**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BESHALACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of
Miriam Heller z"l
whose yahrzeit falls on the seventh of Shvat,
by her niece, Vivian Singer.
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Motzaei Shabbat

 We read in Parashat Beshalach that as *Benei Yisrael* stood frightened at the shores of the *Yam Suf*, trapped between the sea and the pursuing Egyptian army, Moshe turned to the people and said, “Do not fear; stand in place and behold the Lord’s salvation which He will be performing for you today, for the way you see the Egyptians today – you will never seem them again, forever” (14:13).

 The Maggid of Duvna, in *Ohel Yaakov*, offers a clever and insightful reading of this verse. He notes that fear undermines a person’s capacity to observe his surroundings. When a person flees from danger, the Maggid writes, he is not likely to notice a precious item dropped by its owner along the road which he is legally entitled to take. Fear causes us to focus our attention solely on avoiding the danger or perceived danger, and so we are incapable during that period of noticing anything around us that is not related to the source of our fear. This is why Moshe told the people at the shores of the sea not to be afraid. He wanted them to pay close attention to the miracle that was unfolding – “behold the Lord’s salvation.” The Maggid boldly suggests that the final clause of the verse, which is generally understood as a promise that *Benei Yisrael* would never see the Egyptians again, should actually be read to mean that the miracles that would imminently transpire would never be repeated. Moshe urged the people not to fear so they could focus their attention on the events that would soon unfold, because these events would never repeat themselves, and thus this was their only opportunity to experience them.

 The lesson of the Maggid’s insight, perhaps, is that we must not let our anxieties and concerns about the future divert our attention away from the experiences of the present. There is much to enjoy and appreciate that we miss due to our burden of worry and fear. The Maggid of Duvna here urges us to always heed Moshe’s call, “Do not fear; stand in place and behold the Lord’s salvation” – to observe and appreciate the blessings we are given at any moment, recognizing that they will not always be with us.

Sunday

 We read in Parashat Beshalach the *Shirat Ha-yam* – the song of praise jubilantly sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the miracle of the splitting of the *Yam Suf*. The Torah introduces the *Shirat Ha-yam* by telling, “*Az yashir Moshe u-Vnei Yisrael* *et ha-shira ha-zot*” – “Then did Moshe and the Israelites sing this song…” (15:1).

 The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 23:7) comments that after the miracle of the sea, the angels wished to sing a song of praise. The Almighty told them that Moshe and *Benei Yisrael* should sing first, and only then the angels may offer their praise. It appears that the Midrash seeks to explain this manner the seemingly unusual phrase, “*Az Yashir*” with which the Torah introduces the *Shirat Ha-yam*. According to the Midrash, the Torah emphasizes that *Benei Yisrael* sang this song of praise “*az*,” right there and then, without first waiting for the angels to sing their song of praise.

 What might be the significance of the fact that God instructed *Benei Yisrael* to sing their song before the angels sang theirs?

 The Kotzker Rebbe explains that angels, unlike humans, are always prepared and ready to sing to the Almighty. As they are perfect beings without our human foibles, they are consistent and naturally driven at all times to do the right thing. We flawed humans, by contrast, are fickle, unsteady and inconsistent. We can be inspired to do what is right at one moment, but then soon later find ourselves tempted and lured to act wrongly. And thus God told the angels that their song could wait, but *Benei Yisrael*’s could not. If *Benei Yisrael* felt inspired and driven to sing praise, they should do so immediately, without delay, before the inspiration subsides. The angels would be just as driven to sing later, and so they needed to wait for *Benei Yisrael* to complete their song.

