

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

“That day, God saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians...The Israelites saw the great power God had displayed against the Egyptians, and the people were in awe of God. They believed in God and in his servant Moses. Moses and the Israelites then sang this song, saying."

The Song at the Sea was one of the great epiphanies of history. The sages said that even the humblest of Jews saw at that moment what even the greatest of prophets was not privileged to see. For the first time they broke into collective song - a song we recite every day. There is a fascinating discussion among the sages as to how exactly they sang. On this, there were four opinions. Three appear in the tractate of Sotah: Our rabbis taught: On that day Rabbi Akiva expounded: When the Israelites came up from the Red Sea, they wanted to sing a song. How did they sing it? Like an adult who reads the Hallel and they respond after him with the leading word. Moses said, I will sing to the Lord, and they responded, I will sing to the Lord. Moses said, For He has triumphed gloriously, and they responded, I will sing to the Lord.

R. Eliezer son of R. Jose the Galilean said: It was like a child who reads the Hallel and they repeat after him all that he says. Moses said, I will sing to the Lord, and they responded, I will sing to the Lord. Moses said, For He has triumphed gloriously, and they responded, For He has triumphed gloriously.

R. Nehemiah said: It was like a schoolteacher who recites the Shema in the synagogue. He begins first and they respond after him. (Sotah 30b)

According to Rabbi Akiva, Moses sang the song phrase by phrase, and after each phrase the people responded, I will sing to the Lord - their way, as it were, of saying Amen to each line.

According to R. Eliezer son of R. Jose the Galilean, Moses recited the song phrase by phrase, and they repeated each phrase after he had said it.

According to Rabbi Nehemiah, Moses and the people sang the whole song together. Rashi explains that all the people were seized by divine inspiration and miraculously, the same words came into their minds at the same time.

There is a fourth view, found in the Mekhilta: Eliezer ben Taddai said, Moses began and the Israelites

repeated what he had said and then completed the verse. Moses began by saying, I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously, and the Israelites repeated what he had said, and then completed the verse with him, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and its rider He hurled into the sea. Moses began saying, The Lord is my strength and my song, and the Israelites repeated and then completed the verse with him, saying, The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. Moses began saying, The Lord is a warrior, and the Israelites repeated and then completed the verse with him, saying, The Lord is a warrior, Lord is His name. (Mekhilta Beshallah Parshah 1)

Technically, as the Talmud explains, the sages are debating the implication of the (apparently) superfluous words *vayomru lemor*, "they said, saying", which they understood to mean "repeating". What did the Israelites repeat? For R. Akiva it was the first words of the song only, which they repeated as a litany. For R. Eliezer son of R. Jose the Galilean they repeated the whole song, phrase by phrase. For R. Nehemiah they recited the entire song in unison. For R. Eliezer ben Taddai they repeated the opening phrase of each line, but then completed the whole verse without Moses having to teach it to them.

Read thus, we have before us a localised debate on the meaning of a biblical verse. There is, however, a deeper issue at stake. To understand this, we must look at another Talmudic passage, on the face of it unrelated to the passage in Sotah. It appears in the tractate of Kiddushin, and poses a fascinating question. There are various people we are commanded to honour: a parent, a teacher (i.e. a rabbi), the Nasi, (religious head of the Jewish community), and a king. Many any of these four types renounce the honour that is their due?

R. Isaac ben Shila said in the name of R. Mattana, in the name of R. Hisda: If a father renounces the honour due to him, it is renounced, but if a rabbi renounces the honour due to him it is not renounced. R. Joseph ruled: Even if a rabbi renounces his honour, it is renounced...

R. Ashi said: Even on the view that a rabbi may renounce his honour, if a Nasi renounces his honour, the renunciation is invalid...

Rather, if was stated, it was stated thus: Even on the view that a Nasi may renounce his honour, yet a king may not renounce his honour, as it is said, You shall

surely set a king over you, meaning, his authority should be over you. (Kiddushin 32 a-b)

Each of these people exercises a leadership role: father to son, teacher to disciple, Nasi to the community and king to the nation. Analysed in depth, the passages makes it clear that these four roles occupy different places on the spectrum between authority predicated on the person and authority vested in the holder of an office. The more the relationship is personal, the more easily honour can be renounced. At one extreme is the role of a parent (intensely personal), at the other that of king (wholly official).

