

**Standing at the Bank of the Sea Together – Pesah Yizkor 5767**  
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There are moments in our lives when we, like B'nai Yisrael, stand at the Banks of the Sea. There are moments in our lives when we, too, find ourselves standing at the Bank of the Sea, with Egyptians and danger pressing down on us from one angle, and the deep, dark sea stretching out in front of us.

There are moments in our lives when we, too, arrive at a moment that was thrust upon us, a moment that we either planned for or didn't, a moment when history or fate was driving our lives rather than our own choice or intention. We stand at the Bank of the Sea feeling trapped, caught, stuck, scared....like B'nai Yisrael. Or, like B'nai Yisrael, we feel strong and ready to fight...or ready to just throw in the towel...What could B'nai Yisrael have felt standing at the bank of the Sea with the Egyptians within sight and advancing?

In the Torah we have the anonymous mob crying out to Moses; and Moses, in response, seeking to calm them down. In a midrash from the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, the Israelites are characterized as having different reactions to the situation. The Midrash parses these from the four phrases of response Moses gives to the people. Let me read you the midrash, and if you'd like, you can see the text upon which it is based in your Eitz Hayyim on the top of page 403 in Parashat Beshallah:

The Israelites at the Red Sea were divided into four groups.

One group said, (1) 'Let us throw ourselves into the sea.'

One said, (2) 'Let us return to Egypt.'

One said, (3) 'Let us fight against them.'

And one said, (4) 'Let us scream out against them.'

The group that said 'Let us throw ourselves into the sea,' was told, (1) 'Stand by, and witness the deliverance that the Lord will work for you today.' The one that said, 'Let us return to Egypt,' was told, (2) 'For the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again.' The one that said, 'Let us fight against them,' was told, (3) 'The Lord will do battle for you.'

The one that said, 'Let us scream out against them,' was told, (4) 'And you shall hold your peace.' (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Beshalah, Ch. 3)

The Midrash refuses to see the Children of Israel as one large horde that acts in harmony. Rather than reading their cries as one emotion, playing on Moses' lengthy response, the midrash says, there are many different reactions that one could have to this situation. There are many different ways one could have felt standing at the sea, and Moses, in his wisdom, perceived that each type of response, each group of Israelites, needed their own message.

Let us again put ourselves at the Bank of the Sea. Most of us in the room have experienced the death of a loved one. Whether we prepared for it or not, whether we had warning that it was going to happen, whether we had accepted the reality of the situation or not, whether we were ready or not, our loved one died. And even if one has not experienced the death of a loved one, we have stood at the bank of the Sea in other times as well. Maybe we have received a frightening diagnosis, maybe our career has taken a horrible turn, maybe we have found ourselves in a situation where there is only pain and fear and darkness wherever we look. At this moment of crisis, we can react in many ways.

In her ground-breaking book "On Death and Dying" Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages of grief that people experience either as they are dying or as they experience the death of a loved one: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. These stages have often been misunderstood as a process that each one who grieves must go through in a prescribed order.

According to David Kessler, co-author with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross of the last book written before her death:

"The five stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. [The stages] were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives."

When we each stand at the bank of the Sea, we each experience our own unique reaction. And we will not be held at any one stage. We may react one way initially and three minutes later or three days later, we may react differently. The important thing to remember, in order to stand at the bank of the Sea together is that we all need the same thing...someone to journey with us, to stand by us, to assure us we are not alone, and sometimes to push us as Moses and God pushed B'nai Yisrael.

Let's look at the four groups that the midrash characterizes.

One group said, (1) 'Let us throw ourselves into the sea.'

One said, (2) 'Let us return to Egypt.'

One said, (3) 'Let us fight against them.'

And one said, (4) 'Let us scream out against them.'

One group said, (1) 'Let us throw ourselves into the sea.'

When we realize where we are standing and what is truly happening in this exact moment of our lives, some of us respond with Depression, sadness, a sense of loneliness and isolation. We may just want to throw ourselves in the sea. We don't see any way of moving forward. We know we can not move backward. All we feel is the darkness engulfing us and hope then for a relief of our pain.

To this group Moses said: Stand by and witness the deliverance that the Lord will work for you today. What was Moses doing? He told this group to stand still. Don't make any sudden moves. Don't do anything that is irreversible. Stand still. Wait. Watch. You are still be breathing. You are still living and you will see that the world has more to offer you than just pain. Moses counsels patience. Moses suggests a new perspective. Moses encourages hope and faith.

I want to say at this point that while on the one hand this midrash can teach us much about the experience of facing a crisis and surviving, it might not be the best teacher of how to journey with the person in grief and crisis. Trying to offer someone words too soon often results in not hearing the person where they are, not allowing the person to experience what they need to experience and, therefore, not being much of a help. Standing here, in this moment of Yizkor, however, we can remember the experience and seek to learn from B'nai Yisrael's experience.

