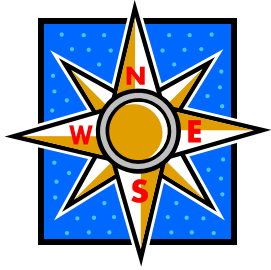


A Year of Encompassing Torah



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**Parashat BeShallach
Shabbat Shirah**

**January 19, 2008
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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,  
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,  
The Sovereign of all worlds,  
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,  
And commanded us to engage ourselves  
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah  
Is to wrestle with Torah –  
To challenge our tradition while loving it,  
To question it while celebrating it.***

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**An Added Blessing
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**

find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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**Parasah BeShallach 5768  
Shabbat Shira**

As the last remnants of the evening fog that spread throughout Egypt began to lift, Moses called out to the Israelites, "*Zuzu, chevrah!* – (Move, my friends!) It's time to go. Grab whatever you can take with you and meet me immediately on the road that leads out of town – before the fog has a chance to dissipate completely..." Hearing these words sent many an Israelite household into a tizzy. What do they take with them? Where are they going -- not that it matters much, as long as it is far away from the Egyptians. Anything should be better than the conditions under which they were living presently. Or, so they thought! But that's a subject for a different day. What concerns me on this Shabbat is the idea of what to take with us when we learn that there is a household of things to consider when told that the house that we are occupying is burning and smoke is curling around everything that we have accumulated in our lifetime, and you have a matter of seconds to consider what to take that is standing between you and escape!

"Every object that you love and every treasure that you adored will soon be turned to ashes." What is the one thing that you will strive to take with you as you exit your home? Will it be some irreplaceable photographs or perhaps the computer? Or will it be an insignificant item that was saved from an event that marked a precious event or relationship with someone you loved? Perhaps it is your private collection that is a part of your lifelong hobby! Whatever it may be, despite the safety for your own life, you feel compelled to take it with you, no matter what the end cost may be.

In composing this d'var torah I, too, have contemplated on what it is I would take with me. IN doing so, I feel quite overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the "things" that I have collected in life, and how much they weigh, not just physically, but more so emotionally and psychologically. As Edward Readicker-Henderson points out, after a fashion it is very easy for all of us to discover how little space remains in our already cluttered homes and our cluttered minds for one more thought of adding to what we already possess. At what point in our "buying" do we come to the realization that "the sacred was buried under the mundane"? (Spirituality & Health, Jan 2008) When will we face the stark reality that we can't take it all with us, whether it be a fire that we face or death itself?

"Nearly all of us are owned by the stuff we think we own..." In America, while the average sized family has decreases, the average sized home has increased – in order to accommodate our possessions. How many of us have a garage for the family automobile, but there isn't enough room to park the car in the garage because of all the things that are being stored there? My Buddhist friends have commented that there is a Hindu saying, "Desire causes suffering." How true it is that we have become so unattached to the things that we buy, that we desire more without regard for what we already have. The same can be said about the intangible items in our lives as well. Ever wonder what happens to all this stuff we spent a lifetime collecting? More often than not our children open up the garage and spill everything on the front lawn and sell it all so that they can avoid the grieving of going through their parents' treasures!

I look at my own home and I wonder what my two girls will find sentimental when I and Lynn no longer walk this earth. What will they bequeath to themselves and their step-brothers, and what will end up in other people's homes or better yet, by the curb.

In the Bible we are told that the Israelites took what little possessions they owned, as well as the dough that was made ready for baking, and they put it on their backs as the sun baked it into *matzot*, which is why we eat tasteless, dried out cardboard crackers for seven or eight days. This is what we remember from this event in our family's history – when they were forced to evacuate their homes on a moment's notice.

Edward Readicker-Henderson shares with his reading audience a different response than the one most of us are willing to share. When posed with a similar question, what would you take out of your house if it were burning, French author and filmmaker, Jean Cocteau offers an astounding answer. He says that he would "take the fire." Why bother trying to decide what is most valuable and easiest to remove when you can just as easily take out the fire instead. When we are caught forever in the dead weight of our possessions, it makes perfect sense to take out the one thing that is forcing us to decide. But, we all know, such a desire, in itself is impossible given its nature and its appetite to eat up everything in its path.

Just recently the Jewish community was taught a lesson in regard to the indiscriminate power that a fire can achieve when the Gloucester synagogue went up in flames in a matter of moments, and there was nothing that the fire department could do to stop the flames from spreading. While saving the Torah scrolls was important, even that small gesture was not available. Everything turned to ash in a matter of a few hours. Even when the fire itself was extinguished, the ashes continued to smolder for another day before it was finally put out. When the greater community came to Gloucester to be with the "mourners" we learned from them that the building was really no more than a warehouse for the things that they had collected along the way. They escaped with the more important items, the things of more infinite value than any Torah scroll would cost them to replace. They still had their memories, the ones that had been a part of the Torah and its instructions to them throughout their occupation in that building across the street from the YMCA.

We, too, at Temple B'nai Abraham, have our own memories – of the Bow Street Shul as well as the one on Lothrop Street. We are collecting those memories in preparation of celebrating our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a community. While certain events took place in the synagogue, our memories are not of the building itself but more so of the feelings that we associated being there with others. How valuable these memories are, especially since the older generation leaves us for life in a different world beyond this one.

Keeping all of this in mind, I recall the two messages that Moses delivered as the Israelites

waited for further directions from Aaron and his brother. In one scene, Moses goes before the Pharaoh demanding that he release the slaves who had been building his cities. “Let my people go” has become the defining tag line throughout the centuries both in verse and in song as other slavery movements made similar demands on government officials who refused to learn from history. However, Moses delivers a completely different message to his own people that deserves equal recognition as we gather our thoughts and our memories of this historic event in anticipation of this year’s Passover seder.

