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Parshat B'shalach: Crossing Over Into Song

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I have traveled a lot. Very often people do not even know what country I am living in. So I like to think I know airports quite well. On Wednesday, I went to an area of JFK that I had never been to before. Tucked away in the corner of the fourth floor of Terminal Four is a chapel-- well really four chapels, each a different religious space.

I went on Wednesday morning to participate in a "learn-in" at JFK that was organized by students at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. While walking past the chapels throughout the day, I noticed that - for the most part - the prayer spaces were empty or at the very most had one or two worshipers. But the Jewish chapel at the end of the hall was full. It was full of men and women studying Torah. It was full of conversations about the laws of Shabbat, the Parsha, laws of Nidda, and discussions of the different meanings of "*Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdrof*" ("Justice, justice, you shall pursue").

To mark the end of our day at JFK we went to the Arrivals Hall to pray and sing. We said Psalms and sang out - right there in the middle of the hallway.

It is in *Parshat Beshalach*, that *B'nei Yisrael* are almost free. They have the taste of freedom after generations of slavery, but that feeling of freedom is short lived. They find themselves trapped. On one side is Pharaoh and his army and on the other is the *Yam Suf*. Miraculously the sea splits and they are finally free of their enslavement.

It is after this great miracle that Moshe, Miriam and all of *Bnei Yisrael* burst into song and dance. They are filled with gratitude, happiness, and relief from the tension that had built up inside.

Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, the *Kedushat Levi* teaches in *Parshat Beshalach*:

We know that when a person has seen the greatness of the Creator, one will first react with awe and trembling and cannot feel the joy in the moment - even though the phenomenon that was witnessed also grants them a great salvation. Only later will such a person understand that what they witnessed a short while ago was a display of God's largesse orchestrated on their behalf. At that point one begins to enjoy the spectacle they have witnessed and only then can they express their gratitude in a form appropriate to the overwhelming nature of the miracle. This is what *Rashi*, wished to convey to us in the first few words of his commentary on the words *Az Yashir*.

I look forward each year to feeling just that experience when we read *Parshat Beshalach*. It is during this Torah reading that I stand with the community and relive the experience of crossing the sea. The community joyfully joins the reader reading parts of *Az Yashir*, recreating the experience of the crossing of the sea together, as is described in the Gemara in BT *Sota* (30b). Standing in shul on

Shabbat Shira brings the Torah reading alive in a way that does not happen often. To be able to see the Egyptians on one side and a sea on the other, to feel the joy and pleasure after the great fear and awe of what we just experienced, I feel not that I am listening to someone else's memory, rather reliving one of my own!

I think about this past Wednesday when I brought my Torah learning to a place that is a place of fear. A place that for many people might be their *Yam Suf* - a potential obstacle to their freedom. It was in that space that we were able to bring Torah, prayer and song - with hopes that each person will feel the experience of the splitting of the sea, and they too will join the song that can only be sung when there is no more fear.



Rabbi Eryn London, is a chaplain resident at New York Presbyterian - Weill Cornell Medical Center. She earned her B.A from Goucher College, where she majored in theatre, minoring in psychology and Judaic studies. Eryn subsequently earned an M.A. at Goldsmiths, University of London. She specialized in applied drama: theatre in educational, community, and social contexts. Eryn made aliyah in February of 2010 and studied at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies and at the Susi Bradfield Women's Institute of Halachic Leadership at Midreshet Lindenbaum. She is one of the co-founders of "Gam Yachad", a multi-denominational Beit Midrash for Israeli rabbinical students. Eryn has served as scholar in residence and rabbinic intern at the ACT Jewish Community in Canberra, Australia, Adath Shalom B'nai Israel in Chicago, Illinois, and at the Mt. Freedom Jewish Center in Randolph, New Jersey. In addition, Eryn has lectured in various communities in Israel, Canada, Colombia, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.