

## **PARASHAT BESHALACH**

### **Divine Therapy at the Red Sea**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### **A. WHAT IS THE POINT OF THIS MIRACLE?**

Shemot chapter 14 recounts the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea. It is followed by the Song at the Sea, which constitutes an independent literary unit. (As a general rule, when we find poetry in Tanakh juxtaposed with a prose text – or even embedded within it – the two genres should be dealt with separately; poetry is not an integral part of the narrative.) It is preceded by the conclusion of the tale of the exodus (13:17-22, the opening section of this week's parasha). Although our connection of the beginning of Beshalach to the narrative of Bo does not square with the traditional division into parshiot (and this is not the place for a discussion of this issue), there are several stylistic and thematic indicators pointing in this direction. For example, Cassuto points out that the last two verses of the unit (13:21-22) are composed in an "elevated lyrical style," doubtlessly resulting from the fact that these verses serve as a celebratory conclusion to the story of the exodus.

What is the aim of the miraculous event narrated in our story? An explicit answer to this question is to be found in the story itself, twice, in God's words to Moshe:

"I shall harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will pursue you, and I shall be honored through Pharaoh and all his army and EGYPT WILL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD." (14:4)

"Behold, I will harden the heart of Egypt and they will come after you, and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army with his chariots and his horsemen. EGYPT WILL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD when I am honored through Pharaoh and his chariots and his horsemen."  
(14:17-18)

There is a difficulty with the idea that the purpose of the miracle is for Egypt to know God: the Egyptians who pursue Israel are drowned in the sea - "not one of them remained" (verse 28). Ibn Ezra (Perush Arokh 14:4) explains:

"'And Egypt will know' – those who remain (alive), as well as those who drown, just before their death – 'that I am God.'"

The realization of this purpose is not described in our parasha. The sole reaction of the Egyptians described in the story is to be found in verse 25:

"And Egypt said, Let us flee from before Israel, for God fights for them against Egypt."

If this is the "knowledge of God" to which the verses refer, it lasts only for a short time. No mention is made of the Egyptian nation in their land knowing what took place or knowing that God caused it. In any event, our story describes no widespread recognition of God and we find a hint of it only in the Song of the Sea (15:14): "The nations will hear and will be afraid." Even there, the list of nations (Philistines, Edom, Moav and Canaanites) does not include Egypt.

In God's words as quoted above there is an additional objective to the events of the story: "I shall be honored through Pharaoh and his entire army," meaning revenge on Pharaoh and Egypt for their sins against Israel, for "when the Holy One avenges Himself of the wicked ones, His name is made great and honored" (Rashi, quoting the Mekhilta). The realization of this objective is indeed described in our story at length.

A closer look at the story of the splitting of the sea, with an analysis of its structure (sections B-E below), will reveal that alongside this explicit and overt double purpose

of the events, there is another important objective that pertains specifically to Israel (section F below).

## B. DIVISION OF THE STORY INTO TWO HALVES

Our story is divided into two halves of slightly different length. The first half ends with Bnei Yisrael panicking at the sight of the approaching Egyptian army, followed by Moshe's calming words:

"Do not be afraid; stand and watch the salvation of God which He will perform for you today, for as you have seen Egypt today you shall not see them again forever. God will fight for you and you shall be silent." (13-14)

But these words are somewhat enigmatic, and it appears that even Moshe himself was not sure of their exact meaning: how would Israel never see Egypt again? What was about to happen? For this reason Moshe cries out to God (we are not told this explicitly) and God answers him, thereby solving the mystery and alleviating the distress of Israel:

"Why are you crying out to Me? Speak to Bnei Yisrael, that they proceed. And you, lift up your staff and stretch your hand over the sea and divide it, and Bnei Yisrael will come through the sea on dry ground." (15-16)

This speech by God would seem to start the story over, and it corresponds both thematically and linguistically to what He says at the beginning of the story.

Part 1:

"God spoke to Moshe ... Speak to Bnei Yisrael that they should encamp ... You shall encamp by the sea...

I shall harden Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them, and I shall be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and Egypt will know that I am the Lord." (1-4)

Part 2:

"God said to Moshe ... Speak to Bnei Yisrael that they should go forward... and Bnei Yisrael will come into the midst of the sea on dry land.

I will harden the heart of Egypt and they will come after them, and I shall be honored through Pharaoh and his whole army, his chariots and his horsemen. And Egypt will know that I am the Lord when I am honored through Pharaoh and his chariots and his horsemen." (15-17)

Thus the division between the two halves has a firm basis not only in the change that comes about in the plot but also in the clear formal parallel between the openings of both halves. We find that the first half of the story, verses 1-14, describes the events that took place on the shore of the Red Sea, while the second half, verses 15-31, describes mainly what took place inside the sea itself (and, at the end, on the other side).

