



## No Victory Until All Have Crossed the Sea Parashat B'shallah 5782

Rabbi Sharon Brous

*On the shabbat of my son's bar mitzvah, I refuse to flatten our Torah or defang our heroes, robbing their words of their firepower precisely when we need them most. Dr. King was a radical, just as the story of our liberation from enslavement in Egypt is radical. For this fraught time, a radical read of the moment: exploitation and oppression, suppression and subversion thrive today only because enough of those who have reached the shore of freedom are prepared to turn our backs on those still scrambling to escape harm's way.*

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I love when Dr. King's birthday weekend coincides with Parashat B'shallah.

I love it because the narrative of our ancestors finally emerging from the long, dark night of captivity and crossing the sea into the dawn of their liberation is so pregnant with meaning for our time, and Dr. King wasn't about to let us forget it. For him, this was no bedtime story. It wasn't even meant to be descriptive: it was prescriptive. It wasn't past—it was present.

Dr. King loved this story. We know that, because he spoke of it often. In a sermon after Brown v Board of Ed in 1954—one of my favorites—called the Death of Evil Upon the Seashore, he proclaimed that when the Israelites witnessed the bodies of the Egyptians washed up against the shore, they knew it meant that “evil in the form of injustice and exploitation cannot survive. There is a Red Sea in history,” he said, “that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory. And that same Red Sea closes in to bring doom and destruction to the forces of evil.”

This is the very heart of my theology, as many of you know. The fuel of my spiritual life and political commitments, the heart of our communal work to build a more just city, nation and world.

You know, we could talk together on this Shabbat, this sacred weekend when we celebrate the life and legacy of Dr King, of Dr. King's most potent dream—in which his children, and all of ours, are judged by the content of their character not the color of their skin. We could pay homage to his dream, a dream that has fueled and inspired social movements not only here but around the world.

But today is my son's bar mitzvah. And I fear that Levi, along with all of our kids, is growing up in a world in which we flatten our Torah and defang our heroes, taking the firepower out of their words precisely when we need them most. A world in which rabbis and pastors quote Torah while denigrating the image of God every day by supporting policies contemptuous of their fellow human beings. A world in which public officials invoke Dr. King's name and Representative John Lewis's heroism while supporting the very agendas that undermine everything they fought for.

On this shabbat, I beg us to move beyond the platitudes, move beyond the performative celebration of Dr. King, and engage him and his legacy for what they truly were... which the world desperately needs today.

Dr. King was a pastor and a public theologian, a father, husband and son... who was willing to stare into eyes of political leadership and power brokers and name moral failure when he saw it.

In July 1963, a journalist asked Dr. King if he believed that major civil rights legislation could pass. Here's what he said:

"I think the tragedy is that we have a Congress with a Senate that has a minority of misguided senators who will use the filibuster to keep the majority of people from even voting. They...don't want the majority of people to vote, because they know they do not represent the majority of the American people..."

There's a reason Strom Thurmond, Senator from South Carolina, worked so single-mindedly to [block](#) federal recognition of Dr. King's birthday in the 1980s. It's not because King had a dream, it's because, as he said, King held "radical political" views.

Yes, King was a radical.

...if radical means believing that all people living in this, the wealthiest nation of the world, deserve to have enough to feed their children.

...if radical means articulating, without apology, the threats that face America: an addiction to violence, poverty and racism.

A radical like Dr. King would have been furious reading about Kroger this past week. The massive supermarket chain that has brought in RECORD profits these past two years, whose workers struggle to make enough money to pay for rent or their own groceries, the *absolute essentials*. Journalists (Judd Legum and Tesnim Zekeria) found this week that 14% of full time Kroger workers are currently homeless or have been homeless in the past year.

Dr. King would not have stood for that, no. "It is criminal to have people working a full-time job... getting a part-time income," he often said.

Yes, Dr. King was a radical if radical means building multifaith and multiracial coalitions, fusion movements, to end unjust forever wars and to propel economic reforms.

Do you know what his final sermon was called? "Why America May Go to Hell." Please note: he wasn't *telling* America to go to hell—he was warning us that without radical action, that was where we were heading.

That's the sermon Dr. King was writing in room 306 of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. That's what he was holding in his heart as he worried for the sanitation workers and their families. As his heart ached over the ongoing war in Vietnam, and as he witnessed Black Americans "perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity."

We know this, because Dr. King called his mother that afternoon and shared the title of his upcoming sermon with her.

Moments later, he stepped out onto the balcony, and was murdered.

"Why America May Go to Hell."

In that sermon, Dr. King planned to warn his church: "America is going to hell if we don't use her vast resources to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life."

Pretty radical, right?

The radical King fought not only for equality in rights, but in reality: "It isn't enough to integrate lunch counters," he said. "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't have enough money to buy a hamburger?"

I say this today because, Levi—you are right. The lesson you draw from *b'nai Yisrael* in the desert, the lesson of those endless complaints for food and water is exactly right. As Dr. King planned to say, in that final sermon: ..."*nothing is gained without pressure.*"

"Never forget that freedom is... something that must be demanded by the oppressed."

"If we are going to get equality, if we are going to get adequate wages, we are going to have to struggle for it."

Only through struggle, according to Dr. King, will we "make real the promises of democracy..." That is how we make "justice to roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Not through empty platitudes, but through difficult truths. Through courageous stands and yes, sometimes through radical action.

