**SALT – PARASHAT BESHALACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motazei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Beshalach the story of the miraculous splitting of the sea. Several days after Pharaoh sent *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt, he reconsidered his decision and swiftly mobilized an army and pursued them, trapping them against the sea. The Torah relates that when *Benei Yisrael* saw the Egyptian army approaching, they “cried out to the Lord” (14:10), seemingly referring to prayer. But then the Torah says that the people turned to Moshe and angrily shouted, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness?! What is this that you did to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not what we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone and we will serve Egypt, for it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the wilderness!’” (14:11-12).

These two reactions, as many commentators have noted, appear contradictory. On the one hand, the people turned to God in heartfelt prayer, but on the other, they angrily berated Moshe for bringing them out of Egypt, stating that they would have preferred to remain as slaves in Egypt. This contradiction led the *Mekhilta*, as approvingly cited by the Ramban, to explain that different groups among the nation reacted differently. There were those who prayed to God for help, and there were those who vented their frustration by shouting at Moshe.

Others, however, reconcile the two responses described in the verses, based on Rashi’s remarks commenting to the phrase, “The Israelites cried out to the Lord.” Rashi writes, based on the *Mekhilta*,“They grabbed onto their forebears’ profession,” explaining that *Benei Yisrael* prayed just as Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov had prayed. Many have raised the question as to Rashi’s intent, what he sought to add by noting that *Benei Yisrael* prayed just as the patriarchs had. A number of writers, including the Maharik and the *Amar Nekei* (commonly attributed to Rav Ovadya of Bartenura), understood Rashi’s remark to mean that the people did not, in fact, recite a heartfelt prayer. They prayed only because this is what traditionally has been done in times of crisis, but in truth, they were angry and resentful. According to this reading, Rashi sought to reconcile the seemingly contradictory descriptions by downplaying the value of the people’s prayer, stating that their prayers were perfunctory and emotionless, an imitation of their forefathers’ sincere supplications to God.

Irrespective of this question, Rav Yisrael of Modzhitz (in *Divrei Yisrael*) offers a different reading of Rashi’s comment. He notes Rashi’s unusual terminology, speaking of prayer as the “*umanut*” – “profession,” or “craft” – of the patriarchs, and of *Benei Yisrael* “grabbing” (“*tafsu*”) this “profession.” The Rebbe of Modzhitz explains that prayer is, indeed, a “craft,” an undertaking which, to be done properly, requires patience, discipline, hard work, preparation and experience. But when *Benei Yisrael* stood at the shores of the sea, they were caught off guard. They had felt safe and secure, having been miraculously brought out of Egypt, figuring that the horrors of Egyptian bondage were behind them. Suddenly, when they saw the Egyptian army rapidly approaching, they were stunned, and needed to pray quickly, without any time to prepare themselves. They “grabbed” onto prayer, crying to God the best they could without preparation. They practiced the “art” of prayer despite not having had time to properly prepare, and this prayer was lovingly accepted by God, because it was the best they could do under the circumstances.

The Rebbe of Modzhitz explains on this basis God’s statement to Moshe on the shores of the sea, “Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the Israelites that they should journey onward [into the sea]” (14:15). The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 21:5) comments that God was telling Moshe – who was praying at the time – that he had no need to pray, “because My children’s prayers already preceded yours,” meaning, God had already accepted *Benei Yisrael*’s prayers. The Rebbe of Modzhitz explains the Midrash to mean that although *Benei Yisrael* prayed without the appropriate level of concentration and feeling, nevertheless, their prayers were accepted because they prayed the best they could at that time. Although they merely “grabbed” onto the difficult, delicate “art” of prayer, their prayers achieved the desired result, because God expects from us only the best that we can do in any given situation.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted *Benei Yisrael*’s two very different reactions to the crisis they faced several days after the Exodus, when they suddenly found themselves trapped against the sea by the Egyptian army. On the one hand, the Torah tells, ““The Israelites cried out to the Lord” (14:10) – implying that they prayed to God for help. Immediately thereafter, however, we read that the people angrily shouted at Moshe, blaming him for this crisis: “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness?! What is this that you did to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not what we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone and we will serve Egypt, for it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the wilderness!’” (14:11-12).

The Ramban, in discussing these verses, notes a number of different approaches to explain the verses. (As we mentioned yesterday, the Ramban himself prefers the view that different groups among the nation reacted differently.) At the end of his discussion, he cites a passage from the *Mekhilta* explaining that these two reactions occurred at two different stages. Paraphrasing this approach, the Ramban writes:

At first, they cried to God to put it in Pharaoh’s heart to turn away from them, and when they saw that he was not turning back, but was rather journeying and drawing near them, they then said, “Our prayers were not accepted,” and the evil thought entered their minds to question Moshe…

According to this explanation, *Benei Yisrael* initially reacted by uttering a heartfelt prayer, but when it appeared that their prayers were not answered, and Pharaoh’s chariots were fast approaching, they lost faith, and regretted having gone along with the process of the Exodus.

