

First Things First
Parashat Beshallah 5782
January 15, 2022

There's an old Jewish joke that goes like this. There's an elderly person sitting on a train. The train car is quiet, but pretty soon all of the passengers are aware that this person is moaning, repeating over and over again, "I am so thirsty, I am so thirsty." After a few minutes of this, a fellow passenger pulls some water out of their bag, brings it to the elderly person, and they gratefully take it and drink it. The train returns to its previous quiet, until the passengers become aware once again of their fellow traveller. "I was so thirsty! I was so thirsty!"

The idea of the Jewish complainer goes way back, as far back as Parashat Beshallah. In the same Torah portion which contains the peak moment of the Exodus, where God parts the Red Sea, allowing the Children of Israel to



miraculously pass through to safety, there are 4 occasions on which the Children of Israel come to their leaders to complain. On three of these instances they even express a wish that they had stayed in Egypt, that they

had never been freed from slavery. How ungrateful! God literally parted a sea for them, not to mention sending ten plagues. God reversed the laws of physics for these people, and they still aren't satisfied! Do they value their freedom so little?

Upon further reflection, however, I think we might see the Israelites in a different light. Let's take a look at the challenges that they are facing in this story.

In the first episode of complaining, the Israelites have just escaped slavery. Their lives have been upended, and they don't know how they're going to get to their destination or what they will find when they get there. They are trapped between the Egyptian military and the Red Sea, and the Egyptian chariots are on the attack. They come to Moses and Aaron and ask, "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?" The Israelites are at risk of their lives, and they have no idea how they could possibly escape. Can anyone blame them for calling out to Moses and Aaron at their great moment of need?

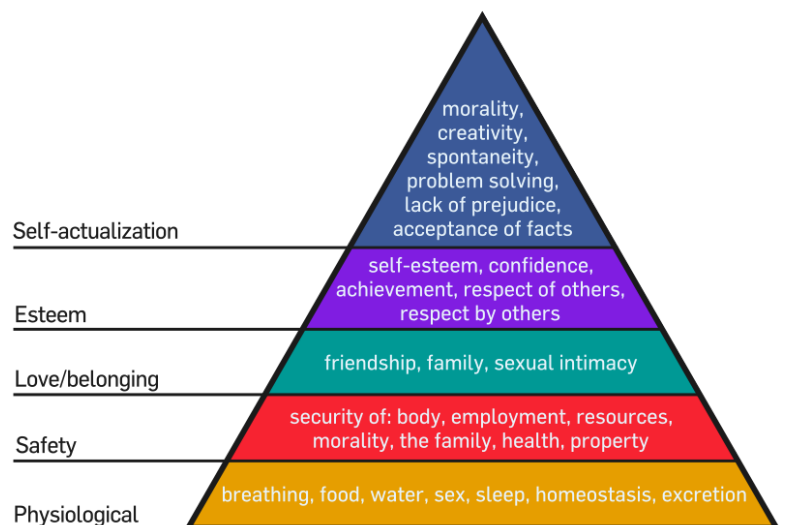
In the next three episodes, what is it the Israelites are asking for? Food and water. They are in the desert, they don't know how to take care of themselves, and they are asking for the basic things they need to keep themselves alive.

It reminds me of one of the first lessons I experienced when I became a parent. Crying, I learned, is communication. Particularly when she was a newborn, crying was simply the primary method that she had of telling me that she needed something. And it is effective! I may not be happy when she cries, particularly if it's in the middle of the night or when I'm trying to get something done, but it's a completely age-appropriate way for her to let me know what she needs, and it gets the job done.

So too, the Israelites were **communicating** to Moses and Aaron, and to God, that they had needs. They had needs that were important and immediate, and which they were not able to satisfy themselves.

In 1943 the psychologist Abraham Maslow developed the theory known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which states that in order for a person to achieve higher-level needs, such as emotional and spiritual fulfillment, they must first have

their basic needs met. This concept is often illustrated as a pyramid. At the bottom of the pyramid are physiological needs, including food and water,



and as you go up in the pyramid you get to Safety, Love and Belonging, Esteem, and finally Self-actualization. In other words, if you don't have food and water, and if you aren't safe, self-actualization isn't worth very much. So of course the Israelites were upset when they didn't have basic security, food and water! How on earth were they supposed to appreciate being free from Egypt, even when that freedom happened by way of incredible miracles, when they were afraid of drowning or of starving to death?

Now Moses and Aaron had trouble seeing the Israelites this way. They had put in a tremendous amount of effort, and put themselves at risk repeatedly, in order to bring the Israelites to freedom, and they were emotionally spent. They saw the people's calls as an insult, a suggestion that they, and that God, weren't good enough. In the final episode in this parashah, where the people ask for water, Moses even cries out to God saying, "What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!"

God, however, doesn't see it that way. God does exactly what the Israelites ask for in each of these so-called "complaining" stories. God rescues the Israelites from the Egyptians, God makes the waters of Marah drinkable, God gives the people Manna and meat to eat, and God gives

them water at Refidim. God sees their crying out as communication, meant to call attention to basic needs, needs which God meets.

This weekend is a time when people all over our country celebrate the life and legacy of Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr. The main campaign for which he is known, the Civil Rights Movement, was a quest for political protections and freedom for people of color in America. Today, we celebrate the political freedom that the Civil Rights Movement achieved. However, when the Civil Rights Act was passed, Dr King didn't stop fighting. He didn't stop fighting, because even with political or legal freedoms, not everyone is able to experience true equality.



Many of us may be aware that when Dr King was assassinated, he was no longer working specifically for Civil Rights— he was working on the Poor People's Campaign! In 1967 he announced this campaign, whose purpose was to secure jobs, unemployment insurance, a fair minimum wage, and education for poor adults and children. He was highly aware of the way that poor people in our country were facing systemic barriers to

financial success. He fought to build a society where everyone would have access to economic opportunity.

Just like the Children of Israel, who achieved political freedom from Egyptian slavery, many people in our country -- *even today* -- find themselves in a position where they are unable to fulfill some of their basic needs. Without access to housing, healthcare, employment, running water, food, and other basic needs, it's very hard to feel free, or to exercise or appreciate one's political rights.

Let's recall how the Passover seder, which commemorates and reenacts our redemption from Egyptian bondage, begins. Does it begin by inviting everyone who needs a seder to join us? No. It could have begun that way. If it had, we wouldn't have been surprised. But instead it begins: Kol dichvin yeitei v'yechol: May all who are hungry come and eat. Only afterwards does it say, "kol ditzrich yeitei v'yifsach," May all who are looking for a seder come and make pesach with us.

First things first. May we come to recognize the crucial importance of addressing people's basic needs and providing them with economic freedom -- as well as addressing their political freedom.

Shabbat shalom.