

## Beshalach The Plishtim or the Sea?

### A. The Questionable Plishti Plan

The *parsha* begins with a strange opening. “*Vayehi beshalach paro es ha'am*. When Paro sent out the people Hashem did not send them through the land of the Plishtim even though it was close, because He said, 'Perhaps the people will regret leaving Egypt when they see war and they will return to Mitzrayim.'”

This *pasuk* is puzzling. Back in Parshas Shmos, Moshe Rabbeinu had his first encounter with Hashem at the burning bush. In the long dialogue that they had there, Hashem pressed Moshe to accept the mission to lead the Jews out of Egypt, but Moshe resisted, claiming he was unfit to be the leader of the people. God said to Moshe, “You are the one who has to do this, because you will be my messenger when the people come to Har Sinai to serve me.” *V'zeh l'cha ha'os ki anochi shlachticha, b'hotzi'acha es ha'am mi'mitzrayim taavdun es haElokim al hahar hazeh*.

Additionally, in the four words that Hashem used to describe the redemption of the Jews, the four *l'shonos* of *geula*, Hashem told Moshe that He would take Bnei Yisrael as His people. Their acceptance of the Torah was actually the fulfillment of the promise of *vlakachti eschem li lam*. Why then does the Torah say that Hashem considered sending Bnei Yisrael through the land of the Plishtim? That's not the way to Har Sinai to receive the Torah and become Hashem's chosen people!

As the reason for not going through Eretz Plishtim, which is part of Eretz Canaan, the Torah writes that Bnei Yisrael might be afraid when they see war and return to Egypt. The whole point of leaving Mitzrayim, though, was to become the people of God, to establish our connection to Him through the Torah. They had to go to Har Sinai, to fulfill the dreams and promises made to Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov. That is the apparent reason for skipping the shortcut of Eretz Plishtim. Why does the Torah here give a different reason? The reason of going to war with the Plishtim is a moot point. Of course Bnei Yisrael had to go to Har Sinai to receive the Torah! That is the real reason why Hashem took them on the detour into the desert, away from Eretz Yisrael.

### B. What Did Bnei Yisrael Do to Merit the Exodus

Shem Mishmuel explains one of the fundamental questions of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. What merit of the Jewish people warranted this exodus? God changed the fundamentals of natural law for the benefit of the Jewish people. What merit did they have? Water turned to blood, all Egyptian firstborns died while no Jews died, darkness came. Of course, the Jews had the merit of their *avos* Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. However, God doesn't change the world for people living today just because of people who lived hundreds of years earlier. God would not make miracles for people who would not be helped by the miracles. Clearly there was something in the generation of the Exodus that Hashem saw them as worthy for these miracles.

Moshe resisted and wanted to know what the purpose of the exodus would be. Hashem said it was so that they will serve God on Har Sinai – that they receive the Torah. These weak slaves, weak as they were spiritually, possessed untapped potential. Through their exodus from Egypt and their march

through the desert, something would develop within them. They would rise to the occasion and deserve the Torah. This potential, which does in part come from the *avos*, grew as a direct result of their experience of slavery. Their fathers' merit as well as and their own experience as slaves made them ready to be sanctified at Har Sinai and receive the holy Torah.

There's a famous Yiddish vort. Its easier to take the Jew out of Egypt then it is to take Egypt out of the Jew. The slavery in Egypt had a double meaning. First, it was a physical situation in which the Jewish people were unfortunately captive for more than 200 years. They were subjected to the brutal effects of the slave regime. These years affected them on a deeper level too. Culturally they became Egyptian. At the sea, the midrash says, the angels protested. "Both of these groups, the Egyptians and the Jews, are serving idols." At the sea, in crisis, the Jews took out their idols! This mistaken idea of other gods, had penetrated to the depths of their psychology. They were idol worshipers and pagans. When crisis met them at the sea they reverted to their old ways. The angels could not understand the merit of the Jews over the Egyptians. Even though the Jews had been physically freed, and Paro issued a proclamation to that effect, their cultural enslavement was still in force.

The midrash emphasizes that when the Jews left Egypt, Paro sent out the nation, *b'shalach Paro*. Paro did not just allow them to leave, he accompanied them on their way out. He gave them a farewell parade. This meant that Paro and the Egyptians who came to the parade felt that the free Jews would capture Canaan but they would still maintain loyalty to the Egyptian empire, like the British colonies who conquered land but stayed loyal to the Commonwealth. The Jews were so emotionally attuned to their host country of Mitzrayim that they would remain within the governing network of Egypt.

This was a fundamental problem of the freedom from Mitzrayim How could Bnei Yisrael become free culturally from their long experience in Mitzrayim?

