

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS BESHALACH

Revelations at the Red Sea

PART I: TRUE TO FORM

INTRODUCTION: A DEFINING EXPERIENCE

The splitting of the Yam Suf is well-known to us as the final chapter in our salvation from the Egyptians, and of the retribution meted out to them. It is worthwhile pondering, however, whether this event introduced any new element in our formation and development as a nation. This is especially so in light of a comment in the Midrash regarding one of the primary names by which the Jewish people are known – *Ivrim*. The Midrash explains that the word עברים is a contracted form of the two words “עבר ים – they passed through the sea.” This is notwithstanding the fact that we were known as *Ivrim* prior to this event – nevertheless, the title received full import and meaning at the time of *Kriyas Yam Suf*. This comment appraises us of the fact that passing through the Yam Suf is not merely something that happened to us, but rather it is something that *defines* us as a people. This idea certainly requires further investigation.

TRIBUTARIES: YOSEF AND THE YAM SUF

There is a fascinating comment elsewhere in the Midrash regarding the words we say in Hallel when describing *Kriyas Yam Suf*: “הַיָּם רָאָה וַיִּנָּס” – *The sea saw and it fled.*¹ The verse does not specify exactly what it was that the sea saw which caused it to flee. Concerning this, the Midrash² explains that it saw the coffin of Yosef, which Moshe had brought out from Egypt. The connection between these two is that Yosef, too, had fled when he was tempted by Potiphar’s wife, as described in Parshas Vayeshev.³ Therefore, upon witnessing the coffin of the one who had fled, the sea did likewise.

Here, too, it is worthwhile reflecting on the relationship between these two events. Needless to say, Yosef displayed extreme righteousness at that time, and every righteous deed deserves to be rewarded; nonetheless, we need to understand how the particular event of the sea splitting was considered a fitting reward for Yosef’s good deed.

1 Tehillim 114:3.

2 Midrash Shocher Tov to Tehillim ibid.

3 See Bereishis 39:12.

WHEN WATERS BECAME WISE

One of the verses in *Az Yashir* (the Song of the Sea) describes the parting of the waters by saying:

וּבְרוּחַ אֶפְיֹד נִעְרְמוּ מַיִם

*And with the wind from Your nostrils water became piled up [on either side].*⁴

The translation of the word “נִעְרְמוּ” as “piled up” relates it to the word “עֲרִימָה – pile.” Interestingly, however, Onkelos translates these words as “חִכְמוּ מֵאֵ – the waters became wise,” relating the word “נִעְרְמוּ” to the word “עֲרָמָה”, which is a term for wisdom. More fascinating still is a comment of the Vilna Gaon,⁵ who draws our attention to the opening words of the verse which states that this effect was caused by “the wind from Hashem’s nostrils.” In other words, the wind which caused the sea to split was not merely *effected by* Hashem, but rather *came from*, so to speak, within Hashem Himself! What is the significance of this idea?

We cannot help but be mindful of the only other place in the Chumash where the verse describes Hashem blowing into something, namely, the original creation of man, where Hashem “blew the soul of life into man.”⁶ Here, too, by blowing into the sea “from within Himself,” Hashem endowed it with a godly quality, one which Onkelos defines as “wisdom”.

Yet still the matter requires our understanding. Ultimately, all agree that the waters split and piled up on either side. What are we meant to learn further from the fact that this effect was brought about through the water “attaining wisdom”?

MOSHE AND THE MEANING OF WATER

To better understand this matter, let us ponder certain ideas that are associated with water. As we know, the background to the name “Moshe,” as stated in the Torah, lies in the fact that he was “drawn up from the water.”⁷ On the face of it, this name does not seem to do full justice to Moshe. After all, a person’s name is meant to represent their essence. Considering everything that Moshe achieved — leading the Jewish People out of Egypt through the Red Sea to Mount Sinai, transmitting the Torah to them, being the one in whose merit the manna fell for forty years, and achieving a level of prophecy unparalleled in history either before his time or afterward — is the only thing we can say about him that he was drawn up from the water?