Following the ten plagues, which leads into the Torah portion for this week, this is what Moses had to say in his State of the Union address to the Israelite nation living in Egypt: "And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to that child, ‘It was with a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of form Egypt, the house of bondage...’”

What I find most remarkable is that Moses could have spoken about any number of things for the Israelites to do as they prepared to leave town on this evening before their liberation. He could have called upon them to seek revenge on a nation that had become increasingly weakened by the plagues. Yet, this is not the direction that Moses took. In their preparing to leave Moses instructs his people to pack what is most important to the fledgling nation. He reminds them not to leave behind their memories. The message of the Torah could not be any more clear: “Teach them to your children...” will become the battle cry of the Jewish people for centuries to come as the means by which we shall become free from the tyranny of others.

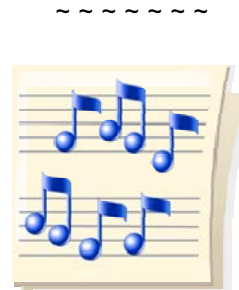
Rabbi David Gutterman states in his d'var torah, “How will this state of the Jewish union survive and thrive? In a word — education. A people can only be free and a society can only flourish where education is the passion. This is the hallmark of dignity, this is the essence of power, and this is the Jewish message.” (JWR, January 11, 2008) Education becomes the hallmark of the Jewish people. It is what will sustain us for years to come when other cultures fail.

I return to my original question. If my house were burning, what would I take with me? My

books are very important to me because of what they have taught me and the places they have taken me between the pages. Yet, nothing is as important as the fire itself. I refer, not to the one that threatens to eat up all that I have attempted to accumulate in life. No! I refer to the one that burns within me, the fire that is known as “passion” – that emotional state that motivates me to become a better person.

On this Shabbat, as we contemplate what to take with us on our spiritual journeys out of our own versions of “Mitzrayim”, what the rabbis refer to as the “narrow places” in our lives, may we find the memories that we need to take with us in a place that is easily accessible.

May the memories that take with us continue to inspire others as they have inspired us to become who we are, as we teach them with passion to our children.



### **Parashat BeShallach 5768 I Write the Song the Whole World Sings**

I have colleagues who claim that I write too much. What I have discovered about myself is that I write to think. It is the way in which I have become accustomed to sort out certain feelings and emotions that need a way to express themselves as they appear on paper, or better yet, on a screen that can easily be rearranged when the thoughts themselves become disconnected! I have also been told that I often whistle what sounds like a melody as if it roams, without beginning or end. It occurs when I am going from one place to another, including when I am standing in an elevator or going down the stairwell.

This Shabbat we celebrate in song as we recognize the passage that speaks to Israel’s response after crossing the Sea of Reeds in

their escape from slavery. We learn that the first thing that both the men and the women did, all be it separately, when the danger passed was to break out into music. In his d;var torah for this week, Rabbi Edward Feld (JTS, Bashalach, 5768) comments:

“When the inner world of feelings swells beyond what the mouth can express, what remains is ... song. Music transcends the boundaries of words and transforms a moment into an expression of release. Songs of joy, songs of redemption, songs of healing, songs of pain - without words, the notes and verses reveal a moment of Truth, characterized by clarity, presence, vision and understanding.”

Music is a very part of the fabric of who we are, as individuals and as a nation. Wherever we go we are greeted with some form of music, whether it be the grocery store or the shopping mall. In the gym, all of the exercise equipment now has the capacity for us to hook up our earphones to listen to the television as we exercise, if we do not have our own personal music devices to keep us company and stepping to the music. It has not escaped my noticed how our children have memorized dozens of songs but cannot remember beyond the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence!

The music we listen to helps us with out moods, and the words themselves become a part of our vocabulary. It is no wonder that the sages who created the siddur, the prayer book, lifted these lyrics to be included as part of our daily routine in the synagogue. To highlight its significance, to distinguish this event from the other parts of the Torah narrative, the scribes have created a blocked effect with the words. I once heard that they wrote the words this way to remind us about the bricks that our ancestors once made to build the Pharaoh's cities. Now we create a new structure out of the blocks of words.

Now I learn something new from Rabbi Feld who comments that what we sea in the written form of the Song of the Sea are written blocks of words in which there is more white space between the words than the black ink of the words themselves. The reason for this is to remind us that “sometimes what is not said is often more profound that what is actually expressed.” Music is what represents the white space between the words. Music is the power that draws things together because it transcends

the words. Music is a language that does not require interpretation from one culture to another. More importantly, music has the power to heal.

We learn in the Book of Saul that whenever the evil spirit had fallen upon him as King, David was invited to bring his lyre and play it for the king. When he did so, the text tells us that the evil spirits lifted themselves from harming the king. On one level I knew that the songs that David wrote as psalms had a very powerful effect over the soul. What I did not know is that oncologists have been using music as part of the therapeutic process with their patients who were suffering from cancer. According to a report written by Mitchell Gaynor, music has helped cancer patients in the healing of their disease. He claims that when a person is sick, he or she is out of tune with the rest of the world that vibrates at a certain frequency. “Vibrations from music or instruments work to re-harmonize their bodies.”

Just as the automobiles that we drive need to go into the repair shop every once in a while for a retuning, we, as humans, need to consider re-harmonizing ourselves by letting our souls react and refine themselves to the music of the world, no matter what our mood may be.

Shabbat Shirah is a gentle reminder to those who don't pray on a daily basis to reach out to the words of the Torah that remind us what it means to give our souls a musical voice to connect to.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our heart find expression as the music we sing enters the chambers of our heart, bringing with it harmony, peace, and wholeness.

May the individual notes that we sing ourselves, penetrate the deepest recesses of our being, as we each seek our own way to “sing a new sung unto God.”