

*Postcards from the Edge of the Promised Land**In the Sea*

[Exodus 14:10-14, 21-25](#)

We are immersing ourselves in the stories of the Exodus—the long, hard journey that led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt toward the promised land. Today is the third of our six Sundays in this story. And today we come to what is perhaps the most dramatic and memorable piece of this story: the crossing of the Red Sea.

Here's the two-minute back-story about how we get to this moment. Remember, last week we talked about Moses, who reluctantly took on leadership of a straggly group of people who had been slaves in Egypt for generations. They knew they weren't free, but they had a hard time lifting their eyes enough to see that freedom was a possibility. I will make them into a people, God said to Moses. My people. I'll get them out of here. Just do what I say.

Moses did. He went to the Pharaoh of Egypt and said, "Let my people go."
"No," Pharaoh said. "I'm not going to do that." What a surprise.

And suddenly—coincidentally?—terrible things begin to happen in Egypt. Ten plagues, one after another. Flies, frogs, water pollution, hail, locusts, darkness. Each time something goes wrong, Pharaoh hardens his heart, digs in even deeper, will not give in. These slaves will not be set free. Until the tenth plague—the firstborn son of every Egyptian family dies. Miraculously, the Hebrew families are spared. Then—only then—Pharaoh says, "Go. Just go. I will not stand in your way."

In the middle of the night, the Israelites leave, before Pharaoh can change his mind. They move—600,000 of them, the Bible says—out into the desert, and they camp there. They celebrate the first Passover. They thank God, from the bottom of their hearts, for saving them. But somehow, they'd gotten in their heads that the promised land was going to be right next door to Egypt, that they'd walk right out of hardship and into glory. They'd imagined—because that's what we do, right?—that the transition from slavery to freedom would be quick and inspired and painless. They are immediately surprised and disappointed.

What's more, as soon as the Hebrew slaves are out of sight, Pharaoh's heart hardens again. He changes his mind, decides that letting the work force leave the country wasn't such a great idea after all. So he calls out his armies—all the soldiers, horses, chariots, of one of the great armies of the world. All of them bear down on Moses and the people.

So when they get to the edge of the water—the sea that separates the continent of Africa from the Middle Eastern peninsula—the Israelites think, 'We're screwed. We are totally, totally done.' And like desperate, frightened people everywhere, they look for someone to blame. Moses is an easy target. 'What's wrong with you, Moses?! We told you this would never work! We would have been better off staying slaves in Egypt than coming out here to die like this!' It must have been a terrible, and terrifying, moment.

You know the story. Moses raises his arm and stretches his hand out over the water. And suddenly, unexplainably, the waters split, left and the right, leaving a strip of dry ground in the middle, wide enough for all those just-freed slaves to walk across to the other side. But the tension does not ease immediately, because the Egyptian army is still in hot pursuit. Before all the Hebrews are safely out of the way, the Egyptians

enter the seabed, on the same ribbon of dry land. Horses, chariots, well-armed soldiers pound toward the people, faster, faster. Until the Egyptian generals look down and suddenly realize that they've been drawn out into the middle of the sea. They panic. They try to turn around. Their horses rear. And then—as the last of the slaves get to the opposite shore, Moses holds up his hand again and the waters come back together, drowning the entire Egyptian army. The good guys are saved.

All of this you could watch in one of the action movies that's been made from this story. But there are some subtleties that don't make the movies, that I want to focus on today.

First: What do you think really happened here? Was the parting of the Red Sea a one-time, miraculous intervention into the laws of nature, a God-only thing that is likely never to be repeated? Is that what makes this such an important, powerful story? Is that why repeating it for generation after generation has given identity to a whole people and religious tradition?

Maybe. As you can imagine, scientists and archaeologists and biblical literalists have spent many years and thousands of dollars trying to validate the historicity of this event. Here's one way they explain what happened: The Israelites arrived at the edge of what we now know as the *Reed Sea* at a point where the water was shallow. There may have been a ridge in the sea bed that was normally covered by water. On this day, there was a fierce east wind that temporarily exposed that ridge of higher ground. This happens sometimes, scientists say; on Lake Erie, in the U.S., strong winds can sometimes produce water elevation differences of as much as sixteen feet. The Israelites arrived at the shore at exactly the right time. Foot travelers would have had an enormous advantage over any mechanized vehicles. The wheels of the Egyptian chariots got mired in the mud. They couldn't advance or retreat. And as the soldiers focused on dislodging their chariots, they didn't notice that the wind was dropping, the tide was returning, the island in the middle of the water was shrinking. The mightiest army in the ancient world was defeated. Its best warriors were drowned. Not by a miracle, but because of a strategic error—that led their army into mud where their own equipment was a liability.

