



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

## Beshalach 5784

### P.L.O.: The Noble Illusion, The Ugly Reality

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 17, 1976)

**T**he conclusion is inescapable: this is a crazy world. Sometimes I question if we are not all in the grip of a mass psychosis, if we do not all live in a universal snakepit.

Consider the mad scene of international affairs: the United Nations, an organization supposedly devoted to the pursuit of world peace, hails a gun-toting gangster; the Third World, organized to make little countries independent of superrich powers, favors the oil imperialists and gangs up on another little, lonely country; countries the likes of Sudan, which has butchered hundreds of thousands of Blacks, vote to declare that Zionism is racism; the first Jewish Secretary of State in 200 years of American history pressures Israel more than he does its foes; the Administration of this country is near hysteria because it is afraid that the Soviets will build a base in Angola, and yet they are beginning to push Israel to agree to a Palestinian state – which will most certainly become a Soviet base that will threaten not only Israel, but Egypt and Jordan and Lebanon as well; many liberals, including some Jews, refuse to take seriously or literally the “Palestine Covenant,” which declares it a stated aim of the P.L.O. to destroy Israel, and excuses it by saying that it is only propaganda – when the same people have had the experience of Hitler not being taken seriously, and Nasser too, only to learn later that they meant exactly what they said.

The Talmud (Pes. 50a) teaches: R. Joseph the son of R. Joshua ben Levi became sick and fell into a coma. Then he was revived, and his father said to him, “What did you see?” what kind of pure vision did you behold as you were at the gates of that other, greater existence? The son answered, למעלה ותחתונים למעלה – “I saw a topsy-turvy world, in which what normally is at the bottom was at the top, and what usually is at the top was at the bottom.” To which the father said, בני, עולם ברור ראית, – “My

son, what you saw was the same world!” That other world – that is the lucid one, whereas this world is the עולם הפוך, the crazy, mad, demented, topsy-turvy world!

And so I insist: the rational and reasonable world that we dream of, the one we assume ought to exist even if it be far short of perfection, that is the עולם ברור, the lucid world. The reality through which we are now living is unquestionably the עולם הפוך, the crazy and mad world.

But craziest of all is the near universal adulation received by the P.L.O. I understand Russia – but why China? Why the Third World? Why Japan? Why Sweden? Why the abstention of England and France and Italy?

But, if so many nations reverence the P.L.O., then certainly there must be something to it. Let us be honest. The P.L.O. does seem to make a case. There is something compelling about its presentation. They are a dispossessed people, coming into their own, fighting for their own land, writing nationalistic poetry and drama, sacrificing, building a shadow government, scoring victories, and inspiring seemingly fair-minded people.

But of course, the answer is that all this is meretricious. It is the illusion of nobility disguising an ugly reality. It is the paint of innocence on the face of the harlot.

Let me mention to you a strange interpretation by the Tosaphists (in the מושב זקנים, ed. Sasoon). At the conclusion of our Sidra we read of Amalek: ויבא עמלק וילחם, “*And Amalek came and made war against Israel in Rephidim.*” Why, ask the Tosaphists, did Amalek take such chances? After all, Amalek had heard of all the miracles that had been performed for Israel in Egypt, of all the supernatural intervention on its behalf – why then the risk of provoking a battle with Israel?

The answer they offer is almost mind-boggling: Because Amalek contemplated its own name, “עמלק,” and discovered that the letters of this name are identical with the initial letters of four great Jews: Amram (עמרם), Moses

(משה), Levi (לוי), and Kehat (קהת). Amalek assumed, since its name formed the ראשי תיבות or initial letters of these four Israelite spiritual giants, that it too would be endowed with a supernatural triumph. But the mistake that Amalek made was that it failed to consider the סופי תיבות, “concluding letters” of these four names. Rearranged, these letters spell the Hebrew word מיתה, “death!”

And this, they conclude, is the meaning of the verse (Nu. 24:20) by the Gentile Prophet Balaam: ראשית גוים עמלק ואחריתו עדי אובד, “*The first of the nations is Amalek, and its end will be utter destruction.*” What Balaam meant was that Amalek may boast of “the first,” that the first letters of the four Jewish heroes spell its own name, but its end or conclusion will be destruction – because the last letters of those names spell מיתה, death.

Now, this sounds like an elaborate, artificial, playful word-game – somewhat unreal, odd, and not a little fantastic. Surely it does not qualify as a lesson in Realpolitik. Yet – it is just that! It is a brilliant, if Midrashically phrased, expose of the hypocrisy of Amalek in its numerous incarnations in the tortured history of our benighted species.

The P.L.O.-Amalek has grabbed the ראשי תיבות, the initial letters of Jewish leadership. It is putting itself over before the world as the Arab version of Zionism or Jewish national liberation. If the Jews can do it, the Arabs can too – and even better. Amalek too has its equivalents of Amram and Moses and Kehat and Levi. They have their national poets, their heroes, their Irgun and Stern groups, their claim to the land, an equivalent of sorts of the Jewish Agency and a shadow government and even a Diaspora...

But – that is where the comparison ends! The world sees only the innocent face, the ראשי תיבות or initial letters; it ignores the סופי תיבות, the ugly reality that is beneath and at the end of Amalek, at its own peril.

Jewish nationalism began with Abraham, and Jews never denied it. Throughout the centuries, for every day, without cease, we knew that the Land of Israel is our land. But the Arabs, as recently as twenty years ago, were declaiming their assertion that there is no Palestine, that it is only Southern Syria – a view which articulated well with the philosophy of history of the late and unlamented Arnold Toynbee.

Israel incorporated in its Declaration of Independence that it extends the hand of shalom, peace, to its neighbors. The P.L.O. bases its covenant upon the principle of death to Israel.

The Jews fought valiantly against the British – their

troops and their police. The P.L.O. has yet to encounter Israel upon the field of battle. It fights only against unarmed civilians – men, women, and children.

Israel, for the sake of its own nationhood and peace, has suffered truncation and amputation from the very beginning of World War I. The article by Mrs. Golda Meir in this week’s New York Times is most compelling when she points out that of all the land taken from the Sultan after the First World War, only one per cent was put aside for a Jewish national homeland. Three quarters of what was left was then put aside for an artificial country, TransJordan. Jews then accepted the 1947 partition, which cut off even more of what should have been ours. Indeed, if the Arabs are truly interested in only setting up a Palestinian State on the West Bank and in Gaza – why did they not do that until 1967? The answer is, of course, that the P.L.O. means what it says: If it gets a state now on the West Bank and in Gaza, it is only an “interim state” until they can destroy Israel and rule over the entire area. Their goal is simple as it is cruel: politicide.

So of this Amalek too it may be said that it poses with the ראשי תיבות of virtue and greatness, but behind it all are the סופי תיבות of death and destruction.

The fact is that the blood brothers of this Amalek are cruel to their own kind. Compare the Jewish world-wide efforts via the UJA for Israel – with all its disappointments, despite the fact that so many Jews give nothing, and that those who give usually give far less than they should – compare this to the cruelty of the OPEC Arabs towards their Palestinian brothers. Only this week the United Nations released the statistics that the oil revenues of the OPEC states were in the vicinity of two hundred billion dollars. They paid out approximately a hundred billion dollars for imports. Hence, they had left a clear excess of pure profit in the vicinity of a hundred billion dollars. Of this, they gave no more than about seventy million dollars to the Palestinian refugees – which comes to the merest fraction of one per cent of their excess cash!

The world sees only P.L.O.-Amalek in its “initial letters”; at best it treats Israel and the P.L.O. as two antagonists equally deserving of the world’s solicitude and sympathy. But the same world has only begun to get a taste of the real P.L.O., of the death and destruction dealt out by this contemporary Amalek.

The Arabs, through the P.L.O., have taught that acts of random death are acceptable; they have removed all restraints from unbridled terrorism towards the rest of the world as well. Witness the kidnapping of the OPEC oil

minister a while ago. And now, most recently, the Western-supported Angolans, threatened with military defeat, have warned the world that they are going to emulate the P.L.O. in all their barbaric methods of unconventional warfare. Those who have embraced this Amalek and have embarrassed the People of Israel will yet regret it – ואחריתו עדי אובד!

I do not know, and neither does anyone else, whether or not Israel will be forced to accede to some kind of Palestinian State. I hope not. If it is, it will be patently unjust – but it will not be the first such injustice in the world and certainly not in Jewish history. But one thing is certain. We American Jews, although there is no reason why we must blindly accept the program of either the government of Israel or its internal opposition, must not falter at this point. We must dissociate ourselves from the kind of unfortunate proposals as that by Arthur Waskow which appeared in the Op-Ed pages of the New York Times this week – not because he is a dove, but because he writes as if Israel and the P.L.O. are legitimate adversaries ...

