

Why the sea split: Magnificent Midrash Magnifying the splitting of the sea

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### **The tall tale of the Midrash**

The Written Torah outlines the exodus from Egypt in *Parshat Beshalach*, but the midrashim surrounding such an already astonishing event add grandeur to this momentous moment. *Shemot Rabbah* (21:6) tells of one of said tall tales:

God instructs Moshe to lift his staff over the sea and split it. Moshe responded, “You commanded me to split the sea, but doesn’t it say in *Yirmiyahu* (5:22) that you set the sand as a boundary to the sea? And behold, you have sworn to never split it!” (R. Eliezer HaKapar stated this is what Moshe said, “Didn’t you say that the sea would never be dry? As it says, “You commanded me to split the sea, but doesn’t it say in *Yirmiyahu* (5:22)” and it says “Who closed the sea behind doors. (*Iyov* 38:8).) God responds, “You didn’t read from the beginning of the Torah (*Bereshit* 1:9) where it says that I gathered the water below the sky. I am the one who prescribed such a collection, so too I made a deal with the sea from the

beginning that I would split it, as it says (*Shemot* 14:27) “At daybreak the sea returned to its strength/normal prescription, to the normal prescription that I prescribed from the beginning.” Immediately Moshe understood and went to split the sea, and since he went to split the sea, he did not merit being split himself. The sea responds to Moshe, “For you (Moshe) I am going to split? I am greater than you because I was created on the third day and you were created on the sixth day.” When Moshe heard this, he left and told God that the sea does not want to be split. What did the Almighty do? He took his right side and put it on the right side of Moshe, as it says (*Yeshayahu* 63:12) “Who made his glorious arm march at the right hand of Moshe, who divided the waters before them to make Himself a name for all time.” Immediately the sea saw God and fled, as it says (*Tehilim* 114:3) “The sea saw and fled.” What did the sea see? The sea saw that God put his right hand on Moshe and was unable to prevent the sea being split and fled immediately. Moshe then asked the sea, “For what reason did you flee?” The sea said, “Due to the God of Yaakov, because of the awe of the holy one, the source of blessing.” Immediately since Moshe lifted his staff on the sea, it split, as it says (*Shemot* 14:21) “The waters were split.”

### **Facing the face value of the Midrash**

*Midrash Rabbah* details a fantastic narrative between Moshe, God, and the Yam Suf. A casual glance reveals that this passage cannot be taken literally. People do not speak to the waters, or certainly, the seas do not respond. Seas do not have emotions, nor do they calculate comebacks. However, if that were not enough to force the reader to understand such a passage in

a non-literal sense, certainly its internal contradictions will require the reader to see that the author intended for a lesson to be learned from such a fable.

There are several ways this *midrash* is “reality-challenged”. Moshe quotes from the book of *Yirmiyahu*, who had not been alive at the time. Additionally, the Talmud explains (*Bava Batra* 15a) that *Yirmiyahu* wrote the book himself. Perhaps one could claim that Moshe knew all of *Tanach*, even before Mount Sinai, ironically, this very *Midrash* points to the fact that he did not. God quoted from the very beginning of *Bereshit*, something Moshe himself transcribed later in time.<sup>1</sup> The next sticking point is when God sends Moshe to split the sea and the sea refuses! Did God not know that this would be the sea’s response? Certainly the reader wouldn’t claim the author of this Midrash denoted a lack of omniscience to God. Additionally, though God and the sea had an existing deal, somehow the sea didn’t remember. Clearly, such an account cannot be taken literally. So what can we learn from such a tall tale?

### **Examining the case**

Let’s examine some of the peculiarities involved.

1. Moshe debates God because he doubts the power of the almighty.
2. He does not believe that it is within the power of God to split the sea.<sup>2</sup>
3. God could have responded that He set the sea, so He can unset it. But instead...
4. ...He responds that He initially set the sea to be split at this time.
5. Somehow this resolves Moshe’s misunderstanding.
6. How was that response useful? Was he not already aware that God created the world?

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<sup>1</sup> Mahazav claims that in fact Moshe did have earlier parts of the Torah, as he quotes from a few Midrashic sources. For simplicity, we will work with the opinion of the Torah, Talmud, and Rishonim who hold that he did not. In fact, perhaps my answer given later on can explain the purpose of such midrashim.

