Arms and Minds: Thoughts for Parashat Beshallah, January 31, 2015

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In the first verse of this week's parasha, we learn that God led the Israelites out of Egypt through a longer route, "lest they regret [their departure from Egypt] when they see war, and they return to Egypt." If they had taken the more direct route toward the Promised Land, they would have had to confront the Philistines in battle. God "worried" that the Israelites would be daunted by war and they would run back into the slavery of Egypt.

But the very next verse informs us that "the children of Israel went up armed out of the land of Egypt." Apparently, the Israelites gathered weapons before departing Egypt, so that they would be ready to face enemies that confronted them. Question: If the Israelites were well armed, why was God worried that they would become so frightened by war that they would return to Egypt rather than to fight their enemies? Obviously the children of Israel had weapons and were expecting to use them.

The Torah is teaching us an important insight into human nature. Physical preparedness does not equal emotional preparedness. Yes, the Israelites had weapons; they had the physical tools to fight wars. But God knew that they lacked emotional preparedness. They had spears, but they did not have courage. They had weapons, but they did not have confidence in their ability to use them effectively. They had lived so long as slaves, they did not have the mindset to act courageously as free, powerful people.

This lesson applies to many aspects of life. People may attain university degrees, but still lack the confidence to actually apply what they have learned in real life situations. People may have amassed a fortune of wealth, but still feel fearful and insecure. People may live in luxurious homes, but still feel depressed and unfulfilled. The psychologist David Myers, in his book "The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty," points out that the physical conditions of Americans have improved dramatically over the years; yet, Americans don't seem to have become happier. Since 1960, the US divorce rate has doubled, the teen

suicide rate has tripled, the recorded violent crime rate has quadrupled, the prison population has quintupled. The rate of serious clinical depression has more than tripled over the last two generations, and increased by perhaps a factor of ten from 1900 to 2000. (Cited by Barry Schwartz, “The Paradox of Choice,” p. 109.)

Having material assets does not necessarily mean having emotional strength. Physical appearance does not necessarily reflect inner reality. The Talmud (Pesahim 50a) tells a remarkable story. The great sage, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, had a promising and learned son who took ill—and died. The grief at the loss of this young man was immeasurable. But then, amazingly, the son somehow revived. And the joy at his coming back to life was no doubt even greater than the grief at his supposed death. Rabbi Yehoshua realized that his son had undergone a unique experience, having tasted death but then having been returned to life. So the father asked the son: what did you see on the other side? What is the nature of the world after death? The son responded: “olam hafukh ra-iti,” I saw a topsy-turvy world. Those who are great here are small there; and those who are small here are great there. Rabbi Yehoshua told his son: “olam barur ra-ita,” you saw a clear world; you saw things the way they really are.

In this world, we cannot easily judge who is actually great or insignificant. We live in a world of illusions and shadows, and we are easily deceived. How can we know the real essence of anyone, if they are truly great or not, if they are truly good or not? How can we see things here as they ultimately are in the eyes of God? Only in the next world, the world of spirit and truth, does clarity prevail. In this world, not only are we not able to clearly understand others, but we often have difficulty even evaluating our own true selves. People seem to be happiest when their external and internal selves are in harmony, when they relate to others with honesty and kindness, when they seek to see the “olam barur,” the world in its clarity. Weapons in themselves do not make one strong. Wealth and status in themselves do not make one happy. It is the inner spirit of courage, kindness, humility and gratitude that are the keys to a good life.

Angel for Shabbat