We must not allow this Administration to use us in order to exert pressure on Israel in this matter.

But above all, despite tensions and threats and possibly coerced relinquishing of territory, we must never fear! Concern and caution, yes – but not fear and not despair.

We read this morning: Pharaoh and his hordes drew near, and the Children of Israel lifted up their eyes and

ויראו מאד – ויצעקו בני ישראל אל השם, “and they were greatly afraid and the Children of Israel called out – prayed – to the Lord.” One normally assumes that the Children of Israel prayed because they were afraid, and their prayer was that they be saved from the clutches of Pharaoh. But the great Hasidic teacher, R. Samuel of Slonim, maintains that they prayed for forgiveness – for being afraid in the first place ...

The State of Israel, and Jews throughout the world, will have tough decisions to make in the days ahead. The situation will probably get worse before it gets better. But we must proceed with intelligence and understanding, even though with regret and possibly anger; without panic and impetuosity, without compromising on our ultimate goals – but above all else, with hope and without fear.

We are a people that have encountered Amalek more than once in our long adventure. We have survived him and overcome his deadly threats.

And we shall do so again – now and always. It is worth recording that promise and hearing it in our own ears once again today. ויאמר ה' אל משה כתב זאת זכרון בספר ושים – באזני יהושע – “And the Lord said to Moses, write this as a memorial in a book, and place it in the ears of Joshua” – that the Lord Himself will vanquish Amalek, and Israel shall live forever.

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## Very Funny

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

As the nation stands by the Yam Suf and watches the Egyptian army chasing after it, apparently with the now familiar Egyptian goal of driving them into the sea, they turn to Moshe and say, “Was it for a lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt?” (Shemos 14:11). Moshe responds to them, “Do not fear. Stand fast and see the salvation of God that He will perform for you today ; for that which you have seen Egypt, today, you shall not see them ever again” (Shemos 14:13). While the first part of Moshe’s response, in which he tells the people that God will save them, is obviously appropriate to the situation, the second part is a little more difficult to understand. The Ramban writes that Moshe was telling them that God commanded them that they should never willingly return to Egypt. How did that prohibition speak to the fears that the people had mentioned to him?

Actually, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, writes that the remark about graves that the people made to Moshe is a typical example of Jewish wit and irony, as if to say “What! They don’t have enough graves in Egypt ?” He explains that this sense of irony is what has enabled the Jewish people to endure over the millennia, in the face of so many persecutions. Rav Hershel Schachter explained that humor is an effective way of relieving tension at critical moments. If we look at the complaint to Moshe in this way, we can understand that since the people did not mean for their remarks to be taken seriously, Moshe did not answer them precisely to the point. However, with the background of a different incident in the parsha, I would like to suggest a different answer, which, I believe, will give us further insight into the minds of the nation standing at the Yam Suf.

After crossing the Yam Suf, the people traveled for three days in the wilderness of Shur, and could not find water to drink. They then arrived at Marah, where they could not drink the water because it was bitter, and so they proceeded to complain to Moshe, asking what they would drink. Moshe cried out to God, who instructed him to throw a tree into the water to make it sweet. Moshe followed God's instructions, and then delivered an oration to the people, saying, "If you will listen diligently to the voice of God, and you will do what is just in His eyes, and you will give ear to His commandments and observe all His statutes, then any of the diseases that I placed upon Egypt, I will not place upon you, for I am God, your Healer" (Shemos 15:26). Rabbi Aryeh Leib Bakst, zt"l, in his Kol Aryeh, mentions a conversation he once had with Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, spiritual advisor, or mashgiach, of the Ponevezh yeshiva in Bnei Brak. Rabbi Levenstein asked why Moshe delivered a 'mussar shmooz,' or an ethical discourse, to the people when what they needed was simply a glass of water? As long as we are on the topic of Jewish humor, Rabbi Levenstein's observation reminds me of a comedy routine of the Jewish humorist, Shelly Berman, which I heard a recording of many years ago. A student at the University of Chicago was attending a philosophy class, and he asked his professor if he could leave in order to quench his tremendous thirst with a glass of water. Instead of simply answering yes or no, the professor delivered lengthy, profound discourse on the essence of a glass of water. What, he asked, is a glass of water. Is it really a glass of water? He continued in this fashion for quite some time, until the student finally dropped dead of thirst! Moshe, however, was not a philosophy professor. Why, then, did he respond to the people's request in this way?

Rabbi Levenstein explained that the people were too caught up in their physical need for water, and did not understand what was going on behind the scenes. In actuality, as Rabbi Chaim Moshe Luzzatto says in his Mesillas Yesharim, everything that happens to us in life

is really a test from God, to see if we will place our trust in Him. Thus, the water we drink, the bread and meat we eat, do not have intrinsic value. Rather, they all serve as props to help us develop our connection to God in this world. That is what Moshe was trying to tell the people. While God did provide them with the water they asked for, Moshe was trying to get them to focus on what was behind their need for water, and, therefore, gave them a talk on the importance of trusting in God. With this explanation in mind, we can return to our original question about Moshe's response to the people's remarks as the Egyptians approached them at the Yam Suf.

The rabbis tell us that at least eighty percent of the Jewish people died in Egypt during the plague of darkness, because they simply did not want to leave the country. They apparently had developed such a fascination with the place that they wanted to stay. Part of Moshe's task in taking the remaining Isrealites out of the Egypt was to rid them of any traces of this fascination. Perhaps this is why God hardened Paharaoh's heart again, after allowing the nation to leave, so that he would lead the Egyptians on a chase to catch the Jews and ultimately bring them to a watery death at the bottom of the Yam Suf. This was all done in order to rid the people of their fascination with Egypt, by seeing the ignoble end of that country's proud army. When the people started complaining to Moshe and saying that perhaps they would be better off in Egypt, Moshe realized that they were missing the whole point of what was happening. That is why he told them that they were prohibited from ever returning to Egypt. God, he said, would save them from the pursuing Egyptians, but they must understand that the reason for this entire episode was to rid them of their attachment to that country. For this reason, they could never return to Egypt, so that their attachment to it could never be revived. Moshe, then, was responding to the core problem that lay behind the immediate situation, just as he would later do at Marah, as we saw from Rabbi Levenstein.

## The Real Chashivus

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on January 17, 2019)

**T**here is an enigmatic Medrash Rabbah at the beginning of this week's Parsha. The second pasuk in our Parsha says: *Va-yaseiv Elokim es ha-am derech ha-midbar Yam Suf*—Hashem circuitously rerouted them

into the midbar. And the Medrash says: *Va-yaseiv* means *haseiba*. We learn from here that *afilu oni she-be-Yisrael lo yochal ad she-yeiseiv*—even a destitute Jew cannot have a Pesach Seder without *haseiba*. In the old days, the rich

people and the nobility always ate be-haseiba, while the poor ate in a very simple fashion. But at the Pesach Seder everyone does haseiba because it says *va-yaseiv*. Now, what exactly does this mean? It seems to be just a play on words. *Va-yaseiv* means Hashem took them on a circuitous route. At first glance, that really has nothing to do with haseiba, meaning to lean while you are eating. What is the deeper connection here?

The Birkas Yitzchak explains this Medrash based on the words, *va-yaseiv Elokim es ha-am derech ha-midbar*. Hashem took them into the midbar. At the beginning of Bamidbar Rabbah, the Medrash points out: *Va-yidaber Hashem el Moshe ba-midbar Sinai*—the Torah was davka given the midbar for many very substantive reasons. Hashem did not want to bring us straight into *Eretz zavash chalav u-dvash*—a wonderful paradise—where we had a big country, riches, farms and vineyards, big houses, etc. But what kind of impression would we have received? Ah, we left Mitzrayim, and now have cheirus, chashivus, and success. What is success? Success is having big houses, fancy cars, significant titles, and high-paying jobs. Instead, Hashem brought us out into the midbar. And what did we actually have in the midbar? Fortunately, at the end of the Parsha, Hashem gave us something to help us survive—enough bread to eat and water to drink for that day, and no more. We had no money in the bank, parnassa, fancy food, houses, or cars. We lived in a desert—a place of not much gashmius. But, on the other hand, we received the Torah in the desert. What did Hashem teach us by taking us into the desert? That the measure of cheirus, now that you are free, is not how much money you can make, the size of your house, how many titles you can put before your name, or how expensive your car is, etc. Rather, it is the ruchnius. Can you keep the Torah? Can you come close to Hashem through learning Torah and doing mitzvos?