According to the *Maharal*, Moshe being “drawn up from the water” actually encompasses *all the above achievements*.⁸ How so?

Water represents formlessness. It has no form of its own and, moreover, can wear away the form of other things with which it comes into contact. The most dramatic expression of this formless quality of water can be seen in the Flood at the time of Noach. The Hebrew word for flood is “מַבּוּל,” which Rashi explains as relating to the word “מַבְלָה — to wear away,”⁹ and indeed, the waters of the Flood wore away the form of everything that was in the world at that time. We know that Hashem’s punishments are *middah keneged middah* — measure for measure. The appalling moral decline into which that generation had sunk could be summed up by saying that they had lost their form and distinction – their Divinely-oriented qualities and characteristics known as *Tzelem Elokim* (the Divine Image). Therefore, they were

4 *Shemos* 15:8.

5 Cited in *Kol Eliyahu*, Parshas Beshalach.

6 *Bereishis*

7 *Shemos* 2:10.

8 *Gevuros Hashem* *ibid*.

9 *Bereishis* 6:17.

punished by a flood of water which erased the form of the face of the entire world.

In light of this, we can now appreciate the significance of Moshe's name referring to him being "drawn up from the water." We asked earlier that it doesn't seem to tell us much about Moshe, but in fact, explains the *Maharal*, it says everything! Everything that Moshe achieved was a product of the fact that he removed himself to the greatest degree humanly possible from the formlessness represented by water, attaining instead the ultimate level of *Tzelem Elokim* — the Divine Image — in all that he did.

A MIRACLE — AND A MESSAGE

Considering the above, the events of the Yam Suf will take on an entirely new dimension; for they not only represented the final stage in our departure from Egypt, but also contained a foundational message for where we were headed. Before our eyes and at Hashem's command, water — the epitome of formlessness — attained form and definition. This is a profound expression of what our task was to be upon receiving the Torah — to impose form and higher meaning on an otherwise formless physical world. This is the deeper meaning of the water solidifying as a result of "receiving wisdom" from Hashem, indicating that we, too, can impart form on ourselves and the world around us by developing and empowering the higher Godly aspects within ourselves.

REFLECTED IN THE WATER

In this regard, one event which embodies the idea of imposing *tzurah* over *chomer* was that of Yosef and his experiences with Potiphar's wife. Through identifying fully with his higher faculties and bringing them to bear on the situation, Yosef was able to withstand that trial and avoid giving in to temptation. Hence the Midrash says that the waters of the sea fled when they saw Yosef's coffin; in response to him giving precedence to *tzurah* over *chomer*, the sea did likewise.

Indeed, the Jewish people themselves had already begun to take steps in this direction. Taking the lamb for the Pesach offering in full view of the Egyptians, with the potential risk that this entailed, as well as following Moshe out into the desert without any provisions, were both gestures that represented being guided by ideals and idealism and not by mundane concerns of material comfort and security. This too, was instrumental in causing the waters themselves to attain form and allow them to pass through.

In contrast, the Egyptians epitomized a life of excess with no physical restraint.¹⁰ As such, the waters which had attained *tzurah* for the Jewish people, lost it again when the Egyptians entered the sea. In this regard, we could say that each group found itself in the water's response to its presence.

EMULATING THE DIVINE

It turns out that through the splitting of the Yam Suf, Hashem demonstrated the concept of giving *tzurah* to *chomer* — a concept which then became a motif for the mission of the Jewish people themselves. It is most interesting to note that the concept of imitating Hashem, i.e. following in His ways, which is discussed in numerous verses in Chumash Devarim, receives its first expression in *Az Yashir*. The Gemara cites the opinion of Aba Shaul who explains the words "זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲנִי גֹדֵל — *this is my God and I will glorify Him*" to mean "*and I will emulate Him.*"¹¹ Rashi expounds that the word "וְאֲנִי גֹדֵל" is to be understood as a contracted form of the words "אֲנִי וְהוּא — *I and Him,*" expressing the desire that we should be as similar as we can to Hashem by emulating His ways. The relevance of this concept to the Song at the Sea is that it received profound demonstration in the splitting of the sea itself, as Hashem was saying, "Just as I gave *tzurah* to the formless, so, too, shall you!"

