**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT BESHALACH**

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In loving memory of Yitzchak ben Chaim Zvi Schwartz z"l,   
who passed away on 13 Shvat 5771

and Sheva Shayndel bat David Schwartz z"l,   
who passed away 13 Shvat 5778

Dedicated by Avi and Sarah Schwartz

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**The Splitting of the Sea**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

### I. "Speak to the Children of Israel, that they go forward"

The following verses describe the well-defined division of labor between the various characters who played an active role on the shores of the Yam Suf:

And the Lord said to Moshe: “Why do you cry to Me?

Speak to the children of Israel, that they go forward.

And lift you up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it;

and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground.

And I, behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall go in after them; and I will get Me honor upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen.

And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten Me honor upon Pharaoh, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen.” (*Shemot* 14:15-18)

We will deal with the role of two of the active players: that of the people of Israel and that of God.

The order of the division of roles indicates that the people of Israel were expected to begin moving forward even before the sea was split. According to the simple understanding, they were supposed to enter the water together with their wives, their children, their animals and all their possessions, and only afterwards would Moshe split the sea. What lies behind this sequence of events, which runs counter to all logic?

It seems that the nature of the miracle of the splitting of the sea required that the people of Israel do whatever they could do on their own to escape the Egyptians. Only after they have exhausted all possibilities would God activate His mighty hand and change the natural order, thereby saving His people from the sea and from those who were pursuing them.

From here we can learn that it is inappropriate to cry out to God and ask for His immediate intervention before one has done all that is in his power to solve his problem on his own. According to the *Midrash Tanchuma*,this is how Avraham conducted himself; when the *satan* created a river in his path while he was en route to the *akeida*, he did not turn to God to come to his assistance until the water reached his neck.

Furthermore, this strange act of Israel's entering the water with all their children and possessions showed the amazed Egyptians that they were prepared to do anything so as not to return to the bondage of Egypt. It also expressed their unqualified faith in God's command and absolute confidence in His salvation.

*Chazal* attributed this great act first and foremost to one man – Nachshon ben Aminadav, who later became the prince of the tribe of Yehuda:

R. Yehuda said to him [R. Meir]: That is not what happened; but each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the sea. Then sprang forward Nachshon the son of Aminadav and descended first into the sea. (*Sota* 37a)

This exposition of *Chazal* may be seen as paralleling an incident that is described in a style very similar to that used to describe the splitting of the Yam Suf – God's deliverance of Israel through the hands of Devora and Barak at Mount Tavor, in the Yizrael valley and at the Kishon stream. Let us examine what is stated there:

And Devora said to Barak: “Up, for this is the day in which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand; is not the Lord gone out before you?” So Barak went down from Mount Tavor, and ten thousand men after him.

And the Lord discomfited Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his host, with the edge of the sword before Barak. (*Shoftim* 4:14-15)

The steep and forested Mount Tavor served as a refuge for Barak against the chariots of Sisera, which could not maneuver there. Devora commanded Barak to leave his refuge and lead his soldiers into the abyss of the Yizrael valley, which was inundated with Sisera's chariots. The miracle – apparently a massive cloudburst that flooded the Kishon along with Sisera's chariots – took place only after Barak and his men did the impossible: They looked death straight in the eye, putting their trust in the salvation of God that had been promised through His prophet, and death was the first to blink.

### II. "And the angel of God removed"

Even before the splitting of the sea and Israel's entering into it, two of God's angels – the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud – protected the people of Israel and separated them from the Egyptian camp:

And the angel of God who went before the camp of Israel removed and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud removed from before them, and stood behind them, **and it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; and there was the cloud and the darkness here, yet gave it light by night there; and the one came not near the other all the night.** And Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. (*Shemot* 14:19-21)

The night had already fallen, and the angel of God who went before the camp of Israel at night was the pillar of fire. The pillar of fire stood behind the camp of Israel and gave them light into the sea that was before them. The pillar of cloud stood behind it and spread darkness over the camp of Egypt. The phenomenon of the retreat of the sea seemed blurry, strange but possible, and the Egyptians continued their way heavily through the darkness, but they could not overtake the people of Israel, who were advancing in the light. The goal of the angels who darkened the path for the Egyptians was to widen the gap between the two camps, so that when the last of the Israelites would once again be on land, the entire Egyptian force would still be in the depths of the dry seabed.

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Another comment on the last three verses (19-21) cited above: Each of the three verses has seventy-two letters. The *Geonim* had a tradition that these verses include the glorious and revered name of God, known as the seventy-two letter name.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rashi understands that we have here seventy-two names consisting of three letters each.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I can certainly not decipher even a shred of a hint regarding this glorious and revered name. But it is possible that this name expresses God's revelation through His mighty hand – when His children find themselves in a troubling situation that has no natural solution, and the only way out is God's mighty hand that operates with supernatural power, as is attested by the contents of the three verses.