And this is similar to what we learn from the very next pasuk: *Va-yikach Moshe es atzmos Yosef imo*—Moshe took the bones of Yosef. And Chazal comment: *Chacham lev yikach mitzvos*—someone smart chooses mitzvos. While all the other Jews occupied themselves with packing gold and silver, Moshe knew what was even more precious—mitzvos! And it was a mitzvah to fulfill Yosef's shevua, and mitzvos of Kevuras ha-Meis and Gemilus Chasadim, to take *atzmos Yosef imo*. He went all over Mitzrayim in search of the hidden tomb of Yosef while everyone else was

busy collecting gold and silver—because he knew it was important.

Returning to our Medrash, Chazal say: *Afilu oni be-Yisroel lo yochal ad she-yesev*. The chidush here is not that an ashir should eat be-haseiba at the Pesach Seder. That is obvious. If you want to celebrate your cheirus, you should do it in style. The ashir must take out all his nice furniture and cushions and say: Look, I am a chashuv, fancy guy—I am a gvir. And what is his avodah on Pesach? He should say: I am a gvir, a fancy guy. I make a gazillion dollars. I have a magnificent mansion. And yet, I give credit to Hashem for taking me out of Mitzrayim. I am not a self-made man—everything I have and achieve comes from Hashem.

And what's the avodah of an oni on Pesach? The oni has nothing. He has no house and no car, not much food, etc. His avodah is *va-yasev Elokim es ha-am derech ha-midbar*. He needs to say: I am also be-haseiba. I am a *ben chorin*—freeman and nobility. No one looks up to me. No one respects me. No one talks to me with reverence. But that doesn't matter! I am chashuv in Hashem's eyes. I am oved Hashem and grow in ruchnius. And that is the real chashivus. I do not care that I am living the lifestyle of a midbar. I may not have money, a fancy house, or gourmet food. And yet, I am rich in Torah and Mitzvos. And that is worth more than any money.

And perhaps that is what Chazal were midayek from this whole series of psukim describing Yetzias Mitzrayim and going into the midbar. Hashem took them to the midbar and said: You are leaving the *sir ha-basar*—the *gashmius*—of Mitzrayim. And you are coming to some place where there is not much *gashmius*, but there is something better than that—*ruchnius*.

And unfortunately, the society we live in nowadays—even in certain frum circles—sometimes teaches us to judge people based on how much money they make, chashivus of their job, the luxuriousness of their car, and the grandeur of their house, etc. And this avodah is not only for the oniyim at Pesach Seder. When we are zocher Yetzias Mitzrayim every day, it is our job to stand up and say: Gashmius is not what makes you chashuv and a freeman. And it is not what makes you rich. Rich is being rich in Torah and Mitzvos. Chashuv is being chashuv in Hashem's eyes. And that is all you truly need in life in order to be successful. Shabbat Shalom.

# Emotional Exhaustion

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

**T**ake a moment to empathize with Moses. How would you feel if after orchestrating a miraculous escape from Egypt and crossing the Red Sea, you were verbally assaulted and felt physically threatened by the very people you saved? First, the Israelites complained about the dearth of food and then they murmured concerning the lack of water. They even requested a return to Egypt so they could, at bare minimum, have enough to eat and drink. Moses called out to God in what seems to be a mixture of frustration, fear, and disappointment, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!” (Ex. 17:4).

Immediately after this incident, without pause in the verses, Amalek burst onto the scene, attacking the escaped slaves as they traversed hazardous desert terrain. Moses, presumably mentally and physically exhausted from the exodus and from internal conflicts, confronted the first combat scenario facing this young nation. He appointed Joshua to select troops to go to battle, and told him, “Tomorrow, I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand” (Ex. 17:9). He ascended the hill with Aaron and Hur while Joshua and the soldiers fought below. Without explaining the exact mechanism, the verse states that, “Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed” (Ex. 17:11). Despite the relatively clear military strategy, the momentum, however, was difficult to maintain. Moses’ hands became heavy, and he was unable to lift his staff any longer.

Why did Moses’ hands become heavy? The Sages in a certain Midrash weren’t satisfied with the simple natural possibility of physical exhaustion. They identify instead a feebleness that was forged from failure. They critiqued Moses on two fronts. First, as Rashi notes, instead of delegating to Joshua to “choose for us men” to fight, Moses should have done so himself. Second, instead of acting immediately, Moses said he would ascend the hill “tomorrow.”

According to these Midrashim, Moses’ heaviness of hands was a psychosomatic manifestation of his procrastination and a deflection of responsibility. As he stood on the hill trying to lift his hands and his people to victory, physical exhaustion, the residual emotional turmoil from the internal discontent, and the guilt from how he initially handled the conflict, all laid heavily upon

his soul. It all took an immense physical toll. Perhaps also gnawing at his confidence and exacerbating the fatigue, was the question he asked immediately upon being called on by God, “Who am I” to lead these people? (Ex. 3:11).

It is precisely at this moment of crisis that Moses learned from his mistakes and modeled how a leader can be supportive of his people during crisis, even amidst personal exhaustion. Knowing that the war would take time, he pivoted to sitting, instead of standing. The verse mentions that he sat on a rock, which the Talmud highlights as a signal of empathy (Ta’anit 11a). While he could have sat on something more comfortable, his mindset was determined by the state of crisis: “Israel is in tribulation. I will be in tribulation together with them.” This not only reflected emotional empathy but a concrete action that allowed him to feel some small aspect of the burden the soldiers were feeling physically. This small physical sacrifice symbolized a strong sense of solidarity.

But sitting and empathizing was not enough to replenish his strength. Moses could no longer hold up his hands or the nation by himself. It is at this point that Aaron and Hur played a pivotal role in supporting and holding up Moses. They provided the physical and emotional support for him to persevere.

In *Staying Human: A Wartime Chronicle*, Dr. Erica Brown highlights the fact that Moses ascended a hill, and not a mountain: “At war, leaders need to see and be seen,” she writes. “Leaders cannot be remote from those they serve at times of crisis.” As noted, the soldiers’ ability to see Moses’ staff played a critical role. According to the Mishna in Rosh Hashana, it was not the staff that performed miracles, it was a vision of God: “As long as the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed, but if not, they fell.” Moses, with the support of Aaron and Hur, inspired the soldiers to retain their faith and commitment to God and their mission, which imbued within them a sense of purpose, hope, and Divine inspiration. This message was likely all the more powerful as the soldiers saw the physical exertion and sacrifice Moses was making to help them maintain their advantage.

As the war in Israel passes day 111, and we confront the devastating news of so many soldiers killed in battle this past week alone, our collective hands are being weighed down by physical exhaustion and the heaviness of distress.

It is upon us to emulate Moses, Aaron, and Hur. We should demonstrate our empathy and solidarity with Israel and its soldiers with a personal token of physical sacrifice, our symbolic sitting on a rock. What are you sacrificing during this war? We can also work on inspiring ourselves and

others by lifting our hands and our eyes in faith and prayer to our Father in Heaven. Finally, we need to embrace each other, affording the physical and emotional support we need to unite in victory.

## Ramban on Our Parshah: Serenaders and Serenaded

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

After crossing the Sea, the Jews see the bodies of the Egyptians strewn about on the sand and they realize that their captors are truly vanquished. As Moshe declares (Shemot 14:13), they will never again see a fearsome Egyptian army bearing down on them. The Jews are moved to sing full-throated thanks to Hashem. But the Torah introduces the song with the words, *Az yashir Moshe uVnei Yisrael*, which seems to mean, “Then Moshe and the Jewish people will sing.” Why does the text use what seems to be future tense?

Some commentators explain the text as past tense:

- Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra contended that *Az yashir* is not actually future tense; it is past tense, “Moshe and the Jewish people sang.” In the extended version of his commentary, he noted similar language in other biblical events which were clearly meant to be in the past: “Then Shlomo built” (Melachim I 11:7), “Then Yehoshua spoke” (Yehoshua 10:12), “Then Moshe set aside” (Devarim 4:41).
- Rashi also noted similar language elsewhere, and suggested that *Az yashir* means, “Moshe and the children of Israel were moved to sing.”

On the other hand, the tanna Rabbi Meir read *Az*

*yashir* as referring to the future. He saw in our passage a foreshadowing of a future song in the time of *tehiyat hameitim*, when the deceased will be restored to life – “Then, Moshe and the Jews will sing,” (Sanhedrin 91b)

Ramban quoted Rashi’s approach, but rejected it on the basis of language elsewhere in Tanach that does not fit well with Rashi’s explanation. [See, for example, Shemot 33:7 and Tehillim 78:40.] Instead, he contended that the Torah sometimes uses what appears to be future tense to describe past events because the speaker – Hashem – is a Narrator who positions Himself as though observing an event as it happens. Hashem removes the “fourth wall” that is supposed to separate Himself from the audience, and declares, “Then I saw Moshe and the children of Israel on the verge of singing.”

