YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Beshalach**

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**To the Sea of Suf**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

Translated by David Strauss

### I. Why not by way of the land of the Pelishtim?

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not by the way of the land of the Pelishtim, although that was near; for God said: Lest the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt. But God led the people about, by the way of the wilderness by the Sea of Suf. (*Shemot* 13:17-18)

At this point, the Torah ignores the fact that the people of Israel must go to Mount Sinai, the place about which God had said to Moshe: "You shall serve God upon this mountain" (*Shemot* 3:12). Israel's heading east from Rameses (toward the Gulf of Suez) rather than northeast – to the land of the Pelishtim on the Mediterranean coast – is explained differently: fear of war. In contrast, the Egyptians understand Israel's heading into the wilderness as heading to the place of "the God of the Hebrews"; they do not associate it with the Israelites' heading toward the Land of Israel.

The reason given by the Torah for going by way of the wilderness is fear of war in the land of the Pelishtim. What is this fear? After all, the people of Israel will eventually reach the land of Canaan and fight their enemies for many years! The war to be fought with the inhabitants of the mountainous region of *Eretz Yisrael* will not be easy, and the solution in any case will require the direct assistance of God, as the Torah itself attests:

Hear, O Israel: You are to pass over the Jordan this day, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourself, cities great and fortified up to heaven, a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know and of whom you have heard say: Who can stand before the sons of Anak? Know therefore this day, that the Lord your God is He who goes over before you as a devouring fire; He will destroy them and He will bring them down before you; so shall you drive them out and make them to perish quickly, as the Lord has spoken to you. (*Devarim* 9:1-3)

Targum Yonatan relates to this issue:

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not by the way of the land of the Pelishtim, although that was near; for God said: Lest the people tremble when they see their brothers who died in battle – two hundred thousand people, men of valor, of the tribe of Efrayim, who took hold of shields, and spears, and other weapons, and went down to Gat to plunder the flocks of the Pelishtim. But since they transgressed God's decree and left Egypt thirty years before the end, they were delivered into the hands of the Pelishtim, who killed them.

The *aggada* brought by Targum Yonatan is based on what is stated in the book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*. We will deal with that passage at length in our study of a different *parasha* in the book of *Bemidbar*:

And the sons of Efrayim… whom the men of Gat that were born in the land slew, because they came down to take away their cattle. And Efrayim their father mourned many days, and his brethren came to comfort him. (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 7:20-22)

According to the plain sense of that text, however, this event took place much earlier, still in the lifetime of Efrayim the son of Yosef, after which Efrayim still fathered children.

From outside sources, we know that during the period under discussion, sea peoples arrived from Europe to the shores of *Eretz* *Yisrael*. The new Pelishtim that arrived from Europe overcame the ancient Pelishtim (mentioned in the days of Avraham and Yitzchak), pushed them inland, and settled in their place in the coastal cities. It is possible that one of the causes of this invasion was a volcanic eruption on the island of Crete (the Biblical Tarshish) in the Mediterranean Sea – an eruption that devastated the entire island, and from which were saved only those who succeeded to escape by way of ships. These people sought a new homeland, and many reached the shores of the land of Canaan. It is possible to argue that the great ash cloud that rose from the eruption traveled to Egypt, and this was the plague of darkness that struck when Moshe stretched his hand toward the sky – a plague of darkness that could be felt by the hands, as asserted by *Chazal*. Perhaps God created the plague of darkness by way of this dark cloud.

An allusion to the possibility that these two events – the exodus from Egypt and the invasion of the sea peoples – took place at the same time can be found in the prophecy of Amos:

For the Lord, the God of hosts, is He that touches the land and it melts, and all that dwell therein mourn; and it rises up wholly like the River, and sinks again, **like the River of Egypt**. It is He that builds His upper chambers in the heaven and has founded His vault upon the earth; He that **calls for the waters of the sea,** and pours them out upon the face of the earth; the Lord is His name. Are you not as the children of the Ethiopians to Me, O children of Israel? says the Lord. **Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Pelishtim from Caftor**, and Aram from Kir?(*Amos* 9:5-7)

The prophecy in Amos teaches us two things: 1) The descriptions of the natural disasters that he describes seem to be taken from the plagues in Egypt and the splitting of the sea. 2) The plain sense of his words suggests that when God took Israel out of Egypt, he also took the Pelishtim out of Caftor (Tarshish-Crete) and brought them to *Eretz Yisrael* with them.

