

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

In September 2010, BBC, Reuters and other news agencies reported on a sensational scientific discovery. Researchers at US National Center for Atmospheric Research and the University of Colorado have shown through computer simulation how the division of the red sea may have taken place.

By sophisticated modelling, they've demonstrated how a strong east wind, blowing overnight, could have pushed water back at a bend where an ancient river is believed to have merged with a coastal lagoon. 63mph winds from the east could have pushed the water back at an ancient river bend. The water would have been pushed back into the two waterways, and a land bridge would have opened at the bend, allowing people to walk across the exposed mud flats. As soon as the wind died down, the waters would have rushed back in. As the leader of the project said when the report was published: "The simulations match fairly closely with the account in Exodus."

So we now have scientific evidence to support the biblical account, though to be fair, a very similar case was made some years ago by Colin Humphreys, Professor of Materials Science at Cambridge University, and Professor of Experimental Physics at the Royal Institution in London, in his book *The Miracles of Exodus*.

To me, though, the real issue is what the biblical account actually is. Because it is just here that we have one of the most fascinating features of the way the Torah tells its stories. Here is the key passage: Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. (Ex. 14: 21-22)

The passage can be read two ways. The first is that what happened was a suspension of the laws of nature. It was a supernatural event. The waters stood, literally, like a wall.

The second is that what happened was miraculous not because the laws of nature were suspended. To the contrary, as the computer simulation shows, the exposure of dry land at a particular point in the Red Sea was a natural outcome of the strong east wind. What made it miraculous is that it happened just there, just then, when the Israelites seemed trapped,

unable to go forward because of the sea, unable to turn back because of the Egyptian army pursuing them.

There is a significant difference between these two interpretations. The first appeals to our sense of wonder. How extraordinary that the laws of nature should be suspended to allow an escaping people to go free. It is a story to appeal to the imagination of a child.

But the naturalistic explanation is wondrous at another level entirely. Here the Torah is using the device of irony. What made the Egyptians of the time of Ramses so formidable was the fact that they possessed the latest and most powerful form of military technology, the horse drawn chariot. It made them unbeatable in battle, and fearsome.

What happens at the sea is poetic justice of the most exquisite kind. There is only one circumstance in which a group of people travelling by foot can escape a highly trained army of charioteers, namely when the route passes through a muddy sea bed. The people can walk across, but the chariot wheels get stuck in the mud. The Egyptian army can neither advance nor retreat. The wind drops. The water returns. The powerful are now powerless, while the powerless have made their way to freedom.

This second narrative has a moral depth that the first does not; and it resonates with the message of the book of Psalms:

His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,  
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;  
the Lord delights in those who fear him,  
who put their hope in his unfailing love.  
(Psalm 147: 10-11)

The elegantly simple way in which the division of the red sea is described in the Torah so that it can be read at two quite different levels, one as a supernatural miracle, the other as a moral tale about the limits of technology when it comes to the real strength of nations: that to me is what is most striking. It is a text quite deliberately written so that our understanding of it can deepen as we mature, and we are no longer so interested in the mechanics of miracles, and more interested in how freedom is won or lost.

So it's good to know how the division of the sea happened, but there remains a depth to the biblical story that can never be exhausted by computer simulations and other historical or scientific evidence, and depends instead on being sensitive to its deliberate and delicate ambiguity. Just as ruach, a physical wind, can part

waters and expose land beneath, so ruach, the human spirit, can expose, beneath the surface of a story, a deeper meaning beneath.

The beginning of a new year tends to be a time for predictions. Have you peered into the crystal ball, read the runes, consulted the astrologists and listened to the soothsayers? Good. Then you know what's going to happen. My prediction, which I make with total confidence, is that total confidence in predictions is never warranted. They turn out, more often than not, to be wrong.

Here are some of my favourites. "Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible," said Lord Kelvin, president of the Royal Society in 1895. "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home," said Ken Olson, president and founder of Digital Equipment, a maker of mainframes, in 1977.

"Everything that can be invented has been invented," said an official at the US patent office in 1899. And Charles Darwin wrote in the foreword to *The Origin of Species*, "I see no good reasons why the views given in this volume should shock the religious sensibilities of anyone."

Despite the many political experts, research institutes, think tanks, government and university departments, no one foresaw the bloodless end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Few foresaw the possibility of a terrorist attack like 9/11, that changed our world.