 The Kotzker Rebbe here is teaching us that we need to do the best we can under our conditions at any moment. There will be times when, like *Benei Yisrael* at the sea, we will feel inspired and driven to soar to great heights. But there will be many other times when we feel uninspired, periods when we are beset by difficult struggles and challenges, and occasions when we fail. The implication of the word “*az*,” the Rebbe teaches, is that we must do “then,” at any given moment, the best we can do under those specific conditions. Only angels are expected to do precisely the right thing at all times, to remain perfectly steady and steadfast without any failures. We must certainly try as much as possible to be consistent and unwavering like the angels, but the reality will always remain that we are but human. Our objective must therefore be “*az yashir*,” to exert maximum effort at all times under the conditions we face, even when we cannot achieve the same results and reach the level that we could attain under different circumstances.

Monday

 The Torah in Parashat Beshalach tells of the manna, the miraculous food which fell from the heavens each morning to feed *Benei Yisrael* during their period of travel through the wilderness. On Friday, we read, twice the ordinary quantity of manna was provided, so that the people would have food also for Shabbat, when no manna fell. On the first Friday after God began providing the manna, Moshe instructed the people to cook or bake the manna that day in preparation for Shabbat (16:23).

 The Tosafists, in *Moshav Zekeinim* (Parashat Behaalotekha), question on the basis of this verse the famous tradition (mentioned in Yoma 75b) that *Benei Yisrael* were able to experience any taste they wished in the manna. If the manna could be tasted any way one wished, the Tosafists ask, then why was it necessary for them to cook or bake the manna at all? Seemingly, according to this tradition, there was no preparation needed before partaking of the manna, and it is thus difficult to understand why Moshe instructed the people to prepare the manna before the onset of Shabbat. The Tosafists suggest that the people would need to verbally mention the food which they wanted the manna to become, and thus they “cooked” the manna by speaking. Cooking in this fashion was forbidden on Shabbat, and so the people needed to “prepare” the food through their verbal pronouncement before Shabbat.

 This issue touches upon the interesting discussion of several halakhic authorities concerning the status of forbidden actions performed through supernatural means. If a person commits a prohibited act, but not in the standard manner, but rather through magical powers, does this transgress the given prohibition?

 Several writers noted a seeming contradiction in this regard between two *halakhot*. The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (101a) writes that one may trap a snake on Shabbat through magical incantations, despite the prohibition against trapping animals on Shabbat, and this ruling is codified in the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 328:45). The *Mishna Berura* explains that this is allowed because it is not the natural way of trapping. This *halakha* certainly suggests that supernatural methods of committing an otherwise forbidden act are permissible. On the other hand, several sources (including *Halakhot Ketanot* 2:98) indicate that one is guilty of murder even if he kills through some supernatural, magical technique. The Steipler Gaon, in *Kehilat Yaakov* (Bava Kama 45:2), answers this question by drawing a distinction between the Shabbat prohibitions and other Torah violations. The Shabbat prohibitions are unique in that they are violated only when the act is performed through a regular, direct action. If one performs one of the prohibited Shabbat actions *ki-le’achar yad* – indirectly, in a roundabout way, then he does not violate Shabbat (on the level of Torah law). By the same token, the Steipler Gaon explains, performing a forbidden Shabbat activity through supernatural means does not constitute an act of Shabbat desecration. When it comes to all other Torah prohibitions, one is guilty of a violation even if he commits the act in a “magical,” supernatural way.

 This position, it would seem, is at odds with the aforementioned comment of the Tosafists regarding the manna. As we saw, the Tosafists claimed that it was forbidden to “cook” the manna by supernaturally transforming it into the desired food. This would certainly suggest that supernatural means of committing a forbidden act are prohibited even in the context of the Shabbat prohibitions.

 A slightly different view is taken by Rav Chaim Palagi, in his *Leiv Chayim* (O.C. 2:188). Rav Palagi also distinguishes between the Shabbat laws and other Torah prohibitions, but he formulates this distinction differently. He writes that on Shabbat, one transgresses any one of the thirty-nine *melakhot* (categories of forbidden activity) only if he performs an action in the normal manner in which that action is usually performed. Since hunting is not normally done through incantations, but rather through a physical act of seizure or entrapment, trapping via incantation does not constitute an act of Shabbat desecration. In general, however, one transgresses the Torah’s laws even if he commits the act through supernatural means.