The Ramban describes the people’s mistake as their having hinged their hopes on just a single means of resolving the crisis – Pharaoh’s change of heart. They saw this as the only possible way they could be saved, and so this is what they prayed for. Naturally, when this prayer went unanswered, they despaired. They could never have imagined that they could be saved in a different manner – and they certainly could never have imagined the sea splitting so they could cross to safety. Faith requires recognizing just how limited our vision is, how we really can never know what we truly need. While of course we are entitled and encouraged to pray for what we, from our narrow perspective, consider the most desirable outcome, our prayers must be accompanied by a genuine sense of humility and submission. We need to acknowledge God’s infinite wisdom and power, His ability to care for us and assist in countless ways that we could never imagine. Just as *Benei Yisrael* were wrong for assuming that the only solution to their predicament was Pharaoh’s change of heart, so do we err when, in any situation, we feel dependent upon a particular outcome, that our or our nation’s wellbeing necessitates a specific set of circumstances. We must trust that God can solve our problems and care for us in an infinite number of ways which we, with our very limited minds, are wholly incapable of even imagining.

Monday

In the *Shirat Ha-yam* – the jubilant song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the miracle of the splitting of the sea – they proclaim, “*U-v-ru’ach apecha ne’ermu mayim*” (Shemot 15:8), which is commonly interpreted as, “And with the breath of Your nostrils, the waters were heaped.” As several commentators (including Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Seforno) explain, the word “*ne’ermu*” stems from the word “*areima*,” which means “pile” or “heap,” as in the phrase “*areimat chitim*” – “pile of wheat” (Shir Hashirim 7:3). The waters of the sea are described here as having been transformed into two tall “piles,” forming a path of dry land through which *Benei Yisrael* were then able to safely cross.

*Targum Onkelos*, however, translates the word “*ne’ermu*” as “*chakimu*” – “were intelligent,” or “sly.” According to the *Targum*, the word “*ne’ermu*” is associated with the word “*arum*,” which is used, for example, to describe the sly, conniving snake in *Gan Eden* (“*Ve-ha-nachash haya* ***arum***” – Bereishit 3:1). The waters were “sly” in the way they split to form a dry path through which *Benei Yisrael* could cross. Chizkuni explains *Targum*’s translation to mean that the waters of the sea were “wise” in that they drowned the Egyptians. The waters receded at the right time to allow *Benei Yisrael* to cross, and then fell back into place when the time came to drown the Egyptians.

It should be noted, however, that the word “*ne’ermu*” appears in the context of the sea’s initial splitting, the way it miraculously formed two “walls” around *Benei Yisrael*. The drowning of the Egyptians is described only several verses later (10). We might assume, then, that if *Targum Onkelos* translates “*ne’ermu*” as a reference to wisdom and cunning, this description relates to the waters’ splitting, and not to their drowning of the Egyptians.

Perhaps, the “wisdom” of the waters was the wisdom to discontinue one’s normal course of action. Since the time of the world’s creation, the ocean’s waters had remained in place in their basin, but now the time came for them to do something drastically different, to rise to either side in order to form dry land. It takes a degree of wisdom and intuition to make drastic changes, to discontinue something to which we have grown accustomed, when the need arises. Like the waters of the sea, we all have familiar habits and routines which have become second nature. There is a certain level of intelligence that we require in order to know when we must act differently, and reverse our normal, habitual course of action. While habits and routines are, of course, vitally important for our stability and productivity, at the same time, there are times when, like the waters of the sea, we need to reverse our course due to extenuating circumstances. The “wisdom” of the waters is the wisdom to know when we need to follow our usual routine, and when we need to disrupt our routine and do something different in light of new realities.

Tuesday

In *Benei Yisrael*’s song of praise sung after the miracle of the splitting of the sea, they describe God drowning the Egyptian soldiers with the phrase, “*Natita yeminekha tivla’eimo aretz*” – “You outstretched Your right [hand], and the ground devoured them” (Shemot 15:12).

Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, comments that the imagery of the ground “devouring” the Egyptians is not merely a metaphoric depiction of the waters violently crushing them to the ground. Rather, in Rashi’s words, “*Zakhu li-kvura*” – although the Egyptians were killed as punishment for persecuting *Benei Yisrael*, they were deemed worthy of burial. Their corpses were not strewn about, but were rather buried underground, and this is the meaning of the depiction of the ground “devouring” the Egyptian horsemen. Rashi explains that they earned burial in reward for having confessed after the plague of hail, “*Hashem ha-tzadik*” – that God was just, and they had sinned (9:27). Although this remorse proved to be short-lived, and Pharaoh and the Egyptians continued refusing to let *Benei Yisrael* leave, nevertheless, those moments of honest introspection and confession rendered them worthy of burial.