I've been thinking of all of that as I look to this parasha... like Dr. King and like Levi, I'm swept up in the drama of it all. And like both of them, my heart is drawn to a few particular details, which I find teeming with meaning for our time.

Here's one I want you to hold with me this shabbat of truth telling:

*B'nai Yisrael* stands in terror at the water's edge. It's the dark of night. Levi has described it. Moshe lifts his arms and the people enter the waters. And (14:22)

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבֻּשָׁה וְהַמַּיִם לָהֶם חֹמָה מִיְמִינָם וּמִשְׂמָאלָם:

*The Children of Israel enter the sea, walking on dry land! And the water stands like walls on their right side and on their left.*

Just how much ground did they cover this way? We don't really know—I've seen estimates ranging from 3 to 11 miles across. However you calculate, it took them many taken hours—in *the midst of the sea, on dry land.*

But at some point on that long, terrifying, awesome crossing, Egypt starts after them. Every one of Pharaoh's horses. Every chariot. All night long, they pursue the Israelites in the midst of the sea. Ultimately, God confounds the Egyptians, creates turmoil, as the waters close in over their heads, just at the break of dawn.

But there's a problem. After describing all of that in detail, verse 14:29 repeats nearly verbatim what we have already learned in 14:22:

וַבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָלְכוּ בַּיַּבֻּשָׁה בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם וְהַמַּיִם לָהֶם חֹמָה מִיְמִינָם וּמִשְׂמָאלָם:

*The Children of Israel walked on dry land in the midst of the sea! And the water stands like walls on their right side and on their left.*

This is very unusual, for the Torah to repeat a verse.

Or haChaim, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Moroccan rabbi, suggests that repetition is only a literary device. It's goal: to emphasize for the Egyptians and the world how great the miracle was that B'nai Yisrael experienced.

But Ibn Ezra, the great 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish commentator, offers something much more terrifying: when the water started to close on the Egyptians, *there were Israelites who still hadn't made it to the other side.*

How was it that in our great liberation story, we allowed some Israelites to make it to freedom's shore, and others to be left behind?

And who were they, those Israelites who were still scrambling to make it across? Who were those stragglers? It was, of course, the elderly, weak, sick, children. Those already most vulnerable.

Now how does this story end? At the end of the *parasha*, *b'nai Yisrael* suffers a brutal attack by Amalek in the desert. Lots of tribes attack Israel. Why does Amalek become our eternal enemy? In Deuteronomy we learn that it's not just that they attacked, it's that they attacked from behind, targeting the weakest and most vulnerable (Deut 25: 18).

So they were the ultimate cowards. And we—we traitors to our own... especially the most vulnerable. So be careful who you leave behind! If only *b'nai Yisrael* had learned the lesson at the sea. And shame on us—then and now—that we continue to fail to learn the lesson of history.

To honor “Dr. King the Saint,” we’d say on this shabbat: redemption is possible! The night is long, and the path is fraught. But we, too, can step into the raging waters and cross over to freedom’s shore on dry land!

But to honor “Dr. King the Radical,” we must go further. To honor the real Dr. King, we must be honest: we don’t know how this experiment with democracy will turn out.

We only need to look to this week to see how profoundly unwilling some of our political leadership is to step into the fray to protect the rights and dignities of those historically disenfranchised. How effortlessly some of our senators have wedded themselves to the “rules” over the rights and dignities of so many human beings.

Meanwhile, if you want to see the full scope and scale of American ingenuity, look at how far our law makers have gone to keep certain Americans from voting:

Poll taxes, grandfather clauses, the threat of bloodshed, beatings and mob violence, gerrymandering. Literacy tests. And, brilliantly, felony convictions-- crafted intentionally to disenfranchise Black voters.

When the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act back in 2013, they claimed that this was all in the past! Presumably, that chapter of our history had been closed.

And yet, over last several years, voter suppression tactics have reached a fevered pitch, now cynically coded as “voter integrity” efforts.

How can they get away with this? To truly honor the legacy of Dr. King, we must be honest: *Exploitation, oppression and suppression can only continue in our time because enough of those who have reached the shore of freedom are prepared to turn our backs on those still scrambling to escape harm’s way.*

Those people—the front of the pack—they existed in Dr. King’s time too. He understood them as an even greater threat to Black justice, to equal justice, and to American democracy than the White Citizens’ Council or the KKK. It was “the white moderate,” he decried... “more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action;’ who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another’s freedom.”

Ibn Ezra says it took a miracle of miracles for those stragglers to survive. The ones the others were willing to leave behind. וזה הי' פלא בתוך פלא

Yes, in the end, the people all made it to freedom. And that is greatest testament to God’s glory. But it took miracle upon miracle.

Today, we don’t wait for a miracle from God. We learn the lessons of history, and make miracles happen ourselves.

What gives me hope today? I believe we are learning. We know that there is no victory until EVERYONE, literally everyone has made it out of Pharaoh’s grasp. Then, and only then, will we pick up our timbrels and gather together in song: שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאֹה גָאֹה סוּס וְרֶכֶב וְרָמָה בַיָּם: —sing a song of praise—for oppression and evil have finally drowned in the sea!

Shabbat shalom--