Ramban’s perspective reminds us of an important point: that there are two parties involved, not one. Hashem is a party to the story; the song at the sea is not only sung by the Jews, it is also witnessed by Hashem. Hashem deliberately enters the record, describing His experience of the song, in order to say, “I heard their song, and I felt it worthy of recording for future generations.”

## Rav Soloveitchik on Beshalach: Taking It to the Next Level

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

*Shirat ha-yam*, the song sung by Moshe and the Jewish people at the Red Sea, is more than an exaltation of God in verse. On close examination, it shows itself to be a credo containing foundational principles of Jewish faith and belief. Among others, it references God’s omnipotence, His eternity, and the establishment of a Temple.

The second half of the second verse of the song reads, “*this is my God, and I will glorify Him; my father’s God, and I will exalt Him*” (וְזֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲנֹנְהוּ, אֲלֵהֵי אָבִי וְאֲרַמְּנֶהוּ) (Exodus 15:2). Rashi glosses the words “my father’s God”

as follows: “I am not the beginning of the holiness; the holiness has been longstanding, and His divinity has been upon me from the days of my fathers.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, we inherit our holiness as Jews from our ancestors.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explained that this is one kind of holiness that a Jew possesses. Being born Jewish grants a person innate holiness—“my father’s God.” But there is another level of holiness encapsulated by “this is my God, and I will glorify Him.” When a Jew accepts upon himself or herself the mitzvot and builds a life dedicated to God’s service, they possess another kind of holiness.

The non-Jew who converts, fully embracing Jewish life, possesses this second level of holiness, too.<sup>2</sup>

The Rav showed that this distinction is implied by the two blessings about Jewish chosenness recited every morning. We bless God “who has not made me a Gentile” (שְׁלֹא עָשָׂנִי גּוֹי), and we bless God “who has chosen us from all peoples” (אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים). Logically speaking, isn’t this redundant? If God has not made us Gentiles, then mustn’t He have chosen us to be otherwise, to be His people? The Rav answered that one aspect of our chosenness is genealogical, that is, we are the progeny of Avraham, and so we bless God for not having made us Gentiles. A second aspect is reflected in the verses, “you shall be for Me a treasure from all the peoples... And you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6). This chosenness goes beyond simple lineage and is generated and sustained by active commitment and dedication to study and practice.<sup>3</sup>

These two levels of holiness and chosenness have direct halachic consequences for the thorny case of the apostate Jew. The Jew who renounces their religion cannot erase their ancestry; consequently, their act of betrothal would be considered valid. In other areas, though, like ritual slaughter or the writing of a Torah scroll, the apostate is halachically no different from a non-Jew, rendering the meat non-kosher and the Torah scroll invalid. This can be explained using the above distinction. Jewish betrothal depends on the inborn sanctity; ritual slaughter and holy writ demand the additional holiness of commitment and observance.<sup>4</sup>

### Seizing the Crown

בְּשִׁלְשָׁה כְּתָרִים נִכְתְּרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל: בְּכֶתֶר כְּהֵנָּה, בְּכֶתֶר מְלָכוּת וּבְכֶתֶר תּוֹרָה.  
*Israel was crowned with these three crowns: the crown of priesthood, the crown of kingship, and the crown of Torah.*<sup>5</sup>

Thus says Avot de-Rabbi Natan. The first two crowns belong to those who are anointed, the priest and the king. Their anointing indicates an inner sanctity and nobility that accompanies their position of stature. It is a product of lineage, an innate holiness in one’s genes. The Rav argued that the same can be said regarding the crown of Torah, which is available to any Jew for the taking, and not to a select few of a particular bloodline.<sup>6</sup> When we work hard to attain it, to become “a kingdom of priests” with acquired holiness, we become elevated and our personality is refined. Those engaged in Torah study and mitzvot are transformed and acquire a new sensitivity to and a different view on the world.<sup>7</sup>

### Thanks for Everything

Rabbi Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik, the Rav’s namesake and great-grandfather, identified another, similar duality in shirat ha-yam. The Midrash says that Moshe chose az (אֶז) as the first word of the song to right an earlier wrong involving the same word. Moshe had complained to God, “Since that time (מֵאָז) when I came to speak to Pharaoh in Your name, he has done evil to this people...” (Exodus 5:23).<sup>8</sup> How does the verbal repetition of a word undo wrongdoing?

Rabbi Soloveitchik answered this with a conceptual distinction between two types of gratitude. When someone is delivered from suffering, they are grateful to God for being relieved of it. The suffering itself is not considered any cause for thanksgiving. To borrow the conceptual structure above, this is the natural, baseline kind of gratitude. When Moshe and the Jewish people rejoiced at the Red Sea, they displayed a higher-order gratitude. They were thanking God for their bondage, for through it they were the instrument of God’s glorification in the world. They had searched and found meaning in their suffering, so they thanked God for it in addition to their rescue. This, of course, must have taken spiritual effort, of the same type required for acquiring the second holiness and the crown of Torah.

Moshe initially bemoaned the Israelites’ bondage using the word az. His choice to begin the song with az did not mysteriously negate his earlier act of misspeaking, but exemplified his and the people’s newfound recognition.

Rabbi Soloveitchik located these two levels of gratitude in a verse recited during Hallel: “I praise You, for you have afflicted me, and You have been a salvation for me” (Psalms 118:21). That is, we thank God for the affliction because it prompts the salvation, by which the (ex-) sufferer becomes a vehicle for the sanctification of God’s name. We show gratitude for the experience in its entirety.<sup>9</sup>

The Rav applied this to a puzzling inclusion in the prayer of Al ha-Nisim, which we say on Chanukah and Purim. Why do we thank God “for the wars” (עַל הַמְּלָחָמוֹת) during the Maccabean era and when the Jews fought back against the anti-Semites of Shushan and the rest of Persia? Perhaps the intent is to declare that our faith in God is so strong that we perceive even the darkest and most challenging moments our nation has faced to be the product of God’s providence, and we declare our submission to His inscrutable will.<sup>10</sup>

### Exploring the Rav’s Insight

We have learned that concerning the verse, “this is my



God, and I will glorify Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him" (Exodus 15:2), the Rav understood the first half to be about acquired holiness and the second half about innate holiness. Shouldn't the order of the verse be reversed if the second is the basis and the first is the addition? Perhaps the Torah wishes to instruct that every individual's aspirations and attainments are more significant than their yichus, their pedigree.

In the first blessing of the Amidah, God is addressed as the God of each of the three Patriarchs. Rabbi Meir Eisenstadt wondered why the word "God" (אֱלֹהֵי) is repeated three times; why not say "the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov"? He suggested that in each generation, the son achieved an even deeper appreciation of and faith in God. The legacy inherited from each father served as the foundation on which spiritual monuments could be built.

Rabbi Shimon Shkop is said to have later asked why the blessing ends with "the shield of Avraham" (מִגְן אַבְרָהָם). He proposed that Avraham was unique in that his father

bequeathed him nothing but idols. Avraham had to lay a new foundation, the ground level for his son, his grandson, and for all of us.<sup>11</sup>

We can emulate Avraham and take our holiness and chosenness to the next level by being dissatisfied with what we have imbibed unconsciously from our upbringing. The greatest aspect of our faith is the way in which we develop our own personalities by internalizing and embodying the principles of the Torah in our own lives.

1. Rashi on Exodus 15:2, s.v. אלהי אבי.
2. Schachter, *Nefesh ha-Rav*, 282.
3. Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur, 12–13.
4. Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 208.
5. Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 41:1.
6. See the formulation in Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Talmud Torah*, 3:1.
7. Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 205–206.
8. Exodus Rabbah, 23:5.
9. Beit ha-Levi, Beshalach, s.v. אז ישיר משה.
10. Shurkin, *Harerei Kedem*, 303.
11. Rabbi Daniel Stein, "Emunah and Bitachon," [www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/985449](http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/985449) (accessed March 4, 2021).

## United by Action, Not Words

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

One word is on everyone's mind. During the past year, Israeli society was plagued by corrosive social rifts and vitriolic political disagreements. October 7th changed everything, and the ensuing war left us little choice but to unite in defense of our lives. Unity has been involuntarily thrust upon us. The atmosphere of unity in Israel has suffused across the Jewish world. The entire Jewish nation, across many continents and across all denominations, has banded together to defend our people and its homeland. The word "*achdut*", or unity, has become a motto: *yachad ninatzeiach* (together we will triumph).