If what we have said is correct, then at the time when Israel left Egypt, cruel wars were taking place along the coast of *Eretz Yisrael* between the ancient Pelishtim and the new Pelishtim. God did not want Israel to enter into this maelstrom, and so He decided to lead them from a different direction.

It can also be argued based on what follows from the book of *Shofetim* (chap. 1) that the people of Israel lacked the wherewithal to deal with the iron chariots of the coastal lowlanders, and so at the first stage they conquered the central mountains. Although the hand of God could have saved them from the Canaanite chariots, supernatural miracles must be limited in the development of God's people, and the miracle seems to have been sufficiently great in the conquest of the mountain region. The purpose of God's people is to integrate themselves in the natural world of man, and from there to ascend to higher levels, rather than to skip over the stage of natural development. This is also a reason that God did not lead them through the land of the Pelishtim.

My revered teacher R. Yoel Bin-Nun proposed a different explanation of our *parasha.*[[1]](#footnote-1)According to him, the concern that perhaps the Israelites would return to Egypt was not because of their despair of conquering the land, but just the opposite – because of their desire to receive assistance from the Egyptian superpower in conquering the land. During the period in question, Egypt was the superpower that spread its wings over the Canaanite nations, as follows from the Al-Amarna letters.[[2]](#footnote-2) At that time, Egypt controlled the way of the land of the Pelishtim, which ran along the coast in northern Sinai, and Egyptian garrisons manned them as far as the land of Canaan. Leaving Egypt with the Egyptian gifts, gold, and silver utensils, could have been interpreted as an Egyptian blessing of Israel's independence, which was beginning to take shape. This is also the way that they were sent from Babylonia under the auspices of Koresh, king of Persia – with gold and silver, and under the protection of Persian forces, as is described in *Ezra* (chap. 1). Those who returned to Zion were subject to the Persian ruler until the dissolution of the Persian kingdom, and during that time never achieved political independence.

The people of Israel's going by way of the Sea of Suf led to a confrontation with the Egyptian army at the Sea of Suf, at the end of which the Egyptian army drowned in the waters of the sea, whereas "the children of Israel walked on dry land in the middle of the sea" (*Shemot* 15:19). There the Israelites learned of God's power against the Egyptian chariots of iron, and they understood that even in *Eretz Yisrael* He would be able to fight against the iron chariots, as He would later fight against Sisera, commander of the army of Yavin, king of Chatzor (*Shofetim*, chap. 4).

The most important point: Through God's victory over the Egyptian chariots, the people of Israel learned from whom they would someday have to seek help when an enemy from the north threatened them. Four kings stumbled on this matter and in their distress turned for help to Egypt, rather than turning to God: Hoshea ben Ela king of Israel, and Chizkiyahu, Yoshiyahu, and Tzidkiyahu kings of Yehuda.[[3]](#footnote-3) In all of these cases, Egypt betrayed them and failed to deliver Israel from the hands of their enemies – Ashur and Babylonia. This is what Yeshayahu writes about these events:

Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many, and in horsemen, because they are exceeding mighty; but they look not to the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord… Now the Egyptians are men, and not God, and their horses flesh, and not spirit; so when the Lord shall stretch out His hand, both he that helps shall stumble, and he that is helped shall fall, and they all shall perish together. (*Yeshayahu* 31:1-3)

These kings turned to Egypt in the wake of Shelomo, king of all of Israel, who turned to Egypt for help to acquire from it an army of chariots, and for this was probably forced to make an alliance with the king of Egypt and marry Pharaoh's daughter. However, the Torah commanded about the king of Israel: "Only he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord has said to you: You shall henceforth return no more that way" (*Devarim* 17:16).