I suggest that this was the issue at stake in the argument over how Moses and the Israelites sang the Song at the Sea. For R. Akiva, Moses was like a king. He spoke, and the people merely answered Amen (in this case, the words "I will sing to the Lord"). For R. Eliezer son of R. Jose the Galilean, he was like a teacher. Moses spoke, and the Israelites repeated, phrase by phrase, what he had said. For R. Nehemiah, he was like a Nasi among his rabbinical colleagues (the passage in Kiddushin, which holds that a Nasi may renounce his honour, makes it clear that this is only among his fellow rabbis). The relationship was collegial: Moses began, but thereafter, they sung in unison. For R. Eliezer ben Taddai Moses was like a father. He began, but allowed the Israelites to complete each verse. This is the great truth about parenthood, made clear in the first glimpse we have of Abraham: Terach took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. (Bereishith 31:11)

Abraham completed the journey his father began. To be a parent is to want one's children to go further than you did. That too, for R. Eliezer ben Taddai, was Moses' relationship to the Israelites.

The prelude to the Song at the Sea states that the people "believed in God and in his servant Moses" - the first time they are described as believing in Moses' leadership. On this, the sages asked: What is it to be a leader of the Jewish people? Is it to hold official authority, of which the supreme example is a king ("The rabbis are called kings")? Is it to have the kind of personal relationship with one's followers that rests not on honour and deference but on encouraging people to grow, accept responsibility and continue the journey you have begun? Or is it something in between?

There is no single answer. At times, Moses asserted his authority (during the Korach rebellion). At others, he expressed the wish that "all God's people were prophets". Judaism is a complex faith. There is no one Torah model of leadership. We are each called on to fill a number of leadership roles: as parents, teachers, friends, team-members and team-leaders. There is no doubt, however, that Judaism favours as an ideal the role of parent, encouraging those we lead to continue the

journey we have begun, and go further than we did. A good leader creates followers. A great leader creates leaders. That was Moses' greatest achievement - that he left behind him a people willing, in each generation, to accept responsibility for taking further the great task he had begun. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Hashem said to Moshe, "Stretch your hand upon the sea, and the waters shall return upon Egypt, on their chariots and their riders." (Shemos 10:6) When people learn the story of Moshe splitting the sea, they often imagine that he raised his arms and the water split, and then when he lowered them, the water came crashing down. Perhaps this is a carryover from the subsequent story about the war with Amalek, where the Jews overpowered the enemy when Moshe's hands were raised, but when they were lowered, and the Jews stopped looking to Heaven, Amalek seemed to become more victorious.

Here, however, the waters remained standing like a vast wall, until Moshe directed them to fall upon the enemy and drown them. The Malbim says that nature changed at this time. Just as previously it was the nature of water to fall and be affected by gravity, now it was the nature of the world for the water to remain upright.

Therefore, when Moshe raised his arm, signaling the water to revert to its previous state, he performed a miracle of changing nature which was just as great as that which had taken place with the water standing upright. Since he was changing the nature, it required the direct intervention of Hashem to make it happen, and it was He who directed Moshe to raise his arm.

Others explain that scoffers argued Moshe wasn't special. It was his "magic wand," the staff he wielded, which contained mystical powers and had anyone else held it, they, too, could have performed wonders. Therefore, Hashem commanded Moshe, "Raise up your staff from your hand, and stretch your arm upon the waters." He wanted Moshe to show the world that it was his holiness and devotion to Hashem which empowered him to perform miracles.

There is one other idea we'd like to suggest, before tying these ideas all together. Yes, when it was time to enable the Jews to cross safely through the sea, Moshe lifted his hands as Hashem directed him. When Moshe lifted his hands, Hashem made a strong wind blow which caused the water to stand at attention. After the Jews crossed, it was time for the retribution to occur.

Nevertheless, Moshe refused to act on this without Hashem's command. He understood that he was to do something to cause the Egyptians to drown, but did

not want to be the decisor or perpetrator of this act. Only when Hashem directed him to take action, would he do so.

What we see from the miracles of splitting the sea and bringing it back together is that Hashem is willing and ready to empower His people with the ability to do amazing, powerful, miraculous things. He enables them to become superhuman, and control the forces of nature almost like Hashem, Himself. However, the way this occurs is that the people so empowered have connected themselves to Hashem and subjugated their will for His.

