Worries about our Worrying: Thoughts on Parashat Beshallah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Beshallah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Q. What is the text of an Emergency Alert sent out by a Jewish Organization?

A. Start worrying! Details to follow.

This joke reflects an ongoing reality of Jewish life. There always seems to be something to worry about, some crisis that is about to erupt, some threat to our survival. Even when we don't yet know the details, we are called upon to get into the worrying mode.

The late Professor Simon Rawidowicz wrote a fascinating essay which he entitled: "Israel--the Ever-Dying People." He points out that in each generation, going back many centuries, Jews thought that Jewish history was coming to an end. They worried about destruction at the hand of vicious enemies; they worried about exiles and expulsions; they worried about spiritual decline; they worried about assimilation. It seems that since the time of Abraham, we've been worrying about our imminent demise. Although we have been "ever-dying", Professor Rawidowicz reminds us that after 3500 years we are still alive!

Perhaps our very awareness of the fragility of our existence has given us an added tenacity to survive, to find ways of solving problems. The 19th century Rabbi Israel Salanter once quipped: "When people come to a wall that they can't go through, they stop. When Jews come to a wall that they can't go through--they go through."

This week's Torah reading includes the dramatic episode of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. When they reached the shore of the sea, they faced an existential crisis. Behind them, the Egyptian troops were coming to destroy them. In front of them was the Red Sea. They were trapped, with no obvious solution to their dilemma.

The Midrash tells of various reactions among the Israelites as they pondered their imminent destruction. Some said: we should have stayed in Egypt! Others said: the situation is hopeless; we and our families will perish. Woe unto us.

The common denominator of these approaches is that they led to psychological and emotional paralysis. Crying over what they could have done or should have done did not address their current crisis; it stifled their ability to cope. Declaring the situation to be hopeless led to despair. They came to a wall--and they stopped.

The Midrash tells that Nahshon ben Aminadav, head of the tribe of Judah, walked into the Red Sea. When the water reached his neck, then the sea miraculously split--and the Israelites were saved. Nahshon is described as a great hero because he took things into his own hands; he acted decisively; he risked his own life.

Yet Nahshon's heroism was not the result of a sudden burst of desparation. Rather, we can imagine that Nahshon deliberated carefully before entering the sea. He might have thought: God performed so many miracles for us in Egypt; God obviously has unlimited power; if God wanted us to be liberated from Egyptian servitude and to be brought into the Promised Land, surely God can and will make good on His promises to us. Armed with this reasoning, Nahshon entered the Red Sea. He was confident God would redeem His people. Nahshon came to a wall--and he went through; and he brought the rest of the people through as well.

When we receive Emergency Alerts from Jewish organizations telling us to start worrying because we are facing enormous threats, we should worry. But we should worry in the right way. Worrying that stems from regret that we should have or could have done things differently--such worrying is negative and self-defeating. The past is over, and we need to confront the crisis as it faces us now. We don't have the option of returning to the past to undo decisions. (Hopefully, we can learn from these past decisions when we get through the current crisis, and contemplate how to make future decisions.) Likewise, it is not productive to sink into self-pity and passive despair. Indeed, despair feeds on itself and infects others with a spirit of helplessness.

We should worry like Nahshon worried. We should not minimize the dangers and the risks; but we should deliberate on what is at stake and how we can overcome the difficulty. We should have confidence that if God has brought us this far, He will keep His promises to us and bring us ultimate redemption. We should be ready to act decisively, to think "out of the box", to maintain forward momentum.

On April 17, 1818, Mordecai Manuel Noah--one of the great American Jews of his time--delivered an address at the dedication ceremony of Shearith Israel's second synagogue building, on Mill Street in lower Manhattan. He closed his talk with a prayer: "May we prove ever worthy of His blessing; may He look down from His heavenly abode, and send us peace and comfort; may He instill in our minds a love of country, of friends, and of all mankind. Be just, therefore, and fear not. That God who brought us out of the land of Egypt, who walked before us like 'a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night,' will never desert His people Israel."

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