I was once present at a gathering where Bernard Lewis, the scholar of Islam, was asked to predict the outcome of a certain American foreign policy intervention. He gave a magnificent reply. "I am a historian, so I only make predictions about the past. What is more, I am a retired historian, so even my past is passé."

We know so much at a macro- and micro-level. We look up and see a universe of a hundred billion galaxies each of a hundred billion stars. We look down and see a human body containing a hundred trillion cells, each with a double copy of the human genome, 3.1 billion letters long, enough if transcribed to fill a library of 5,000 books.

There remains one thing we do not know and will never know: What tomorrow will bring. The past, said L. P. Hartley, is a foreign country. But the future is an undiscovered one. That is why predictions so often fail. They don't even come close.

Why, when even the ancient Mesopotamians could make accurate predictions about the movement of planets, are we, with all our brain-scans and neuroscience, not able to predict what people will do? Why do they so often take us by surprise?

The reason is that we are free. We choose, we make mistakes, we learn. People constantly surprise us. The failure at school becomes the winner of a Nobel Prize. The leader who disappointed, suddenly shows

courage and wisdom in a crisis. The driven businessman has an intimation of mortality and decides to devote the rest of his life to helping the poor.

This is something science has not yet explained and perhaps never will. There are scientists who believe freedom is an illusion. But it isn't. It's what makes us human.

We are free because we are not merely objects. We are subjects. We respond not just to physical events but to the way we perceive those events. We have minds, not just brains. We have thoughts, not just sensations. We react but we can also choose not to react. There is something about us that is irreducible to material, physical causes and effects.

I personally believe that the way our ancestors spoke about this remains true and profound. We are free because God is free and He made us in His image. That is what is meant by the three words God tells Moses at the burning bush when he asks God what is His name. God replies, Ehyeh asher Ehyeh. These are often translated as "I am what I am." What they really mean, though, is "I will be who and how I choose to be." I am the God of freedom. I cannot be predicted. Note that God says this at the start of Moses' mission to lead a people from slavery to freedom.

There is something about the human person that will always elude scientific analysis. Our future is unpredictable because it is made by us and we are free. So I urge you to do one totally unpredictable act of kindness in the next twenty-four hours and show someone that the world is a little better than they thought it was going to be. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust [rabbisacks.org](http://rabbisacks.org)

#### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Torah Lights

“**A**nd Moses brought the bones of Joseph with him, since [Joseph] had adjured the children of Israel to take an oath; [Joseph] had said, 'God will surely remember you; bring up my bones with you from this [place].'” [Exodus 13:19] At the very opening of the Torah portion of Beshalach, just as we've reached the climax of the ten plagues and the Israelites have been sent forth out of their Egyptian bondage, we find a fascinating throwback to a former heroic personality from the Book of Genesis: Joseph.

Why interrupt the drama of the Exodus with the detail of concern over Joseph's remains? From a certain narrative perspective, Joseph's name even evokes a jarring note at this moment of Israel's freedom. After all, Joseph may well be seen as the very antithesis of Moses: Joseph begins within the family of Jacob-Israel, and moves outside of it as he rises to great heights in Egypt, whereas Moses begins as a prince of Egypt and moves into the family of Israel when he smites the

Egyptians. Joseph is the one who brings the children of Jacob into Egypt whereas Moses takes them out; Joseph gives all of his wisdom and energy to Egypt whereas Moses gives all of his wisdom and energy to the Israelites. It can even be argued that the very enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians was a punishment for Joseph's having enslaved the Egyptians to Pharaoh as part of his economic policy (Genesis 47:19–23). So why bring up the remains of Joseph at this point in the story?

The fact is that Joseph is a most complex and amazing personality, who very much stands at the crossroads of and makes a vital connection between the Books of Genesis and Exodus. We have previously pointed out that the jealous enmity of the brothers towards Joseph was in no small way rooted in the grandiose ambition expressed in his dreams: sheaves of grain evoke Egyptian agriculture rather than Israeli shepherdry, and the bowing sun, moon and stars smack of cosmic domination. While yet in the Land of Israel, Joseph had apparently set his sights on the then superpower, Egypt – and the second dream suggests that Egypt is only a stepping stone for universal majesty.