Rav Moshe Mordechai Karp, in his *Va-yavinu Ba-mikra*, notes the significance of the anthropomorphic reference to God’s “right hand” in this verse, in light of the *Mekhilta*’s interpretation. This verse speaks of the ground “devouring” the Egyptians as a result of God’s “outstretching” His “right hand.” It turns out, according to the *Mekhilta*, that it was as a result of this “right hand” that the Egyptians were granted burial. This is significant, Rav Karp notes, because several verses earlier (15:6), *Benei Yisrael* proclaim, “*…yeminekha Hashem tir’atz oyeiv*” – “Your right [hand], O Lord, crushes the enemy.” It thus emerges that the same “right hand” which punished the Egyptians also granted them the dignity of burial. Although God harshly punished the Egyptians for their cruelty, He also, at the very same time, rewarded them for their moments of sincere introspection and remorse.

There are occasions that require chastising and reprimanding, sometimes with a “right hand” – firmly and forcefully. But even when such a situation arises, we must not overlook the positive, respectable aspects of the person which warrant respect and appreciation. Too often, the need for harsh condemnation of wrongful conduct leads us to see only the wrongful conduct, without acknowledging the person’s goodness or admirable qualities and achievements. Just as God’s proverbial “right hand” rewarded the Egyptians for the good even while punishing them for the bad, we, too, must ensure to recognize all that is good in people even when harsh criticism is warranted.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Beshalach (15:20) that following the singing of *Shirat Ha-yam* – the euphoric song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after miraculously crossing the sea – Miriam, Moshe’s sister, took a drum and began playing music and dancing together with the women. The Torah here describes Miriam as “Miriam the prophetess, Aharon’s sister,” prompting the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:22) to raise the question, “Aharon’s sister, and not Moshe’s sister?!” – wondering why Miriam is referred to as the sister of Aharon, and not also the sister of Moshe.

The Midrash explains that the Torah here alludes to the time before Moshe was born, when Aharon was Miriam’s only brother. Miriam prophesied at that time that her mother would bear a child who would grow to redeem *Benei Yisrael* from bondage. She is called here “Miriam the prophetess, Aharon’s sister” because the Torah draws our attention to the prophecy she had pronounced many years earlier, when Aharon was her only brother.

Why would the Midrash find within this verse, which speaks of Miriam’s celebrating the miracle of the splitting of the sea, an allusion to her prophecy eighty years earlier of the birth of the nation’s deliverer?

The answer, perhaps, is that the Midrash seeks to emphasize that Miriam rejoiced and “played the drums” not only in moments of jubilant triumph, but also in times of hardship and distress. She played the role of “drummer,” of encouraging her people and disseminating joy, not only after the miracle of the sea, but also back in Egypt, when despair and hopelessness had set in. Even then, she worked to lift people’s spirits and bring them happiness. It is not difficult to celebrate during times of triumph and success, to “play the drums” and exude joy when the “sea splits,” when we experience salvation and enjoy prosperity. Miriam’s greatness lay in her ability and determination to “play the drums” and spread hope and happiness in dark times, when people felt despondent and had despaired. And thus as the Torah describes Miriam’s ecstatic celebration at the shores of the Sea of Reeds, the Sages of the Midrash remind us that Miriam played this role also many years earlier, as her nation endured harsh persecution, remaining upbeat and hopeful of the happier future that awaited them.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Beshalach tells of the terror that gripped *Benei Yisrael* on the shores of the Sea of Reeds as they saw Pharaoh’s chariots pursuing them. They responded by crying out to God – “*Va-yitz’aku Benei Yisrael el Hashem*” (14:10).

Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, comments, “*Tafesu umanut avotam*” – “They grabbed onto their forefather’s craft.” Meaning, they followed the patriarchs’ example of turning to God in prayer. Rashi proceeds to show that the three patriarchs all prayed, citing verses which *Chazal* understood as referring to the patriarchs’ prayers. Avraham is described as having “stood” before God (Bereishit 19:27), referring to his impassioned plea on behalf of the city of Sedom. Yitzchak went to the fields in the afternoon to “converse” (“*la-suach*” – Bereishit 24:63), and Yaakov “encountered” a place at dusk (“*va-yifga*” – Bereishit 28:11), and both these expressions are interpreted to mean prayer.