We have all considered the pressing question: what will the "day after" look like in Gaza? What political arrangement in Gaza can provide Palestinian stability without threatening Israel. A different, but equally important version of this question is: what will the "day after" look like within our society? Will we revert back to division and discord or will we preserve our current condition of unity. We are all in search of a magic solution to preserve our resuscitated national solidarity.

Typically, we articulate unity in broad ideological terms. We envision ways to bridge the differences between ourselves and those who possess different religious or political views. By celebrating the common ideas or values

which unite us, rather than accentuating the values which divide us, we coexist with people whose lifestyles differ from our own. We bridge ideological chasms by stressing shared values and common narratives.

Unlike ideological *achdut* which is achieved through common ideas, a more powerful version of unity, which can be termed "social *achdut*" is achieved by common experiences. We are deeply interconnected when we step outside our social standings and professional titles and perform common ordinary tasks. Action is always more compelling than thinking. Acting together yields deeper solidarity than merely thinking about common values.

### Moshe the Pallbearer

Parshat Beshalach portrays the triumphant liberation of our people from Egyptian persecution. After two centuries of humiliation and dehumanization, we victoriously marched out of Egypt with our eyes set upon the promised land. Leaving in breakneck speed, we furiously darted around Egypt, organizing our families and livestock for the journey. It was a chaotic scene, with little time to remember an ancient promise to a long-forgotten grandfather. Everyone was far too busy to extract Yosef's remains from his Egyptian crypt. On this day of mayhem,

no one had the time or presence of mind for this chore. No one, except Moshe Rabeinu, arguably, the busiest man on Earth. Preoccupied with an entire nation, Moshe still found the time to personally excavate Yosef's coffin from Egypt. More impressively, during the entire forty-year desert trek, Moshe never delegated this menial task to others, but instead, kept the coffin in his constant presence. He didn't view this assignment as beneath his dignity or unfit for his lofty station. This man, who humbled a tyrant, split the seas, and scaled the heavens, didn't regard towing a coffin as undignified.

Moshe Rabeinu refused to erect social barriers between himself and the common people. By performing common and ordinary duties, he experienced social unity, not allowing himself to be locked into a specific profile based upon his professional standing. Unlike the bones of Yosef, Moshe refused to be put into a box.

### War is a Leveler

Over the past few months, the war in Israel has helped us step outside our own boxes and, through common experience, achieve social unity. Our soldiers are fighting side-by-side, regardless of socio-economic status or professional occupation. War is a great leveler as everyone, regardless of social status or rank, performs the exact same tasks and missions. Previous status in civilian life doesn't affect wartime assignments. Students are fighting alongside lawyers, while Hi-tech entrepreneurs are sitting in tanks next to farmers and fishermen. IT specialists next to factory managers. New fathers next to grandfathers. Newly married husbands next to grizzled war veterans. In the battlefield, everyone is equal.

A middle-aged rabbinic colleague of mine (name withheld for privacy reasons) is a brilliant Talmudic scholar, as well as a revered community Rabbi in Israel. He was drafted into a reserve tank unit and has spent the past 100 days in active combat. During this period, in his spare time, he published an advanced Torah essay in memory of a student who was killed in battle. During those 100 days he was an ordinary soldier, no different from the younger or less educated members of his unit.

This week, his entire platoon was released, and he received the award of "*ot hitztaynut pelugatit*" honoring him for being the most diligent and hardworking soldier of the entire 50-member platoon. I am inspired that someone of his caliber didn't allow his professional profile to stand in the way of working hard, alongside many younger soldiers. This is just one of many examples of how war has erased the social and professional boxes which often define us and

limit us.

### Taxi Drivers

This home front or the "oref" has also leveled us. We have been pressed into emergency service, stepping outside our typical comfort zones to perform tasks and errands which were never part of our normal routines. Over the past few months, in addition to being a Rabbi and teacher, I have become a taxi driver, food deliverer, babysitter and stand-in parent for my grandchildren, whose own parents have been drafted. We have tried not to let our titles and social standing impede our wartime assistance. No tasks are too high or too low.

One vivid story perfectly captures this home front unity. During the war, out of security concerns, the yeshiva's Arab kitchen staff was barred entry. Facing this manpower shortage, students volunteered for kitchen detail. A month ago, on a day that no students were available, our executive director volunteered for kitchen duty. To everyone's astonishment, he was quickly joined by Rav Meidan, our 73-year old Rosh Yeshiva, who himself was preoccupied both with yeshiva obligations, as well as with dealing with his own son's serious battlefield injuries. For Rav Meidan, washing dirty dishes was never viewed as beneath his dignity or unfit for his title.

True leadership does not mean influencing others through loud announcements or through popular social media posts. True leaders set quiet examples of self-sacrifice as they role-model core values of life. Watching the Rosh Yeshiva donning an apron, I immediately thought of Moshe hauling a coffin out of Egypt. Nobility has little to do with the wallet or with clothing. True nobility lies in our spirit, and can surface while performing any task, high or low, honorable or menial.

Life on the battlefield, as well as on the home front has helped us step out of our narrow profiles, allowing us to share common tasks and common experiences. I feel more unified with my people when we all perform the exact same tasks and chores, regardless of any professional profile or social standing. It is refreshing to be ordinary and to be common. I feel this unity more viscerally and more authentically than ideological unity, which is built upon common values our ideals. Experience is always more powerful than ideas. Unity of experience will always be more powerful than unity of ideas.

Experiencing social unity, I don't just respect other people's opinions, but I act as they act. They act as I act. In this, we are one.

## Vah'chah'moo'shim: A Call to Arms?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat B'shalach, Pharaoh sends the Israelite slaves out of Egypt. But, after a quick change of heart, Pharaoh and the Egyptian army pursue the Israelites, entrapping them at the sea. The sea splits, the Israelites walk through on the dry land, and Pharaoh and his Egyptian hoards drown in the churning waters.

Moses and his sister, Miriam, lead the people in songs of exaltation, thanking the Al-mighty G-d for the People's miraculous deliverance.

At the opening of Parashat B'shalach, when the Torah records the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt, and the Al-mighty's intention to lead them to the Promised Land, Scripture informs us that even though it was a shorter route, G-d did not lead the people through the land of the Philistines, because He was afraid that if they encounter war, they would lose faith and regret having left Egypt. And so, G-d made the people turn toward the wilderness, toward Yam Suf--the Sea of Reeds (sometimes translated as the "Red Sea").

Scripture then notes (Exodus 13:18): וַחֲמִשִּׁים עֶלּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם מְאֻרָּחִים. This verse is generally translated to mean that the children of Israel were "armed" when they went up from Egypt.

Rashi indicates that the people had to be armed, because they were going into the wilderness where they would encounter Amalek, Sichon, Og and Midian and would need weapons to defend themselves.

Otzar HaTorah, the Torah Treasury, published by ArtScroll, cites a number of alternative explanations for the enigmatic term וַחֲמִשִּׁים--"chah'moo'shim." Rabbeinu Bachya explains that despite the fact that they were under G-d's direct protection, the Israelites took weapons with them, reflecting the Talmudic dictum cited in Pesachim 64b, that no one should rely on miracles, since G-d intervenes only after people make a good-faith effort on their own behalf.

Rabbi Yosef Ber Soloveitchik states that this verse is connected to the following verse that reports that Moses took the bones of Joseph out of Egypt with him. In effect, Rabbi Soloveitchik asserts that Joseph's bones were the "weapons" that protected the people against the Egyptians at the sea. It was, as the Yalkut Shimoni states, that only when the sea saw the bones of Joseph, did the waters part.

The Chozeh of Lublin states that the "armaments" that the Jews took along with them was really the power of

prayer. In fact, when the Jews came to the Sea of Reeds, they did battle not with physical armaments, but with prayer, as the verse states (Exodus 14:10), "the children of Israel cried out to G-d."

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov in his Sefer Haparshiot, presents several additional interpretations of the phrase וַחֲמִשִּׁים--"vah'chah'moo'shim," explaining that the word chah'moo'shim comes from the Hebrew word חַמֵּשׁ--chah'maysh, meaning "five." Rabbi Kitov suggests that the Jews were armed with five types of weapons: a bow and arrow, a handstick, a spear, a sword and a shield. Alternatively, suggests Rabbi Kitov, the five elements of protection were actually Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron. Another original explanation cited by Rabbi Kitov is that the Israelite children served as the people's protection, or that the Erev Rav--the mixed multitude of Egyptians who joined the people of Israel, were their protection, alluding to the prophecy in Zacharia 2:15, that on that day the nations will be joined to G-d. Rabbi Kitov also notes that alluded to in the word "chah'moo'shim," is the fact that the Torah mentions the exodus from Egypt fifty times.