But then, does not the Torah picture the Almighty as the creator and master of the entire world, and is it not Israel's mission to be a kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation with the mandate of perfecting the world in the Kingship of the divine? And with his very last breaths, in the closing lines of the book of Genesis (Gen. 50:24–25), does not Joseph profess absolute faith in God's eventual return of the Israelites to their homeland, at which time he makes his brothers swear that his remains will be taken "home" to Israel as well? The full picture of Joseph seems to depict a great-grandson of Abraham, who fully grasps the importance of the Land of Israel for his nation, but who also recognizes the eventual necessity of their being a source of blessing for "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3), their mission of peace not just for the family but for the world.

The Midrash describes a fascinating scene: "At the exact time when all of the Jews were occupied in gathering the booty of Egypt, Moses was occupied in gathering the bones of Joseph. Who informed Moses as to where Joseph was buried? Serah, the daughter of Asher, who was still living in that generation [of the Exodus]. She went and told Moses that Joseph had been buried in the River Nile. Moses then stood at the foot of the Nile River and cried out: 'Joseph, Joseph, the time of redemption has come, but the Divine Presence is holding it back. If you will show yourself, good. If not, I shall be freed of the oath which you made me swear.' Immediately the coffin of Joseph rose to the surface of the Nile River..."

Hence, when the Israelites went forth from Egypt, two casks [aronot] accompanied them for forty years in the desert: the cask of the life of all worlds [the

divine Torah which they had received as family tradition until that time] and the cask [casket] of Joseph. The nations of the world would ask, "What is the nature of these two casks? Is it necessary for the cask of the dead to go together with the cask of eternal life?" But in truth the one who is buried in this [cask] fulfilled whatever is written in that [cask]. [Tanchuma, Beshalach, 2]

Generally this midrash is understood to be saying that Joseph fulfilled the moral commandments already expressed in the Torah from the story of creation up until and including the Exodus. After all, Joseph was moral and upright, even to the extent of rebuffing the enticements of the beautiful "Mrs. Potiphar," thereby earning the appellation of "the righteous." However, I would suggest an alternate interpretation: The Torah of the book of Exodus encased in one cask fulfilled the dreams, expectations and prophecies of Joseph buried in the other cask. Joseph foresaw an eventual exodus from Egypt and return to Israel. Joseph also foresaw a cosmic obeisance of the sun, moon and stars to the universal God of justice and peace whom he represented. This too was fulfilled when the world was paralyzed by the force of the plagues, when the nations trembled at the destruction of Egypt and victory of the Israelites when the Reed Sea split apart: "Nations heard and shuddered; terror gripped the inhabitants of Philistia. Edom's chiefs then panicked, Moab's heroes were seized with trembling, Canaan's residents melted away...God will reign supreme forever and ever." [Exodus 15:14–15, 18]

Yes, at the supreme triumphant moment of the Exodus, Moses stops to fulfil a vow and take the bones of Joseph, the essence of Joseph (the Hebrew word "etzem" translates both as "bone" and as "essence") out of Egypt and into Israel with the Israelites. Moses wanted the faith of Joseph, the universality of Joseph, the majesty of Joseph, the grandeur of Joseph, to accompany the Israelites throughout their sojourn in the desert. After all, the casket of Joseph imparted a crucial lesson: God's rule of justice, compassion and peace must capture the entire world, all despots must be seized with fear and trembling, and all human beings must be free. May Joseph's eternal gravesite in Shechem be salvaged and re-sanctified as a beacon to Jewish faith in a world redeemed. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. ©2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**T**he centerpiece of this week's parsha is naturally the great song of Moses and of the Jewish people after their moment of deliverance from Pharaoh and the flooding sea. This song of Moses and of Israel is repeated daily throughout the centuries of Jewish life in

our morning prayer service.

The exultation of the moment is still retained and felt many generations later in the unmatched prose and poetry written in the Torah. What makes this song unique is that there is no reference to human bravery, to the courage of the Jewish people in plunging into the sea or to the leadership of Moses and Aaron in shepherding the Jewish people through this crisis. Rather, the entire poem/song is a paean of praise and appreciation dedicated to the God of Israel.

God operates, so to speak, through human beings and world events. Many times His presence is hidden from our sight. Sometimes it is even willfully ignored. In later victories and triumphs of the Jewish people and of Israel, it is the human element that helps fashion those victories and triumphs that is acknowledged and celebrated.

But here in the song of Moses and Israel we have an acknowledgement of God's great hand without ascribing any credit to human beings and natural and social forces. I think that this is perhaps the one facet that makes this song so unique. Compare it to the song of Deborah, which forms the haftora to this week's parsha. In that song the prophetess assigns a great deal of credit to the armed forces of Israel, to Barack its general, and even to Deborah herself, a fact that does not escape the notice of the rabbis of the Talmud. No such self-aggrandizement appears in the song of Moses and Israel at Yam Suf.