### **C. The Fear Necessary to Receive the Torah**

In Masechta Brachos the gemara says that the experience of Har Sinai was with *eima yira reses vzeia*. When the Jews finally did arrive at Sinai to receive the Torah from God, they felt fear, trepidation, shaking, and perspiration. In other words, fear of God was the core experience. They felt an awareness of the oneness of Hashem and were overcome with awe. Without that emotion, they could not possibly receive the Torah.

The Torah is not just a book of laws or history. You can't look at the Torah as a history book. You can't even look at the Torah as a law book. It is an *experience* of God. Chazal say that when the Jews stood at Sinai, heaven came down to earth. Hashem opened up the gates of heaven so that everyone could see how all the parts of the world are connected. In order to experience such a phenomenon people had to focus on the uniqueness of God. People who worship idols or hold other kinds of beliefs are incapable of receiving the *mitzvos*. People like that would not be able to internalize the awareness of Hashem, His unity and His uniqueness. You can't just give them the Torah and expect it to get into them. The Torah is an experience of Hashem. As the *pasuk* states, "Those of you who are connected to Hashem are alive." The rest are spiritually dead. Spiritually dead people cannot receive the Torah.

This was a tremendous problem that faced Hashem and Moshe. How could they change this mindset of the slaves? They had spent more than 200 years in Egypt, with its worship of many different gods, including the worship of Paro as an eternal god-person. They had built pyramids in honor of these

strange gods, and for Paro to continue to live on within them after death. They had put tables, chairs and beds inside the pyramids. The Egyptians placed food in front of the dead body of Paro so it would be able to eat. They believed that Paro would somehow stay alive after death and still guide their country.

How could the Jewish people escape these idolatrous beliefs so that they would be able to accept the Torah?

#### **D. The Vitality of Torah to The World's Existence**

In Masechta Shabbos 88, our sages say that receiving the Torah was critical for the entire world. Hashem had made a condition when He created the world. If the Jews accept the Torah, the world would be fine. Otherwise, Hashem said that the world would revert to *tohu va'vohu*, it would disintegrate.

Our tradition teaches us that 26 generations lived from the time of creation until the Torah was given. 26 is the *gematriya* of the Shem Havaya. This name of Hashem is known as the name of the *mida* of *chessed*. Hashem kept the world alive for 26 generations without the people of the world deserving it. He maintained the world though *chessed*. But the time to earn life had finally arrived. The world had to justify its existence.

Hashem always deals with everyone in the world with a combination of *chessed* and *din*, a free pass and paying for the ticket. If you can pay for the ticket, then you shouldn't get it for free. But Hashem knows that a world with only *din* is too difficult for the average human being. So Hashem begins His relationship with people using *chessed*. Even people who don't deserve it get a free pass. But later down the road the *chessed* has to switch to *din*.

Hashem had waited 26 generations for the world to reach the point at which people would deserve the blessings of the world. The Jews *had* to accept the Torah. This would justify all of God's creation, from the smallest blade of grass to the vast distances of the galaxies and stars, and all of the rules of nature. All of this wonderful universe was created so that one day people would deserve it through the Torah and through our self perfection. So without the Torah, the world was basically a useless endeavor and would disappear.

Hashem showers *chesed* first. Hashem created the world before people started doing *mitzvos*. He put man into Gan Eden before man ever did a good deed. Hashem starts with us with pure beneficence. But as time goes on, Hashem wants us to switch to the track of *din*, justice.

26 is a mystical number. There were 26 generations from Adam until Moshe. They were generations of *chesed*. Despite idolatry, promiscuity, outright murder and theft, God kept giving the world the energy to continue, with tremendous blessings of life and food. But God knew that the time would come to switch gears, for people to deserve God's blessings and to justify their lives. When Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah at Har Sinai, the whole world switched tracks, onto the track of *din*. When the Jews accepted the Torah they ushered in a new era.

#### **E. False gods, False Goals**

However, the Jews were culturally Egyptians. The Egyptian worldview doesn't place God in the center. It has many false ideals and goals. In those days, those goals included accumulating idols and worshipping the Paro. Today, it is accumulating wealth and other notions of success. Whatever the false values are, they drive God out of the core reality of the purpose of this world – to see God in every experience of ours.

So how could the Jews, who were so foreign in their mindset to Judaism, go to Sinai? According to chassidus, Egypt had regularly committed the three cardinal sins. They were murderers. They threw Jewish babies into the river. They committed other horrors, although we won't go into the horrific details here. We know the Egyptians also acted immorally in the area of sex. We know how the wife of Potifar tried to seduce Yosef. She was not alone in her promiscuity. Rashi explains the *pasuk* in *makas bechoros*, *ein bayis asher ein sham mes*, there was no house in which an Egyptian person did not die. Rashi explains that these included many people who did not seem to be firstborns. Why did they die? Women had been having babies with other men who were not their husbands. Egypt was full of terrible licentiousness. There was a total moral breakdown.