Despite all these interesting homiletical interpretations, perhaps the most riveting, as well as disturbing, is the alternative explanation of "vah'chah'moo'shim" cited by Rashi, also based on the root word chah'maysh--five. Says Rashi, citing the Mechilta Tanchuma 1, אֶחָד מִחֲמִשָּׁה יָצָא, וְיָאָרְבֶּעָה הַקְּלָקִים מִתּוֹ בְּשִׁלְשֶׁת יָמֵי אַפְלָה, Only one-fifth of the Israelite people departed from Egypt! The other four-fifths died in Egypt during the three days of darkness!

Clearly, this Midrashic interpretation is not easily reconciled with the actual text. After all, our commentators labor diligently to explain how seventy souls (69 men) who came down to Egypt with Jacob (Genesis 46:8-27), expanded so rapidly to become 603,550 men over the age of 20, in just 210 years. To justify this enormous growth, our rabbis explain that each time a Jewish woman in Egypt gave birth she delivered sextuplets (see Rashi on Exodus 1:7). If only one-fifth of the Israelites made it out of Egypt, as this Midrash maintains, that would mean that more than three million males(!) had to be born within 210 years.

And yet, despite this unrealistic demographic estimate, the interpretation of only one-fifth of the Israelites departing is not summarily dismissed, underscoring its obviously vital importance. This Midrash not only reflects the reality of the devastating assimilation in Egypt, but also

forecasts what Jewish history would later confirm many times over: that the greatest threat to the survival of Jewish people would come not from their physical enemies, but from their own spiritual weakness.

Many mainstream historians maintain that Jews constituted fully one-tenth (approximately seven million) of the great Roman Empire's population at the turn of the Common Era, and that despite all the physical travails that the Jews endured over the millennia, were it not for assimilation, there should still be approximately 500 million Jews in the world today. And yet, contemporary demographers usually set the present worldwide Jewish population at only 13-16 million Jews.

We need to also bear in mind that according to this interpretation, the 603,550 Jews who left Egypt at that time, the so-called top "99th percentile" of identified and committed Jews, the ones who refused to assimilate, refused to engage in the drunken and bloody orgies with their Egyptian masters (see Passover 5767-2007) these so-called "loyal and committed Jews," were the very ones who proceeded to test G-d in the wilderness ten times, at Marah, with the Golden Calf, with the Mannah, with their

demands to return to Egypt, to find new leadership, and to find a new G-d. If so, if these were the virtuous ones, we can only imagine what the rest of the Israelites who remained in Egypt were like.

It is from this seemingly insignificant verse, and from the various interpretations of the one little Hebrew word "Vah'chah'moo'shim," that we gain an insight into much of Jewish history. The lesson is eminently clear: Military weapons do not protect the People of Israel, nor do armored shields, nor do bows, arrows or spears. What protects the Jewish People most effectively is our peoples' passionate commitment to Torah, and our loyalty to our faith. It is our single-minded devotion to provide the most excellent Jewish education for Jewish children that gives us the ability to survive and thrive.

Our sages teach, מְעֵשָׂה אֲבוֹת, סִימָן לְבָנִים, (Sotah 34a) the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children. Parashat B'shalach is our call to arms, our call to insure Jewish posterity. This more than 3,000-year-old document could not be more relevant, nor its message more resounding, than the lesson we learn from parashat B'shalach today.

## The Power of Silence

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

In the שירת הים, the exuberant song of praise sung by Benei Yisrael after the miracle of the sea, which we recite each morning, they proclaimed, מי כמוכה באלים, ה' – literally, "Who is like You among the mighty, O God!" (15:11).

The Gemara in Maseches Gittin (56b) advances a fascinating – and ever so important – reading of this pasuk. The context of the Gemara's comment is the shocking story of Titus, the Roman general who invaded Yerushalayim and destroyed the Beis Ha'mikdash. The Gemara relates that Titus committed unspeakable acts of desecration upon entering the sacred site. He slit the paroches (curtain) with his sword, and stormed into the קודש הקודשים, the inner sanctum of the Beis Ha'mikdash. He opened a Sefer Torah on the floor, and defiled it with a harlot. In reference to this appalling incident, the Gemara cites the pasuk מי כמוכה באלים בה' – "Who is like You among **the mute**, O God!" God witnessed this outrageous desecration of His Mikdash, and yet He remained silent. He allowed Titus to commit these acts. He did not intervene. This was an unparalleled display of strength and power. מי כמוכה באילמים ה'.

It doesn't take strength to respond to an insult with an insult, to shoot back, to call someone names, to react angrily. True strength is remaining silent, maintaining one's dignity and composure, refusing to be dragged into the mud. Reacting with anger is a sign of weakness. The greatest strength is remaining silent.

This week's haftara concludes, ואוהביו כצאת השמש בגבורתו, – "those who love Him shall be like the sun when it comes out in all its force" (Shoftim 5:31). The Gemara (Gittin 36b) says that this pasuk refers to הנעלבין ואינן עולבים שומעין חרפתן - "those who are insulted but do not insult, who hear their disgrace but do not respond." These people are comparable to צאת השמש בגבורתו. They are the ones with real strength. They have true גבורה, real power. If we want to be strong, then let's not respond to every offensive or hurtful remark we hear, or every offense or hurtful message we receive. Let us follow Hashem's example and remain אילים, silent, without compromising our honor or dignity just to get back at somebody.

# The Individual and the Community

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

וְהַיָּמִים לָהֶם חֻמָּה מִיְמֵינָם וּמִשְׂמֹאלָם.

*And the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left (14:29)*

The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni sec. 234) notes that the word for “wall” in this pasuk חֻמָּה is missing the letter *vav* – and thus expounds that this word also has a connotation of anger that was levelled against the Jewish People at that time:

*This teaches that Samael (the spiritual overseer of evil) rose up and said: “Master of the world, did the Jewish People not (also) serve avodah zarah in Egypt, yet You are performing miracles for them?” Hashem responded: “Did they serve avodah zarah while in a settled state of mind? Behold, they only served it out of oppression and desperation! Are you judging an act performed under duress as (equal to) one performed of one’s own volition?”*

The Meshech Chochmah asks a simple question concerning the above Midrash. This was not the first time or place where Hashem performed miracles for the benefit of the Jewish People. Over the course of the entire preceding year, Hashem had brought plagues against the Egyptians, while at the same time miraculously protecting the Jewish People from harm. Why do we not find any objection by the forces of evil to these earlier miracles? Could they not have accused: “Why are You miraculously sparing them from the plagues? Did they not also worship avodah zarah?”

## Two Categories of Torah Prohibition

In order to appreciate the background to the above Midrash, the Meshech Chochmah prefaces with a most thought-provoking observation.

It is possible to divide the Torah’s prohibitions into two categories:

1. Things the Torah has forbidden on account of their spiritual damage, such as avodah zarah and forbidden relationships (*arayos*).
2. Things which are damaging to others and which reflect a corrupt character and moral deficiency, such as lashon hara, robbery and machlokes.

If we compare the punishments proscribed by the Torah for violating these two types of prohibitions, we will find something quite surprising.

- Violating prohibitions within the first category incurs punishments ranging from malkos (lashes, e.g. for

eating non-kosher food) to kares (Divine excision, e.g. for eating on Yom Kippur or eating chametz on Pesach) and even capital punishment (e.g. for profaning Shabbos).

- Violating prohibitions within the second category generally does not incur any formal punishment. Sins such as lashon hara and machlokes are not punishable by beis din since they do not involve an action (only speech); while with sins such as robbery, the obligation to return the object or reimburse its value replaces the liability of malkos.

Based on the above differentiation in terms of punishments incurred, we would likely conclude that sins belonging to the first category are more severe than those belonging to the second.

## From the Individual to the Community

However, all the above pertains only to sins committed by the individual. When it comes to the community, however, we find that the situation is practically reversed! Many sources seem to indicate that interpersonal wrongdoings result in far more dire consequences than do violations of other mitzvos. Thus we find, for example, the Talmud Yerushalmi (Peah 1:1) compares and contrasts two generations, that of David and that of Achav:

*In David’s generation, they were all righteous. Nevertheless, since there were slanderers among them, they fell in battle. Achav’s generation, however, were idolators, yet since there were no slanderers among them, they would go out to battle and would be victorious.*

This is most astounding. Given that David’s generation are referred to as righteous with regards to most aveiros, being lax “only” in the relatively less severe sin of slander, how did they suffer defeat while the idol-worshipping generation of Achav experienced victory?