The greatest miracle of life is that Hashem loves us and pays attention to us. Through this, He enables us to do more and be more than we ever thought possible. If we focus on doing Hashem's will, He will give us the power to work wonders, and be His partner in it all.

The Brisker Rov once lent a man a not-inconsiderable amount of money. When the time for repayment arrived, the man did not have the money and was ashamed to come to the Rov for an extension. He avoided him for some time but since the Brisker Rov never mentioned it again, he assumed the Rov had forgotten. He relaxed and waited until he was able to repay the loan.

When that time came, he approached the Brisker Rov with a slightly sheepish smile on his face. "I'm sure the Rov doesn't remember," he said "but a while ago you lent me money, and I am here to repay the loan."

"Not remember?!" exclaimed the sage. "Of course, I remembered. There are two ways to walk from my home to the Bais HaMidrash. The shorter way gets me there faster but takes me past your house, while the longer way is quite circuitous but does not pass your home.

Since the day I lent you the money, I have taken the longer way so as to avoid the issur of appearing demanding. I went out of my way to make you comfortable in borrowing the money and thus lend properly. I did not forget about the money, but neither did I forget about you." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"This is my God ve-anveihu, my father's God, and I will exalt Him." (Exodus 15:2) What is the best way to give thanks to God? As the walls of the sea come crashing down on the elite Egyptian chariots, and the Israelites realize that the Egyptians will never be able to attack or subjugate them again, a spontaneous song of gratitude and praise bursts forth. The Shira is Israel's magnificent cry of religious awe, an acknowledgment of God's "great hand" (Ex. 14:31) and direct involvement with their destiny.

To say that the Israelites were grateful would be a gross understatement. The accepted custom in most

synagogues throughout the world, and for virtually all of Jewish history, is for everyone to rise when the Shira (Song of Praise at the Reed Sea) is read from the Bible. That Shabbat is known as Shabbat Shira. Every single day observant Jews recite the Shira, because it is included in the "Verses of Song" with which the morning prayer liturgy begins. The language of the Shira is highly charged and intense. The climactic exclamation of Israelite adoration and commitment is obscured by one word which is difficult to translate: "This is my God ve-anveihu, my father's God, and I will exalt Him" (Ex. 15:2).

What does "ve-anveihu" mean?

Targum Onkelos translates the phrase as "This is my God, and I shall build a Temple for Him," "naveh" (from ve-anveihu) being the Hebrew word for home. Rashi prefers "This is my God, and I shall declare His beauty and praises [in prayer]," "na'eh" or "noy" (from ve-anveihu) being the Hebrew word for beauty and goodness. An anonymous Talmudic sage builds on the same verb root as Rashi, but gives it a somewhat different twist: "This is my God, and I shall beautify [His commandments before] Him by serving Him with a beautiful sukka, a beautiful shofar." (Shabbat 133b)

The opposing Talmudic view, in the name of Abba Shaul, divides the Hebrew into two words: I and Thou – ani ve-hu – turning the verse into a ringing endorsement of proper ethical conduct: "This is my God, and I shall be like Him: Just as He is compassion-ate and loving, so must I be compassionate and loving..." (ibid.)

These four views may be seen as an ascending order of commitment. The first opinion has the Israelites commit to building a temple for God. The second view, sensitive to the fact that an external structure says nothing about the nature of the spirituality within it, insists that the Jews declare their intent "to declare God's beauty and praise to all of those who enter the world" (Rashi, ad loc.), in other words, to publicly pray to Him. The third level is not satisfied with prayers alone, but prefers a whole panoply of adorned rituals. The final position maintains that the most important issue is not what we build, what we pray, or even what we do; it is rather who we are – the personality and character which make up our essential being – that really counts.