### III. "By a strong east wind"

Let us return to the role played by God, among the various actors at the scene. How did God harden the heart of Pharaoh to enter the sea with his horses and chariots, while surrounded by huge waves? "And with the blast of Your nostrils the waters were piled up; the floods stood upright as a heap" (*Shemot* 15:8).

We can explain this as did the Chizkuni – that the heavy darkness that prevailed because of the unusual pillar of cloud did not allow the Egyptians to see that they were entering the sea. They did not know about the splitting of the sea, and because of the darkness they thought that they were still on the shore. Only toward morning did they realize that they were already deep in the sea, but by then it was already too late, and the waves of water of the sea that was returning to its place crashed upon them.

We wish to offer a different explanation that understands the term "hardening the heart" in its plain sense – namely, that the Egyptians entered into the sea not because they did not know where the sea was, but out of excessive and inappropriate courage and stubbornness.

The Yam Suf did not split suddenly. It was a gradual process that lasted many hours:

And Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. (*Shemot* 14:21)

A strong wind blew throughout the night, slowly and gradually raising the waves of the sea and revealing the seabed. This continued for many hours, and the eye became accustomed to it. It could have been viewed as an uncommon but glorious phenomenon of nature, and not necessarily as the mighty hand and outstretched arm of the God of Israel. The Egyptians thought that they could quickly cross the short distance that the people of Israel, laden with their children and animals, had taken so long to cross. Thus, their hearts hardened – and when they realized their mistake and understood the meaning of God's mighty hand, it was already too late.

Let us expand on the possible connection between the great miracle of the splitting of the sea and nature as we know it.

In order to visualize in some small way the splitting of the Yam Suf, try the following experiment: Take a small, flat plate and fill it with water 1-2 centimeters high. Then fill your lungs with air and blow with all your strength on the water from one side of the plate to the other. A "land path" will be formed in the water, which might be similar to the path by way of which Israel crossed the Yam Suf. It was the strong wind that created the path in the water:

And the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. (*Shemot* 14:21)

And with the blast of Your nostrils the waters were piled up; the floods stood upright as a heap; the deeps were congealed in the heart of the sea… You did blow with Your wind, the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters. (Ibid. 15:8, 10)

It is certainly not my intention to imply that any one of us could have split the Yam Suf by blowing out the air in his lungs. As humans, we can do this with a small plate, with water of almost no height, creating a "path" of limited length for a few seconds. God, with His great power, did this with "the blast of His nostrils," in the middle of a sea tens or hundreds of meters deep (apparently in the Gulf of Suez), creating a wide path over which an entire nation crossed over the course of many hours. Here the power of God is manifest as king and as "a man of war" (*Shemot* 15:3), who acts in terms understandable to man ("a strong east wind"), but with power that mortals, as strong as they may be, can never attain.

### IV. "A maidservant saw at the sea…"

*Chazal,* describing the great miracle of the splitting of the Yam Suf, say as follows:

A maidservant saw at the sea what Yeshayahu and Yechezkel did not see. (*Mekhilta*, *Massekhta De-Shira* 3)

The reader might wonder: But surely the maidservant at the sea saw the chariots of Pharaoh, whereas Yechezkel saw the chariot of the *Shekhina*!

I learned from my revered teacher, R. Yoel Bin-Nun, that the maidservant saw the resting of the *Shekhina* on the sea. Yechezkel, on the other hand, saw the *Shekhina's* departure from the Temple and from Jerusalem. Hence, that which the maidservant saw was greater than what Yechezkel saw.

I wish to propose two additional answers to this question. The first relates to the revelation of Israel's heroism and faith as they crossed through the sea. The second focuses on the manner in which God revealed Himself to Yechezkel.

Today, especially after the Gulf War and the second Lebanon War, we are well aware that while the test of the army's resilience is important, the test of the home-front's resilience is no less important. In both wars, the vast majority of the public withstood the test. This is the way to look at the people of Israel at the battle at the Yam Suf at the time of the exodus from Egypt. God conducted the war through His heavenly army. But the resilience of the home-front, of the people of Israel, was of paramount importance for the success of God's war against Pharaoh and the Egyptian army of chariots.

The people of Israel entered the sea with their wives of children, in the midst of a strong east wind that lifted the water way over their heads, roaring waves that were held up by the strong wind alone and to the human eye seemed liable at any moment to fall back down with force to their natural place on the floor of the sea. Try to imagine a Jewish mother holding an infant with one hand and pulling along her two-year old toddler with the other, the deafening noise of the wind making his crying inaudible. She heads down to the bed of the sea in the darkness of night in the midst of the water that is lifted up high, only because this is what Moshe had told her to do in the name of God. She marches on with her husband and her older children, like a well-disciplined army following the orders of Moshe, and she does not turn back. The sheep and the donkeys that are carrying the family's possessions advance with them. Only after we internalize this awesome sight can we understand the aforementioned statement of *Chazal*:

A maidservant saw at the Yam Suf what Yeshaya and Yechezkel did not see!