This is completely in line with the character of Moses who is described in the Torah as being the most humble and self-effacing of all human beings. There is no question that without Moses there would not have been an exodus from Egypt nor salvation of Israel on the shores of the Yam Suf. But it would be completely out of character for Moses to assign any of the credit for these enormous and miraculous achievements to himself or his actions and leadership.

Thus the greatest of leaders and the most gifted of prophets attains that championship of leadership and prophecy by downplaying his role. Moses is well aware of his greatness and his unique relationship with the God of Israel. He is not naïve enough to think of himself as a plain ordinary human being. To do so would really be a form of ersatz humility. But he is wise enough to realize that this exalted status that he has attained is little more than a gift that God has bestowed upon him.

From the beginning of his leadership career, when he attempted to refuse becoming the leader of Israel till his last days on earth, he retains this innate humility, which allows him to be the strongest of leaders and most courageous of prophets. There is a lesson in this for all later generations and for all of us that aspire to positions of leadership and importance. That is why this song of Moses and Israel is repeated daily in Jewish life. ©2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at

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## ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

### Preparation

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**N**umerous laws are derived from the verse: "On the sixth day they shall prepare what they bring in..." (*Shemot* 16:5). First, we derive from it that one should prepare properly on Friday for Shabbat, so that everything will be ready by the time Shabbat starts.

Second, we derive the rule of *muktzah*: if an item was not prepared or set aside for Shabbat use in advance, it may not be used or moved on Shabbat.

Third, our Sages derive from the verse that one may prepare on a weekday for Shabbat, but may not prepare on Shabbat for a weekday. For this reason, many people do not wash dishes or pots following Shabbat lunch, because they know they will not need to use them again until after Shabbat. Some people do not fold their *tallit* after *shul*, as they consider it preparing for a weekday since they will not be wearing a *tallit* again until Sunday.

Based on the requirement to prepare during the week for Shabbat, our Sages derive that if Yom Tov is on Friday, it is prohibited to prepare on Yom Tov for Shabbat. The only way this preparation becomes permitted is if a person sets aside food for an *eruv tavshilin* before Yom Tov. By doing so, he is beginning preparations for Shabbat on the day preceding Yom Tov.

Up to this point, we have addressed preparation undertaken by people. However, why do we need the verse cited above to tell us about such preparation? We have another verse which makes the same point: "Tomorrow is a day of rest . . . so bake what you want to bake now" (*Shemot* 16:23).

Therefore, the Gemara posits that our verse is speaking about something that was "prepared by heaven," such as an egg that was laid on Shabbat. (This is one of the main subjects of the beginning of *Tractate Beitzah*). Such an egg may not be used on Shabbat or the Yom Tov that follows it on Sunday. Similarly, if Yom Tov is on Friday, an egg laid on Yom Tov may not be used for Yom Tov or the Shabbat following it. Since these eggs did not exist before Shabbat or Yom Tov, they could not have been prepared or set aside beforehand. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

## RABBI AVI WEISS

### Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he Torah gives a clear message about the value of Jewish life, as we are reminded that no one should be permitted to murder Jews with impunity.

In the Shirat Hayam (Song at the Sea), Moses and the Jewish People use three expressions to describe the drowning of the Egyptians. First, the

Egyptians “descended in the depths like stone” (Exodus 15:5). Second, Moses describes the defeat this way: “You sent forth Your wrath, it consumes them like straw” (15:7). Finally, the Jews sing out that the Egyptians “sank as lead in the mighty waters” (15:10). One could claim that these phrases seem contradictory. Did the Egyptians sink like stone, like straw, or like lead? Which was it?

Rashi notes that these variant similes are descriptive of different Egyptians who were punished in accordance with what they deserved. The most wicked were tossed around like weightless straw and allowed to suffer miserably. The best of the group drowned like lead, which of course sinks immediately and therefore suffered the least. Those who did not fall into any clear category sank like stones (Rashi, Exodus 15:5, based on the Mechilta).