Perhaps there is an even deeper level to this difference of opinion. The Midrash Mekhilta (chapter 3), cited by Rashi (ad loc.), mystifyingly declares that a lowly maidservant at the moment of the splitting of the Red Sea had a deeper vision of the divine than even the great mystical prophet of the supernal chariot (ma'aseh merkavah), Ezekiel the son of Buzi. The sages of the Talmud make another comparison involving Ezekiel, when they declare: "To whom may Ezekiel be compared? To a town dweller. To whom may Isaiah be compared? To a city dweller." (Hagiga 13b)

I heard a fascinating interpretation of this statement in the name of Rabbi Isaac Bernstein. When

a city dweller from London, for example, has an appointment in New York, they go straight to the agreed-upon point of rendezvous. They are oblivious to the tall buildings and impressive plazas they are used to seeing at home anyway. Not so the unsophisticated town dweller. They are liable to become so distracted by the novelty of big-city architecture that they can miss their meeting altogether.

Isaiah and Ezekiel both have uplifting visions of divine splendor. Isaiah, the prophet of the Land of Israel, is likened to the city dweller who, used to living with spirituality all the time, goes straight to the heart of his vision: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is filled with His glory." (Isaiah 6:3)

Ezekiel, on the other hand, lives in Babylon, and is therefore compared to the town dweller. He is so wonder-struck by his exalted picture of the divine that he seems to get lost in the myriad of details. Verse after verse describes the angels, the merkavah (mystical chariot), the accoutrements, with no mention of the Divine Presence itself, as it were.

From this perspective, the miraculous experience of the maid-servant at the Red Sea enabled her, Isaiah-like, to have an even deeper perception than Ezekiel; she got straight to the central core of the issue when she declared "This is my God." She did not get distracted by the details surrounding the divine.

How are we to serve God in order to come closer to His essence, and to benefit from the divine sparks themselves? What can we learn from the vision and understanding of the Israelites at the Red Sea to help us in our quest for the divine? How can we offer thanks, and get close to God? If indeed the key word is "ve-anveihu," then the Targum says that we ought to build a Temple for Him. But many individuals get so caught up in the engineering and aesthetic facets of the external structure that they lose sight of the spiritual *raison d'être*. Look at any synagogue building committee and you know what I mean! Rashi says that we get close to God by praying to Him and singing His praises. How many synagogue attendees truly take prayer seriously, considering that they are in a house of God and not a social center? I generally define a proper synagogue as one in which the Almighty Himself would feel comfortable praying. With the exception of specific prayers at special moments, I am not sure I have ever davened in such a place!

The anonymous sage suggests that we must beautify the rituals we use in our divine service. Sadly enough, many people devote a great deal of energy to punctiliously observing every jot and tittle of Jewish law and custom, but neglect the God and Godliness which is supposed to be the purpose behind all their rituals. They simply miss the forest for the trees.

The Hafetz Haim makes the following analogy. A man sees his house burning. He rushes into the flames, emerging with pajamas, a woolen bathrobe and toys to comfort his baby daughter during the cold night

outdoors. "But where is your child?" cry out the anxious onlookers. The father was so obsessed with the paraphernalia that he forgot his daughter. So it is with many Jews, adept at every detail in their observance of the rituals, while they seemingly forget the God of love and compassion in Whose name they perform the commandments in the first place.

To this end, along comes Abba Shaul: "This is my God and I shall be like Him." If I am to truly serve Him, I dare never lose sight of His compassion and loving-kindness, and must adopt those traits as the infrastructure of my character and everyday activities. Only in such a way do I succeed at uncovering the divine essence.

From this perspective, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch gives the most meaningful and all-inclusive interpretation to the word "ve-anveihu" when he translates the verse as "This is my God, and I shall become His house": My body and my very being must become His dwelling place, the physical receptacle which expresses His will. Hirsch is saying that from the moment an individual wakes up in the morning to the last second before they go to sleep at night, their entire being, their total consciousness, must become a dwelling place for God and a living expression of the divine essential qualities. A person's very self and being, their every word and action, become the vehicle, or merkava, of the divine. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Shemot: Defining a Nation, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinShemot. © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l

Wein Online

Victories and triumphs inevitably are followed by letdowns, frustrations and sometimes even disappointments. The high point of the story of the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt is recorded in this week's parsha with the eternal song of Moshe and Israel at the Reed Sea. The exultation of Israel at seeing its hated oppressors destroyed at its feet knew no bounds. It is as though its wildest dreams of success and achievement were now fulfilled and realized. However, almost immediately the people of Israel, faced with the problems of the real world which seemingly never disappear no matter how great the previous euphoria may have been, turn sullen and rebellious. Food, water, shelter all are lacking. And even when Moshe provides for them the necessary miracles that are required for minimum sustenance in the desert of Sinai, their mood of foreboding and pessimism is not easily dispelled.