Before examining the nature of the parallel between the two halves of the story, and the significance of this parallel and of the structure of the story as a whole, let us first examine each half individually.

### C. STRUCTURE OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE STORY (1-14)

This half can be divided into two parts. The first part, verses 1-8, contains two units:

Verses 1-4 – God's command to Moshe to mislead Pharaoh by guiding Bnei Yisrael back on a route towards Egypt, and its fulfillment.

Verses 5-8 – Pharaoh's decision to pursue Bnei Yisrael and the beginnings of putting it into action.

This section concludes with the surprising words (v. 8), "And Bnei Yisrael went out with a high hand." These words serve to remind us of the exodus (13:18), "And Bnei

Yisrael went up armed from the land of Egypt." But what are they doing at the end of the unit that describes Pharaoh's pursuit? These words are simply an ironic introduction to what will be revealed in the second part of this half. As the Rashbam explains:

"Went out with a high hand' – they had no concerns at all until they saw Pharaoh and his nation pursuing them, and then 'they were very afraid.'"

The second part also opens with the pursuit of Egypt after Bnei Yisrael (verse 9), and this appears to be a repetition. But the previous pursuit was hidden from the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, while now the Egyptians have come into the very midst of them: "And they reached them as they encamped by the sea." Thus eye contact is established between the two camps (verse 10): "And Bnei Yisrael lifted their eyes and behold, Egypt was coming after them." At this point, the "high hand" of Bnei Yisrael turns into terrible fear and crying out to God.

Immediately thereafter they launch into a speech (verses 11-12); let us now examine it closely:

"And they said to Moshe:

Was it for lack of graves IN EGYPT

That you have taken us to die IN THE DESERT

What is this that you have done to us, to take us out of EGYPT?

Is this not what we said to you IN EGYPT, saying:

Leave us alone, that we may serve EGYPT

For it is better for us to serve EGYPT

Than that we die IN THE DES."

Pattention to the reversal of the poles: in reality, Egypt is the land of servitude and the throwing of sons into the river, while the desert is the symbol of going out to freedom

and life. In the speech of Bnei Yisrael, though, the desert – in its two appearances, at the beginning of the speech and at its end – becomes the place where people die, while Egypt (in its five mentions), albeit a place of labor, is a place where people live – and even merit a respectable burial. The speech expresses regret over having left Egypt and a hysterical reaction of those who left that country armed and "with a high hand." Therefore the psalmist says (Tehillim 106:7), "Our forefathers in Egypt did not appreciate Your wonders... at the sea they rebelled, at the Red Sea."

But in the context in which the speech appears in our story, it gives rise to derision on the part of the reader: this is a classic situation of irony, where the complainers are not aware of what we, the readers, have known since the beginning of the story – that the danger is only apparent; the situation which has come about is an artificial one which is meant to exact revenge from Egypt.

#### D. STRUCTURE OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE STORY (15-31)

Like the first half, the second half of the story is also divided into two parts:

Verses 15-22 – the miraculous splitting of the sea, allowing Bnei Yisrael to enter into its midst.

Verses 23-31 – the miraculous drowning in the sea of the Egyptians who were inside it.

The description of the second miracle concludes in verses 28-29, while verses 30-31 summarize the event. Verse 29 corresponds with verse 22, which summarizes the description of the first miracle:

"Bnei Yisrael came into the sea on dry land,

And the water was for them a wall on their right and on their left." (22)

"Bnei Yisrael walked on dry land in the midst of the sea,

And the water was for them a wall on their right and on their left." (29)

The reason for the repetition is that verse 22 describes the actual event of Bnei Yisrael entering into the sea, with the water forming a wall on each side of them, while verse 29 reviews the incident as the recent past ("halkhu" rather than "va-yelkhu") in order to contrast it with what happened to the Egyptians, which was previously described in verses 27-28. In other words, the two miracles described in this half of the story should not be regarded independently; rather, each should be seen in light of the other.

Throughout this half of the story there is a recurring "leading word" – "ha-yam" (the sea), which repeats itself fourteen times. It appears seven times in each subsection of this half, such that the two miracles are presented in light of each other. The presentation of each miracle also follows a common structure: divine command; its fulfillment; Israel and Egypt in the sea; the pursuit and its conclusion.