What emerges from Rashi is the precision of punishment, and moreover, the clear statement that only those who were guilty of oppressing and murdering Jews would receive such penalties. While one may imagine that a large part of the Egyptian population drowned in the sea, such is not the case. Ibn Ezra seems to support this point when he notes that the Egyptian chariots pursuing the Jews had three officers on each (Ibn Ezra, Exodus 14:7); a small percentage of the Egyptian population (Ibn Ezra, Exodus 14:13).

In 1956, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik wrote that with the establishment of the State of Israel, “God...suddenly manifested Himself.” One such manifestation was that “Jewish blood is not free for taking, is not hefker” (Kol Dodi Dofek). During the Shoah, Jewish life, for most of the world, was worthless. It was reported that, at times, Jews were not even gassed before being incinerated, as the cost was too high.

And what was that cost? Rabbi Yitz Greenberg asks. It was a fraction of a penny. Even in death, we were considered to be worth nothing. With the establishment of the state, Rabbi Soloveitchik declared that one could sense God’s presence in that Jews would be protected. No one would be able to spill blood in Israel without a strong response.

Now, of course, Judaism mandates that we not gloat in the defeat of our enemy. The rabbis make this point when declaring that only the half Hallel (celebratory prayer of praise) be recited on the last days of Passover, the anniversary of the drowning of the Egyptians. Indeed, the Midrash notes that God silences the angels who sang in celebration of the Egyptian defeat, telling them, “How dare you sing for joy when my creations are dying?” (Megillah 10b). During the Passover Seder, too, as we list the plagues, we spill a little bit of wine, symbolic of the sadness of spilling Egyptian blood.

So too, in contemporary times, Israel does not gloat in attaining victory through the loss of enemy life. While doing all they can to spare the lives of innocent civilians, it defends itself with strength, with the

understanding that Jewish blood is not cheap. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd it was told to the King of Egypt that the nation [Israel] had fled, and the hearts of Pharaoh and his servants were turned to the people..." (Exodus 14:5) Plague after plague assailed the Egyptians, destroying their country. Finally, when Hashem had exhibited all the wonders He wished, Pharaoh sent the Jews out of Egypt. He chased them out, trying to get them to leave the night of the tenth makka, as the firstborn Egyptians were dying, but the time for the Exodus didn't come until high noon the next day. The Jews left Egypt with heads held high, with animals laden with wealth, and under the direction of Moshe and Aharon. Pharaoh and his servants couldn't be rid of the Jews fast enough.

Despite this, when Pharaoh was told that the Jews ran away, he had a change of heart and decided to chase after them. What was that about? He knew they didn't run away. Why mobilize millions of Egyptians to run after the Jews, in what would ultimately be a suicide mission, when you were the one who chased them out?

In the past, we've highlighted this as a lesson in the power of words. Though he knew all the facts, when it was conveyed to Pharaoh as if he'd been bested by the sneaky Jews, he became indignant and wanted them back. He forgot all that led up to his wanting to expel them, simply because of his ego, triggered by emotional words.

Today, we'd like to suggest a different approach. When it was told to Pharaoh that the Jews escaped, it was suggesting that Pharaoh didn't recognize what he had when the Jews were in his land. How could he have let such a powerful tool for success slip through his fingers? Indeed, Chazal say that if the nations of the world had known how beneficial the Bais HaMikdash was for them, they would have stationed guards around it to protect it.

Looking back over millennia, we see that the countries which hosted the Jews became powerful and wealthy. Those that expelled them, crumbled and fell into the dustbin of history. Just as when Yaakov came to Egypt and the waters of the Nile overflowed its banks, the presence of the Jews in Egypt was the best thing that could have happened to them. They were given power and prestige because of the nation in their midst.

When they were gone, the Egyptians realized what they'd given up. They finally got clarity in how valuable the Jews really were to them, perhaps even worth suffering more than they already had. Yes, they had acquiesced and sent them out, but now that they

were gone, they regretted their decision, so they began the chase.

The people of the world today don't realize how important we are for their success. They foolishly hate us and seek our destruction, but it is only their own downfall they hasten. For our part, we must strive to be the holy nation of Hashem, worthy of bringing good fortune wherever we go.

