

**B'shalach:
Stand Still, Get Quiet
Exodus 13:17 - 17:16
Rabbi Rachel Goldenberg**

In this week's parasha, the Israelites finally make their way toward freedom. They are encamped near the Sea of Reeds when Pharaoh has a change of heart and sends his army after them:

[10] As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to YHVH.

[11] And they said to Moses, "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?"

[12] Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?'"

[13] But Moses said to the people, "Have no fear! **Stand by**, and witness the deliverance which YHVH will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again.

[14] YHVH will battle for you; you **hold your peace!**"
(Exodus 14:10-14)

י ופרעה הקריב וישאו בני ישראל את-
עיניהם והנה מצרים | ניסע אחריהם
וייראו מאד ויצעקו בני ישראל אל-
יהוה:

יא ויאמרו אל משה המבלי איך קברים
במצרים לקחתנו למות במדבר מה זאת
עשית לנו להוציאנו ממצרים:
יב הלא נזה הדבר אשר דברנו אליך
במצרים לאמר חדל ממנו ונעבדה את-
מצרים כי טוב לנו עבד את מצרים
ממתנו במדבר:

יג ויאמר משה אל העם אל תיראו
התוצבו וראו את ישועת יהוה אשר-
יעשה לכם היום כי אשר ראיתם את-
מצרים היום לא תספו לראתם עוד עד-
עולם:

יד והוה יהוה ילחם לכם ואתם תחזקו:

The Israelites are trapped. They have nowhere to go - the Egyptian army is gaining on them, and on the other side is the Sea of Reeds. Fear turns to anger turns to blame. They are so overwhelmed that they are ready to head back to slavery. In verses 13 and 14, Moses's response is to tell them to stand still (*hityatzvu*), watch what is happening (*ur'u*), and get quiet (*tacharishun*) - classic mindfulness instructions.

We can't deny the fact that the Torah frames this narrative of our redemption in terms of war and battle between God and our enemies. However, what struck me this year is how the Israelites themselves do not participate in a battle against the Egyptians here. A force much greater than themselves - YHVH - will neutralize the danger, causing the Egyptians to drown. In the

meantime, the Israelites' challenge is to "stand by and witness," without fighting or running back to Egypt.

We can probably think of examples in our own lives - likely not as dramatic as this scene at the Sea - but where we are feeling attacked, endangered, cornered, or overwhelmed, and where we are tempted to run away or fight back. It could be a situation or interaction at work or home. In my own life, it can be something as mundane as being invited to do an extra speaking or teaching engagement. The pressure of my schedule, my ego's desire to get in front of more people, feelings of guilt if I say no and disappoint someone, worry that I'm not spending enough time at home with my kids - all of these enemies combine, creating great enmity and constriction internally. Fear of not being good enough tempts me to say no, fear of missing out on an opportunity tempts me to say yes. Self-absorption draws me into a victim's story about never having enough time for the things I want to do. Anger and blame might even arise at the very lovely people who invited me for putting me in this position!

In these situations, when I can call upon my inner Moses, reminding me to "stand by, and witness," I'm much more likely to do the wise thing and not say yes or no right away. Later, with more witnessing and sitting with the fear and anger, I can breathe and soften around the enmity, creating more space internally. I can then come back to the decision with a clear head, my ego in check, and a more realistic sense of what will best serve me, my family, and the world. There is no need to fight or to run away. The "enemies" sink away on their own, into the sea of loving awareness.

You made Your wind blow, the sea covered them;
They sank like lead in the majestic waters.
Who is like You, YHVH, among the celestials?
Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in splendor, working wonders?
You put out Your right hand, The earth swallowed them.
In Your love You lead the people You redeemed.
(Exodus 15:10-13)

י נשפת ברוחך פסמו ים
צלו כעופרת במים אדירים:
יא מי כמכה באלם יהוה
מי כמכה נאדר בקדש
נורא תהלת עשה פלא:
יב נטית ימינה תבלעמו ארץ:
יג נחית בחסדך עם־זו גאלת
נהלת בענך אל־נוה קדשך:

This dynamic that we witness in our individual minds and hearts has broader implications for how we seek change in the world. In her book, *Love Your Enemies*, Sharon Salzberg reminds us of the constricting nature of anger, fear and self-absorption, and how these qualities are not the most helpful or sustainable internal motivations for pursuing justice. She brings a teaching from Ethan Nichtern, founder the Interdependence Project¹:

¹ Sharon Salzberg and Robert Thurman, *Love Your Enemies*, Hay House: New York, 2013, p. 152.