



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Beshalach 5768

By Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

January 19, 2008

For most of the past 3,000 years, civilization was shaped by smallpox. The disease decimated entire populations, destroyed cultures, swept across continents and altered the course of human history. Smallpox killed five reigning European monarchs in the 18th century alone. For people born in previous centuries, the disease was a fact of nature, a part of life on this planet that appeared as impossible to prevent as natural disasters. And yet, over the last decades, the facts of nature changed. Widespread vaccination campaigns throughout the 19th and 20th centuries worked. The disease was eradicated. In 1979 the World Health Organization certified the end of smallpox.¹

In this week's *parshah*, *Beshalach*, the Israelites also faced a fact of nature that appeared immutable and devastatingly dangerous. As they fled slavery with their taskmasters in hot pursuit, they came up against the Sea of Reeds – a churning, impassable ocean. But suddenly, their horizon literally expanded: "Moses held his arm out over the sea and the Eternal One drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground."²

This was arguably the pivotal moment in Jewish history. We tell and retell the story of the parting of the sea in every weekday, Shabbat and holy day prayer service, morning and evening. It is recounted in prayer more frequently than the details of the creation of humanity or the giving of the Torah.

Why do we need to hear this story so often?

Because it is in this moment that we realized that nothing is immutable. We saw that seas can split open and diseases can be eradicated. The facts of the world ceased to be facts.

And we responded to this new awareness with action as we charged forward into the sea: "The waters were split, and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left."³

I often find myself looking at the world from the perspective of the Israelites *before* the sea split. The massive gap in wealth between rich and poor nations feels as absolute and unchangeable to me as the Sea of Reeds must have felt to Moses as he saw it in the distance, and as unassailable as smallpox appeared to my great-grandparents. However, this week's *parshah* reminds me that nothing is truly unchangeable.

Life can change in the Global South through human deeds. We can take action through advocacy, service and education. Changes that would transform the quality of life in the world's poorest countries are not only necessary, but possible. The world's poorest countries currently spend billions of dollars to pay off old debts to wealthy nations like the U.S. Debt relief would expand the horizons of the Global South much as the parting of the Sea of Reeds did

¹ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/smallpox/en/>

² Shmot 14:21

³ Shmot 14:21-22

for the Israelites. Imagine how access to HIV treatment, education for women and food security would throw open the boundaries of our shared global community.

The Israelites responded to the splitting of the sea with songs of praise. The Midrash teaches that this was the first time people collectively praised God. "Ah, *this*," says God in the Midrash, "is what I have been waiting for!"⁴ What exactly was God waiting for? Certainly God was not in need of human praise. Rather, God was waiting for humanity to recognize that the borders of our world are never fixed. And God was waiting for us to respond to this knowledge with awe and with action.

The miracle of the Sea of Reeds is not just that the ocean parted. After all, an omnipotent God could split the Sea at any time. The miracle is that the Israelites *saw* the ocean divide and, despite everything they had been taught about the way the world works, they charged forward into the narrow dry path which appeared like a sliver of hope between the waves.

This week, as we hear the story of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, may each of us realize that the horizons of our world are broader than we think: oceans can crack open, diseases can be eradicated and the balance of world wealth can be shifted. And may we respond to this wonderful realization as the Israelites did at the Sea of Reeds—with acts of justice and with shouts of joy.



Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla is a Chaplain Resident at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) Medical Center and Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute. He is also an activist, writer, organizer and educator. He has lectured and led workshops on gender and sexual diversity in Judaism throughout Israel, Canada and the U.S. Before moving to San Francisco, Elliot served as the rabbi of the Danforth Jewish Circle, Toronto's social justice-oriented synagogue. Elliot was ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 2006. He can be reached at ekukla@gmail.com.

⁴ Shmot Rabbah 23:4

©2007 American Jewish World Service

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the inaugural recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. The AJWS Torah Commentary series is made possible in part by funds granted by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.