*R' Eliezer Gordon, the Telzer Rov, was supported by his father-in-law for many years as he focused on learning Torah. At one point, his in-laws' financial situation took a turn for the worse. Nonetheless, whenever R' Leizer was offered a rabbinic position, his father-in-law was against the idea. His wife protested, "How long can we support him?"*

*He replied, "Who knows who is supporting whom? Are we supporting him with our money or is he supporting us with his Torah learning?" Finally, his wife won and R' Leizer accepted a position. On the day the Gordons were scheduled to leave, R' Avraham Yitzchak Neviazer, the father-in-law, suddenly collapsed and died.*

*His wife, a true tzadekes, eulogized him, "Woe is to me. I killed him. He said to me, 'Who knows who is sustaining whom?' Now I know that it was our son-in-law who supported us. We were living in the merit of his Torah." (Special thanks to Sheldon Wieder for his reminder of this story.) ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## **Jewish Geography**

A simple understanding of the crossing of the Yam Suf would be that this body of water was in-between Egypt and Eretz Yisroel (and/or Mt. Sinai), and had to be crossed – from one side to the other side – in order to get from one to the other. [That the Yam Suf is the Red Sea is indisputable, even if some try to suggest otherwise. Suffice it to say that the Yam Suf is given as an eastern boundary of Eretz Yisroel (Shemos 23:31; see Melachim I 9:26 and Rashi on Shemos 10:19), referring to the eastern fork of the Red Sea, i.e. the Gulf of Aqaba. We crossed the Gulf of Suez (the western fork), as evidenced by our coming out in מדבר שור (Shemos 15:22), which "faces Egypt" (Bereishis 25:18), southwest of Eretz Yisroel.] Several Rishonim (early commentators) are of the opinion that we didn't cross the Yam Suf from end-to-end, but came out on the same side we entered, travelling in a semi-circle (or three sides of a rectangle). And there were valid reasons why they thought so.

The Talmud (Arachin 15a) says that the Children of Israel were concerned that just as they had emerged from the sea on this side, the Egyptians had emerged (alive) on the other side, and could continue to chase them. Tosfos asks why they were concerned, since the Egyptians were stuck on the other side! Did they think G-d would perform a miracle for the Egyptians too, so

that they could cross the sea? Additionally, several stops after crossing the sea, the Children of Israel were back at the Yam Suf (Bamidbar 33:10). Why did they go back to the sea they had just crossed? To answer these questions, Tosfos suggests that the Yam Suf was south of both Eretz Yisroel and Egypt (and not between the two), and went from the west (near Egypt) to the east (south of Edom and Moav). The Children of Israel entered the sea on its northern side (near Egypt) and emerged on the same side farther east. They were concerned that the Egyptians had emerged elsewhere on the northern side of the sea, so could still chase them. As they travelled farther east – parallel to the sea on its northern side – they ended up on the coast once again. [Tosfos actually includes a map. However, the map is not the same in all editions of the Talmud; even the same publishers have "updated" the map over the years.]

Ibn Ezra (Shemos 14:17), Chizkuni (Shemos 14:22) and Radak (Tehillim 136:13, see also Shoftim 11:16) point out that we were in מדבר אתם before we crossed the sea (Shemos 13:20 and Bamidbar 33:6) and after we crossed it (Bamidbar 33:8; please note that מדבר אתם and מדבר שור are one and the same, see Ibn Ezra on Shemos 15:22). How could we have been in the same desert both before and after crossing the sea? Well, if we entered and exited on the same side, this is not an issue.

[We can add Rambam (Avos 5:4) to the list of Rishonim who say we crossed the Yam Suf in a semi-circle rather than from end-to-end, but keep in mind that he wrote his commentary on the Mishna earlier in his life, before he moved to Israel and then Egypt, so might have changed his mind.]

Despite these strong arguments, because we now know that the Yam Suf surrounds the Sinai Peninsula, there's no need to say we didn't cross it. [Bear in mind that G-d instructed us to make an about face (Shemos 14:2), going back to where we had previously been, in order to trick Pharaoh (14:3).] Our route can now be explained very simply: we travelled east past the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez (between the gulf and the Great Bitter Lake) into מדבר אתם before reversing ourselves and travelling west back to the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez (or beyond it), where we became "trapped" between the Egyptians and the sea. After crossing the sea – back to the eastern bank of the Gulf of Suez – we were in מדבר אתם once again, but concerned that the Egyptians may have emerged where they had entered, and could still chase us by travelling north of the gulf (as we had previously done). As far as why we were back at the Yam Suf a few stops later, we travelled south along the eastern coast of the Gulf of Suez to get to Mt. Sinai, which is in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula, or – for those who think Mt. Sinai is in Saudi Arabia – travelled across the Sinai Peninsula to the Gulf of Aqaba before moving past it.