¹⁰ See Vayikra 18:2 where the Jewish people are specifically warned not to conduct their physical relationships in the immoral manner they had witnessed in Egypt.

¹¹ Shabbos 133b.

FINDING MAN

Indeed, this concept forms part of the very definition of man. The Hebrew word for man is אָדָם, which has two meanings. The lower meaning is related to the word "אֲדָמָה – earth," denoting the place from which man's physical being was formed. However, the higher definition is related to the word "אֲדָמָה – I shall emulate,"¹² reflecting man's capacity to emulate the Divine. Thus, we may say that in experiencing the splitting of the sea, the Jewish people discovered a higher definition of Man. It is most interesting to note how this idea is alluded to in the words themselves. The word for water – מִים – has the numerical value of 90. Accordingly, the splitting of מִים gives a result of 45, which is the numerical value of the word אָדָם. For indeed, with the splitting of the sea, a true picture of man emerged.¹³

In light of all this, we can well understand the comment of the Midrash cited above, that the experience of "עבר ים – passing through the sea," becomes part of the definition of the Jewish people as "עברים". This historic event exposed us to both our capacity and our mission as Hashem's people.

PART II: CREATION AND HISTORY

A MAIDSERVANT'S VISION

Another aspect of revelation at the Yam Suf is referred to in a comment of the Midrash, on the words in Az Yashir: "זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲנִיְהוּ" – This is my God and I will glorify Him." The Mechilta states:

ראתה שפחה על הים מה שלא ראה יחזקאל בן בוזי

*[Even] a maidservant saw at the sea what [the prophet] Yechezkel ben Buzi did not see.*¹⁴

The basis of this comment is that the Hebrew word "זה" always denotes something in whose presence one is. Understandably, this Midrash is somewhat enigmatic:

1. What did the maidservant "see" at the Yam Suf that she had not already seen during the year of the plagues?
2. Why is her experience contrasted specifically with that of the prophet Yechezkel?

12 See Yeshayahu 14:14.

13 Rav Uri Yungreis, Ori ve'Yishi Parshas Beshalach.

14 Mechilta de'Shira sec. 3

OF HORSES AND RIDERS

Before answering these questions, let us note another aspect of the events at Yam Suf which receives particular emphasis in the beginning of Az Yashir:

סוס וְרִכְבּוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם

The horse and its rider, [Hashem] threw into the sea.

Rashi explains that this phrase is highlighting the fact that the Egyptians were thrown into the sea while they were yet atop their horses, as opposed to first being knocked off their horses and then being thrown in the sea. Evidence of the significance of this idea is found in Miriam's condensed version of the song,¹⁵ which contains just this one line:

שִׁירוֹ לַה' כִּי גָאָה גָאָה סוס וְרִכְבּוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם

Sing unto Hashem for He is exalted above the arrogant, the horse and its rider He threw into the sea.

Why is this detail so significant? What difference does it make whether or not the Egyptians were on their horses when they were thrown into the sea?

MAASEH BEREISHIS AND MAASEH MERKAVAH

A highly esoteric area of Torah with which Yechezkel is closely associated is the vision of the *Merkavah* (Chariot), which he describes at length in Chapter One of his sefer. Rav Tzaddok Hakohen of Lublin¹⁶ provides a glimpse into this area, allowing us to at least attain a working formulation. He does so by contrasting it with another mystical area of Torah known as Maaseh Bereishis:

Maaseh Bereishis – discusses the concept of Hashem's creation and guidance of the physical world.

