

D'VAR TORAH – PARSHAT BESHALAKH

January 22, 2005

by Esther Ticktin on the occasion of her 80th Birthday

What I want to do in my דבר תורה *d'var Torah* today is very ambitious, and at the very outset I need to ask your indulgence on two matters. First of all, it will be much longer than what we usually tolerate as an introduction to a discussion, but I hope you'll listen to it as an 80th birthday present for me. And, secondly, in the same way, I honestly hope that instead of responding with testimonies of appreciation of me, as we often do on such occasions, you'll try instead to address the problems, the thoughts and feelings, and the challenges that I am going to raise in this דבר תורה *d'var Torah*.

I will eventually deal with the שירה *shira* – the song of the Sea of Reeds – that we have just read, but I'll get to it in a convoluted way. What I really want to talk about is: What is *Torah*? And what is *Torah* for me? In what sense is it holy and how do we study it best as a part of שבת *Shabbat* services? I have struggled with these questions for many decades, and I want to share some of these experiences with you today.

When I was about 16-18 years old, in the middle of WWII, having recently come from Europe, I belonged to an orthodox Zionist youth movement that trained young Jews for Aliyah to Eretz Yisrael, communal life on a kibbutz, and work in agriculture. Our slogan was תורה ועבודה *Torah ve'avodah*: "*Torah and Labor*." I had joined the movement in Europe in the early days of Hitler. עבודה *'Avodah (Labor)* represented the physical building of a nation and a national homeland in the ancient historical home of the Jewish people. תורה *Torah* meant Jewish religion, understood by me at that time as the traditions practiced mostly by my mother: Shabbat, kashrut, the holidays, Jewish prayers, and the belief in a God who wanted us to observe His מצוות *mitzvot*, the most important one of which was (to my mother) צדקה *zedakah*: helping the poor, feeding the hungry, and generally caring for our fellow human beings. I had no doubts about תורה ועבודה *Torah ve'avodah* being enough to build my life around; I felt exhilarated by my ideals and my future. I didn't really know much about orthodoxy, except that

both my parents were raised in orthodox homes and that they learned their love and concern for others and their sense of justice from that tradition. Both my father's secular humanistic Socialism and my mother's gentle care for the poor, I was always told, had their roots in that tradition.

I had some close friends in the movement, all of us waiting for the end of the war so we could go on Aliyah and work on building the Jewish homeland and lead a life of equality and justice on an agricultural kibbutz. But apart from my close friends and the fiery pep talks of the leaders, I didn't see much caring and love in the behavior of my *chaverim*, towards me, towards each other, or towards strangers. It made me question the value of idealism – the total devotion to a set of slogans. Does it really make us better people? Is it a foundation for a better life, for a more compassionate society? And what about orthodoxy? Does it somehow put the emphasis on strict observance of laws that have little or nothing to do with compassion, respect for others, care for the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable – in other words, with seeing every human being, including women, as created in the image of God?

Right around the time when I asked myself these questions, a number of *chaverim* organized themselves as a “*gareen*,” a cell group that would train together and eventually, as soon as the war was over, go on a kibbutz in the Land of Israel (or, as we usually said at that time, in Palestine). I guess I was very ambivalent about applying to be accepted, and my way of expressing that ambivalence – I now know – was in a letter saying how much devoting my life to the building of Eretz Yisrael meant to me, and how much I believed in the communal equality of kibbutz life and the practice of תורה *Torah*. The only reservation I had – I wrote – was that I did not believe in תורה מסני *Torah mi Sinai* – meaning that I did not believe that the words of תורה *Torah* came directly from God on Mt. Sinai in any literal way. I added that I was prepared to lead a *Torah*-true life in every regard because I believed in a disciplined tradition-based lifestyle, and, of course, I'd be ready to raise my children in a fully religious way.

Well, the group didn't accept me, and I said to myself, "Thank God!" and was free of orthodoxy forever.

But God and the Jewish people and "Jewish teaching" (another word for *Torah*) and tradition have never lost their importance for me, and over the last decades, my commitment to them has grown and deepened. I have learned many ways of reading *Torah* – other than the orthodox way – and many of them are interesting, but have nothing to do with the famous Jewish triad: God, Torah, and the people Israel. For example, knowing and believing that there are many historic layers of tradition incorporated in תורה *Torah*, that it certainly wasn't all written by Moses, that it represents many points of view – all that is very interesting, and historically, objectively, no doubt, truer than the traditional belief in a god-inspired single author, but it doesn't help me in finding God's word for me or for my people Israel in my world today.

Nor do I see much point in reading *Torah* to prove how much more advanced and civilized ancient Israel's ethics were than those of its pagan neighbors. That may be something to be proud of, but it is not *Torah* in the sense of teaching us how to live a God-centered life today.

How, then, do I read *Torah*, in a way that makes it, indeed, as the סדור *siddur* says:

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה

Etz chayyim hee lamachazikim ba

It is a Tree of Life to those that hold fast to it

And

דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום

Derakheha darkhei no'am, vekhol netivoteha shalom

Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace. ?