#### E. DETAILED PARALLEL BETWEEN THE TWO HALVES

Dividing each half into six sections, we shall see that there is a direct parallel between the two halves (a-b-a-b), rather than the chiasmic structure (a-b-b-a) we have discovered in other parshiot.

UNIT 1 of each half (1-4, 15-18) describes God's command. We noted above (section B) the linguistic and thematic parallels between these units. From this parallel, it becomes clear that the two-stage plan to mislead Pharaoh is as follows.

Stage A: Encampment at the sea, aimed at bringing Pharaoh to the conclusion that "they are lost in the land; the desert has closed in on them" such that he would be tempted to pursue Bnei Yisrael.

Stage B: When Pharaoh saw that Bnei Yisrael walked into the midst of the sea which had become dry land, he would be tempted to enter himself into the midst of the sea.

UNIT 2 (4b-8, 19-22) describes preparations for the pursuit: Pharaoh's preparations in the first half, and God's enabling the Jews to enter the sea in the second half.

UNIT 3 (9, 23) of each half is an almost identical description of Pharaoh's pursuit of the Jews: to their encampment (9) and into the sea (23).

Until now the comparison between the two halves has revealed great similarity between them, sometimes approaching identical wording. From this point onwards the correspondence between the two halves is one of contrast, arising from the fact that in the first half Bnei Yisrael are unaware of the true situation, since they do not know of the Divine plan to mislead Pharaoh and for God to be honored through his army. It is only in the second half that this plan is revealed to them fully, and then their perception changes.

UNIT 4 (10, 24-25) presents a contrast between Bnei Yisrael's distress upon lifting up their eyes and seeing the Egyptians following them (10) and the Egyptians' distress when God views them.

UNIT 5 (11-12, 26-30) contrasts Bnei Yisrael's complaint to Moshe based on their fear of the approaching Egyptian army (11-12) to the story of the Egyptians being covered by the waters of the sea, cancelling Bnei Yisrael's fear (26-30). This contrast is brought full cycle only at the end of the story, when Bnei Yisrael finally believe in God and Moshe, as opposed to their bitter complaints before.

UNIT 6 (13-14, 31) returns to a direct parallel: Moshe's calming words in the first half are realized in the second half. "...Behold GOD'S SALVATION which He shall perform TODAY" (13) corresponds to "GOD SAVED ISRAEL THAT DAY" (31); "You shall never see them again [after today]" (13) parallels "Israel saw Egypt dead on the seashore" (31).

## F. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE STORY

What purpose is served by the structure of the story as we have revealed it? It would seem that our story is one of trouble and then salvation. The first half of the story presents the distress facing Bnei Yisrael, while the second half presents the solution to this distress with a double miracle of salvation. If this were indeed the true message of the story, the appropriate structure would be a chiasmic structure - which is common in biblical stories which narrate a "problem and its solution." Our story, however, is built on a direct correspondence between the two halves. What is the reason for this?

The answer is simple: this is not a story of true distress. From the start it is clear to the reader that the distress is artificial, and its purpose is "that I may be honored through Pharaoh and his whole army." This being the case, the story is not one of distress and salvation but rather of a Divine plan and its realization in two stages. (Another example of a story with a similar structure, and for a similar reason, is that of the akeida, where the second half opens with unexpected intervention [Bereishit 22:11-12]: "An angel of God called to him from the heavens... Do not set your hand against the boy." The fact that the call to Avraham is by name and he answers "Here I am" in both halves hints at the fact that the parallel between the two halves is a direct one. The distress of the first half is an artificial one, for we have been told from the start that "The Lord tested Avraham" and we know that Yitzchak will not be sacrificed.)

The explanation for the correspondence is therefore that Part I describes the first stage of the plan of misleading Pharaoh and its realization, while Part II describes the second half of this plan and its realization. Since the two stages are similar to each other, and both are aimed at the attainment of the same goal, it is natural that they be presented in the story in direct correspondence.

We may still ask, what is the point of the Divine plan being divided into two stages and this correspondence between them? Could not both have been combined into one Divine message to Moshe about Pharaoh's heart being hardened such that he would pursue Bnei Yisrael into the desert and ultimately into the sea? The answer to this question lies not in the identical or similar units of comparison between the two halves (units 1-3) but rather in the units which correspond inversely (units 4-6). The crux of

the contrast in these units is between the reaction of Bnei Yisrael to the events of the first half and the reality that reveals itself to them in the shaf.