And this mood is heightened by the sudden unprovoked attack of Amalek against the people of Israel. Again, Amalek is defeated by Yehoshua and Moshe but the mere fact that such an attack occurred so

soon after the events of the Exodus, has a disheartening effect upon the people. The moment of absolute physical triumph is not to be repeated in the story of Israel in the Sinai desert. But physically speaking, the experience of the desert of Sinai will hardly be a thrilling one for Israel. So, it is with all human and national victories. Once the euphoria settles down, the problems and frustrations begin.

In relating the miracle of the sweetening of the waters at Marah, the Torah teaches us that “there did the Lord place before them laws and justice and there did He test them.” There are many interpretations in Midrash, Talmud and rabbinic literature as to what those “laws and justice” were. But it is certainly correct to say that the main “laws and justice” that were taught to Israel at Marah was that the problems of life go on even after miraculous victories and great achievements. Victories bring high if sometimes unrealistic expectations. Measured realistic response and realistic assessments are necessary to harvest the fruits of such victories.

The less grandiose our expectations are the less painful our disappointments become. The generation of the descendants of those who left Egypt, who were now accustomed to the grueling challenges of the desert and who had not shared in the euphoria of the destruction of the Egyptian oppressor, were much better equipped to deal with the realities entailed in conquering the Land of Israel and establishing Jewish sovereignty and society there. Our times have also witnessed great and unforeseen accomplishments here in Israel. But because of that very success, we are often given over to disappointment and frustration at the current unsolved problems that still face us. We would all wish to sing a great song of exultation and triumph over our enemies and problems. With God’s help, we may yet be able to do so. Yet until then we would be wise to attempt to deal with our realities and problems in a moderate, practical and wise fashion. © 2026 Rabbi B. Wein zt”l - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

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Preparation

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Numerous 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 DAVID LEVIN

Thus Sang Moshe

After Moshe and the B’nei Yisrael crossed the Red (Reed) Sea on dry land, and watched the Egyptians and their chariots drowned in the waters, Moshe led the people in a song of praise and thanks to Hashem. The Song is too long to quote here, but we will deal with various sentences and groups of sentences to see the power of this song and its place in our daily lives.

HaRav Yehudah Nachshoni outlines the Song of Moshe, which is also called Shirat Hayam, the Song of the Sea: “Verses 1-5 praise Hashem for His miraculous punishment of the Egyptians who were drowned in the sea. Verse 8 then goes back to an earlier event, telling of the waters that piled up, standing upright like a wall, and of the enemy’s plot to pursue Israel and divide up spoils.” HaRav Nachshoni continues, “The second half of the song deals with what will occur after the drowning, when all the nations hear what happened and tremble, and Hashem leads His nation to His holy Sanctuary. It ends with several verses of prayer.”

The first words of this song are “Az yashir Moshe uv’nei Yisrael et hashira hazot laHshem, Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang this song to Hashem.” There are two grammatical incongruities found in this

introductory phrase: (1) the verb is singular, but it refers to Moshe and the Children singing, and (2) the verb is in the future tense but translated as past tense. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch picks up on this problem. The word “az” which is usually translated as “then” comes from the word *chaza* which is “seeing in your mind something invisible, far off (and) transposes the thoughts away from the present to make you see an event which occurred at some other period, past or future, actually in the process of happening. The tense is accordingly chosen, not which would be in accordance with the time of relating, but which is suitable for the period of the happening itself.”

The Torah continues, “Hashem’s strength and power to eradicate has been a salvation for me.” Rashi points out that Hashem revealed Himself to the people at the crossing of the sea, and “even the mere slavewoman saw at the sea that which prophets did not see.” The Hebrew term in this sentence uses “*azi*, His strength.” The Ramban explains that *ibn Ezra* tied this word to “*zimra*, song,” rendering the translation “Hashem is my strength and song.” This indicates that Hashem’s strength, exhibited at the sea, caused this spontaneous outbreak of song. The *Kli Yakar* indicates that the word “*oz*, strength” is a sign of “*din*, strict judgment without mercy.” The term “*Ka* (the first two letters of the Tetragrammaton which is Hashem),” is the characteristic of mercy. The *Kli Yakar* states that righteous people can change strict judgment to mercy, whereas wicked people change mercy into strict judgment. He also states that a righteous person will also be happy receiving strict judgment instead of mercy because he values Hashem’s Truth even when it he receives punishment.

