

Crossing The Sea To Go Backwards

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We Jews are a fractious lot. And the Hasidic world is the ultimate in bitter religious splits. Satmar, the largest dynasty today, has two rival rebbes. But the first rancorous division of a Hasidic court I encountered was amongst another Hungarian dynasty, the followers of Reb Arele. What is it about Hungary, or should I say the Carpathians, that breeds such fierce fanaticism and rivalries?

When Aharon (Arele) Roth died in Israel in 1947, he left a small community known as Shomrei Emunim, the Guardians of the Faith. They had a little shtiebel on Rehov Meah Shearim that his son took over against his father's wishes (the son had a dream that his father had changed his mind). So his son-in-law went off and founded Toldos Aharon, which eventually overshadowed the original. Both groups fed the sort of extremism that has earned Meah Shearim its dubious reputation. To this day, as they have spread out, they are the main force behind the Beit Shemesh barbarities. Meet them individually and they can be charming and gentle, but in mass and on the warpath they make the Sioux look like sissies. Over the years, they have grown from a handful into thousands, and Toldos Aharon itself has now split too. Extrapolate and the future is scary.

I am mentioning them now because of the seventh day of Pesach, when we celebrate crossing the Red Sea. One of the remarkable features of the movement was the custom initiated by Reb Arele on the morning of the seventh day of Pesach to start running between the singing, massed bodies of his followers, until he actually collapsed of exhaustion. The idea was to relive the experience of fear, of dashing through the waters before they swept back. Instead of the sedate procession featured in Hollywood reconstructions, this version feels the episode as one of terror, only assuaged by the relief of getting to the other side and then seeing one's enemies destroyed.

In some ways it reminds me of the BBC nature film of the masses of wildebeest migrating across the river Mara, stopping, overlooking the flooded, crocodile-infested waters, terrified to jump in, but unable to push back. Then a Nachshon Ben Aminadav leaps in and they all follow over to their promised land of lush pastures.

I was fascinated when, as a teenager, I first saw Reb Arele cross the sea in his small shtiebel. Then over the years as they split and grew and built much larger, luxurious temples to their gods, and as rebbes were younger and stronger, the dramatic performances became even more overpowering. That's the beauty of the mystical approach—to experience, to live one's religion, rather than coldly recount and blindly observe. But in this anecdote lies an important lesson.

You are aware, I am sure, that, as on most issues, great rabbis of the past have argued about things that seem to be simple in the Biblical text, like

the design of the Menorah or indeed crossing the Red Sea. Some believe they walked straight across. Others suggest they marched in a semicircle and returned to the same side they set out from. According that point of view, the lesson I would draw is that fear sometimes deceives us into making obviously wrong decisions. It paralyzes us, like animals hypnotized by their killers.

And there are two kinds of fear I have in mind. Last week I mischievously entitled my piece "Oil or Occupation". Whereas I had in mind getting a job, many of my readers thought I was referring to the occupation by Israel of the West Bank. Of course I was not. But that did illustrate the automatic response we have to certain words according to our preconditioning. This time I do want to make that connection. It is clear that the present situation is not working, neither for Israelis nor Palestinians. Both sides are unhappy. It may indeed be true that no solution is ever going to be possible because there is so much going on behind the scenes, so much doubletalk, so little genuine goodwill, so many vested interests and external pressures that no solution is possible, just a less unsatisfactory compromise. But if fear is the only motive, then I believe we are just progressing in an arc that will take us back to where we started. And if we ignore the suffering of others, how can we argue that ours should be recognized?

The same fear of taking a leap goes for religion. The early Hasidic masters were innovators who wanted to find ways of bringing people back to the beauties of a spiritual, mystical life. But over time fear of the outside, fear of losing control, of being corrupted, prevented them from innovating or from making concessions to draw more people into their orbit. This is what characterizes extreme Orthodoxy today. For the 1% it attracts, the rest are pushed away, intellectually and creatively. There is no spirit of progress or renewal, just carrying on in the same way as before. Which might work for those within, but will leave the rest to the spiritual crocodiles.

Any journey is risky and the first progress to the Promised Land was neither smooth nor easy. But at least they overcame their fears and crossed the sea. Our generation seems to be making no such progress. Nevertheless, on Friday I will identify with those of the pious who will reenact the crossing, though in my mind it will be onwards and upwards, not backwards.