Is this possible? Absolutely. Does it matter? I don't think so.

Look at it this way. Whatever the mechanics were—whether this was a natural event or required a suspension of natural laws—something happened that turned upside down what we know about the way the world *always* works. A straggly group of former slaves, men, women, children, escaped on foot *from one continent to another* with a powerful, mechanized army in pursuit. When they got to the edge of the sea—surely an obstacle that should have ended this whole story—somehow they got to the other side safely. The strength of the far superior army proved to be its weakness. The weak were saved by their willingness to walk straight into danger.

Maybe that's all we need to know. Maybe the story's meaning is not in an explanation of weather mechanics on that particular day. Maybe the power of this miracle is far more astonishing, and much more relevant to our lives today: A group of slaves with no army, no money, no power, was liberated from the mightiest empire of the ancient world. Along the way, they came to a physical barrier that should have stopped them cold. And it did not. They were saved. Their far more well-equipped oppressors were the ones who were stopped. Somehow, it seems, the power of the universe conspired to defend the powerless.

And if it happened once, it can happen again.

There's a *midrash* story about this event that begins with the question "When the Israelites began to cross the sea, was the land in front of them already dry, or did they walk into water first?" The midrash says Moses went first. He walked straight into the sea. And the waters didn't begin to part until Moses was all the way in. Only when the water was up to his nose, and all the people were in the water behind him, did the miracle happen. Only after the people had committed themselves entirely to God. Put themselves in a position where they were trusting God to act. Only their dependence on God, being up their noses in risk-taking, made the water surge apart, and a way forward appear. God shows up—God finds us and saves us—in that moment we are willing to walk straight into what makes us most afraid.

There's another story in the Jewish tradition, about what happened as the Red Sea closed up again. When the people got to dry ground and turned around to see that the Egyptian armies were drowning, they broke into a song of gratitude and relief. The angels in heaven were about to join the singing, the story goes, when God silenced them. "How dare you sing for joy when my creatures—the works of my hand—are dying?!" God said. No one's death—not even an enemy's—pleases God. And that's why, every year when the Passover Seder is celebrated and the cup of blessing is shared, a few drops of the wine are spilled out first—to remind God's people—generations later—that the cup of celebration cannot be full when others have suffered to make it happen.

There is a theme emerging, even in the few stories we have heard so far. It's a partnership between God and humans, a mutuality. God wanted to free the Israelites from slavery. But God needed a human partner. It could only happen if Moses stepped up, if Moses was willing—beginning with the flexibility to turn his head—twist his neck—to investigate a strange thing happening in a bush in the desert. God could only make the sea part if the people were willing to step into the water, up to their noses, trusting that a way forward would appear.

All the earlier stories in the Bible—the ones about creation and Noah, the promise to Abraham to give him a child and make his family a blessing to the world—all of those were unilateral initiatives by God. God never asked Noah or Abraham for their agreement.

Now, here, in the Exodus story, we begin to see what has been true ever since: that what God can do in the world—everything God does to renew and save creation, to create justice, to set people free—depends on human consent. From this point in the story of our religious tradition, God will always be seeking human participation, partnership. God will be seen—visible to human eyes—not in occasional strokes of divine power, but in everyday acts of divine empowerment. Empowerment of God's people. Of us. God cannot do good in this world without us.

In every story along the Exodus journey, God says to the Israelites, as God says to us, 'I will save you, and then I will give you the power to save one another. I will make you free, but then I want you to create a free society.' God shows us the way, and then God expects us—needs us—to come alongside.

May we find the courage to keep moving—toward God, toward one another, toward freedom. Even when the water is up to our noses.

Resources for these sermons:

- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation, Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, Maggid Books and The Orthodox Union, 2010
- Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, Schocken Books, 2001