I am having trouble conveying in a few sentences the full, powerful impact of what תורה *Torah* means to me. The way we treat the handwritten scrolls with awe and tenderness, dressing it carefully and beautifully, kissing it, guarding it with our life, learning its content and the correct way of reciting it, making it the center of our בר Bar and בת Bat Mitzvah – all this doesn't quite make its being a tree of life for us. Sometimes it even strikes me like a memorial service for a beloved and honored dead. Much closer to my sense of making it a tree of life is Fabrangen's stubborn and persistent ritual of reading the whole פרשה *parsha* in our own language each week and discussing its meaning for us. The earliest founders of Fabrangen had the genius and understanding of instituting this rich and promising innovation in the weekly Shabbat service. Of course, we don't always stick to the task of asking the questions of *Torah* that would make it a Tree of Life – but we keep coming back to the same פרשה *parsha* year after year (for more than 30 years now!), so the questions eventually do come up.

Finally, then, what is תורה *Torah* for me? I'll quickly dispose of the questions of authorship, dating, and historicity. As far as I know, no one as yet has come up with an accepted date of when or where the תורה *Torah*, as we now have it, was put together. I am assuming that it was composed many centuries after the events that it describes and many centuries before the Rabbis and the Church Fathers put into writing their interpretations. I believe that the author of this wonderful epic was a deeply religious Jew, a literary genius, and a profound psychologist. He – and I assume it was a man, judging from his treatment of women – obviously based his story of the beginnings of the Jewish people on ancient oral stories, more or less succeeding in resolving contradictions, but most important for future readers of his epic, he believed firmly in the relevance of God to human affairs.

Regardless of when or by whom the תורה *Torah* was written, it seems to have been almost immediately accepted as the book that defined us as a people and as a testimony to our relationship with God. By accepting the תורה *Torah*, we accepted our task of doing God's work on earth and modeling a God-centered society to the other nations. The problem, of course, is (and always has been) how we are to do all this. And Jewish tradition has struggled with this question for at least 2,000 years.

The early solution was to compose a basic set of laws that are found in the *Torah*. But the question was and remains how can time- and culture-bound laws predict what a living God will want us to do? The early and longest-lasting solution seemed to be to have dedicated and truly religious Jews interpret the תורה *Torah* laws for each generation. But these, originally, time-relevant interpretations eventually also resulted in a narrow orthodoxy, incapable of transcending the letter of the law. That has been the experience of all religious ideologies trying to translate individual visions and experiences into systems of social justice and peace.

What, then, is the invaluable holiness of the *Torah*? To me, it is the witness of our covenant with God: nothing less and little more. When I read *Torah*, I say: I belong to a people who has dedicated itself to do God's work on earth. What is that work? The way the prophet Micah put it is still, for me, the best way for both individuals and for nations: "God has shown you what is good and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

I read *Torah* not to find a prescription on how to live such a life today. But for essentially two reasons: to rededicate myself to the covenant between God and the Jewish people – which includes me, and to see how the early Jews did it. And here I read with sympathy and empathy, but not uncritically. I don't believe that the author of the תורה *Torah* knew what was on God's mind, nor – in the case of Abraham, let's say, that Abraham interpreted clearly what God told him to do with Ishmael or with Isaac. I believe that we can know God's will, but we can also easily confuse our guilty conscience with God's command to us. So, I read the *Torah* carefully but also critically.

What I hope to get from the weekly discussions are some ideas and guidance about God's word to us as we face personal and political situations as Jews today.

Now, let me see what I might say about today's פרשה *parsha*, about the Song at the Sea of Reeds. ---

It is first of all a song of triumph over Evil and the final step in the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. So it's a joyful song of tremendous relief: we're finally really out of our bondage – we're finally free! The triumph is not only over the enemy who wanted to keep us as his slaves. It is also over the enemy's hubris, over Pharaoh's thinking that his chariots and riders were world-class and could easily defeat the fleeing Israelite slaves.

And I must admit that I can identify with Moses' and Miriam's singing and dancing at the sight of their pursuing enemies drowning in the sea. I certainly felt something of that when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. It meant the end of the War to me, and the end of torture and death of millions of my people. (It was only much later that I asked the questions of justice, humanity, responsibility for the future, etc.)

But the relief and triumph over evil is not the major theme of the song. The major theme is the glorification of God and God's power and God's control over nature for the sake of His people Israel. The whole story seems staged by God who will reward Israel's trust in Him by letting them pass through the sea as the waters formed a wall on each side so they could pass through dry land, and who will then return the surging waters to make the mighty Egyptian army drown.

My questions are the obvious ones: Does anyone still believe that the God we know because He/She is part of us, as we are part of this God, who loves justice and cares for the humble, the vulnerable, and the poor, is an all-powerful God who controls earthquakes and tsunamis and lets them loose on sinning humans because they don't

believe in Him? A God who would snare the Egyptians into destruction to prove that He is more powerful than the Pharaoh?

I do believe that God wants us to defeat the Pharaohs. We do God's work and we do celebrate the victory over Hitler – as I did. But what after the song of triumph?

Reading *Torah* in every generation afresh, as I believe we have to, our ancestors, the Rabbis of the Talmud were also troubled by the song and by the way it attributes to God the human tendency of self-centeredness, competitiveness, and desire for vengeance.

In an often-cited Midrash in Tractate Megilla of the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan expressed the view that God does not rejoice in the downfall of the wicked. The ministering angels wanted to sing Hallel, a hymn of praise at the destruction of the Egyptians, but God said: "My children lie drowned in the sea, and you want to sing?"

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What I hope to hear from you in the discussion is what does the weekly reading of the *Torah* mean to you?