The Meshech Chochmah explains. The success or the lack thereof which the Jewish People enjoy in confronting their enemies is a function of the proximity of the Shechinah (Divine Presence). In this regard, the Torah (Vayikra 16:16, see Yoma 56b) expresses the principle, that Hashem שָׁכַן אֶתְּם בְּתוֹךְ טְמֵאוֹתֵיכֶם, *Dwells among them in the midst of their impurities.* This means that although there will ultimately be a reckoning for each and every wrongdoing for each and every individual, nonetheless, the Shechinah remains among the community of Bnei Yisrael

and protects them. This was the situation as it pertained in Achav's time.

However, when it comes to sins which cause friction and fragmentation within the community, this causes the Shechinah to depart from it,<sup>1</sup> leaving the Jewish People vulnerable to their enemies, as happened in David's generation.

### **The Flood, the Golden Calf and the Spies**

With this idea in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains a statement that Chazal make relating to the generation of the flood. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 108a) states that although that generation were remiss in matters including avodah zarah and forbidden physical relations, nonetheless, their judgment was only sealed on account of the sin of robbery. Here, too, we wonder: given that they were involved in such severe sins, why was it specifically the sin of robbery which sealed their fate?

The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is as per the above. As serious as that generation's sins may have been, nevertheless, had they not included robbery among them, the merit of the community would have protected them from calamity. However, since they also engaged in robbery – which is a crime that tears the very fabric of the community and is ultimately a crime against the community itself – they lost any protection which being part of the community could have afforded them. Once this happened, their status reverted to that of individuals, leaving them fully exposed to the consequences of their many sins, and thus the Gemara says that “their judgment was sealed on account of the sin of robbery.”<sup>2</sup>

In this vein the Meshech Chochmah cites the Gemara (Yoma 9b) which discusses the sins that led to the destruction of the first two Batei Mikdash. The first Beis Hamikdash was destroyed on account of the three cardinal sins: avodah zarah, arayos and bloodshed. In contrast, the generation at the time of the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash is described as being involved in Torah, mitzvos and acts of kindness; however, since there was sinas chinam – baseless hatred – among them, the Beish Hamikdash was destroyed. The Gemara concludes that not only does this teach us that sinas chinam is equal in severity to the three cardinal sins, it is even worse, for the exile following the first destruction lasted only seventy years, while the current exile which resulted from the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash has yet to end. Here, too, the second generation is described as one that had no indictment in the area of Torah and mitzvos, with their only failing being in the area of sinas chinam.

Nevertheless, we see that this failing alone – involving as it did a sin against the community – was severe enough to incur an exile which exceeded the first exile many times over and which persists until our time.

Similarly, we find that when Bnei Yisrael sinned with the Egel (Golden Calf), Hashem forgave them, whereas when they sinned with the Meraglim (the spies), they were not forgiven. The Meshech Chochmah explains that, here too, the different outcomes of these two sins derive from their differing nature. The Chet Ha'egel was in the area of avodah zarah. As such, Hashem was prepared to forego punishment at that time due to their status as a community.

In contrast, the Chet Hameraglim involved wrongdoings that relate to moral conduct and “menschlichkeit”, such as spreading slander about the land – and about the One who was leading them there – as well as lack of gratitude towards Hashem Who had taken care of their every need and Who clearly had their best interests in mind. As such, there was no defense for their actions based on their status as a community, for their wrongdoing was in the area which undermines the very concept of community!<sup>3</sup>

### **The Jewish People in Egypt and at the Red Sea**

With the above idea in mind, let us return to the Midrash which describes the accusation against Bnei Yisrael during the splitting of the Red Sea, namely, that they, too worshiped idols. We asked, why was this accusation not levelled against them earlier on during the entire year that they were miraculously spared from the ten plagues?

The Meshech Chochmah answers: although Bnei Yisrael had committed serious sins in Egypt, nevertheless, there was internal harmony among them, as pointed out by the Midrash (Mechilta Parshas Bo, mentioned in the essay on Parshas Va'eira.) that there was no lashon hara between them. Under these circumstances, their status as a community afforded them protection from their sins.

However, upon finding themselves pursued by the Egyptians and trapped at the Red Sea, the Midrash relates that they split into four groups: One group advocated throwing themselves into the sea, a second group said they should return to Egypt, a third group argued that they should fight the Egyptians while the fourth group said they should pray that Hashem deliver them. This divisiveness and fragmentation had the effect of divesting them of their status as a community. Once they lost that status, they found themselves susceptible to an accusation concerning sins such as avodah zarah which they had committed earlier on!<sup>4</sup>

With these words, the Meshech Chochmah is guiding

us in terms of how to access the protective element of community that we all need, it happens through us being protective of the community itself. With the Divine Presence in close proximity we can be hopeful in setting our sights on removing all imperfections – both as a community and as individuals!

1 This is derived by the Meshech Chochmah from the abovementioned discussion in the Yerushalmi, for following David's reference to the slanderers among the Jewish People (Tehillim 57:5) he says (57:6) רוּמָה עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲלֵקִים, *Be exalted above the heavens, O God*, which the Yerushalmi interprets to mean, "Remove Your Shechinah from among them!"

2 A careful analysis of the Meshech Chochmah's words indicates that sins in the area of interpersonal relationships bring about two negative effects: Firstly, they remove the protective element afforded by being part of a community, thereby leaving its members exposed to indictment from their wrongdoings as individuals. Secondly, it is no longer even in the interest of those people to be judged as a community, for on the contrary, a community that sins against itself is judged more harshly by Hashem than one which sins against Hashem Himself!

3 Perhaps here, too, the Meshech Chochmah means to say that in compromising their community status through the Chet Hameraglim, the Jewish People thereby retroactively forfeited their defense in the face of the Chet Ha'egel, which was based on their being a community. Indeed, Rashi (Bamidbar 14:33, s.v. *arbaim*) states that the Chet Hameraglim "reopened" the indictment against the Bnei Yisrael for making the Egel, which had been in a state of suspension prior to that time. That "reopening" can be understood in light of the Meshech Chochmah's discussion here (suggested by R' Yisrael Moshe Aryeh Bernstein).

4 In fact, the Meshech Chochmah takes the issue of the timing of the accusation one step further. The allusion within the pasuk to the accusation is the fact that word "chomah" (wall) in pasuk 29 is written without the letter *vav*, חמה which allows it to be read as "cheimah" (anger). However, an almost identical phrase appears just a few pesukim earlier (pasuk 22) as Bnei Yisrael first enter the Red Sea and there the word is written with a *vav*, חומה. Why is the accusation not alluded to in the earlier pasuk?

## The Long and Winding Road

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

**T**he shortest route between two points is a straight line. It would make sense that when the Jewish people depart from Egypt, the fastest route to take on their journey to Eretz Yisrael would have been a straight shot across the northern Sinai desert into the Negev. Yet as they begin their trek in the opening of Parshat Beshalach, God directs the nation southwards toward the Yam Suf, making the route unnecessarily longer. As the Jewish people reach the Yam Suf, fearing for their lives as the Egyptian army rapidly approaches, a miracle occurs; the

There is a fascinating parshanut point here. Sometimes, the Torah will forego communicating an idea at an earlier opportunity if the idea will be expressed more potently in a later setting. As we have discussed, the Jewish People in their fragmented state were susceptible to indictment regarding their avodah zarah in Egypt. However, one could seemingly respond to this accusation by pointing out that they had in fact done teshuvah for this by bringing the Korban Pesach, a primary element of which was the public disassociation with and repudiation of avodah zarah! Once they have done teshuvah, they are no longer equated with the idol-worshipping Egyptians!

However, at a certain point in the splitting of the Red Sea, we find that the Egyptians themselves realized the worthless nature of their idolatry and that their deities were useless and powerless to protect them from Hashem's punishment. Pasuk 25 reads

וַיֹּאמֶר מִצְרַיִם אֲנוֹסָה מִפְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי ה' נִלְחָם לָהֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם.  
*Egypt said, 'I shall flee before Yisrael, for Hashem is waging war for them against Egypt.'*"

In a sense, one could say that with these words, the Egyptians were also doing teshuvah for their earlier idolatry. This being the case the accusation against Bnei Yisrael has gained momentum, for the disparity between them and the Egyptians has now been removed: in terms of the sin of avodah zarah – both were guilty, while in terms of doing teshuvah – both had done so! It is for this reason the accusation is alluded to in the later pasuk, for in the interim it has attained greater potency. Samael now asks: "Why did you accept Bnei Yisrael's teshuvah for their avodah zarah but not the Egyptians' teshuvah for theirs?"