Maaseh Merkavah – discusses the concept of Hashem's guidance of world history. In the same way that a chariot comprises many different parts, yet all of them are steered by the rider in the direction to which he wishes the chariot to go, so too, the manifold and diverse courses of nations and their leaders are ultimately being steered by Hashem in the direction toward which He wishes to guide the world.

In this regard, we could say that the year of the plagues gave the Jewish people insight into *Maaseh Bereishis* – as they witnessed Hashem's control of the forces of creation which were miraculously enlisted in the punishment of the Egyptians. *Kriyas Yam Suf*, on the other hand, provided an encounter with the *Maaseh Merkavah*, as it enlisted the plans of Pharaoh and the Egyptians against the Jewish people to lead them exactly where Hashem wanted them to end up. This is what lies behind the emphasis of them being drowned while the riders were yet atop their horses. The Egyptians were never more fearsome or impressive as they were at that moment, mounted on their horses and chariots and galloping in full pursuit of their defenseless quarry. It was with this very power that they played their role in Hashem's Divine orchestration of that slice of history.

It is in respect to this idea the Sages say that a maidservant beheld more than the prophet Yechezkel. The manipulation of historic human forces known as the *Merkavah* that he saw in a prophetic vision, the entire people experienced in epic form as a tangible reality.

15 Verse 21.

16 Sefer Zichronos 29b, cited in Mimaamakim, Parshas Beshalach maamar 17.

ONE BEHIND SEVEN

According to the Maharal, this major concept is contained within the opening word of the Song of the Sea. The word “אז” consists of the letter *zayin* with an *aleph* behind it. In the Torah, the number seven is used to denote something that is happening in all directions.¹⁷ Accordingly, the word “אז” expresses the idea that behind the multifarious forces in play in the world, there is the Aleph, the One God, Who is guiding and directing them toward their ultimate purpose.

KRIYAS YAM SUF AND KINGSHIP

This will also explain the introduction of another concept within the events of *Kriyas Yam Suf*, namely, that of *Malchus* – kingship. The song of *Az Yashir* itself culminates with the words “ה' ימלך לעולם ועד” – *Hashem shall reign forever.* Likewise, in the blessing after the Shema in the morning, we introduce this verse by saying “יחד כולם הודו והמליכו” – together they all gave thanks and acknowledged [Your] kingship”, and in the evening we say “ומלכותו ברצון קיבלו עליהם... מלכותך ראו בניך” – His kingship they accepted willingly upon themselves... Your children beheld Your kingship.” Why is this concept associated with the Yam Suf, specifically, and not with the earlier plagues in Egypt?

The concept of Hashem’s kingship is this very idea that He steers the events of the world and the designs of its leaders toward His ultimate purpose. As we have seen, this central idea was impressed upon the Jewish people in most dramatic fashion at the *Yam Suf*. Indeed, the Midrash explains that the words in Tehillim “נכון כסאך מאז” – Your throne was established from antiquity,” refer to the moment of *Az Yashir* (אז)! The experience at the *Yam Suf* served to establish and embed the concept of kingship within the consciousness of the Jewish people – in a way that would fortify them for their tumultuous history during which they would witness the raging and diverse forces of the world firsthand. The ability to endure and maintain their faithfulness to their Divine mission was provided for them in this formative experience at the sea.

IN CONCLUSION

What emerges from all the above is that although the concept of Revelation is one we normally do not associate with the Exodus until we reached Har Sinai, nonetheless, it was present in a most profound manner during the splitting of the Yam Suf. Through the events that happened there, Hashem revealed to us ideas of most major import, both regarding the way in which He runs the world, as well as our role and capacity in expressing His will and introducing His message to that world. In this regard, *Kriyas Yam Suf* was not merely historical in nature – it was historic in that it enlightened and empowered us toward our unique history. As such, we look back at those events from our point in history to look forward to the full realization of the vision we attained there, when Hashem’s kingship will be recognized by all.

¹⁷ See e.g., Devarim 28:7.