Chassidus and kaballa scrutinize the phrase that Yosef told the brothers when they first arrived, *ervas haaretz basem liros*. You have come to a naked land, a place with a breakdown of sexual mores between man and woman. It was a country of *giluy arayos*. It was full of idolatry too. Paro himself was the leading deity. This is the country and worldview that the Jews lived in. But they had to get this culture out of themselves in order to receive the Torah.

## F. Leaving Egypt Behind

Leaving Egypt physically would not be enough, they had to get Egypt out of their minds psychologically. They couldn't think of their idols or about women as Egyptians thought. How would Hashem create a different mentality for them? They couldn't go to *matan Torah* straight from Egypt. Their receiving the Torah would have been an external *pro forma* act, but it couldn't be an essential acceptance of the Torah in all of its spirit and perspective. This was the key challenge, to imbue the Jewish people with *eima yira reses* and *zeiah*, the fear of God, the feeling of awe, of being overwhelmed by His presence.

How could the Jewish people be purified mentally, psychologically, sociologically, and culturally? Paro had escorted the people out of Egypt, he thus reasserted his psychological and spiritual control over the people. How would they drive out their fear and awe of the idols and deities of Egypt, including the great deity Paro? How would they develop a fear of the true God?

Therefore, Hashem in His infinite wisdom devised a plan, Before he would take Bnei Yisrael to Sinai, the first thing He would do would be to take them to the land of the Plishtim on the coast of Eretz Yisrael. They must confront the Plishtim and, if they succeeded, then they would be able to go to Sinai.

## G. Plishti Pathos

The Plishtim are an enigmatic people. Of all the nations of Canaan, the Plishtim interact most with the Jews. Starting from the times of Avraham and Yitzchak, the Torah describes many interactions with the Plishtim. In Tanach, we see the Plishtim as the great enemy of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael. The great battle of the young David and the giant Goliath, is the battle between the Jews and the Plishtim. They

attacked many times during King Shaul's reign. They captured the *aron* in the time of the prophet Shmuel. The *shofet* Shimshon's entire life was a battle against the Plishtim. He met his untimely death in a Plishti temple, after he was seduced by the Plishti woman Delila. The Plishtim were fighting with the Jews from the time of Avraham all the way through King David and afterwards. This is more than 800 years of conflict!

Who are the Plishtim? Where did they come from? They came from an island called Kaftor, perhaps Cypress. Rav Ahron Soloveitchik noted that the Plishtim never developed a written alphabet. They were illiterate. They did not read, rather they only spoke and fought. They were a warrior nation, illiterate and anti-intellectual. They were the antithesis of the Torah. According to the Torah, the intellect is the crown of the human being, the power of human thought and human expression. The ability to read and write Torah is absolutely critical. Who were these mysterious Plishtim, and why did they confront us so much?

Shem Mishmuel explains that we notice a certain cultural milieu that defines Plishti culture. They were a culture of cynics, *leitzaanim*. Shimshon was killed in a gruesome mocking theater. He was blinded and put on display and laughed at by the crowds. They laughed at him until they died in the building he had leveled. The *mida* of the Plishtim is *schok*, derision in its worst form, the antithesis of *yiras Hashem*. In Mishlei, Shlomo writes repeatedly that the opposite force to Torah is the *letz*, the scoffer. The *apikores*, the enemy of Hashem, is the person who ridicules the Torah and makes a joke of religion. The scoffing and ridiculing and making fun is the antithesis of what Hashem wants. He wants us to feel a sense of responsibility and to feel the awesomeness of what it means to be a human being. He wants us to feel the responsibility of all that God has given us, the *ol malchus shamayim*, the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. But the scoffer rejects all this, he only wants to have a good time. Nothing is sacred to the *letz*. He will make fun of the blind, mock the cripple and the handicapped. He will make jokes of everything sacred.

In our time, so much of our public entertainment is making fun of the sacred. This kind of humor is the main enemy of the Torah and Am Yisrael. Amalek wants to physically destroy the Jew. As horrendous as Amalek is, it's not as bad as the Plishti. The Plishti is the destruction of the Jewish mindset, of looking at the world through Torah lenses. The Plishti says the world is a big joke, we don't have responsibilities. We take for ourselves and we don't have to pay any price for it. We take and have a good time and step on anyone in our way. The Plishti is a scoffer and mocker, the antithesis of Torah.