In truth however, the two acts of teshuvah are not comparable. In the same way that Hashem responded to the accusation concerning avodah zarah by saying that Bnei Yisrael did so out of oppression and desperation, not from a settled frame of mind, the same may be said regarding the Egyptians' teshuvah which occurred when they frantically realized that they were trapped between the walls of the sea. This cannot be compared to the teshuvah done by the Jewish People who, by bringing the Korban Pesach, were deliberately and courageously defying their surroundings and cutting ties with avodah zarah, all this at a time when they were no longer being oppressed. The Meshech Chochmah concludes this section with the words: "May Hashem grant that Yisrael return to Him from a fully settled state of mind.

sea splits before their eyes, allowing them to walk within it on dry land. One would presume that the path taken through the sea was a straight line – crossing directly from the western shore eastwards to the Sinai desert. But astonishingly, the Rambam (commentary to Avot 5:4), Tosfot (Arachin 15a, s.v. 'Khsham'), and the Ibn Ezra (Shemot 14:17) all deduce that the Jews emerged from the Yam Suf on the same side of the beachhead from which they entered! In reading the p'sukim describing the journey of the Jewish people in Bamidbar (33:7-10), we see that

the dry path through the Yam Suf was actually a semi-circle, returning the Jews to the very shore from which they came. Why, then, does God take them on this path, which while miraculous, was no shortcut?

Often, the journey itself is more critical than the destination. There is so much to be learned when we journey. The travails of wandering sharpen our perseverance. Along the journey we are able to hone an appreciation for what is most significant in our lives. The destination is never guaranteed, but the values and priorities we bring into the journey are, as are the values and priorities we develop along the way.

How long will it take us to win this war? What does victory look like? No one knows. The chapter of Jewish history we are living through is yet another personal and national journey, a challenging detour from the path we felt we were on.

But let us stop for a moment and think about what values we have brought to this journey as we move towards victory. We have seen the country, indeed world Jewry, come together in unity, doing whatever we can to help the

other. I have seen soldiers committed to each other to the point they are willing to risk their own lives to protect the other.

The bumpy, treacherous road on which we travel has taught us a great deal about maintaining solidarity and identifying our national priorities. Zionism was a word on the decline both in Israel and the diaspora. Yet now the term and fidelity to its ideal has had a resurgence, even becoming a rallying cry. We bemoaned the priorities of the younger generation. Yet on this journey, we all realize the amazing valor and selflessness of our youth.

The values we bring to this journey shape the *weltanschauung*, the spirit of our country. We would never have asked for the horrors that brought us here, and we pray for the challenges to cease. But along the way, we have doubled down on our values and maintained our faith. We have journeyed many times before, and we have always come out stronger and more resilient. This is why Am Yisrael is never afraid of the long and arduous journey.

Nesiyah tova – safe travels.

## Haftarat Beshalach: Discerning the Hand of God

Rabbi Gideon Shloush (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarah, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

**P**arashat Beshalach is by far one of the most exciting parashiyot in all of the Torah. It is here that we read of the Jewish people's dramatic crossing of the Red Sea, accompanied by the beautiful *Shirat Ha-Yam* (Song at the Sea). From the depths of their souls, the Jewish people poured forth a song of praise and thanksgiving for their miraculous salvation from the Egyptian army.

How fitting it is, therefore, that the haftarah perfectly parallels this parashah. For it is here that we read *Shirat Devorah* – the heartfelt song of Devorah. In her shirah, the prophetess leads the Jewish people in praising God for miraculously saving them from the advancing troops of Sisra, the commander of the mighty Canaanite enemy.

Who was Devorah? When did she live? What was her leadership style? Why was she an important figure in Jewish history?

The story of Devorah is recorded in the book of *Shoftim*. This was a glorious period, spanning four hundred years, from the days of Yehoshua up until the period of Shmuel Ha-Navi. Devorah, from the tribe of Naftali, was the fourth of the Judges. She led her people around the year 1106 bce. The Talmud records that Devorah was also one of

seven prophetesses in Tanakh. That list includes Sarah, Miriam, Chanah, Avigayil, Chulda and Esther, in addition to Devorah.

God loved Devorah. In the haftarah she is referred to as "*Eishet Lapidot*" – "the woman of wicks." The Midrash explains that she is so named because she took the time to lovingly prepare wicks for the Tabernacle. In appreciation, God said, "Devorah, you have increased My light, so I will increase your light. You will shine as a guiding light for the Jewish people."

R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch says that Devorah was a woman of fiery enthusiasm and inspiring speech. She judged the people and encouraged them towards a path of Torah observance. She was a wise, pious, and modest woman. The haftarah tells us "*ve-hi yoshevet tachat tomer*" – "she sat beneath the palm tree." The Talmud (*Megillah 14a*) explains that she didn't meet with people in the house, but rather she sat outdoors when she judged, so as to avoid any issues of *yichud* (seclusion) with men.

During the time that she became a judge, trouble was brewing for the Jewish people. Up until this point, their oppressors had been foreign armies. Now, however, the



budding Israelite nation was overcome by the Canaanites who lived directly in their midst. Sisra, general to Yavin, King of Chatzor, would continuously mock the Jewish People. He would say, "Where is your great God who saves you from suffering?" This aggression prompted the Jewish people to cry out to God for salvation.

What follows, as described in our haftarah, is that Devorah receives a prophetic message that Barak ben Avinoam should wage war against Sisra. (Many commentaries suggest that Barak was her husband.) Devorah instructs Barak to take ten thousand men to fight alongside him. Barak and his comrades would have to face an army that numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Devorah tells Barak, "Arise and confront Sisra. God has given him into your hands. God goes before you and fights for you."

Barak follows her word and God takes charge of the battle. He sends confusion upon the armies of Sisra. As Devorah recounts in her song, when the stars appear at night, they radiate with such intensity that the soldiers overheat in their armor. They immediately seek refuge along the banks of Nachal Kishon, where they hope to cool off. Miraculously, the shallow brook turns into raging waters and drowns the enemy army.

Seeing his army's demise, Sisra runs for his life (Radak explains that Sisra not only fled on foot but he purposely did not flee with any surviving soldiers so as not to be detected). As he runs for his life, he approaches a group of tents. There, a young woman, Yael, sees the panic-stricken general and invites him into her tent. Yael offers Sisra milk to drink and he becomes very drowsy. Then, "*va-tekhaseihu be-semikhah*" – she covers him with a blanket ("*semikhah*"). The commentaries explain that if you switch around the letters of "*semikhah*" you get the words "*ko shemi*" – "My Name is here." This *remez* (hint) indicates that Yael did not sin with Sisra, but rather, God was very much a part of this plan to get Sisra into Yael's tent. As he sleeps, Yael takes an iron pin from the edge of the tent and hammers it into his face.

Upon learning of the fall of Sisra, Devorah pours forth a most beautiful and poetic song of thanksgiving to God. This was a moment of great salvation for the Jewish people. The Zohar tells us that Shirat Devorah is filled with the secrets of Divine wisdom and is one of the ten great songs in (Tanakh and) Jewish history.

It is striking to see the parallels that exist between our parashah and the haftarah. In both stories:

The enemy leader denies the existence of God

- God wages war on Israel's enemies from the heavens
- God confuses the enemy camp
- God drowns Israel's enemies in the water
- God completely annihilates the enemy
- The enemy leader survives (though only temporarily in the case of Sisra)
- A woman leads a song of praise
- The songs that follow the Israelite victories are works of poetry
- The songs visually appear in the Torah in a magnificent "brick" form on the page

There are many lessons to be learned from this haftarah but the one that I find especially meaningful is the importance of giving shirah to God.

Our Sages tell us that we learn from both Shirat Ha-Yam and Shirat Devorah is how important it is never to delay in praising God and thanking Him for His kindness.

Shirah is unique for it emanates from the depths of our souls. It allows our inner most feelings to burst forth. It is a demonstration of our longing to be closer to God. "*Kol ha-neshamah tehaleil Kah, halelukah*" – "My entire soul sings praise to You, oh Lord."

How blessed we are to live in a time where we have so much to be thankful for, and to praise God for. Especially noteworthy is that although surrounded by enemies, our people continue to thrive in our historic homeland. Isn't it remarkable to see the magnitude of construction taking place all across the Land of Israel? Entire neighborhoods and cities have sprung up in the most barren of places. There are new roads and buildings at every turn. Cranes are everywhere. We are no doubt living in the days of *Kibbutz Galuyot* (the Ingathering of the Exiles), as God prepares for the arrival of the Mashiach, *Techiyat Ha-Meitim* (the Resurrection), and the building of the Third Temple.

Let us not take this for granted. We must give shirah each day for what are privileged to witness God's active fulfillment of His promise to return His people to their national homeland, after a significant absence of nearly two thousand years.

It is now that we await the opportunity to hear the final song, which will be sung by the Jewish people at the time of the final redemption (Yeshayahu 42:10 and Tehillim 149:1). May we merit witnessing this climactic moment.