 This approach perhaps provides us for an explanation as to why it was forbidden for *Benei Yisrael* to “cook” the man through a verbal proclamation. As this was the standard manner of preparing the manna, it fell under the prohibition of cooking on Shabbat. Although unusual methods of performing *melakha* generally do not constitute Torah violations, this method of cooking would violate Shabbat since it was the usual method of food preparation at that time and under those circumstances.

 It should also be noted that the Gemara (there in Masekhet Yoma) states that the sinful members of the nation did not enjoy this special feature of the manna, of miraculously transforming it into whichever food they desired. Accordingly, we could easily explain that the command to prepare the manna before Shabbat was directed specifically to them. The righteous members of the nation, who were able to miraculously turn the manna into the food of their choice, perhaps had no need to prepare their manna before Shabbat.

(Based on Rav Chaim Leib Eisenstein’s [*Peninim Mi-bei Midresha*, Parashat Beshalach](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48330&st=&pgnum=143&hilite=))

Tuesday

 In the *Shirat Ha-yam* – the jubilant song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the splitting of the *Yam Suf* – they give praise to the Almighty for casting “the horse and its rider” into the sea (15:1). The *Mekhilta*, in a seemingly peculiar passage, tells that when God judged the Egyptian horses, He asked each horse why it pursued *Benei Yisrael*. The horse naturally denied all accountability, blaming the Egyptian rider for having it gallop in pursuit of the newly-freed slaves. God then turned to the Egyptian horseman, who blamed the horse for chasing the people. The *Mekhilta* concludes that God placed the horseman on the horse and judged them together. He found them guilty, and thus decreed that they should be drowned at sea.

 The explanation of this remark appears to emerge from the subsequent passage, which parallels an account in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 91a-b) of an exchange between the Roman emperor Antoninus and Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi. Antoninus argued to Rabbi Yehuda that a person could escape punishment when he is judged after death, because the body and the soul could each blame the other for the sins that the individual committed during his lifetime. The soul could point to the fact that once it departed from the body, it regained its state of pristine purity, and the body could point to the fact that once the soul departed, it was incapable of any wrongful act. Rabbi Yehuda replied by drawing an analogy to two men – one blind, the other lame – who were assigned to guard the king’s field. The lame servant saw the animals in the corral, and they devised a plan whereby the blind man lifted the lame man so he could pull out animals, which they proceeded to eat. When the king accused them of stealing his animals, they claimed innocence, arguing that neither a lame person nor a blind person could be capable of such a crime. The king then lifted the lame person on top of the blind person, and had them convicted for the crime they committed together as partners. Similarly, Rabbi Yehuda said, God will hold us accountable for our wrongdoing because the body and soul worked together to commit the wrongs of which we are guilty.

 This analogy explains the earlier metaphor of the horse and horseman. *Chazal* here depict the relationship between the body and the soul as similar to that between a horse and its rider. Technically speaking, the Egyptian horsemen did not themselves pursue *Benei Yisrael*; they rode on horses, which brought them in pursuit of the former slaves. Clearly, however, this argument is absurd, as it was the riders who had the horses gallop and steered them in the direction of *Benei Yisrael*. Similarly, we might try to blame our failings on our “horse” – our negative tendencies and weaknesses. If we were created without our sinful inclinations, then we would live pure, innocent lives without any failures. Nevertheless, we will be held accountable for our failures because when all is said and done, we are the “riders.” The “horse,” our negative tendencies, cannot act on its own. It is ultimately our decision what our body does and how we conduct ourselves. God created us with a “horse,” with innate human tendencies and desires, but we are able and expected to steer them in the proper direction and to restrain them when necessary. The decision to act wrongly is made by our intellect, by our free will, and not by our natural inclinations. We must assume full responsibility for our actions, and not attempt to absolve ourselves on the basis of our “horse,” because of our natural weaknesses.