### II. The meaning of the decision to go by way of the wilderness

The plain meaning of the decision to go by way of the wilderness is that the way leading to the land of the Pelishtim was well-known and anyone taking it could not go astray, while the way of the wilderness was an unknown. When the people of Israel went back to Pi Ha-Chirot, they gave Pharaoh the opportunity to err and to think that they did not know their way, as will be explained below.

This choice, however, had another result – namely, the mistrust that the people of Israel expressed to Moshe time and time again during their arduous journey through the desert sands. When Moshe talked to them about going to the land of Canaan, they thought that they were embarking for a few days on a short trip in Mediterranean weather along the coast until they reached a place of settlement in the land of Canaan. Those who left Egypt did not anticipate the long and arduous trek through the heart of the Sinai wilderness, a trek that included difficult ascents and steep descents in the "Great Mountain" region on the way to Mount Seir, the desert, and the Negev. Therefore, when they turned to a long and winding road, they thought that Moshe had made a mistake or that he was leading them to his family in the land of Midyan. They expressed their lack of trust in their numerous complaints and requests to return to Egypt.

On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that the long and difficult trek that forced them to be satisfied with the little that they had greatly helped to transform a band of slaves who did not know each other into a united people – a people, that in the end was able to fight for their new homeland for fourteen consecutive years.

### III. Where did the israelites go?

The Torah does not tell us the precise route taken by the Israelites. One of the geographers' favorite hypotheses is that the Israelites travelled across northern Sinai, entered northward into the Mediterranean Sea (as will be explained below) in the Sabchat Bradvil area, and then turned in an arc eastward and then southward once again to the coast of northern Sinai. The advantage of this hypothesis, from their perspective, is that in the Mediterranean in that area there is an underwater ridge upon which the Israelites could have walked. At an extremely low tide, this ridge could have turned into dry land in the sea, and at high tide the ridge could have become immersed in the depth of the waters. Thus, in their opinion, we can explain the Israelites' walking on dry land in the middle of the sea and the Egyptians' drowning in the water a few hours later. These geographers identify Ba'al Tzefon, where the Israelites camped before entering the water, on the Mediterranean coast in various different places.[[4]](#footnote-4)

But the Torah explicitly states that the people of Israel did not travel along the Sinai coast, which is the way to the land of the Pelishtim. Moreover, throughout Scripture, the Sea of Suf is not the great sea (what we call the Mediterranean), but rather the southern sea. It seems, then, that the people of Israel crossed the Gulf of Suez in its northern part. Assuming that the land of Goshen from which they left is the Faiyum basin (as we suggested in *Parashat Vayigash* in the section dealing with the descent to Egypt), they walked east until they reached the gulf, as will be explained below.

It may be possible to support this suggestion with the words of the prophet Yeshayahu:

And the Lord will utterly destroy **the tongue of the Egyptian sea;** and with His scorching wind will He shake His hand over the River, and will smite it into seven streams, and cause men to march over dry-shod. **And there shall be a highway for the remnant of His people** that shall remain from Ashur, like as there was for Israel **in the day that he came up out of the land of Egypt.** (*Yeshayahu* 11:15-16)

And in that day you shall say… **for God the Lord is my strength and song; and He is become my salvation.**

Yeshayahu speaks about an additional route going from Egypt to *Eretz* *Yisrael* in the wake of the miracle performed for Chizkiyahu that was like the miracle of Pesach, and he describes another splitting of the sea and another song of the sea, which even includes a verse from the song of the sea sung by Moshe and the people of Israel:

Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; **for God the Lord is my strength and song; and He is become my salvation.** (*Yeshayahu* 12:2)

 According to him, the splitting of the sea took place at "the tongue of the Egyptian sea." This "tongue" can only be the Gulf of Suez.