Moshe’s song continued, “This is my G-d and I will beautify Him; the Elokim of my father, and I will exalt Him.” HaAmek Davar explains that in this phrase, Moshe pointed out that the people who exited Egypt with him survived through the name of Hashem (Mercy), but the generation of his father(s) lived under the name of Elokim (Judgment). This was a restatement of Hashem’s words in Parashat Vaeira, “I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’akov as Keil Shakai (the Almighty G-d, similar to Elokim), but through My name Hashem I did not become known to them.” The Forefathers were able to be judged without Mercy, but the generation that accompanied Moshe were not worthy of being judged without Mercy. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin adds that Hashem not only saved the B’nei Yisrael, but He performed miracles as they crossed which included sweet water to drink, in order that they should realize how pleasant the mitzvot are that they would receive later.

The Torah continues, “With the breath of Your nostrils the waters piled up; like a wall stood the running water; the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.” The Ohr HaChaim explains that Hashem performed three separate actions in the sea: (1) He piled

up the waters, (2) He blocked the running waters with a Wall, and (3) He caused the deep waters to congeal. Rashi points out that the verse speaks in anthropomorphic terms (Hashem’s nostrils) even though we are careful to dismiss any idea that Hashem is corporeal. Rashi states that when a person is angry, wind comes out of his nostrils. His breath is short. When his anger subsides, his breath lengthens. While the Bal HaTurim and the Rashbam associate this breath with the wind that stood the waters as a Wall to allow dry land to appear, others emphasize that this verse was more interested in demonstrating Hashem’s anger.

After the crossing, it was time to return the waters and drown the Egyptians. “The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake and divide spoils; my soul shall be filled with them, I will draw my sword, my hand will impoverish them.’ You blew with Your wind – the sea enshrouded them; the mighty sank deep like lead in water.” HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the Egyptians did not say anything about killing the Jews because that was never their intention. The Egyptians wished to force the B’nei Yisrael to return to Egypt where they would resume their servitude to Par’ao. Par’ao’s first act would be to take back all of the gifts given to the B’nei Yisrael, whom they had feared. But Par’ao also assumed that the B’nei Yisrael would go into the wilderness for two days and return to slavery on the third day. When Par’ao realized that Moshe had no intention of bringing the Jews back to him, he understood that he would have to forcefully cause them to return on his own.

The final section of this song is a promise of the future: “You will bring them and implant them on the mount of Your heritage, a foundation for Your dwelling place that You, Hashem, have made – a Sanctuary, my Lord, that Your hands established. Hashem shall reign for all eternity.” It is appropriate that the Song should conclude with the building of the Temple and the words that Hashem will reign forever. Rabbeinu Bachyai points out that the eighteen sentences of the Song correspond to the eighteen vertebrae in the spine. This song, which is recited every day in our morning prayers, enables us to stand firm and proud as Jews. May we serve Hashem each day, standing tall while remembering how Hashem saved us so that we might serve Him through His commandments. © 2026 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

Stripped of all of history’s dross, the fundamental struggle of humanity is between two views: The recognition of a Creator (and the resultant meaningfulness of human life) and the belief that life is the product of mere chance and, hence, essentially pointless. It is the worldview-struggle between Klal Yisrael and Amalek, introduced at the end of this week’s parsha in a military showdown.

We read how the Amalekites attacked the Jews

after our ancestors' exodus from Egypt, and how Moshe Rabbeinu, from a distance, influenced the course of the battle. "When Moshe lifted his arm, Yisrael was stronger; and when he lowered his arm, Amalek was stronger." (Shemos 17:11)

The name Amalek, whose final letter is "kuf," can be parsed as "amal kof" -- the "toil of a monkey." (Kuf and kof are spelled identically, and kof meaning monkey is found, in its plural form, in Melachim I, 10:22 and in Divrei Hayamim II, 9:21.)

