



Parshas Beshalach

For the week ending 13 Shevat 5759
29 - 30 January 1999

Overview

Pharaoh finally sends Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. Hashem leads them towards Eretz Yisrael with pillars of cloud and fire on a circuitous route avoiding the Pelishtim (Philistines). Pharaoh regrets the loss of so many slaves and chases the Jews with his army. The Jews are very afraid as the Egyptians approach, but Hashem protects them. Moshe raises his staff and Hashem splits the sea, enabling the Jews to cross. Pharaoh, his heart hardened by Hashem, commands his army to pursue, whereupon the waters crash down upon the Egyptian army. Moshe and Miriam lead the men and women, respectively, in a song thanking Hashem. After traveling for three days only to find bitter water at Marah, the people complain. Moshe miraculously produces potable water for them. In Marah they receive certain mitzvos. The people complain to Moshe and Aharon that they ate better food in Egypt. Hashem sends quails so they can have meat and provides them with manna. It is a miraculous bread that falls from the sky every day except Shabbos. On Friday a double portion descends to supply the Shabbos needs. Nobody is able to obtain more than a daily portion, but manna collected on Friday suffices for two days so the Jews can rest on Shabbos. Some manna is set aside as a memorial for future generations. After the Jews complain again about the lack of water, Moshe miraculously produces water from a rock. Amalek then attacks the Jews. Joshua leads the Jews in battle while Moshe prays for their welfare.

Insights

A DIVINE TAPESTRY

“Then Moshe and the Children of Israel chose to sing this song to Hashem.” (15:1)

As a young boy, I remember my mother weaving a tapestry of Gainsborough’s “The Boy In Blue.” It took her forever. One day, shortly before she finished, I remember picking it up and thinking to myself: “Mommy, forgive me — you may be the best mother in the world, but when it comes to needlework...Well, this is a mess! There’s a piece of red sticking out here. Over here, there’s a turquoise thread that seems to go nowhere.” The whole thing looked like chaos.

Suddenly, my fingertips detected smooth regular stitching on the other side of the tapestry. I turned the tapestry over and saw the most beautiful sight: An exquisite and precise copy of Gainsborough’s “Boy in Blue.” The stitches were so regular and well formed. The colors all blended so beautifully. A divine tapestry! All the disjointed threads that I saw on the other side of the tapestry harmonized into a complete and beautiful whole.

Sometimes it’s difficult to see sense in world events. You hear about suffering and evil, and you wonder how this can be the handiwork of a Merciful G-d?

Don’t think you’re alone if you feel like that. You’re in good company. Because one of the greatest men who ever lived felt exactly like you. Moshe, our greatest teacher, himself had his questions about how G-d was running the show. In Parshas Shmos, Moshe went to Pharaoh to ask him to let the Jewish People go. Pharaoh, as you may remember, was not the easiest of negotiating partners. In reply to Moshe’s request, Pharaoh told the taskmasters to stop giving the Jews straw. However the Jews were still required to produce the same quantity of bricks as before. Not surprisingly, the Jews complained bitterly to Moshe. So Moshe went

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22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

info@ohr.org.il

38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

1-212-213-3100

fax: 1-212-213-8717

RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

1-905-886-5730

fax: 1-905-886-6065

Somayach@MSN.com

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Written and Compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

Production Design: Eli Ballon

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back to Hashem and said "Why have You done evil to this people... *From the time* I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he did evil to this People, but You did not rescue Your People."

Moshe wasn't just complaining about the problems he was having *now* with Pharaoh, rather he was saying that "*from the time*" — *from its very beginning* the whole plan to take the Jews out of Egypt was fatally flawed. Moshe didn't see any order in what was going on.

When you look at life's rich tapestry from the wrong side, it looks like a complete mess. Moshe didn't see the Divine needlework of the Creator, he was looking at events from the wrong perspective. However the same word that Moshe used to complain to G-d, he repeated in G-d's praise when he saw the perfection of the Divine Plan. The Midrash says that just as Moshe erred with the expression *mei-az* — "from the time" — so with that same word *az*, Moshe rectified his mistake.

After the Jewish People emerged from the splitting of the sea, they saw the mighty Egyptian army strewn across the beach like so many broken toy soldiers. It was there that every Jew, from the greatest to the most humble, reached a level of insight into the workings of the world that has never been repeated.

This perception moved Moshe and the Children of Israel to song. Song in Jewish thought represents the ability to harmonize all the disparate events in our world and plug them back into the One — *Hashem Echad*.

"Then — *az* — Moshe and the children sang a song."

That song is part of our daily prayers. Maybe one reason we say it every day is to remind ourselves that when life seems like a bad attempt at modern art, we must know that there is an Artist weaving the tapestry. And not a single thread is without design and beauty.

A TREE GROWS IN ISRAEL

"I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only G-d can make a tree."
Joyce Kilmer, "Trees"

The poet sees the hand of Hashem in a tree. But why specifically a tree? Why not a stone, or a river, or a zebra for that matter?