Another thing that we know is the location of "Eitam," which is mentioned before the splitting of the sea:

And they took their journey from Sukkot **and encamped in Eitam, in the edge of the wilderness.** (*Shemot* 13:20)

And again in the list of journeys:

And they journeyed from Sukkot, and pitched **in Eitam, which is in the edge of the wilderness.** And they journeyed from Eitam, and turned back to Pi Ha-Chirot, which is before Ba'al Tzefon; and they pitched before Migdol. And they journeyed from Penei Ha-Chirot, **and passed through the midst of the sea into the wilderness;** and they went three days' journey **in the wilderness of Eitam,** and pitched in Mara. (*Bemidbar* 33:6-8)

It appears that, on the one hand, Eitam is located on the Egyptian side of the sea – that is, on the western side. But on the other hand, Eitam is located at the edge of the wilderness, the wilderness of Sinai, and the Israelites cross the wilderness of Eitam after having crossed the Sea of Suf.

From all this it would appear that Eitam is located near the city of Suez today, in a place where there is no clear distinction between the Egyptian side and the Sinai wilderness.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, they could encamp in Eitam and continue straight into the wilderness of Eitam. God instructed Moshe not to go east to the Sinai wilderness, but rather to travel south on the western coast of the Gulf of Suez to the sea, which would block their passage to the wilderness. Indeed, there – along the shores of the Gulf of Suez, a few kilometers south of the northern part of the gulf – other scholars have identified Ba'al Tzefon. Going south from Eitam to Ba'al Tzefon along the west coast of the Gulf of Suez is what caused Pharaoh and his advisors to mistakenly think that the people of Israel were lost. They surmised (to a great extent correctly, as will be explained below) that the people of Israel, who had lost their way, would lose their trust in God and in Moshe His servant who was leading them, and with a little more pressure, they would agree to return to Egypt. The Egyptians gathered their army in order to return Israel to Egypt with a mighty hand, and especially with the power of fear and with the power of the Israelites' mistrust of their leaders.

Once again, this was God's way to harden Pharaoh's heart. God did not interfere with Pharaoh's free choice, just as He did not do so with the plagues in Egypt. But He gave Pharaoh the opportunity to mistakenly think that he was capable of defeating God, who was leading the people of Israel, and therefore he could cancel his obligation to Moshe. All of this found expression in God's words to Moshe:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, that they turn back and encamp before Pi Ha-Chirot, between Migdol and the sea, before Ba'al Tzefon, over against it shall you encamp by the sea. And Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel: They are entangled in the land, the wilderness has shut them in. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he shall follow after them; and I will get Me honor upon Pharaoh and upon all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. And they did so. (*Shemot* 14:1-4)

It was not only the "mistake" of the Israelites in their journey that hardened Pharaoh's heart. The Torah speaks of another factor:

**And it was told the king of Egypt that the people were fled;** and the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned towards the people, and they said: What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us? (*Shemot* 14:5)

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart was thus the result of a breach of the agreement with him. The people of Israel went out to worship God in the wilderness, and the simple understanding was that they would return to Egypt when that worship was completed. (We wrote extensively about this in our study of *Parashat Shemot.*)

But from where did Pharaoh know that the people of Israel had run away? After all, they had not yet arrived at the site of their worship and they did not reach a "three-day journey," which is measured according to the speed of a quick walker, who proceeds alone, unencumbered by the members of his family, women, children, and the elderly.

Perhaps the fact that the Israelites did not continue east toward the Sinai wilderness, but rather turned south on the Egyptian side, was interpreted by some of Pharaoh's advisers as a violation of their promise and as an attempt to run away to the south. This interpretation differs from what follows from the words of Pharaoh – "they are entangled in the land" – which implies that the people of Israel were trying to go out to the wilderness in order to worship their God, as Moshe and Aharon had said to Pharaoh, but they had lost their way and came to a dead end. It is possible that some of Pharaoh advisors interpreted Israel's heading south as a mistake, while others saw it as a deception that would allow them to run away to the south. In any event, both groups hardened Pharaoh's heart to pursue them – these because of the mistake of the people of Israel and their loss of faith in their leaders, and these because of their escape and their breach of their promise to Egypt to go out for only a few days in order to worship their God in the wilderness.

