole.

If things aren't right...complain! And if you can do something to improve the situation...stop complaining and do something!

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