“We Are the Journey”

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In my high school biology class, we learned that magic phrase, “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” What a wonderful expression of the mystery of the interconnectedness of all life. Ontogeny, the fetal development that all living organisms must go through, follows the billion-years old evolutionary path that led to any one organism’s existence as a member of a specific phylum and species.

I don’t have gills, but I know that I had them briefly during my journey in my mother’s womb.

Our portion begins, “These are the journeys of the children of Israel who came forth from the land of Egypt, host by host, led by Moses and Aaron.” The Torah proceeds to list, in order, the forty-two stops the Israelites make on their forty-year trek from Egypt to Sinai and onward to their final vantage point in preparation for crossing into Canaan. It reads like something between an epilogue and an index.

For the most part, it’s just a list. We went here, then we went here, then we went here. But all along the way it stops to mention some wonderful or horrific event that occurred at a given place. Here we ran out of water. Here we rebelled against God and Moses. Here we discovered twelve life-giving springs. Here we learned about manna. Here we witnessed water pouring forth from a rock. Here we doubted the very existence of God. Here we defeated our attackers and lived to see another day.

The Baal Shem Tov, known as the Besht, homes in on the uniqueness of this passage. Only he, with his unparalleled eye for the psycho-spiritual, sees what is really going on here.

He says that “there is nothing in the general that is not found in the specific.” *Eyn bich’lal ela ma she-bif’rat.* “All forty-two stops, all forty-two ‘journeys’ of the children of Israel, can be found in each and every detail of the universe, indeed in each and every individual soul, from the day of one’s birth to the day one returns to one’s place of eternity, *miyom hivaldo ad shuvo l’olamo.”*

In other words, the phylogeny of the experience of the Children of Israel in their mythic, epic journey from the birthing waters of the Reed Sea to the death of Moses on Mount Nebo forty years later, can be seen in the journey each of us takes through life. That journey is a physical journey to be sure. But primarily it is a spiritual journey, an ontogeny of going from being just another newborn to becoming a person of wisdom, happiness, sadness, memory, and hope.

As if to say that the Torah we have been reading these many months from the Exodus to now is not about what we thought it was about. We thought it was the story of an ancient ethnic group migrating through the desert on their way to a new and better stomping ground. Isn’t that what we thought? Isn’t that how we have been understanding the Torah in front of our eyes?

Well, says the Besht, we have been missing the point. We have been riding in the car or the train and not looking out the window. We have been going through the motions of waking and working and sleeping and waking again, and again, and not looking up to see the unfolding journey in front of our eyes.

All along, the Torah was about us. Each one of us. It was about the fits and starts of our own spiritual growth, from the day we were born to the day we do *teshuvah,* literally the day of our “return” to the place of our origin.

*Eileh mas’ey v‘nai yisrael asher yatz’u.* These are the journeys of *each* of the children of Israel, each of the children of humankind, who once upon a time went forth into the chaos of freedom and, through trial and error, discovered that we were born not to be mere students of Torah, but to be the embodiment of the Torah itself. *We are the journey*.