But there may also have been a third reason for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, a reason that is not spelled out in the Biblical text. While the Israelites were in Egypt, the Egyptian people became accustomed to a slave culture. They forgot what work and physical effort are. The people of Israel did everything for them, and especially the difficult and dirty tasks. The morning after Israel's departure, the Egyptian people woke up to a world they did not recognize, to a world that required them to exert themselves, to work, and to get themselves dirty. In order to return once again to the world of illusions to which they were accustomed, they pursued the people of Israel in order to return them to their work.

Years later, the people of Jerusalem who owned slaves and found it difficult to live without them underwent a similar experience:

The word that came to Yirmeyahu from the Lord, after that the king Tzidkiyahu had made a covenant with all the people that were at Jerusalem, to proclaim liberty to them; that every man should let his manservant, and every man his maidservant, being a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, go free; that none should make bondmen of them, even of a Jew his brother; and all the princes and all the people hearkened, that had entered into the covenant to let everyone his man-servant, and everyone his maid-servant, go free, and not to make bondmen of them anymore; they hearkened, and let them go; but afterwards they turned, and caused the servants and the handmaids, whom they had let go free, to return, and brought them into subjection for servants and for handmaids. (*Yirmeyahu* 34:8-11)

Perhaps, we too, as a society, can learn a lesson from what happened here.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Y. Bin-Nun, "'*Derekh Eretz Pelishtim*' *mul 'Derekh Ha-Midbar Yam Suf*,'" *Megadim* 3 (Alon Shevut, 1987), pp. 21-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Al-Amarna was a poor village situated on the ruins of the city of Akhetaten on the road from Memphis to No-Amon (today, Luxor), a road that runs near the Nile to its east. In 1887, clay tablets were first uncovered there by chance. These tablets formed the "dead" library (that is to say, documents lacking practical importance) of the Pharaoh Amenthotep IV from the 14th century BC. In 1891, a "records office" was found containing many documents, and beginning in 1911 archeological excavations were conducted there by various delegations. The documents that were discovered and translated are known today as the Al-Amarna letters, and they include many letters that were sent to the king of Egypt from various different kings and other important people in the land of Canaan.

   There is a series of letters that was sent from Abdi-Heba, ruler of Jerusalem, to Amenthotep IV king of Egypt, which contains complaints about many people who betrayed him and are cooperating with the Habiru tribes who were invading the land of Canaan. Scholars disagree about whether the Habiru tribes should be identified with the Hebrews, the people of Israel, under the leadership of Yehoshua. There is a strong foundation to assume that these tribes should be identified with the people of Israel. In a letter catalogued as Al-Amarna 287, the king of Jerusalem complains about "the deed of the sons of Labayu [= king of Shechem], who have given the land of the king (to) the Habiru." And in Al-Amarna 289 he asks: "Are we to act like Labaya when he was giving the land of Sakmu to the Habiru?" In Al-Amarna 290 he accuses Bet Choron of defection. See *Le-Melekh Adoni* – *Mikhtavei Al-Amarna*, ed. Sh. Achitov (Jerusalem and Ben Gurion University, 2005). The letters cited here are found on pp. 213-218. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See II *Melakhim* 17:4 about Hoshea; II *Melakhim* 18:21 about Chizkiyahu; *Yirmeyahu* 2:16-18 about Yoshiyahu; *Yirmeyahu* 37:7 about Tzidkiyahu. See also, regarding Shelomo, I *Melakhim* 10:26-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Albright identified Ba'al Tzefon near Tachpanches on the Mediterranean coast. Eissfeldt identified it further to the west with Al Machmadia, near Romani in the northwestern part of Sinai. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Before the digging of the Suez Canal, there was a land connection between Egypt and the Sinai wilderness. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)