

In this week's parashah, Beshallach, the Israelites finally physically move on out of slavery in Egypt. And almost immediately they encounter their first obstacle – Yam Suf, the Sea of Reeds. That in and of itself wouldn't have been such a difficulty – Yacov and his family had crossed it generation earlier, Moshe, on his own, more recently. But in this case, it's an emergency, because the Egyptian charioteers are pursuing them on Pharaoh's orders, intending to bring them back to slavery in Egypt.

And so we have the miracle of the splitting of the sea, in this parashah – in Chapter 14, the sea splits, and the Israelites on dry land, and then the waters flood in, drowning the pursuing Egyptian cavalry. Once the Israelites are on the other side, they face a bewildering and harsh wilderness. As Chapter 15, verses 22-24 state, "Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" Moshe follows Hashem's instructions to sweeten the water, and the people are briefly satisfied, but they soon complain of hunger, which Hashem answers with the miracle of Manna, in Chapter 16, and the first instructions around keeping Shabbat; in this case, by collecting a double portion on Friday and not seeking any manna on Shabbat itself. The people struggle with this stricture even in the midst of a miracle, When they come to Massah and Meribah, they complain – again – about the lack of water, and then Amalek comes and attacks, and they are saved from the attacking army – as in the beginning of the parashah – by a miracle from Hashem, though this time with the participation of some Israelite warriors.

And thus the journey has commenced, with a combination of miracle, trepidation, and complaining that will continue to be the order throughout the following forty years.

But also, with celebration. Because I left out an important part of my summary. After the Israelites cross the sea and witness the Egyptian armies drowning, and before they set out for Marah, where the waters are too bitter to drink, they sing a song – arguably the most famous passage of Biblical poetry in the Hebrew Bible, *Shirat Hayam*, “Song of the Sea.”

I mention the song only now, rather than in my summary earlier, to point out that we shouldn’t take it for granted. The narrative or miracle, journey and complaint would seem perfectly familiar and unremarkable without the song. They, cross, they journey on. But this time, first, they sing. For 21 verses, much of Chapter 15, they exult, in a song and dance that Biblical scholars agree was probably led by women. The refrain that opens it and closes it is first “*Ashira*” – I will sing – and then later “*Shiru*” – sing! “*lashem ki ga’oh ga’ah, sus v’roch’vo ramah vayam!*” Sing out for God has triumphed triumphantly – driving horse and rider into the sea!

A rider on a horse was terrifying, threatening sight. A warrior on a horse could overpower tens of peasants on foot. So when our ancestors sang this line, they were exulting in a true miracle – that when they couldn’t even have reasonably hoped to flee, the most terrifying warriors they could imagine had been overpowered by a greater might.

Of course, there must be ambivalence too, looking at all of the carnage, recognizing the cost of their freedom. There must be ambivalence as the face the journey ahead, which has only begun. And yet they sing.

I spoke this morning at the Big Bold Jewish Climate Festival about the importance of this song, which we can best recognize by bringing another song into conversation: the song *dayenu*, “It would have been enough,” which we sing at our Pesach seders when we tell this story. Probably, many of you only sing a few verses, “*Ilu ilu hozti anu. . . .*”

The verses we usually sing out loud claim, first, that it would have been enough if Hashem had taken us out of Egypt, then that it would have been enough if Hashem had given us Shabbat, then that it would have been enough if Hashem had given us Torah. But if you have any kind of traditional haggadah, *dayenu* is actually a litany 14 verses long. I won't read all of them to you now, but I *will* read the verses that mention the 6 miracles of this week's parashah:

"If S/He had given us their money and had not split the Sea for us; *dayeinu!* [it would have been] enough for us.

If S/He had split the Sea for us and had not taken us through it on dry land; *dayeinu!*

If S/He had taken us through it on dry land and had not pushed down our enemies in [the Sea]; *dayeinu!*

If S/He had pushed down our enemies in [the Sea] and had not supplied our needs in the wilderness for forty years; *dayeinu!*

If S/He had supplied our needs in the wilderness for forty years and had not fed us the manna; *dayeinu!*

If S/He had fed us the manna and had not given us the Shabbat; *dayeinu!*

What does it mean when we say "*dayenu*"? It cannot mean that each individual line would actually have been enough to suffice for all our needs; that we would have managed some other way if the sea hadn't split, or if there hadn't been water or manna to feed us.

But as my parents have written, "It means to celebrate each step toward freedom as if it were enough, then to start out on the next step. It means that if we reject each step because it is not the whole liberation, we will never be able to achieve the whole liberation."

I think this is an important insight, in a moment when so many of us are so exhausted by pandemic, exhausted by politics, exhausted by racial injustice, terrified about the future of the planet – and aware of the enormity of the work ahead. We cannot reject the actions we can take because they are “too small,” or “too late.” The journey is made of small steps. But even more than embracing the journey, the Song at the Sea reminds us that we embrace the journey with joy. That even the *negative victory* “We managed to flee and the Egyptian armies did not succeed in capturing us and taking us back to Egypt” – is worth celebrating. Perhaps each line of *dayenu* deserves its own equivalent of the Song at the Sea.

Contrast this with my colleague’s story -

As Rebecca Solnit writes, “A victory doesn’t mean that everything is now going to be nice forever and we can therefore all go lounge around until the end of time. Some activists are afraid that if we acknowledge victory, people will give up the struggle. I’ve long been more afraid that people will give up and go home or never get started in the first place if they think no victory is possible or fail to recognize the victories already achieved.”

So even as we acknowledge how daunted we are by all the work that faces us, I invite us, in the spirit of the song at the sea, to exult in the small victories - our personal victories over despair, our collective victories over cruelty. Go ahead, write in the chat, if you will, your *dayenu*.