

BESHALACH

THE PLISHTIM OR THE SEA?

A

The Questionable Plishti Plan

The *parsha* begins with a strange opening: “When Pharaoh sent out the people, Hashem did not send them through the land of the Plishtim even though it was close [to Eretz Yisrael] 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 Shemos, Moshe Rabbeinu had his first encounter with Hashem at the burning bush, where God said to him, “*V’zeh l’cha ha’os ki anochi sh’lachticha, b’hotzi’acha es ha’am mi’Mitzrayim ta’avdun es haElokim al hahar hazeh*. 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” (Shemos 3:12).

Additionally, in the four words that Hashem used to describe the redemption of the Jews, the four *leshonos* of *ge’ula*, Hashem told Moshe that He would take Bnei Yisrael as His people. Their acceptance of the Torah was the fulfillment of the promise of *v’lak-achti eschem li l’am*. Why, then, does the Torah say that Hashem considered sending Bnei Yisrael through the land of the Plishtim? While it might be a faster route to Eretz Yisrael, it would skip Har

Sinai, where they would receive the Torah and become Hashem's chosen people!

Moreover, the Torah says that Bnei Yisrael did not traverse the land of the Plishtim because they might be afraid when they see war and return to Egypt. But if the whole point of leaving Mitzrayim was to become the people of God by accepting the Torah, wouldn't the need to go to Har Sinai first be the reason to avoid the shortcut through Eretz Plishtim? Why does the Torah give a different reason? Going to war with the Plishtim would be a moot point if it would mean Bnei Yisrael wouldn't become Hashem's people. That is the real reason why Hashem took them on the detour into the desert away from Eretz Yisrael, not because of a concern lest they return to Egypt.

B

What Did Bnei Yisrael Do to Merit the Exodus?

The 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. Water turned to blood, darkness came, all Egyptian firstborns died while no Jews died. Of course, the Jews had the merit of their *avos* Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. But 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 them. Clearly, there was something in the generation of the Exodus that made them worthy of these miracles.

As described in Parshas Shemos, Moshe initially resisted serving as Hashem's emissary to bring about the redemption. He wanted to know what the purpose of the Exodus would be. Hashem responded that it would be in order for them to serve God on

Har Sinai—that they receive the Torah. These 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. In addition to their fathers' merit, 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*: It's easier to take the Jew out of Egypt than 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 captive for more than 200 years. They were subjected to the brutal effects of the slave regime. But these years affected them in a deeper, more insidious way as well. 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. Why are You saving the Jews and drowning the Egyptians?" Imagine—at the sea, in crisis, the Jews took out their idols! This mistaken idea of other gods had penetrated to the depths of their psyche. 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 Pharaoh had issued a proclamation to that effect, their cultural enslavement persisted.

The Midrash emphasizes that when the Jews left Egypt, Pharaoh sent out the nation: *b'shalach Pharaoh*. Pharaoh did not just allow them to leave—he accompanied them on their way out. He gave them a farewell parade. This meant that Pharaoh and the Egyptians who came to the parade felt that the free Jews would capture Canaan but would maintain loyalty to the Egyptian empire, like the British colonists who conquered land but stayed loyal to the Empire. The Jews were so emotionally attuned to their host

country that they would remain within the governing network of Egypt.

This was a fundamental problem in the exodus from Egypt. How could Bnei Yisrael become culturally free from their long experience in Egypt?

C

The Fear Necessary to Receive the Torah

The Gemara (Brachos 22a) says that the experience of Har Sinai was with *eima, yira, reses, v'zei'a*. 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. It is an *experience* of God. Chazal say that when the Jews stood at Sinai, heaven came down to earth. Hashem opened 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. The Torah is an experience of Hashem. As the *pasuk* states, “Those of you who are connected to Hashem are alive” (Devarim 4:4). The rest are spiritually dead, and spiritually dead people cannot receive the Torah.

This was a tremendous problem that faced Hashem and Moshe. How would 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 Pharaoh as an eternal god-person. They had built pyramids in honor of these strange

gods and for Pharaoh 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 Pharaoh so it would be able to eat. They believed that Pharaoh somehow would stay alive after death and 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

The Gemara (Shabbos 88a) says 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, the world would revert to *tohu va'vohu*, total nothingness.

Our tradition teaches us that twenty-six generations lived from the time of creation until the Torah was given. Twenty-six is the *gematriya* of the *sheim Havaya*. This name of Hashem refers to the *midda* of *chesed*. Hashem kept the world alive for twenty-six generations without the people of the world deserving it. He maintained the world through *chesed*. 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 *chesed* 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 *chesed*. Even people who don't deserve it get a free pass. But later on, the *chesed* has to switch to *din*.

Hashem had waited twenty-six 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 the rules of nature. All of this wonderful universe was created so that, one day, people would deserve it through the Torah and their self-perfection. Without the Torah, the world is basically a useless endeavor and should disappear.

Hashem showers *chesed* first. Hashem created the world before people started doing *mitzvos*. He put man into Gan Eden before he 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*.

