

*Parshat B'Shalach* is an exciting *parsha*; it possess riveting drama, compelling dialogue, and wonderous events. It details the final stage of the departure of *bnei Yisrael* from Egypt as they enter the wilderness and approach the Sea of Reeds just as Pharaoh – who has had a “change of heart” – pursues them with “six hundred of his picked chariots” (14:7). God and Moses unite forces to split the sea and then restore it, annihilating the Egyptian army. Once on the other side of the Sea, *bnei Yisrael*

exhibits the behavior that will become commonplace during their near forty year sojourn in the desert.

That behavior is encapsulated by one word –

“grumbling,” or in Hebrew וַיִּלְלוּ. This word will

recur throughout the *parsha* and appear in future

*parshiot* as well. The grumbling is not, however, the

focus of what I’d like to talk about today. A more

preeminent theme emerges in *parshat Beshalah* that

is more significant than grumbling. It is more

significant because it exhibits itself among the

Israelites and the Egyptians. It appears to be a characteristic that the two peoples share in common. Furthermore, the theme I am about to identify gains resolution at the end of the *parsha*, which signifies to me that it is the true subject of this section of the Torah.

This theme revolves around a couple of related human habits: forgetting, memory, nostalgia, phantasmagoric wish-fulfillment, trauma, and horror-fantasy. As I take you through the examples,

my point will become clearer. The verses that I will touch upon are:, 14:11, 16:2-3, and 17:2-3.

First, I bring before you 14:11. The Israelites say 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? 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’?”

You really have to pause when you read this verse, and you can't listen to closely to it since it will recur in one form or another throughout the remainder of

the Torah. The Israelites *yearn* for Egypt. They explicitly state that they prefer slavery in Egypt. On one level this makes sense since the only alternative they to slavery in Egypt is death in the wilderness. Surely, life – even a life of bondage – is preferable to death. Once again, perhaps you might think a statement like this makes sense since it is uttered before Israel crosses through the Sea of Reeds on dry land. Yet, they utter nearly identical words *after* they have reached the other side in safety, seen the

Egyptians dead on the shore, *and* sung to God in praise for delivering them and defeating the Egyptian army. 16:2-3 states:

“In the wilderness, the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.’”

The same fear expresses itself here: death in the wilderness. The description of that death and of the slavery they mention is more detailed, more vivid.

Their death will be one of starvation. The memory of

slavery now includes the abundance of food they enjoyed – fleshpots, ample bread – in spite of their bondage. Most shocking, they imagine that their death in Egypt would have been by “the hand of the Lord” rather than their actual persecutor. The *parsha* contains a third example of *bnei Yisrael*'s perplexing recollection of their life in Egypt and their fear fantasy about dying in the wilderness.

“The people quarreled with Moses. ‘Give us water to drink,’” they said; and Moses replied to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you try the LORD?’ But the people thirsted there for

water; and the people grumbled against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’” states 17: 2-3.

Similar to 14:11 and 16:2-3, the Israelites express their fear of death. To be more specific, they suggest that Moses will be responsible for killing them, their children, and their livestock. While they don't claim that they had access to ample water in Egypt – as they did to food – they still lament not being in Egypt any longer. Now is the moment to gather together these three passages and unpack their

meaning. What they possess in common is a certain recollection of a previous state – which we generally associate with memory – but one that does not accord with what we would expect based on what we know of the Israelites' past. The proper term for describing these passages is not memory, but nostalgia.

I first learned about nostalgia in the summer after my senior year of high school. Shiri has tired of me saying this, but my senior year of high school

was an extraordinary year – a year so unbelievable that I dare say few have ever experienced such a year. The culmination of fifteen years living in my town, I felt a sense of command and enjoyed a respect that was uncommon. Yet, it was all earned.

In all the activities I participated in, I excelled. In student government, sports, academics, and theatre, I experienced one success after another.

The consequence, however, of having such a great year was that when it ended, I found myself in

the odd group of people who would rather have stayed in high school than gone on to college. Nearly all high schoolers look forward to college. In spite of the enticements of college, I sensed that my freshman year of college would never match my senior year of high school.

