

12 Shevat 5776 | January 22, 2016

Parshat B'Shalach:
Ze Eli V'Anvehu: Pointing to a Personal God

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Parshat Beshallach contains one of the most climactic scenes of the entire book of Shemot, the splitting of the Red Sea. Through miraculous means, the Israelites are dramatically saved on dry land while their Egyptian enemies are plunged into the sea. This redeeming display of divine intervention sparks faith in the Jewish people--for God and God's servant, Moshe--and they erupt in a famous song of praise.

1 Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and they spoke, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for very exalted is He; a horse and its rider He cast into the sea. 2 The Eternal's strength and His vengeance were my salvation; this is my God, and I will adore Him [or make Him a habitation], the God of my father, and I will exalt Him. (Exodus 15:1-2)

אֲזַי שִׁיר־מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאָמֵר
אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאָה גָאָה סוֹס וּרְכָבוֹ
רָמָה בַיָּם: ב עָזִי וְזַמְרַת יְהוָה יִהְיֶה־לִּי
לִישׁוּעָה זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲנֹהוּ אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי
וַאֲרַמְּנֶנּוּ: (שְׁמוֹת טו:א-ב)

As the first collective swell of spiritual consciousness, this song offers a chance to reflect on the nature of spiritual awareness itself. Rabbi David Hartman, z"l, in his book, *The Living Covenant*, invokes these opening verses to do just that. He writes:

Traditional Judaism has always contained a vital dialectic between [*ze Eli v'anvehu*] "This is my God and I will adore Him" and [*Elohei avi v'aromimenhu*] "The God of my father and I will exalt Him" (Exodus 15:2). Loyalty to the God about Whom our fathers told us does not exclude the discovery of new insights and experiences that lead one to say, "This is *my* God." The past does not exhaust all that is possible within one's covenantal relationship with God. When Moses asks God how he should announce God's "name" to the community, he is told to say that he was sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also the God Who is worshipped through the new possibilities that the future may uncover: "I will be what I will be" [*Eheyeh asher eheyeh*]. One loyal to Sinai does not only look backward. (*Living Covenant*, 8-9)

What the Israelites experienced at the Red Sea was a God who was both historical and personal, and a relationship with divinity that was both inherited and created. The immediacy of the encounter collapsed time, and past, present, and future notions of God all opened before them. The God of the patriarchs, who made covenantal promises, was as live as the God who actually, palpably fulfills them. This backward-looking, forward-seeking spiritual tension is one that we ought to emulate, says Hartman.

Cultivating a relationship with the God of our ancestors, *Elohei avinu*, is something that much of our ritual and liturgy supports. Indeed, we invoke our forefathers at least thrice-daily, linking our

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lives to theirs and treading on their merit to keep us in God's good grace. Cultivating our own independent relationship with God, though, a God of "*ze Eli*," is a far more complex affair.

To give shape to this call, let us sketch two entry-points to spirituality—two among many, no doubt—that are captured by the phrase, “This is my God” from Exodus 15:2. Rashi, quoting the Mechilta there, writes on these words:

<p>God revealed Godself in His glory [to the Israelites], and they pointed at God with their finger [as denoted by the word "<i>ze/this</i>"]. By the sea, [even] a maidservant perceived what prophets did not perceive.</p>	<p>בכבודו נגלה עליהם והיו מראין אותו באצבע, ראתה שפחה על הים מה שלא ראו נביאים.</p>
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What was available to all of *bnei Yisrael*—and *bnot Yisrael*—at the moment of great salvation was the gift of transparency. *Ze Eli*. They could point to their immediate experience and say, “This, this is the hand of God.” After years of toil in the land of Egypt, after generations in which God was eclipsed from their lives, they were blessed with a moment of absolute clarity. They could perceive with certainty the urgent, unmistakable presence of a God who heard their cries and who delivered.

It seems that one central impulse in the spiritual quest for immediacy is the longing to be able to say “*ze*,”—that is, to encounter God in ways that are present, powerful, palpable; to invite experiences of *kedusha* (holiness), or of *devekut* (cleaving), that fill a person with awareness of transcendence. The spirituality of “*ze Eli*” demands a relationship with the divine that is intense and deeply felt. It asserts that there is a live Other to whom one can point.

In the absence of sea-splitting pyrotechnics that testify to God’s power, we might yearn in our times for more subtle moments that testify to God’s presence in order to achieve this. As Rashi also points out on our verse, the word "*v’anvehu*" can mean either "I will adore Him" or "I will make a habitation for Him." So "This is my God and I will make a habitation. . ." might entail that the God to whom I can point is the God with whom I can dwell.

אחת | שאלתי מאת־יהוה אותה אבקש שבתי בבית־יהוה כל־ימי חיי לחזות בנעם־יהוה ולבקר בהיכלו:

says the Psalmist, a seeker of God if ever there was one. “I ask one thing of God: Let me sit in Your home all the days of my life, to see your glory and to visit your inner sanctum” (Psalm 27:4). We cannot hope for supernatural miracles that will lift the veil of the world. That is not the reality in which we live. We can, however, try to sit quietly with sanctity and even to encounter deep holiness from time to time. The cry of “*shivti b’beit Hashem*” reminds us that spirituality—so often associated with experiences of ecstasy—can also just be found in the simplicity of everyday living, of sitting in our homes and inviting God in there. Only then might we be blessed with a visit to the *hechal*, to the place of innermost depths.

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Beyond the explicitly spiritual agenda of getting to know a God to whom one can point, there is a second dimension to “*ze Eli*” spirituality. Experiences like the kind at the Red Sea rarely last. It is not the nature of the divine mystery to remain disclosed. The moment that *benei Yisrael* exit the miraculous space—literally and figuratively—they are struck with fear, with a lack of trust in their future. They worry about whether the God who just dramatically and spectacularly saved them from their enemies can also sustain their humdrum, everyday needs. “*Ma nishte?*” they ask, “What shall we drink?” (Exodus 15:24). What will sustain us in the desert? In other words, what will nourish us now? No amount of spiritual enlightenment could save them from the vulnerability of being human.

A second impulse in the spiritual life can be located here, not in the ascent to the divine, but in the descent to all that is inescapably human. In those moments when life—in all of its complexity—intrudes and awakens and unsettles, *those* are the moments when we might open to a world beyond—beyond self, beyond what we thought, maybe beyond words. It is a strange truth that when we feel most raw and vulnerable, when our skin is thinned by the wild unpredictability of the world, we are that much more available to the touch of the other. Like a body burned by the sun, we *feel* more—more fear, but also more tenderness. “ממעמקים קראתיך” “From the depths, I call out to God”—not just from the place of despair, but from within the arresting grip of life laid bare (Psalm 130:1).

Like *benei Yisrael* thirsting for water in the desert, we too might wonder: What will nourish us? And this too is the task of a live spirituality: to help us cope with and embrace vulnerability. A Jewish path that accents these challenges seeks to reframe the stories we tell ourselves. It seeks to help us make meaning out of the mess of our colorful, wonderful, unpredictable, uneven existence. It seeks to help each and every one of us to find our way toward a God that is truly our own. *Ze Keli*. This is *my* God—a God who speaks to my deepest needs, the cravings and confusions of my own soul.

The Song of the Sea, sung by all of our people, thus straddles so poignantly the gap between collective consciousness and individual awareness. As we continue to honor *Elokei avinu (v'imenu)*, let us commit to cultivating lives full of a profoundly present and personally meaningful God, so that each one of us might be blessed to say, “*Ze Eli v'anvehu.*”



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