This is the courage and faith of a trustworthy home-front, which complements the might of "God, the man of war," at the sea. Without it, there would have been no room for God's complete victory over the Egyptian army.

*Chazal* speak of a "maidservant," but they are talking about a proper daughter of Israel, who just now left slavery. It would appear that these words of *Chazal* were also influenced by the prophet Yoel's account of the “great and terrible day of God,| which is similar to the day of God that took place at the time of the exodus:

And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. **And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out My spirit.** And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. (*Yoel* 3:1-4)

From the continuation of Yoel's prophecy, it follows that the servants and handmaids about whom he speaks are the people of Jerusalem who had been sold into slavery by their captors. God will eventually redeem them and pour His spirit upon them. The maidservants will be filled with "the spirit of God," like their ancient foremothers – the Jewish maidservants who had left Egypt.

The exodus from Egypt had taken place six days earlier, as the splitting of the Yam Suf occurred on the seventh day of Pesach. Why, then, were the Jewish women still called "maidservants"? It seems that the liberation from slavery did not end until the moment that the nation of slaves, the people of God, were ready to cast their lives aside in their faith in God and their war of liberation. As long as the people had not yet tasted self-sacrifice in their fight for freedom, they did not yet remove themselves from the category of "slaves" and "maidservants."

Another explanation, on the wings of imagination, may be offered for the comparison drawn by *Chazal* between the maidservant at the Yam Suf and the prophet Yechezkel. The climax of Yechezkel's prophecy regarding the chariot is the last verse in this prophecy, and we will probably never fully understand it:

As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spoke. (*Yech.*1:28)

I once visited Niagara Falls at the U.S.-Canadian border. The many waters fell from a great height into the river below, and the pounding of their fall raised up a great cloud of water drops. The sun shone brightly on this great cloud of drops. The rainbow that was created as a result was strong, with the boldest of colors, and more impressive than anything else I saw there. That rainbow reflected to me the image of that Israelite "maidservant" at the Yam Suf, who held the hands of her children and crossed the sea. She saw the rainbow not in a distant land, but on her way to the land of God's desire. The reflection of the *Shekhina* to her through the colors of the rainbow was brighter than that which was reflected to the prophet Yechezkel, who stood in the exile of Tel Aviv on the Kabar River.

### V. "For the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians"

The picture will not be complete until we examine the behavior of Pharaoh's army, his cavalry, and his horses as they pass through the seabed in pursuit of the Israelites:

And it came to pass in the morning watch, that the Lord looked forth upon the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of cloud, and He discomfited the host of the Egyptians. And He took off their chariot wheels and made them to drive heavily. (*Shemot* 14:24-25)

The strong wind strengthened Pharaoh's heart. He was tempted to think that he was facing a natural phenomenon and not the "blast of God's nostrils," and that his army could cross the sea following the people of Israel. At that point, apparently, the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud moved to the front, between the camp of Israel and the camp of Egypt, and in the early morning God looked through them to the Egyptian camp.

It is possible that courageous soldiers who were led by a determined leader like Pharaoh could have withstood the unusual sight of the combination of the pillar of fire with the pillar of cloud. But the Egyptian soldiers also depended on the mood of the horses that pulled their chariots. The horses, which had already been frightened by the dark night, and even more so by the noise of the waves of water that were made to stand erect by the strong wind, lost whatever was left of their tranquility and self-confidence when God looked down upon them from the pillar of fire burning inside the cloud. Who can imagine the nightmarish vision that they saw on the seabed on that early morning? The horses no longer heeded their riders; they turned back to escape the spectacle of the fire and cloud and God looking through them. The roar of the frightened horses running into each other that night between the waves of water intermingled with the noise of the shouts of the riders and their whipping of their horses.

The water began to seep below the sea bed. The wheels of the chariots sank into the wet sand, and the frightened and whipped horses pulled the chariots with all their might in order to escape the terrible scene. The wheels remained stuck in the wet sand, the axles – the weak links in the chariots – broke, and the horses ripped the chariots off their wheels. They ran about like crazy, swinging about the chariots that were harnessed to their bodies without wheels. The Egyptian riders were thus thrown about in the chariots from one side to the other.

Let us let down the curtain of mercy on the rest of this terrible spectacle and listen for a moment to the lone voice rising above the noise of the water:

The Egyptians said: “Let us flee from the face of Israel; for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians.” (*Shemot*14:25)

(Translated by David Strauss

1. See *Otzar ha-Geonim* (ed. Levin, Jerusalem, 1931), *Chagiga* 14b, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi, *Sukka* 45b, s.v. *ani vehu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)