

Parashat Beshalach

What Can the Torah Teach us about Dreaming of Unlived Lives?

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When I was five, I fell in love with the most beautiful girl in the entire kindergarten. I decided that the most romantic thing would be to invite her to the National Theatre in Prague. But how shall I arrange it? I asked my parents, and they generously did everything for me, including informing the girl and her parents about my plans and organizing the tickets. The certain day came, and I took my best and only suit, asked my mother to tie my tie and asked my father's permission to use his perfume. And after that, we set out. The theatre was absolutely crowded. Finally, I spotted my love and her parents. She had never visited any theatre before and was utterly amazed. When she looked at me, her eyes were full of admiration. Everything was just perfect! Our parents were shaking their hands, and she smiled at me and was waiting for what I would do. I realised that my father had advised me to be a real gentleman and kiss her hand. I was preparing to do it but, suddenly, I felt terribly hungry and imagined my favourite dish, which is dill sauce with dumplings and eggs. I said to my parents I needed to go and after a few vigorous statements from my side, we left my shocked and just lost girlfriend and her mother and father. That's how my first date ended. The truth is that I exchanged love for dill sauce with dumplings and

eggs. ... And today I ask myself what would happen if I didn't leave... Would I live a different life? Is it worth to think about it? What can the Torah teach us about dreaming of unlived lives?

Parashat Beshalach begins with God's decision not to lead the people of Israel by way of the land of the land of Philistines, although it was considerably nearer. God says: "*The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.*" (Shemot 13:17) Therefore, God decided to lead them through the Sea of Reeds. It seems that that the entire show with splitting the sea happened because of one single thing: God's fear of the potential decision of Israelites to reverse everything and go back to Egypt. A few verses below, we see that this fear was perfectly legitimate. Even before crossing the sea, people start to complain: "*Was it for want of graves that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?*" (Shemot 14:12) Even after crossing the sea, having seen God's immense power and knowing that God cares for them, people start kvetshn again, this time about the quality of food: "*If we had died by the hand of the Eternal in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.*" (Shemot 16:3) And again, they are immediately provided with maybe even better kiddush than at the Park Avenue Synagogue. However, after a good kiddush, everybody realised that there was no shnaps: "*Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children*

and livestock with thirst?" (Shemot 17:4) And again, even this problem is solved very fast. But the dream of staying in Egypt doesn't disappear and comes to the surface when Moses talks to God on Mount Sinai and people, in the meantime, create the Golden Calf, a symbol of the Egyptian way of life: *"As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged."* (Shemot 22:20) Again, and not for the last time, the Israelites were asking: *"Would we be living a different life?"* But there was no way back.

My hero Franz Kafka (1883–1924) wisely said: *"From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached."* This point he talks about describes the situation that we accept ourselves as we are with all of our mistakes and our life as it is with all its challenges and imperfections. It is not about burning all bridges behind us and we do not give up on dreaming of living a better life, but we accept the reality at it is as our starting point. This is the point of crossing the Reed Sea. Without this experience of inevitability, our ancestors wouldn't be able to accept their choice, move ahead and celebrate their life as it is.

Dreaming of different lives is not useful, but dreaming of our own life, which is inevitable full of mistakes, challenges and disappointments, is something to pursue. Speaking for myself: Yes, I am the one who exchanged his first love for dill sauce with dumplings and eggs. Although I find it enormously embarrassing, I am happy about it as it was also this decision which brought me

to this very moment. Like the biblical Israelites, I didn't know about the future challenges on my journey. As they didn't count with the death of their big example, Moses, already on the journey, I didn't know that my father, z"l, would leave me so soon. As they didn't know about future quarrels, I didn't know about all my difficulties and challenges at my congregations in Prague. But still, I am grateful for everything: for living when, where and how I live, for being with you, my colleagues, here and now, for being married to my wife, whom I would never exchange for dill sauce with dumplings and eggs. Boker Tov!