Commentary on Parashat Be-Shallah

By Bettijane Eisenpreis

*Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, “The people may have a change of heart when they see war and return to Egypt.” So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.”*

Exodus 13: 17-18

From the very beginning of the Exodus from Egypt, as the Israelites are taking their first baby steps to freedom, God knows there is going to be trouble. He tells Moses to lead the people away from the land of the Philistines because, if they see even a hint of war, they may turn tail and go back to slavery in Egypt.

Why would anyone prefer slavery to freedom? There’s a saying about people preferring the devil they know to the devil they don’t know. Looking back, the people are going to remember Egypt as being a much better place than it really was. They will remember that they had plenty to eat, and they will forget the lashes and shouts of the taskmasters. Egypt was familiar territory; the wilderness is not.

These people have been slaves for over 400 years. They are not used to making decisions for themselves. From the moment they got up in the morning to the time they went to sleep, the pattern of their lives was prescribed by someone else. And now, they have been uprooted, pushed into a perilous journey with no end in sight. The departure from Egypt is only the beginning of a long period of “kvetching” about everything – food, water, the leadership, etc. They are not uniformly thrilled, either with Moses or with God. And both God and Moses want to give up on them from time to time.

Why did God do it? Why free them if they don’t want to be free? Anyone who is a parent, or who has had any contact with children, knows the answer. Growing up is hard to do, but it is essential. Little babies are cute to look at – but ask any mother or father who has to get up three or four times during the night – it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. People, and nations, must mature. It’s a painful process, but it has to happen.

There is another part of the quotation above that also deserves mention. God is said to have led the people by way of the Sea of Reeds, not the Red Sea. Wait a minute! For all of you who are old enough to remember, or who have watched the movie on late-night TV, did Charlton Heston lead the Israelites through the Sea of Reeds? Of course not; it was the Red Sea.

I’ve looked at three different Torah commentaries and they all agree that previous translations were in error. Red Sea sounded good, because it was a real place that people could find on a map. “Sea of Reeds” is unclear, but that’s what the Hebrew says. Was it really a sea or could it have been a marsh with reeds growing in it, difficult to cross but not impossible? That interpretation could cast doubt on the miracle of God’s parting the waters for the Israelites to cross on dry land.

The name of the sea is much less important than the story. A people has been enslaved for 400 years, until God sends them a great man to lead them from slavery into freedom. The story of the crossing the sea on dry land is a foundation myth – one of those stories that parents have told to children for ages and ages. We read about it on Passover every year, and we thank God that we survived to tell the tale. As we say each Pesach, if God had only led us across the sea on dry land, Dayenu – it would have been enough!