You may have noticed that I suggested we returned to the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, rather than to the western side of the gulf; allow me to explain why. We were camped at (or near) Pi Hachiros before entering the sea (Shemos 14:9 and Bamidbar 33:8), called "Pi Hachiros" because it was the gateway to freedom for those trying to escape from Egypt (Midrash Lekach Tov and Midrash Seichel Tov). It makes more sense for this "gateway to freedom" to be north of the gulf; if it was on its western bank, one would still need to go around the northern tip before being free. [It would also explain why the deity located there was called "Baal Tz'fon" – the Baal (deity) of the north – as it was near the northernmost part of the gulf.] Since we were camped near Pi Hachiros, we would have been on the shore of the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, and crossed the sea from the north to the east (diagonally, moving southeast), emerging back at מדבר אתם. Please note, though, that even if we went back to the western bank of the Gulf of Suez, the issues raised by the Rishonim have still been fully addressed, and we could have crossed the Yam Suf from one side to the other side. ©2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

## Cross-Currents

**O**ur ancestors' wondering "Is Hashem in our midst or not?" is followed immediately in the Torah by Amalek's attack (Shemos 17: 7-8). The word expressing Klal Yisrael's existential doubt -- "or not?" -- is ayin, which can also be translated "isn't," "not there," or "nothing."

It's a word that we find in a seemingly different context in Koheles (3:19), where Shlomo Hamelech says that u'mosar ha'adam min habeheima ayin -- "and the superiority of man over animal is nothing."

Which, as it happens, well encapsulates Amalek's philosophy. Famously, its name in gematria equals safek, doubt, which reflects Amalek's conviction that human life is meaningless, just the yield of random evolution, that there is in fact no essential difference between people and animals; and, thus, that there is no ultimate meaning to human life.

That sentiment, of course, isn't Shlomo's true conviction; he concludes Koheles with the statement that "kol ha'adam" -- the essence of man" -- is reverence for Hashem and fulfillment of His directives. The "no difference" pasuk is an unwarranted cry of exasperation, not a description of final fact.

I remember seeing a worthy thought about what that word ayin in the Koheles pasuk might hint at, rendering it not an uninformed cry but, rather, a statement of deep truth.

The first time the word ayin is used in the Torah is in the sentence: vi'adam ayin la'avod es ha'adama -- "and man was not yet there to work the land" (Beraishis 2:5).

As Rashi explains, for the first vegetation to emerge, there needed to be rain, and rain would only arrive when there was a consciousness that could appreciate it as a divine gift. The "working" of the land, the avodah alluded to, was thus avodas haleiv, the "work of the heart" -- a recognition and declaration of gratitude.

And so, the "difference between man and animal" may in fact be precisely "ayin" -- namely, what the word hints at in Beraishis: awareness of Hashem and gratitude for His benevolence, which only conscious human beings can feel and express. ©2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

**RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

## Never Despair

**“S**o G-d turned the people toward the way of the wilderness to the Reed Sea." (Shemos 13:18) Remarkably, a midrash (Shemos Rabbah 20:18) derives from this pasuk that "even the poorest person in Israel should not eat without leaning." Now, beyond the similarity between the word for G-d "turned"/ vayasev and the word for leaning/haseiva, there is no connection that comes to mind between the side-trip to the Reed Sea and the correct posture for someone at a Pesach seder. What is this all about?

Earlier, when Moshe took word of the coming redemption to the Bnei Yisrael, he was singularly unsuccessful in eliciting any buy-in by the people. "They did not heed Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard work." (Shemos 6:9) This explanation seems both inadequate and counterintuitive. Their misery ought to have made them even more receptive to a herald of freedom.

Giving people hope is a wonderful thing. A person whose suffering has a grim forecast for improvement craves encouragement. Tell him about people who've faced similar challenges and prevailed, and he's all ears! He desperately wants to believe that there is still hope for him. Give him the opportunity to hope, and he'll grab it.

But don't overdo it. Tell a person who feels entirely defeated and diminished that not only is there hope for him, but he is destined to become a universally acknowledged celebrity, and he will assume that you are either crazy, or pulling his leg. Laid low by his misery, he cannot relate at all to promises of future greatness. He will not take the forecast seriously.