Twenty-six is a mystical number of *chesed*. The twenty-six generations from Adam until Moshe were sustained through *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 onto the track of *din*. When the Jews accepted the Torah, they ushered in a new era.

E

False Gods, False Goals

But 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 worshiping Pharaoh. Today, it is accumulating wealth, and other notions of success. Whatever the false values are, they drive out the core 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, Egyptians 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 details here. We know the Egyptians also acted lustfully. We know how the wife of Potifar tried to seduce Yosef, and that she was not alone in her promiscuity. As Rashi explains in the context of *makkas bechoros*, “*Ein bayis asher ein sham meis*. There was no house in which an Egyptian person did not die” (Shemos 12:30), because women had more than one “firstborn child” due to their unfaithfulness to their husbands. Egypt was full of terrible licentiousness. There was a total moral breakdown.

Chassidus and Kabbala scrutinize the phrase that Yosef told the brothers when they first arrived in Egypt. “*Ervav ha'aretz basem liros*” (Bereishis 42:12), Yosef tells them. You have come to a naked land, a place with a breakdown of all morality. 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; the Jewish people had to get Egypt out of their minds, psychologically. They couldn't think of their idols or women as Egyptians thought of them. How would Hashem create a different mentality for them? They couldn't go to *matan Torah* straight from Egypt. Receiving the Torah under such circumstances 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 *zei'a*—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? Pharaoh had escorted the

people out of Egypt, thus reasserting 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 Pharaoh? How would they develop a fear of the true God?

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 them. In Tanach, we see the Plishtim as the great enemy of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael. The great battle of the young Dovid and the giant Goliath is the classic battle between the Jews and the Plishtim. They attacked the Jewish People 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. The Plishtim were fighting with the Jews from the time of Avraham all the way through King Dovid and afterwards. This is more than 800 years of conflict!

Who were the Plishtim and where did they come from? They came from an island called Kaftor, perhaps Cypress. Rav Ahron Soloveitchik *z"l* noted that the Plishtim never developed a written alphabet. They did not read; they spoke and fought. They were a warrior nation, illiterate and anti-intellectual. They were the antithesis of the Torah, for which the intellect is the crown of the human being, the power of human thought and expression. The ability to read and write Torah is absolutely critical.

Why did they confront us so much? The Shem Mishmuel explains that we notice a certain cultural milieu that defines Plishti culture. They were a culture of cynics, *leitzanim*. 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 leveled. The *midda* of the Plishtim is *sechok*, derision in its worst form, the antithesis of *yiras Hashem*. In Mishlei, Shlomo writes repeatedly that the opposite force to Torah is the *leitz*, 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 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 of this. He just wants to have a good time. Nothing is sacred to the *leitz*. He will make fun of the blind and mock the cripple and the handicapped. He will make light 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, the Plishti is also horrific. The Plishti is the destruction of the Jewish mindset, of looking at the world through Torah lenses. The Plishti says that the world is a big joke, that 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.

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 Delilah 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 *sechok*. As Sara Imeinu described her happiness upon receiving the blessing of a son, “*Tzechok asah li Elokim*, Hashem made me laugh” (Bereishis 21:6). 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. The Jews should 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 are 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 the 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 unbridled 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. The 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 *ervav ha'aretz*, 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. It compromised even the great Shimshon. He had *ruach Elokim*, God's spirit, beating within him, yet was still overcome by the machinations of the Plishti woman Delilah.

So, Hashem changed His original plan, which had been for Bnei Yisrael to travel through Eretz Plishtim, which would prepare them for Har Sinai next. Hashem was concerned lest they "see war," i.e., see the war-culture of the Plishtim, and thus they would "return to Egypt" (meaning the cultural mindset of Egypt), rather than feeling antipathy towards it. If they would go to Eretz Plishtim, the people might succumb to the Plishti culture, with no responsibility but 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 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 would be a temptation for Pharaoh and his henchman to take off their amiable masks. Pharaoh 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 Pharaoh, who would say, "The Jews are lost in the desert. *Nevuchim heim ba'aretz*. We can now fight them and bring them back to Egypt." Pharaoh truly was a tyrant. His facade of friendship was just a charade to keep the Jews cultural captives. Pharaoh fell for the bait and rushed to attack.

When the Jews stood at Yam Suf, they feared Pharaoh. They saw that Pharaoh was coming to take them back as slaves. They realized that the farewell parade was a farce. It was just another way of keeping the shackles of Egypt upon them. Pharaoh was betraying their trust. He showed himself as nothing but a petty tyrant. They realized that Pharaoh didn't love Jews, he wanted to enslave them. They understood that they had to abandon all of their previous thinking. Pharaoh and Egypt were coming against them to capture them and 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. *Vayire'u ha'am es Hashem*—they truly feared Hashem. *Vaya'aminu ba'Hashem uv'Moshe avdo*—they absolutely believed in Hashem and in Moshe his servant (Shemos 14:31).

The excruciating experience at Yam Suf was critical and defining for Am Yisrael. 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 physically, and the seventh day, when they crossed the Yam Suf. The first day marks the physical exodus from Egypt. The seventh 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.

REVIEW 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

1. 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.