Wednesday

 We read in Parashat Beshalach of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints to Moshe in *Midbar Sin* over the lack of food, in response to which God announced that He would be sending the people miraculous food from the heavens each morning. He declared to Moshe, “*Hineni mamtir lakhem lechem min ha-shamayim*” – “I am hereby sending you down bread from the heavens” (16:4).

 The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 25:5) draws an association between the word “*hineni*” (“I am hereby”) in this verse and Avraham’s response of “*hineni*” when he was called by the Almighty. When God appeared to Avraham to issue the command of the *akeida* – the offering of his son as a sacrifice – He called Avraham’s name, and Avraham replied, “*Hineni*” – “I am here” (Bereishit 22:1). The Midrash tells that God said to Avraham, “I will pay reward to your sons with that same expression.” The word “*hineni*” shared by these two contexts suggested to the Midrash that the miracle of the manna somehow came in reward for Avraham’s response of “*hineni*” when he was summoned by God. How might we explain this association?

 The answer likely emerges from an earlier passage in the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 25:4), where *Chazal* observe how God responded favorably to *Benei Yisrael*’s demand for food despite the inappropriate manner in which they spoke. The Midrash comments that when *Benei Yisrael* finished eating the rations of food that they brought with them from Egypt, they should have simply approached Moshe and respectfully informed him that they had no more food. Instead, they angrily berated him and Aharon, accusing them of bringing the nation out of Egypt to die of starvation in the wilderness (16:3). God should have reacted with anger, but He instead responded, in the Midrash’s words, “They did what they do, and I shall do what I do.” He then announced that He would be miraculously sustaining them with heavenly bread each morning.

 We might suggest that this passage should be read in conjunction with the Midrash’s aforementioned comment linking God’s response to the people with Avraham’s response of “*hineni*.” As became evident from the rest of the *akeida* story, Avraham’s response was an expression of unconditional loyalty and fealty to the divine will. When God called to him, he replied, “*Hineni*” as if to say, “I am prepared and ready to do anything You command me.” Indeed, he was then given the most difficult command imaginable, and he unflinchingly obeyed. The Midrash perhaps draws a comparison between Avraham’s unconditional loyalty to the Almighty and His unconditional loyalty to us, as it were. Although *Benei Yisrael* were undeserving of His miraculous sustenance, having expressed remorse over having left Egypt and their preference to live as the Egyptians’ slaves, God did not abandon them. He would not allow them to perish in the wilderness. Like a parent who feeds his or her child despite the child’s misconduct, regardless of how rudely and inappropriately the child asks for food, God cared for His nation in the desert even though they were unworthy of His kindness. Just as Avraham was committed to fulfilling the divine will no matter what was entailed, God expressed His commitment, so-to-speak, to care for His people regardless of whether or not we are deserving of His kindness.

 The practical lesson we might learn from the Midrash’s comments is that we must be prepared to lend assistance to those who need it even if we justifiably feel they do not deserve it. Sometimes, people in distress do not request the help they need in an appropriate, courteous manner. And when we are approached for help discourteously, our instinctive reaction is to refuse. We must remember and emulate the Almighty’s response to *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints in the wilderness: “They did what they do, and I shall do what I do.” It is natural for people in dire straits to lose their bearings, and the rest of us should not lose ours. We must remain committed and loyal to our fellow in distress even if we feel he acts improperly, following the example set by our loving Father who mercifully and compassionately cares for us even when we do not deserve it.

Thursday

 We read towards the beginning of Parashat Beshalach (13:19) that at the time *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt, Moshe took with him Yosef’s remains. This fulfilled the promise that Yosef’s brothers had made to him before his death, that they would bring his remains out of Egypt for burial in *Eretz Yisrael*.