This is exactly what happened to the Bnei Yisrael. At the beginning of parshas Vaeira, (Shemos 6:6-7) Hashem shared with Moshe the different expressions of redemption, including a triumphant entry into a Promised Land. This was far more than they could wrap their heads around. They therefore dismissed Moshe's words. Accordingly, Moshe complained to Hashem, "The Bnei Yisrael have not listened to me. How, then, will Paroh?" (Shemos 6:12) When I demand that he release all his slaves, he will cynically counter,

"Really? Are they all on board with that? If they don't heed your words, why should I? (Hashem accepted Moshe's point. The very next pasuk sets forth the mission statement of Moshe and Aharon: taking the Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. There is no mention of anything beyond the alleviation of their misery. This was a message that they could listen to, and feel consoled by. Talk of entering Israel would wait till a future date.)

People can be so crushed by their circumstances, that they cannot relate to anything optimistic at all. They sink into complete despair. If ever there were circumstances that could spawn such despair, they were those of the Bnei Yisrael at the Yam Suf. The waters stood before them. They could hear the approach of horsemen and chariots behind them. To the sides -- only desolate wilderness. It looked like the end.

From the depths of despair, Hashem redeemed them. They were taught thereby never to despair; that Divine compassion and intercession could be sought in seemingly hopeless circumstances. In fact, it was to teach them this lesson that Hashem "turned the people toward the way of the wilderness to the Reed Sea." There, He would demonstrate that help could be forthcoming in the worst of situations.

Each year at the Seder we recall Hashem's intercession in Egypt and at the Yam. Everyone leans at the table like elegant noblemen, even at times that we are downtrodden, persecuted. Even the poorest of the poor acts like a privileged member of the royal court. Because we all are. And we now realize that Hashem's turning the people towards the Reed Sea directly generated our practice of leaning at the Seder.

Exactly like the midrash suggests. © 2024 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein and torah.org

### SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

“**H**ashem said to Moshe, 'Pass before the people...'" (17:5) Rashi z"l explains: In the previous verse Moshe Rabbeinu said, "Soon they will stone me." Therefore Hashem said, "Pass before the people.' See if they will in fact stone you."

R' Shlomo Wolbe z"l (1914-2005) comments: Surely Moshe was not exaggerating; he must have had a genuine fear that he would be stoned. Nevertheless, Hashem was displeased with his choice of words.

The midrash Bereishit Rabbah states: "Better the anger of the Patriarchs than the humility of the children." Regarding Yaakov Avinu we read (Bereishit 31:36), "Then Yaakov became angered and he took up his grievance with Lavan; Yaakov spoke up and said to Lavan, 'What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me?'" When our Patriarch Yaakov became angry, he spoke humbly, "What is my sin?" In contrast, when Moshe felt threatened, he spoke accusingly, "Soon they will stone me." Similarly, King David is criticized for saying to Yehonatan (Shmuel I

20:1), "What have I done? What is my transgression and what is my sin before your father [King Shaul] that he seeks my life?" David did not have to express openly the fact that King Shaul wanted to kill him. Hashem doesn't want to hear criticisms of His people even when they are true. (Shiurei Chumash)

A related thought: R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) writes: The great love that we love our nation does not blind us or prevent us from inspecting its faults. Even so, even after the most independent examination, we find its essence to be free of any blemish. "You are completely beautiful, My beloved, and there is no blemish in you" [Shir Ha'shirim 4:7].

R' Kook continues: Any statement in the Written Torah or Oral Torah that could weaken a Jew's love for the Jewish People, even for the completely wicked, is a test--a challenge to a person to increase his love of Hashem until he finds a path through the seeming contradictions, so that his love for the Jewish People and for all of G-d's creations will be alive and sustained in his heart with no doubts. (Orot Yisrael 4:3-4)

R' Zvi Yisrael Tau shlita (rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Hamor) explains: R' Kook is describing a love for the Jewish People that is not based on specific good deeds, but rather on an appreciation of the Jewish People's essence. Such love is not blind to the Jewish People's sins; rather, it is pained sevenfold by every spiritual blemish precisely because such blemishes are foreign to the Jewish People. (L'emunat Eetainu V p.10)

R' Nachman of Breslov z"l (1772-1810) writes: The saddest thing is when the holy Jewish Nation falls into sin, G-d forbid. The worst suffering in the world is nothing compared to the heavy burden of sin. Anyone who appreciates the holiness of the Jewish People, who knows where their souls come from, understands that the Jewish People are inherently distant from sin. Therefore, there is no heavier burden for a Jew to carry than the burden of sin. (Likutei Moharan II 7:3) © 2015 S. Katz & torah.org