<sup>2</sup> Etz Yosef notes that the debate in what Moshe’s question of God was either was that God does not change the laws of nature and he had also sworn to never drown the world again or that he simply does not change the laws of nature. Regardless of the approach, in reference to this article, what is seen is that Moshe’s quandary was that it seemed that God would be changing his mind.

1. When Moshe reports to God that the sea (3 days older) is “playing the seniority card”...God’s response is to accompany Moshe so as to strengthen Moshe’s right hand.<sup>3</sup>

God could have done a number of alternate things.

- A. ...God could have told the sea to split for Moshe.
- B. ...God could have said that the sea was wrong.

The sea split for the Almighty, not for Moshe. As we said, this interaction cannot be taken literally.

### **Putting the pieces together**

First, we can see that God did not respond that the sea was incorrect. This response teaches us a fundamental lesson in regards to Moshe, and to how man relates to the world. As evidenced from the beginning of the Midrash, Moshe’s lack of knowledge stemmed from not being around during the time of creation (he was created after the sea was created). As a result, a miracle in the eyes of Moshe seemed to imply that God would be changing his mind as to how the world should be run. God’s response was that it was always the plan to split the sea at this moment. As such, the sea only had the physical property of conforming to its natural habitat, so the sea was merely unable to split. And it retorts, how can man even think it can have the power to create a miracle and exert dominance over the nature of the sea when man wasn’t even around during the forming of the sea?<sup>4</sup> God does not respond that the sea is wrong; rather the Midrash points out that the causative force which controls nature must be God, the creator of the very laws. Additionally, God was certainly aware that Moshe would be unable to split the sea himself,

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<sup>3</sup> The right arm denotes strength, as seen in all of Tanach and Talmudic literature. For instance, we put Tefillin on the “weak” arm, the left arm. This does not speak to a discrimination of left-handed individuals, it merely points to the predominance of right-handed individuals in the world. That is why a lefty would switch sides for their Tefillin and strap their right arm, since it is weaker. We see a similar phenomenon in culture, as a left-handed fighter has a “South=paw” stance, as opposed to an “Orthodox stance.”

<sup>4</sup> Which is why it uses the language of the sea being formed on the third day as opposed to man being created on the sixth day.

rather, Moshe must confront such a predicament himself. Man must face the reality that we do not control the world, rather, it is God who has the power.

### **Lesson to Learn**

We can learn from this a powerful lesson as man approaches life. Many attribute supernatural powers to items and people; this Midrash directly opposes such a notion. It is only due to the fact that, “He took his right side and put it on the right side of Moshe,” as it were, that Moshe was able to choreograph the splitting of the sea. It is only God that is able to alter the laws of nature, that without intervention, such a magnanimous event could not occur.<sup>5</sup>

### **Why now?**

This message was crucial at this moment in time as opposed to during the ten plagues, which had just preceded this incident, as the splitting of the sea was witnessed by the entirety of the Jewish people and the Egyptians. They saw Moshe lift his staff and the sea immediately split, **as both the Torah and the Midrash point out**. One message could erroneously be understood that Moshe was seen to have power. However, this Midrash is teaching us that God caused the rift, not Moshe. This can also explain the “threat” found in the Midrash where had Moshe not split the sea, he would have been split. Meaning this action solidified the leadership of Moshe in the eyes of the people at that moment in time, and had he not done this action, the leadership of Moshe would have been split, meaning that it would have crumbled. Additionally, one could err and imagine a picture of the people with their backs to the wall, or the sea, as the Egyptians chased them. As such, the splitting of the sea could be seen as a last minute act, hastily carried out. However, as the Midrash notes (and as can be seen in the pesukim that such an event was foretold), it was always the plan.

Thus we see that in a short story, Chazal were able to impart three fundamental messages to the people that one would be able to absorb even without understanding the details of the Midrash. First of all, God doesn't change his mind. This is such a fundamental concept as aside from the fact that if he were to change his mind that would mean he lacks complete oneness, however, if he changes his mind that would mean that he was lacking knowledge, and once he has received new knowledge, he has made a different decision. This cannot be the case, as he is omniscient, as the Midrash points out. The second is that God has complete control over the laws of nature. Finally, man and objects do not contain power; only God has the true power.