

Parshas Beshalach

THIS CANNOT BE HOW IT ENDS!

As the exodus reaches it's climax, the Jews are cornered. They are on the beach among the reeds, Red Sea lying in front of them, with the cloud of the onrushing Egyptian army in the distance. Trapped, the people despair. Yet before Hashem's talks to Moshe, Moshe knows how to fix the situation:

אל-תיראו-התיצבו וראו את-ישועת ה, אשר-געשה לכם היום – “Do not be afraid! Stand and wait, and you'll see God's salvation...” (14: 13)

How exactly did he know?

After they are saved, they sing the Song of the Sea. Curiously, Miriam leads a separate rendition of gratitude, and the Jewish women follow her. Curiously, because why was the Song of the Sea not enough? And curious, because she is identified in a highly unusual way:

... ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן, את-התוף-בגדה; ותצאן כל-הנשים אחריה, בתפים ובמחלות. ותען להם, מרים the prophetess, sister of Aron, took an instrument in her hand, and led the women with instruments and dancing. And she sang to them... (15: 21)

She needs no introduction; we know exactly who she is. The specific identifications, הנביאה – the prophetess, אחות אהרן – sister of Ahron, are odd. She was also sister to Moshe, and what of her capacity as a prophetess? ותען להם means she was responding – but to what?

Sensitive to this, Rashi remarks that it was the prophecy she experienced when she was only Ahron's sister; the prophecy of Moshe's birth. In the buildup to his birth, foreseen by Paroh, he launched a campaign of infanticide against Jewish boys. The Midrash records how Amram and Yocheved, the Jewish leaders of the time, had separated, so as not to suffer this terrible fate. Miriam had this prophecy, and persuaded them by saying that they were worse than the decree itself, as they were preventing the birth of girls too.

When she fell pregnant, the Egyptian military kept tabs on her – but Moshe was born early. When he was born, the Torah describe his appearance as ותרא אתו כי-טוב הוא – which the Midrash says is the same כי-טוב as from the creation of light at the beginning of Creation – and the entire house lit up.

But in spite of such a sign – ולא-יכלה עוד, הצפינו – she could not hide him any longer. After three more months,

which would have been the full term, the Egyptians were looking for her, to see what she had given birth to. She had to abandon the child, prophesied about by her daughter. She placed the boy into a box, and placed him in the river. The Torah implies she could not bear to watch – and who could? What chances would one give a child in a box in a crocodile infested river, in the Egyptian heat, with the army looking for him no less:

וַתִּתְצַב אֶחָתוֹ, מְרַחֵק, לְדַעָה, מֵהַיַּעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ – Miriam stood and waited from afar, to know what would be of him... (2: 4)

The emphasis is on Miriam – Miriam stayed; when Yocheved would not. The thought process is very simple – she had not had a new prophecy, and she was but a child herself. But there is one pure, overarching thought that guides her:

“This cannot be how it ends..!”

And she is not wrong. The daughter of the Jew’s oppressors shows up, which would ordinarily be the absolute worst thing that could happen, but she displays compassion for the boy, and takes him in. The ultimate victory is clutched from the jaws of defeat itself.

Years later, Moshe knew what to tell the Jews, because it had happened before; it was the same story! One Jew and one Egyptian, among the reeds, by the water, hope fading; all the Jews and all the Egyptians, among the reeds, by the water, hope fading. It is the same. “This cannot be how it ends..!” He tells them that he has been in this exact situation before; so הַתִּיַצְבוּ וּרְאוּ – Just watch!

Now, so many years after her prophecy, Moshe has saved their people, and it is her celebration, more than theirs, because this is the conclusion of her prophecy.

It emerges why וַתַּעַן לָהֶם, מְרִיָם – it was her response, because it was her they were learning from.

They had to learn her faith – “This cannot be how it ends..!”.

Just watch.