The Divine plan to "be honored through Pharaoh" through the hardening of his heart to pursue Bnei Yisrael is clear to Moshe and to us right from the beginning of the story. But even those to whom this plan is known do not, at this stage, clearly know how the plan will be realized. It is perhaps for this reason that Moshe does not share his knowledge with Bnei Yisrael. They merely receive a command to return and encamp before Pi Ha-chirot – "and they did thus." What we are told later on – "And Pharaoh will say of Bnei Yisrael..." (verses 3-4) - is said to Moshe, but he is not commanded to pass on this information to Bnei Yisrael. Indeed, it appears that Bnei Yisrael are completely unaware of it.

When Bnei Yisrael discover the Egyptians chasing them, they react with great fear and hysteria. Even Moshe, who knows more than they do and attempts to use this knowledge to calm them, is unable to achieve this aim completely, for even he himself does not know exactly how the salvation will come about. It appears therefore that there is an intentional dimension of irony in the great fear of Bnei Yisrael expressed in verses 10-12. Why does God not tell them or Moshe of His designs? It appears that God left them all in the dark **PRECISELY IN ORDER TO OBTAIN THIS FRIGHTENED RESPONSE.** For what purpose?

Apparently, the main aim of our story is to heal Bnei Yisrael from their psychological enslavement to their Egyptian masters. As Ibn Ezra explains (Perush Arokh 14:13),

"We may ask: how could a great camp of six hundred thousand people fear their pursuers? Why would they not fight for their lives and for their children? The answer [is that] the Egyptians were masters to Bnei Yisrael; this generation which had just left Egypt had grown up under the yoke of Egyptian slavery, and their spirit was downtrodden. How could they now fight against their masters, with Bnei Yisrael lowly and untrained in war?"

We may say that Israel had indeed been taken out of Egypt, but Egypt had not yet been taken out of them. Their "armed" exodus from Egypt, their exodus "with a high

hand," was to a large extent only an external veneer. From a psychological perspective, "the Egyptians were masters to Bnei Yisrael" still, and "their spirit was downtrodden; how could they now fight against their masters?" It was at the Red Sea that Bnei Yisrael were freed psychologically from their fear of the Egyptians.

In order to be healed of this psychological enslavement, from this fear of the Egyptians, it was not sufficient that Bnei Yisrael "saw Egypt dead upon the seashore." The process of rehabilitation has no short-cuts. Sometimes even a physical illness cannot be cured if the condition does not clearly present itself. But in the psychological realm, there is an even greater need to reveal the problem lurking within, hidden even from the consciousness of the sufferer himself, in order that we may heal him.

The purpose of the first half of the story is therefore to bring Bnei Yisrael's great fear of their former masters from potential into actuality. For this purpose it was necessary for them to think that Pharaoh's pursuit of them was a regular enemy pursuit, endangering their lives. At this stage, all their helplessness in the face of their oppressors was revealed. It was also revealed that their exodus from Egypt had not been wholehearted; they now regretted it.

This actualization of their fear of Egypt was obviously meant for the purposes of healing and treatment, and this is in fact what happens in the second half. Only the reversal between their reaction when they saw the Egyptians pursuing (Part I) and when they saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore (Part II) brought them to see the mighty wonders which God had performed on the Egyptians, and to replace their fear of the Egyptians with awe of God.

This process of psychological and mental liberation from the fear of the Egyptians, a process with profound religious meaning, is expressed through a play on words using two similar roots which appear in the last units of both halves (unit 6) a total of seven times. The roots are "y-r-a" and "r-a-h":

\*1. (13) "Moshe said to the nation, Do not be afraid (tira'u)

- \*\*2. Stand and see (u-re'u) God's salvation which He will perform for you today
- \*\*\*3. For as you have seen (re'item) Egypt today
- \*\*\*\*4. you shall not see them (lir'otam) again forever.
- \*\*\*5. (30) Israel saw (va-yar) Egypt dead upon the seashore
- \*\*6. (31) And Israel saw (va-yar) the great wonders that God had performed on Egypt
- \*7. And the nation feared (va-yir'u) God and they believed in God and in Moshe, His servant."

When Moshe spoke to the nation they still feared Egypt. By the end of our story, "the nation feared God." How was their fear (yir'a) of flesh and blood converted into fear of God? The answer is that their "seeing" (re'iya) brought this about. Their seeing "Egypt today," chasing after them in the first half of the story, causes within them profound fear of Egypt. But Moshe calls upon them to stand and see God's salvation. Indeed, when they see Egypt dead upon the seashore, they also recognize the great wonders that God has performed – His salvation. The sight of the eyes becomes a perception in their hearts, and both bring them to awe of God and faith in Him.

Only now is the process of the exodus from slavery to eternal freedom complete; now they are free in spirit as well as in body, and they are worthy and ready to sing a song of praise to God.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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