"When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, don't destroy its trees ... for from it you will eat ... is the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you?" (Deuteronomy 20:19)

The verse states openly that it is forbidden to cut down a fruit tree, and so rule Maimonides as well as all other halachic authorities. What is curious in the verse is the comparison of a tree to man; what does man have to do with the prohibition against cutting down a fruit tree?

Man is like a tree in that his good deeds are his produce, his "fruits," and his arms and legs the branches which bear these fruits. He is, however, an "upside-down tree," for his head is rooted in the heavens, nestled in the spiritual soils of the Eternal, and nourished by his connection to his Creator (Midrash Shmuel on Pirkei Avos 3:24).

The first mishna in "Rosh Hashana" teaches that Tu B'Shvat, the 15th day of the month of Shvat, is the Rosh Hashana, or New Year, for trees (according to the school of Hillel). Why do trees need a New Year? Our Sages teach us that although it still looks like the dead of winter, it is not. Deep inside the tree the sap is beginning to rise (the Hebrew word for sap is "saraph" or "fire," striving to rise ever higher and reach its Creator).

Spring approaches, rebirth has begun. And they teach us that just as it is with a tree so too it is for man; since "man is a tree of the field," the "renaissance," the process of rejuvenation in man has begun. The poet appears to subconsciously draw on the metaphor of tree rather than stone, river, or zebra, as the "hand of G-d" can most clearly be seen in the tree, the metaphor for the handiwork of G-d, the human being.

Sources:

A Divine Tapestry - Rabbi Moshe Zauderer
A Tree Grows in Israel - Rabbi Pinchas Kantrowitz

Haftorah: Shoftim 4:4 - 5:31

THE LAST SONG

“On that day, Devorah and Barak son of Avinoam sang, saying...” (5:1)

Just as the subject of this week’s Parsha is the Song at the Sea, so the subject of the Haftorah is the Song of Devorah the Prophetess.

There are only 10 Songs in history. True, there have been thousands and millions of songs. But only ten Songs with a capital “S”. Only ten *shiros*. The word *shira* in Scripture connotes much more than just a tune. Every *shira* marks a landmark event in history. *Shira* always comes at the completion of a cycle. The first song in history was the song that Adam sang after the Creation was completed: *Mizmor shir l’yom hashabbos*. To this day, it is part of our Friday night prayers.

The second song is in this week’s Parsha: “Then Moshe and the Children of Israel chose to sing this song to Hashem.” The *shira shel yam* comes at the completion of the enslavement of Egypt. *Shira* signifies the great joy of completion.

The third song comes in the book of Bamidbar 21:17, the *shiras habe’er* “Come up, O well....” The fourth song is in *Parshas Ha’azinu*. The fifth is *shiras hagivon* in the Book of Yehoshua. The sixth is the song of Devorah — the subject of our Haftorah; the seventh is the song of Chana; the eighth is the song of David; the ninth is the Song of Songs of Shlomo Hamelech. And the tenth song is the song which has yet to be sung; the song that will be sung in the times of *mashiach*, as it says in the Book of Yishayahu: “On that day there will be sung this song in the land of Yehuda.... (26:1)”

There’s a curious anomaly in this tenth song. All the other songs are called *shira* — the feminine form.

The last song, the song of *mashiach*, is in the masculine — *shir*. Why?

Imagine a Martian with an incredibly powerful telescope looking down at the earth. He zooms in to a tragic scene: A woman in a hospital room surrounded by a doctor and nurses. The woman seems to be on the point of expiring from pain. “What can this terrible scene be?” he thinks to himself. A more knowledgeable Martian — an expert in Earthology — leans across, looks at the monitor and says, “Ah, you’re witnessing how Earthlings bring forth their young. It’s always amazed me that the Human Race exists at all. One would think that after the first generation, no-one would have been prepared to go through such torture.”

Even the easiest of deliveries aren’t that easy. “In pain shall you bear children” (*Bereishis 3:16*). However, once a new life emerges into the world, it is the time of the greatest joy. A time of completion. Reason to sing.

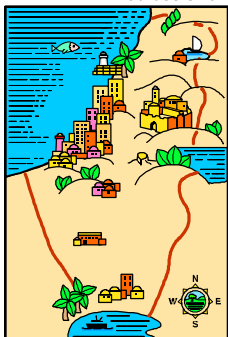
Shira represents that moment of the greatest joy and exaltation. However, just as a birth is often followed by the pain of another pregnancy, so after the joy of every *shira* there follows a form of exile — the moment of transcendence wanes, descending into spiritual decline and distance from G-d.

With one exception. There will be one song which will be complete in its joy because it will not be followed by a descent into another exile. When *mashiach* comes we will sing a new song. A song which has no melancholic aftermath. This will be the one song which is called *shir* in the masculine form. For like a final birth, it will end the cycle of pain and exile.

Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



TSIPORI

The modern settlement of Tsipori serves as a reminder of the ancient city of the same name that was the largest and most important city in Galilee during the first four centuries of the Common Era.

“Why was it called Tsipori?” ask our Sages in the Talmud as they reflect on the relationship between this name and the Hebrew word for bird. “Because,” comes the explanation, “It was perched like a bird on the top of a mountain.”

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