Many later writers raised the question of what the *Mekhilta* here seeks to convey by drawing our attention to the fact that *Benei Yisrael* prayed when they were trapped on the seashore just as the patriarchs had prayed. A second question that has been asked is why the *Mekhilta* would even compare *Benei Yisrael*’s prayer at this time of crisis to the prayers mentioned in the aforementioned verses. These three verses are famously cited by the Gemara (Berakhot 26b) as indicating that the patriarchs instituted the three daily prayers – Avraham introduced the morning *shacharit* prayer; Yitzchak established the afternoon *mincha* service; and Yaakov instituted the recitation of *arvit* in the evening. It turns out, then, that the *Mekhilta* here connects two very different forms of prayer: the desperate plea for help in times of distress – of which *Benei Yisrael*’s cries at the seashore are a quintessential example – and the fixed daily prayers. The *Mekhilta* not only connects these two types of prayer, but goes even further, suggesting that *Benei Yisrael*’s cries at the seashore somehow stem from their patriarchs’ institution of the three daily prayers. How can this be explained? In what way can *Benei Yisrael*’s pleas for help be traced to the institution of *shacharit*, *mincha* and *arvit* which dates back to the patriarchs?

It has been suggested that the *Mekhilta*’s comments precisely seek to teach one of the important purposes of daily prayer – to plant within our consciousness the intuition to turn to God in times of need. Speaking to God three times each day has the effect of engendering, or reinforcing, what we might call the “prayer reflex,” the instinct to petition God when we face any sort of challenge or hardship. It is because of the institution of daily prayer instituted by the patriarchs that *Benei Yisrael* naturally “grabbed onto” prayer as their intuitive response to the crisis they faced when they saw Pharaoh’s army approaching. This institution is what implants within us the natural instinct to turn to God for help and to trust in His unlimited kindness and compassion in times when we might otherwise fall into despair and hopelessness. Through our daily prayer regimen, we acquire the “craft” of prayer which we can then “grab onto” with hope and faith during periods of crisis.

Friday

Parashat Beshalach begins by stating that God deliberately led *Benei Yisrael* along a circuitous route toward the Land of Israel after the Exodus from Egypt. He figured that if they journeyed along a straight, direct path, such that a potential trek back to Egypt would be relatively simple and straightforward, then they might likely try returning at the first sign of trouble. God therefore led *Benei Yisrael* along a roundabout route which made the prospect of returning to Egypt less appealing.

Rashi, commenting on the opening verse of this *parasha*, writes, “If even when He brought them along a roundabout, indirect route, they said, ‘Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt,’ then if they had traveled a direct [path] – all the more so.” The reference here is to the story of the spies, when *Benei Yisrael*’s panicked upon hearing the spies’ report about the frightening armies and fortresses of the Canaanite nations, and they announced, “*Nitena rosh ve-nashuva Mitzrayema*” – “Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt” (Bamidbar 14:4). In his comments here in Parashat Beshalach, Rashi implicitly raises the question of how this could have happened, that *Benei Yisrael* planned to return to Egypt. After all, God had strategized to avoid such an initiative by leading the nation along a circuitous route which made the idea of returning to Egypt impractical. Is it possible that God’s plan failed? Rashi’s answer is that *Benei Yisrael*’s decision to try returning to Egypt in reaction to the spies’ report precisely shows how important it was to make such an endeavor unappealing. If they entertained such an idea even after journeying along a roundabout route, then this would have happened more easily had they traveled in a direct path.

Explaining Rashi’s comments further, *Siftei Chakahmim* notes that Rashi specifically cited *Benei Yisrael*’s pronouncement, “**Let us appoint a leader** and return to Egypt” – indicating that they needed leadership to return to Egypt. *Siftei Chakhamim* understands Rashi to mean that if the nation had traveled along a direct route, then they could have returned to Egypt even without having to appoint a leader, and thus this would have been more likely to happen. By bringing *Benei Yisrael* in a roundabout route, God saw to it that they would be unable to return to Egypt without new, competent leadership, and this thus reduced the chances of their entertaining such a possibility.

*Benei Yisrael*’s journey from Egypt toward the Land of Israel has been viewed by many as symbolic of our personal journeys away from spiritual “exile,” our lifelong process of growth and pursuit of sanctity. As Rashi noted in regard to our ancestors’ journey, there is never any guarantee that we will not seek to return to “Egypt,” that we will not regress and repeat our past mistakes. Just as *Benei Yisrael* sought to return to Egypt when they realized the struggles that awaited them in Canaan, we, too, might despair in times of struggle, and decide that we are better off in “Egypt,” and should not bother persisting in our challenging quest for spiritual achievement. What we can do is reduce the chances of such a “return” by establishing proper routines and habits, to put ourselves in conditions and in a mindset that are likely to keep us on course. We should try, at very least, to make the prospect of spiritual decline counterintuitive, a process that would require a new “*rosh*,” a fundamental transformation of our mindset, of our outlook and our ambitions. This will increase our chances of staying on the path that leads us to the life of sanctity and religious devotion that we are to live.

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