 The *Mekhilta*, commenting on this verse, tells that Yosef’s remains were carried in an ark alongside the ark of the covenant, which contained the tablets given to Moshe at Sinai. When passersby saw the two arks, the *Mekhilta* relates, *Benei Yisrael* would tell them that one contained the remains of a deceased person and the other contains the law of the living God. They would explain that it was appropriate for these two arks to be transported side by side, because the person carried in one ark observed the law carried in the other ark.

 The image of *Benei Yisrael* transporting the *aron* has been viewed as symbolic of the need to “transport” the Torah through every station of life and of history. On the individual level, this means applying the Torah’s values and laws at every stage of our lives and under all the various circumstances that we encounter. Torah is relevant and binding at all times and in all situations, and we must therefore “carry” it with us and have it inform our decisions, our speech and our conduct wherever we find ourselves. On a national level, we must bring the Torah with us into every era and every stage of history. The Torah is as relevant now as it was in antiquity, and we therefore continue “carrying” it with us even in our times, as we address the unique conditions and challenges that arise in our modern-day circumstances.

 With this in mind, we can perhaps more fully appreciate the significance of Yosef’s remains being transported alongside the ark of the covenant. Yosef exemplifies the ideal of “transporting” Torah, of bringing Torah values with us wherever we go, to every situation we face. Yosef was uprooted from his home and sent to a foreign land with a foreign culture and foreign values. And yet, despite finding himself very far from his home environment, Yosef remained faithful to his family’s values and traditions. Even in Egypt, and even when he came under enormous pressure to betray his ideals, he steadfastly adhered to the beliefs, teachings and morals of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Yosef thus embodies the concept of “transporting” the *aron*, the need to bring Torah values with us wherever we go. And so it was indeed appropriate specifically for him to be carried alongside the *aron* in the wilderness, as he set for us the example we must follow of carrying Torah with us at all times, to all the many different sets of circumstances we will confront over the course of our lives.

Friday

 Responding to *Benei Yisrael*’s frantic cries as they found themselves trapped at the shores of the *Yam Suf*, Moshe assures the people that God would save them, and proclaims, “The way you see Egypt today – you will never again see them” (14:13). Rashi follows the simple reading of the text, explaining that Moshe promises the people that they would never again need to face the people who tormented and enslaved them. *Chazal* (Yerushalmi, Sukka 5:1), however, as cited by the Ramban, understood that the Torah here introduces a halakhic prohibition to return to Egypt.

 Leaving aside the practical issue as to the parameters and conditions of this prohibition, it is worth noting the symbolic significance of this command.

On several occasions throughout *Benei Yisrael*’s travels, they expressed their desire to return to Egypt. Specifically, in periods of hardship and uncertainty, they spoke longingly of the security they enjoyed in Egypt despite the harsh conditions of slavery that they endured. As much as they suffered at the hands of the Egyptians, they at least felt the comfort and security that one experiences in familiar surroundings, and did not have to wonder or worry about the future. Indeed, fear of uncertainty is often the greatest obstacle to change. Even when we recognize the need to change, that our current habits or lifestyle are deficient, we avoid making the necessary changes due to the comfort of familiarity. Although we do not feel content with our current state, and we acknowledge that we should improve, we are reluctant to do so because we feel intimidated by the uncertainty of a different reality. Like *Benei Yisrael*, we feel the lure of “Egypt,” of our familiar setting, undesirable as it is.

As we saw, Moshe’s proclamation, “you will never again see them” has been understood as both a promise and a command. The call for change, growth and self-improvement is, indeed, both an obligation that we bear and a guarantee. We must have the courage to make the necessary changes in our conduct and lifestyle, and are guaranteed that permanent, positive change is possible and can endure. It is within our ability to permanently leave “Egypt,” to forever break our negative habits and tendencies, and we are expected to make every effort we can to advance and proceed without ever looking back.

(Based on [an article by Rav Mayer Twersky](http://torahweb.org/torah/2011/parsha/rtwe_beshalach.html))

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