## **H. Plishti Fun, Jewish Fun**

The problem was that the Jews thought like Egyptians, they had an Egyptian mindset. How would they prepare themselves for Sinai? Hashem considered sending them marching towards the Plishtim to see what goes on there. Let them see the promiscuity of the streets there, the Delila movie stars. This is Plishti fun! In the land of the Plishtim, fun is the goal. But it is false fun.

The Torah is also fun, although it is a different kind of *s'chok*. As Sarah Imeinu described her happiness upon receiving the blessing of a son, "*S'chok asa li Elokim*. Hashem made me laugh." The Torah is holy fun. God gives us the pleasure of Torah, a sweet, deep and true pleasure. It is not the destructive scoffing of the Plishtim. See what terrible things come out of the Plishtim. See how the handicapped are stepped on. See how the sick are left to die with no one to care for them. See how they have a culture too busy for reading and writing because they were busy fighting wars, fighting to the death.

This was also true of the Roman gladiators in the arenas of Rome. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to see this Plishti lifestyle and reject it.

According to Shem Mishmuel, Plishti culture was the mother of Egyptian culture. Egypt had responsibility to the empire. In order to preserve their empire, the Egyptians had certain rules and regulations. But the Plishtim were unharnessed by responsibility. They just wanted to have fun without thinking of consequences.

We now live in a world where we have epidemics like AIDS. People just want to have fun without responsibility. They don't think of the consequences. Torah wants every step of the person to be under his logical control, with a sense of responsibility – for myself, for my heritage, and for my environment. Plishti culture is the ultimate *ervas haaretz*, the nakedness of the world. “Let the Bnei Yisrael go to that land and see how bad it is,” said Hashem. Then they would be ready to go to Har Sinai to receive the Torah.

However, Plishti culture is very powerful. Even the great Shimshon was compromised by that culture. He had *ruach Elokim*, God's spirit was beating within him. Yet he was still overcome by the machinations of the Plishti woman Delila.

So Hashem changed the approach. If they would go to Eretz Plishtim, the people might succumb to the Plishti culture, with no responsibility except for pleasure. This is the antithesis of Torah, and the Jews had absorbed a similar culture in Egypt. The culture was too familiar to them to oppose it. They were not strong enough to recognize the Plishti culture as the evil that it truly was.

## **I. Plan B – Yam Suf**

Hashem therefore took the people back to the Yam Suf, back towards Egypt. The Jews were weak and they may actually have wanted to return to Egypt. Hashem told Moshe the secret. Going back towards Egypt will be a temptation for Paro and his henchman to take off their amiable masks. Paro made a great parade to escort them out, hoping that the Jews would want to stay on as a part of his empire.

Now the plan was to tempt Paro, who would say, “The Jews are lost in the desert. *N'vuchim hem bamidbar*. We can now get them, we can fight them and bring them back to Egypt.” Paro was truly a tyrant. His facade of friendship was just a charade to keep the Jews cultural captives. Paro fell for the bait and rushed to attack.

When the Jews stood at Yam Suf they feared Paro. They saw that Paro was coming to take them back as slaves. They realized that the going away parade was a farce. It was just another way of keeping the shackles of Mitzrayim upon them. Paro was betraying their trust. He showed himself as nothing but a petty tyrant. They realized that Paro didn't love Jews, he wanted to enslave them. They understood that they had to abandon all of their previous thinking. Paro and Egypt were coming against them to capture them and to make them slaves once again.

They cried to Hashem. These were revolutionary cries of a people who at that moment abandoned their previous worldview to become His servants. *Vayiru haam es Hashem* – they truly feared Hashem. *Vaya'aminu b'Hashem uv'Moshe avdo* – they absolutely believed in Hashem and in Moshe his servant.

The excruciating experience at the Red Sea was critical for Am Yisrael. It was crucial and defining. It completed the exodus because it completed their deliverance culturally, mentally, and spiritually from Egypt.

A week earlier Bnei Yisrael had physically walked out of Egypt. At the sea they attained a spiritual personal freedom. This is why the holiday of Pesach has two *yamim tovim*, the first day, when they left Egypt, and the seventh day, when they crossed the Yam Suf. The first day marks the physical exodus from Egypt. The seventh day marks the spiritual exodus. On the first day Hashem took us out, and on the seventh day the Jewish people took themselves out. They decided to have a new way of thinking, an *Am Hashem* way of thinking. This is why we celebrate Pesach with a holiday at the beginning and at the end.

**Questions:**

1. Why would Hashem want to detour to Eretz Plishtim before giving the Torah at Sinai?
2. How did the Yam Suf episode replace the Plishti detour and achieve the same result?

**Exercise:**

3. Keep track for a week of situations you are in and note your reactions. See if you react in a Torah way or in a non-Torah secular way.  
Try to train yourself to have Torah reactions in the situations you are in.