

In our parashah the Israelites experience one miracle after the other: HaShem brings them out of Egypt, guides them with pillars of cloud and fire, splits the sea for them and closes it over Pharaoh and his army, makes bitter water potable, gives them manna and quails to eat, and protects them against Amalek. But overwhelmed by the unpredictability of their new lives, they fall into a pattern of complaining and blaming. Sadly, we humans have short memories, short attention spans, and short tempers. We jump to conclusions, we challenge authority or blindly obey, we fear the unknown and resist change, we like to take shortcuts, and adversity makes us long to return to an imaginary past where everything was better. This Shabbat is Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of Song, when we read *Shirat haYam*, the Song of the Sea (15:1-18), which celebrates the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds and our final delivery from Pharaoh's tyranny. It is full of praise and elation, but the people's euphoria soon gives way to complaints and allegations. They are thirsty and hungry, and incensed that their needs are not being met. Their ancestors had dug wells, herded flocks, and planted fields, constantly relocating because of drought and famine. But after centuries of enslavement, the people had lost their initiative and their ability to think and act for themselves. They had become infantilized, and the road to adult autonomy would be long and arduous. In the words of Frederick Douglass, "I have found that to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and as far as possible, to annihilate his power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right. ..." Fully aware of the Israelites' vulnerability, HaShem takes them on a long detour to avoid war in Philistia and the temptation to return to Egypt and the slavery they had just left behind, a route that finds them encamped between the desert and the sea with the Egyptians hot in pursuit. Too frightened to remember the miracles that had already experienced, they cry out to HaShem and castigate Moses for having led them out of Egypt only to let them die in the wilderness. Then, despite another miraculous deliverance, they start complaining again, because they have been slogging through the desert for three days and have found no water fit to drink. But even after receiving abundant water, they continue to grumble and accuse, now, because they are afraid of starving. Uncertainty and hardship can generate such strong nostalgia for the old life, that people forget why they left it behind. The Israelites have fallen into this pernicious trap. Slavery was miserable, but at least they had food, and their lives were predictable. Now, adrift in unfamiliar territory, and with each new challenge reinforcing their fears and weakening their resolve, they are falling into the habit of complaining and blaming others. In addition, they are becoming addicted to miracles. Whenever things look hopeless, HaShem is always there to rescue them. But their gratitude, and their willingness to accept HaShem's authority and obey Moses last only until the next problem arises. They have acquired the self-defeating habit of entitlement, and they show no signs of willingness to extricate themselves from this comfortable new form of slavery. Obviously they have not yet realized that mere physical freedom is only a first step. They may be free from their taskmasters, but they are not free to do as they please and then expect to be rescued when they get into trouble. They will not be truly free until they overcome their addiction to miracles and learn to assume responsibility for themselves individually and for the group as a whole. And for that, they must develop new habits that are founded on remembering and being grateful for HaShem's unwavering help, observing HaShem's commandments, obeying Moses rather than challenging and blaming him, and cultivating the patience necessary to achieve long-term goals. It is going to take time, and there are no shortcuts. According to Midrash Tanchuma Beshalach, this is precisely why the Israelites need a 40-year detour: "The Holy One of Blessing said, 'If I lead them into the land by the most direct route, they will each take possession of a field and a vineyard and neglect the law. Therefore I will lead them through the wilderness for 40 years and cause them to eat the manna and drink the water of the well so that the law may penetrate into their very beings.'" Along the way, the Israelites will lurch from blunder to blunder, duly sobered by each negative experience, but still not quite understanding what is expected of them. They had left Egypt and slavery, but the mentality of their former life holds them in bondage, luring them back every time they feel uncomfortable. Our sages rightly said that although it took only one day to get the Israelites out of Egypt, it took 40 years to get Egypt – in Hebrew, *mitzrayim*, i.e., confinements both literal and figurative – out of the Israelites. Indeed, apart from Joshua and Caleb, only their offspring entered the Promised Land, carrying with them vestiges of Egypt. We are still grappling with this old mentality – impatient, entitled, and always looking for shortcuts that only create new forms of *mitzrayim*. Sadly, more and more people in democratic countries are choosing to ignore history's many lessons and instead, place their trust in individuals who offer easy solutions and promise renewal of a glorious, imaginary past. The old trap is baited and waiting, while freedom remains an elusive and slippery concept that is easily misunderstood by the uninformed and flagrantly misappropriated by the unscrupulous. Will we ever learn? The answer, as my fellow Minnesota Iron Ranger so well put it, is "blowin' in the wind."

Shabbat shalom!