FAITH AND SALVATION

As the newly liberated Jews flee Egypt, their former captors gave chase:

וַיִּפְרֹעַ הַקָּרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת עֵינֵיהֶם וְהָיָה מִצְרַיִם נֹסְעֵ אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל ה' – Pharaoh drew near, and the children of Israel raised their eyes, and Egyptians were pursuing them. They were terrified, and they cried out to the Lord. (14: 10)

Although the Torah clearly intends to mean that he drew near i.e. that he and his army approached, it doesn't actually say that at all. It says הַקָּרִיב – a word used for sacrifices, meaning “he brought near”. The Medrash says that Pharaoh was indeed מְקָרִיב – what he “brought near” was the Jews, closer to Hashem.

Why does the Torah attribute such credit Pharaoh and what is it he did which deserved such high recognition?

There is a Midrash that teaches that prior to the Jews leaving Egypt, there was a debate in Heaven as to whether they should be allowed to leave. The prosecution and defense, the Kator and Sanegor, would keep going in

circles; “The Egyptians worship idols,” was countered with “So do the Jews!” – no redeeming quality could be found in the Jews favour.

The decisive factor in allowing their departure to occur was the faith placed in Hashem through deciding to follow Moshe.

Egypt recognised that their departure would be a massive loss and pursued them. Suddenly, the Jews faith evaporated:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה הַמְבִלִי אֵין קְבָרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לְמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר מֵה זֹאת עָשִׂיתָ לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם – They said to Moshe, “Were there no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert? What have you have done by taking us out of Egypt!?” (14: 11)

Their attachment to Moshe was severed, their faith gone. They cried out to Hashem but didn’t mean it – the entire episode demonstrates a lack of belief in God’s providence.

Moshe prays for assistance, and Hashem replies: מַה תִּצְעַק אֵלַי – What are you crying out to me for? Now is a time for action! This is וַפְרַעַה הַקְרִיב – Pharaoh brought the Jews close to Hashem; but to the exclusion of Moshe from the equation. It is no praise at all.

So Hashem responds:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה מַה תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְּבַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ – The Lord said to Moshe, “Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the children of Israel and tell them to go!”. (14: 15)

Their salvation was not going to be based on Moshe’s prayers, or theirs, as that wasn’t the problem.

Moshe’s authority had to be re-established, so Hashem gave him the solution: וַדְּבַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ – their salvation would be as it was on leaving Egypt – through displaying faith their leader.

As the Pasuk says upon their entering the Red Sea: וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בָהּ וַיִּבְמְשָׁה עֲבָדָיו – They believed in Hashem and His servant Moshe. (14: 31).

APPRECIATING NATURE

One of the most incredible miracles of all times occurs, the Splitting of the Sea, and it’s conclusion happens the same way it began:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה נָטֵה אֶת יָדְךָ עַל הַיָּם וַיִּשְׁבּוּ הַמַּיִם עַל מִצְרַיִם עַל רֶכְבּוֹ וְעַל כָּרְשֵׁיו – Hashem said to Moshe; “Stretch your hand over the sea, and the water will crash back onto the Egyptians, their chariots, and their horseriders. (14: 26)

R’ Shimshon Pinkus wonders why it was necessary for him to lift his hand to “close” the sea, as he did when it came to splitting it. The miracle would be over when the last Jew went ashore, and the sea returning to its normal natural state would seem to be something that just ought to “happen”.

R’ Shimshon Pinkus explains that Hashem was trying to teach the Jews an essential lesson about “natural” occurrences. Quite understandably, splitting the sea requires an action of some sort because it was a miracle; but

the returning of the sea to its natural state is equally miraculous!

We take the laws of nature and physics for granted – Hashem was expressing that we ought not to. There is no fundamental reason which causes things to happen; it is all Hashem. This was the underlying message of Hashem’s command for Moshe to stretch out his hand, in the same way, to both start and conclude the miracle.

They are the same from Hashem’s perspective.

A MAIDSERVANT’S PROPHECY

After experiencing the incredible miracle that was the Red Sea splitting, the people collectively sang Az Yashir:

זה קלי ואנוהו אלקי אבי וארוממנו – This is my God, and I will glorify Him – the God of my father – and I will exalt Him. (15: 2)

The Mechilta observes how any maidservants at the sea saw things that even Yechezkel ben Buzi, who had the most vivid prophecies, did not.