Ki adam l'amal yulad -- "For man is born to toil" (Iyov, 5:7). We humans are here l'amal, for toil, to work to rise above our base natures and serve our Creator according to His will. Our lives have ultimate meaning. This is the credo of Yisrael. © 2026 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA
HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN

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The first place that Bnei Yisrael reach after leaving Egypt is Mara: "They came to Mara, and they were not able to drink the water from Mara for it was bitter; therefore the place was called Mara" (Shemot 15:23). Further on, we read, "There He made for them a statute and judgment, and there He tried them" (15:25). It is not clear what exactly happened in Mara, and why this place is so important that specifically here we are told that God "tried" Bnei Yisrael. Mara appears, at first, no different from all the other places where Bnei Yisrael encamped on their way to Eretz Yisrael; indeed, in the list of the stations in parashat Masei, Mara appears alongside the other place names -- Kivrot ha-Ta'ava, Sukkot, Refidim, etc. -- with no indication of anything special.

However, closer inspection reveals that there is a difference between the complaint that is recounted to us here and all the other complaints that we encounter during the course of the desert wanderings. In every other complaint, we find, at some stage, an expression of the desire to return to Egypt: "We remember the fish that we ate freely in Egypt" (Bamidbar 11:5); "If only we could have died by God's hand in Egypt" (ibid. 14:2); "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt" (ibid. 14:4). At Mara there is no mention or threat, on Bnei Yisrael's part, of returning to Egypt.

What is the significance of this detail? To answer this question, we must address a different one. The Midrash tells us that Bnei Yisrael, enslaved in Egypt, had reached the 49 th level of impurity, but had not yet reached the 50 th level, and therefore the Holy One was still able to redeem them. What was this 50 th level, which Bnei Yisrael had not attained? It is difficult for us to know what the 26 th or 42 nd level were, but it seems

that the 50 th level -- the point from which there would be no return -- can be known. The case from which we deduce this level is the famous story (Avoda Zara 17a) about R. Elazar ben Dordaya, its message being that "It (i.e. repentance) depends only on me." In other words, as long as a person genuinely wants to return to God, to do teshuva, the possibility exists for him to do so.

We know that in Egypt Bnei Yisrael were engaged in idolatry, as described by the prophet Yechezkel (chapter 20). Nevertheless, two things would appear to separate this 49 th level of impurity -- which characterized Bnei Yisrael -- and the 50 th level, which they did not attain. The first is family purity: when the family is no longer pure and Bnei Yisrael are assimilated amongst and merged with the Egyptians, then, technically, there is no nation to redeem; everyone would be non-Jews or mamzerim. This, however, is merely a technical point. The more fundamental difference between the state of Bnei Yisrael on the 49 th level of impurity and the final, irreversible step was that there remained a will to be redeemed. So long as Bnei Yisrael were not reconciled to their suffering, to their status as a nation of slaves, there was still hope for their redemption. And this they did not relinquish.

We may say, then, that the test of Bnei Yisrael at Mara was precisely this: were they still at the 49 th level, and capable of receiving the Torah and being redeemed, or had they reached the 50 th level -- an irreversible and irredeemable state? The fact that, despite their demand for water, they did not express any desire to return to Egypt proved that they passed this test.

In order to understand more deeply what happened at Mara, we must pay attention to the parallel between the episode of Mara and the procedure prescribed for a "sota" -- a married woman suspected of adultery. In the latter case, the Name of God is inscribed and then blotted out in the water; if the woman is guilty, the water becomes bitter. At Mara, the water was bitter to begin with; according to the Midrash, a branch was inscribed with God's Name and cast into the water, and it became drinkable.

What exactly happens to a woman who is a sota, and who drinks the water? We are not speaking here of a person who is above suspicion. Yechezkel describes a sota and it is clear that she has been with a man other than her husband, and has already been warned once; the question here is simply whether she went "all the way" or stopped herself at the last moment before being defiled. The procedure is not meant to clarify whether she is virtuous and her loyalty to her husband is above question; she is clearly very close to deviation from marital fidelity, and what the Torah wants to establish is whether she is still able to do teshuva, or whether her actions have led to a situation where there is no possibility of return.

In a certain sense, as we have explained, this

was the situation of Bnei Yisrael at Mara, where they had to pass a test and show whether or not they had reached the point of no return. The fact that the water became sweet -- paralleling the water given to the sota remaining sweet -- showed that there was still hope. Clearly, the nation here was not assumed to be pious and of great righteousness; nevertheless, the fact that the water did not remain bitter demonstrated that the path to teshuva was still open.