I share this so that you know my state of mind when I picked up the novel One Hundred Years of Solitude. The word *bashert* can sometimes carry an eerie quality. This novel, written by the Latin

American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez spoke to my mood and state of mind as profoundly as one can imagine. The novel gripped me, and I spent many afternoons dwelling with it. I anticipated it when I put it down, and I was wary that it would soon end. More than twenty years later, I can't share with you many details about the novel. It depicts a family in a Latin American town across generations and describes the nature of Latin American political life with its instability and recurring revolutions and

counter-revolutions. The narrative is punctuated by phenomenal scenes of love and romance. I don't know at what point I became aware of what was its preeminent feature, but eventually I recognized the novel as a masterful account of nostalgia.

Nostalgia isn't a word you use in your everyday discourse. For certain, it's a relationship to the past. The key word there is "relationship." The past is not over. One continues to dwell in it; more importantly, one yearns for it. Immediately, you should notice the

paradox. To yearn for that which has happened inverts the true nature of yearning. Yearning is grounded in desire and points to the future. One cannot yearn for the past; yet that is precisely what nostalgia is.

For many years, I cherished nostalgia, nursed it, and cultivated it in the spirit of One Hundred Years of Solitude. At some point, though – I can't say exactly when – a new attitude developed within me toward it, and I began to regard it as the “dreaded

nostalgia.” We call this living in the past. But nostalgia is an even more severe condition than “living in the past.” It can effectively deny the existence of the future. It ultimately affirms myth – a category that denies the distinction between past, present, and future.

When I was in Reading at my last pulpit, one of my congregants was a Literature professor at one of the local colleges, and he gave me an essay he had written about another Garcia-Marquez book, No One

Writes to the Colonel. While the action in the book occurs, as in nearly all his books in Latin America, the author situates it in time with reference to one historical event in 1956 – the Suez Crisis, a war in which Great Britain, France, and Israel joined forces against Gamal Nasser's Egypt. The mention of this event betrays the political outlook of Garcia-Marquez. Sympathetic to Nasser, Garcia-Marquez was a Third World Marxist. His sympathy with Nasser was continuous with his opposition to Israel.

None of these facts, alone, however, is important.

What is important is how they provide a background for the achievement of his artistic description of nostalgia.

Nostalgia as a personal concern is not all that important, but I believe that what we see in the world is something much more disconcerting.

Nostalgia is the undercurrent of large and popular political outlooks.

The Torah states, “But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left” (14:29). We live in a world in which the extremes of political discourse have made walking in the middle “on dry ground” nearly impossible.

Diagnosing the extremes of the Right is simple.

Authoritarianism runs through the extreme right like a blatant streak. The extreme of the Left is not

properly discussed. What I suggest to you is that its defining deformity is its underlying nostalgia.

To understand the reaction of the Palestinian Authority, for example, to President Trump's peace plan last week, one needs to recognize how nostalgia shapes the Palestinians' political outlook. An idyllic past – one that incidentally includes no Jews, or Jews who live exclusively in a subservient position – is at the center of their political activity. It is the

most persistent expressions of anti-modern and anti-liberal politics in the world today.

To conclude, the statements that *bnei Yisrael* makes to Moses are expressions of nostalgia. The Torah shows us these expressions because our human nature makes us prone to this disposition. Clearly, the Torah teaches against nostalgia.

Nostalgia continues to be a powerful force in the political world, giving shape to and narrating the

postures many people adopt. The very end of the *parsha* presents us with a counterpoint to nostalgia:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Inscribe this in a document as a *reminder*, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!’” (17:14).

The Hebrew word for “reminder” is זְכָרוֹן whose root

is *zion-caf-reish*. This root word will be

indispensable in shaping the outlook of *bnei Yisrael*.

It allows us to properly regard the past – without

collapsing into myth – for the sake of the future.

May our future continue to be bright.

B'Shalah