Who were these maidservants? How were there any servants among the Jews, a newly liberated people?

The commentaries wonder how Chazal derived their statement. The Vilna Gaon, the Maharil Diskin and the Maskil L’David accept essentially the same view. Rashi writes that there are two parts to the passuk. The second half, that of “אלקי אבי וארוממנו”, is a reference to Hashem being the God of their fathers, illustrating a relationship begun earlier than those saved at the Sea. The above commentaries explain that the word “זה” refers to both clauses; once for “זה קלי ואנוהו” and then for “זה אלקי אבי וארוממנו”. However, the Jews did not leave Egypt alone. Non-Jewish servants and maidservants, a.k.a. the Eirev Rav, came along in order to convert. Unable to refer to their relationship with Hashem as beginning with their forefathers, substituted “זה קלי ואנוהו” instead. Did the Jews say both statements? Maskil L’David says they did, whereas the Eirev Rav said only “זה קלי ואנוהו”. The Vilna Gaon and Maharil Diskin teach that this passuk was truly split; with the Jews saying “זה אלקי אבי וארוממנו”, and the non-Jewish servants and maidservants saying “זה קלי ואנוהו”.

The commentaries explain how Chazal understood that the maidservant saw “more” than Yechezkel. The word “זה” – “this here” – was used at the Sea to connote something concrete and direct, as opposed to the general “ואראה” – “I was shown” – used in the later prophecies. Chazal saw from this that even this maidservant, essentially any non-Jew who was there, was able to point and say “זה קלי ואנוהו”; and truly saw a greater revelation than even the greatest of the prophets; the Presence of Hashem was manifest in such a great way that one could simply point and say, “This is my G-d”.

Interestingly, there is discussion amongst the Rishonim regarding the nature of Hashem’s “revelation” at the Sea. Rabbeinu Bachayei writes that Chazal do not mean to say that the maidservant had greater ability to grasp such things, nor were they wiser than Yechezkel. Hashem simply “showed” Himself more at the Sea than He ever did to Yechezkel. The Rambam disagrees; in describing the lofty levels reached by the Jews in the generation of the Exodus and the Desert travels, he writes: “The lowest of them was like Yechezkel, as Chazal say. This seems to be a reference to the statement of Chazal under discussion. Apparently Rambam understood this statement to be descriptive of the nation’s spiritual heights, which enabled them to have as remarkable a revelation as they did.

According to the Rambam, two insights would appear. Firstly, that even the “lowest” Jew at that time was indeed

greater than Yechezkel. Secondly, it appears that we need not understand that the maidservant was at least originally non-Jewish. In context, the Rambam is discussing the great level of the Jewish nation at the time, and yet he uses this statement of Chazal as a proof. This leads one to surmise that the Rambam understood that the maidservant in question was Jewish. If this is the case, our original question returns; why is there a “maidservant” in this newly liberated nation?

The Gemara in Sota 11b tells the story of how the pregnant Jewish women in Egypt would go out to the fields to give birth, and would leave their newborns there. To take them home would mean their being captured and tossed into the Nile. Hashem took care of these newborns, sending angels to clean, feed and care for them. When the Egyptians found out about these children living in the fields, they came to kill them. A miracle occurred; the earth would swallow these children deep enough to protect them from Egyptian plows. After the Egyptians left, the children sprouted out of the ground like plants. When they grew up, herds of them would return to their homes. And when Hashem revealed Himself at the Sea, these children “recognized” Him first having been raised in His presence and said: “זה קלי ואנוהו”. Clearly this Gemara understands that the Jews too said “זה קלי ואנוהו”. Now according to the Maskil L’David, that “זה קלי ואנוהו” was also said by the Jews, this Gemara can be congruent with the Mechilta. However, according to the Vilna Gaon and the others, this Gemara too needs reconciliation with the word usage of the Mechilta: “maidservant,” and we are left with our question.

Food for thought.

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