The final point we must clarify is the significance of the conclusion of the section on Mara: "If you will listen diligently to Me, to observe My commandments, My statutes and My teachings, all the diseases that I placed upon Egypt -- I shall not place upon you, for I am the Lord, your Healer" (Shemot 15:26). Usually, conditions are presented in the opposite manner: if you do such-and-such, you will receive X, if you do not, you will suffer Y. Here, however, the promise is only that if you do such-and-such, you will not suffer Y. What is the meaning of this formulation? God gives no incentive here at all; all He tells us is that whoever observes the Torah will not suffer!

This question is such a deeply perplexing one that we are forced to propose a sort of "chesurei mechasra" -- something is missing and we will fill it in. In Sefer Devarim, we find the covenant forged on the Plains of Moav, and there the conditions are formulated in the way we would have expected to find them set out here. "It will be, if you listen diligently to Me" (Devarim 28:1) -- the introduction is exactly the same as in our case, but then we find a list of blessings that Bnei Yisrael will enjoy if they follow God. Only afterwards does the Torah go on to say, "But if you will not listen to Me" (Devarim 28:15) -- and then describes the curses that will befall those "who do not observe the words of this covenant." A review of these curses reveals that they are an exact parallel to the plagues of Egypt: "You will grope about at noon, as the blind grope about in darkness" (Devarim 28:29); "God will strike you with pestilence" (Devarim 28:21); "God will place among you all the evil illnesses of Egypt" (Devarim 28:60); and ultimately, "God will return you to Egypt in ships, in the direction that I told you that you would not see again, and you shall be sold there as slaves and as maidservants, and none shall buy" (Devarim 28:68). In other words, this is precisely the elaboration of the covenant that we find in our parasha: "All the diseases that I placed upon Egypt -- I shall not place upon you." Hence, I believe that the covenant that Bnei Yisrael accepted upon themselves at Mara is the covenant that they accepted later on the Plains of Moav; the Torah simply abbreviates here.

This being the case, we may conclude that the importance of Mara is twofold. First, it was proven there that Bnei Yisrael were still open to repentance and could still be redeemed, for they had not yet attained the 50 th, absolute, level of impurity. Second, Bnei Yisrael accepted God's covenant there, with the understanding

that if they would listen to God they would be showered with His blessings, and if not -- "all the diseases which I placed upon Egypt" would -- heaven forefend -- be upon them also. (*This sicha was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Beshalach 5765 [2005].*)

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

In this week's parashah, we find the beginning of the giving of the Torah. On the verse (15:25), "There He established for [the nation] a decree and an ordinance, and there He tested it," Rashi z"l comments: "He gave them a few sections of the Torah in order that they might engage in study thereof -- the sections containing the command regarding Shabbat, the red heifer and the administration of justice."

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270) writes: This is wondrous! Why doesn't the Torah spell out the laws as it does in other places: "Speak to Bnei Yisrael and command them, etc."? From Rashi's wording it seems that Moshe didn't teach these laws as "official" commandments; rather he told them that this is what they would be commanded to keep in the future, when Hashem would give them the Torah at Har Sinai. In this light, says Ramban, we can understand why the Torah calls these commandments a "test." Bnei Yisrael were being tested to see whether they could accustom themselves to mitzvot and accept them with joy.

R' Simcha Mordechai Ziskind Broide z"l (rosh yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim; died 2000) explains further: Ramban teaches (in his commentary to Sefer Devarim) that the Torah expects more of us than merely keeping the mitzvot. We are called upon to learn from the mitzvot what Hashem's Will is. For instance, the Torah tells us not to speak lashon hara, not to take revenge, and to stand up for our elders. From these and other examples of interpersonal behavior, we are supposed to learn how to interact with our fellow men. Thus, explains R' Broide, when Hashem taught the laws of Shabbat, the red heifer and the administration of justice in our parashah, the purpose was to see whether Bnei Yisrael would look behind those mitzvot to see the Will of Hashem that those laws represent. If Bnei Yisrael succeeded in doing that, it would indicate that they would know what to do with the other mitzvot as well. (Sahm Derech: Ha'yashar Ve'hatov p.19)