One group said, (1) 'Let us throw ourselves into the sea.'

One said, (2) 'Let us return to Egypt.'

For some of us, the moment of crisis is too much for us to bear. In order to live with our loss, we seek to live in the past. We want to return to Egypt. We want to go back to the way things were. A good friend of mine lost her husband and for months she wore his clothes, read his books, listened to his tapes, watched the shows they watched together, and she visited his grave frequently. She wasn't ready to let go. She wasn't ready to take any steps forward, only backward. I've known many people who after a heart-attack return to a diet of steak and potatoes, fried foods and fatty foods. Maybe if they just live life the way they always lived life, everything will go back to normal.

Unfortunately, we all know that we can not move the clock back and eventually we have to accept our new reality. Passover is one of the hardest times to do this. On Passover, we juggle returning to the past and enjoying our loved one's presence. Through stories and jokes, through recipes and rituals that our loved ones taught us, we live with them during the holiday. Yet we also see that there are empty chairs and we are bereft.

To the ones that said, 'Let us return to Egypt,' Moses said, (2) 'For the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again.' There IS NO going back! No matter how hard we try. We eventually need to accept our fate and the fate of our loved ones and take the next steps into the dark unknown world without them.

The third group of Israelites at the Sea said, (3) 'Let us fight against them.' Some of us are fighters. Sometimes we can fight, but sometimes no matter how good we are, our fighting will not have the effect we want.

Our loved one will not be brought back, no matter how many times we trace the course of their treatment, the steps that we took to help them or didn't take and what the doctors could have done differently. We will fight with whoever we decide has caused our pain. We need to fight. With the one who gave us the bad news, with the doctor who was unsuccessful at keeping our loved one alive and even with God—who must have caused our pain, who must have been able to prevent this from happening, who owed us more than this pain and grief that we must bear.

To this group Moses said: ‘The Lord will do battle for you.’ You don’t have to fight anymore. You can leave that to someone else. You can’t continue to look backward and second-guess. You can’t live a life filled with anger and pain. Because no matter what you say or yell or scream, life is still the way it is at the Bank of the Sea. Maybe someone else will be able to help you and you don’t have to figure it out all alone.

Many of us are fighters and that is how we survive our crises. But battling for a future and battling with the past, can be two different things. One puts us moving forward; one keeps our feet stuck in the mud unable to move very far for very long.

And, what of the last group. They said: (4) ‘Let us scream out against them.’ And Moses replied: ‘And you shall hold your peace.’ Like those who respond to grief and crisis with anger, those who respond with bargaining eventually have to accept that no matter what they say or yell or plead, the reality remains. The diagnosis is unchanged. Our loved one is still dead. The crisis remains. No matter what we promise to do, no matter how we promise to behave in the future, there is a limit to the control we can exert over the Universe. We cannot reverse the past.

If each group of Israelites represents a different reaction to grief: Depression, Denial, Anger and Bargaining, we can look for the last stage of acceptance as well. When Moses lifts up his staff and the Sea parts, the path ahead finally becomes clear. It is not without its stones and mess, but it stretches forward into a new future....When the path is clear, the Children of Israel accept their new reality and take their first steps toward a new life.

God called out to Moses after listening to him respond to B’nei Yisrael at the bank of the Sea and God commanded Moses: Tell the Israelites to Journey forward. I hear God saying: You’ll do your part, I’ll do mine. I, God, will travel with you. You will not be alone. The children of Israel will not be alone. You are there, and so is Aaron and so is Miriam and so are my angels.

The message to the people facing the greatest crisis of their lives is that they are not alone. The message of Yizkor is that as well. We are not alone. You are not alone. There are those around you who have also lost their mother or father, sister or brother, wife or husband. There are those around you who

have suffered terrible illness and injury, who have lost their jobs or failed in business. There are those around you who have found a way to move ahead on a new path. We are all in this journey of life together.

You are not alone. Your loved one is with you. In your memories. In your rituals. In the way you prepared for Pesah, and cleaned your kitchen and baked your cakes. In the way you started your seder and sang the seder melodies. Our loved ones inspired our celebration of Pesah. Our loved ones inspire our lives. We live in honor of their lives, some of us live in spite of their lives....We live with the gift of their lives as examples for us of how to be a mother; how to be a father; how to work hard, how to live life well, how to enjoy God's gifts.

We are all on this journey of life together.

May the memories of those we remember this Yizkor inspire us to take the steps toward a life of healing and Shalom—wholeness and peace. May we find peace in the end of Pesah and healing in the experience of rebirth and renewal in this season of Spring.

Kein y'hi ratzon.

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