

## THE LEGACY OF FREEDOM

A commentary of *Parashat Beshalach*  
By Esmond Rosen

*“Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left” (Exodus 14: 21-22)*

*Parashat Beshalach* imparts the extraordinary story of the children of Israel crossing the Sea of Reeds to escape the might of the Egyptian army, led by their Pharaoh, who was attempting to coerce them back into slavery. This historical example of a people successfully defying the ruling elite to determine their own future as free people is recalled annually around the Seder (Passover) table, as we remember that we Jews were *“once slaves in a foreign land”*.

The Jewish people have never forgotten this narrative, as we are required to picture ourselves, as being these very slaves, escaping across the sea, onto dry land and liberation.

At the sea Moses and the Jewish people understood their situation as never before - their years of suffering from their taskmasters, Pharaoh's deception in perusing them following this exodus, their apparent hopelessness surrounded by the wilderness, the sea and the hurtling dust of the oncoming chariots. Therefore, immediately they emerged on dry land and with the relief of seeing their tormenters destroyed they composed 'The Song of the Sea' (*Shirat HaYam*) ... *“I shall sing to Hashem for he is highly exulted having hurled horse and rider into the sea.”*

The prophetess Miriam, Moses' sister, then took up the tambourine and danced together with all the women to express the ultimate spiritual expression of freedom and thanksgiving to Hashem, for their survival from tyranny. This poem, which is recited daily in the

morning service, is therefore a constant reminder, that there is a G-d of the world who loves justice and truth and orchestrates His world accordingly.

It is this notion of what it means to have this belief and the values of protecting the vulnerable, the sick, the stranger in our midst and pursuant of social policies, which respects the rights of others. The concept of human rights obliges us to discuss such pressing questions as genocide, modern day slavery, human trafficking, race and religious hatred, the global environmental crisis, and the future of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook wrote: *“The love for people must be alive in the heart and soul, a love for all people and a love for all nations expressing itself in a desire for their spiritual and material advancement ... and to promote their happiness”*.

The freedom we obtained, as described in *Parashat Beshalach* gave us the veracity to place social justice and activism as a central force within Jewish theology, ethics and education and which ultimately ensured the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations.

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\* Moses parting of the Red Sea