

Illuminating Man's Inner World

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

Rabbi Yehoshua Blass, Mashgiach Ruchani – Yeshiva University



Parshas Beshalach - Man Boldly (And Uncomfortably) Steps Forward into the Unknown

I have always been fascinated by several pesukim that in many ways serve as the apex of Bnei Yisroel's redemption from Mitzraim. The Jews have arrived onto the banks of the Red Sea. They see that there is nowhere to turn and that proceeding forward is seemingly impossible. They raise their collective voice to Moshe Rabbeinu with the biting words:

הַמִּבְּלִי אֵין־קִבְרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לְמוֹת בְּמִדְבָּר

Are there not sufficient graves in Mitzraim that you had to bring us to this dessert to die?

With that Moshe encourages them to be of steadfast faith and to await G-d's salvation.

הַתִּיצְבוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת־יְשׁוּעַת־ה'

The very next pesukim find HKB'H telling Moshe the following:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִה־תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דָּבָר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיִּסְעוּ וְאַתָּה הָרַם אֶת־מִטְּךָ וְנָטָה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַיָּם וּבָקַעְתָּהּ
וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבֵּשָׁה

Then G-d said to Moshe, "Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground. (Shemos 14:15,16)

I have always found these pesukim troubling for two reasons, the second of which is posed as well by the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh. The Ramban argued earlier in Sefer Shmos that the entire geulah came about because of the sincere tefillah of Bnei Yisroel. While based on the amount of

time that the Jews had already been enslaved the redemption should have occurred irregardless, the Ramban said that there was a necessity for tefillah to activate this process. Only then do the pesukim say that G-d fully 'saw' the sufferings of his people. If the entire geulah was predicated on tefillah why now at this juncture, at the end of the redemption process does HKB'H instruct Moshe that his tefillos are inappropriate - מִמָּה תִצְעַק אֵלַי

Secondly, the ordering of the pesukim seems to be incongruous. First the pasuk says to speak to Bnei Yisroel וַיִּסְעוּ, and then Moshe is instructed to lift your staff, spread it over the sea and divide it. Logically shouldn't the command first come for Moshe to perform the neis followed by Bnei Yisroel marching onward?

The answer to these questions and many others are resolved by the underlying theme that runs its way throughout the rest of sefer Shemos until this generation perished in the dessert in the middle of sefer Bamidbar. It's a theme made famous by a comment of the Ibn Ezra in this weeks parsha (Shemos 14:13) Namely that with all of the miracles that the Jews had already witnessed. With all of the moments of divine revelation that this generation had already been party to. Even with Moshe Rabbeinu as the unquestioned spiritual giant that the nation rallied around. Even with all of that, Bnei Yisroel were incapable of moving beyond the basic personality of being slaves. They were terrified to fight the Egyptians who had been their captures and masters. They were unable to envision themselves as shapers of their own destinies with the fortitude to seize the moment. They were unable to muster the courage to enter into Eretz Yisroel upon hearing the report of the obstacles that waited them upon

their arrival. The gilui shechinah in the form of the ten plagues and the events around the sacrifice of the korban Pesach could not undo the psyche that had come to define Am Yisroel over the course of multiple generations. Various halachos of the Korban Pesach were geared towards cultivating the mindset of the free man but that couldn't happen overnight no matter how dramatic and miraculous the circumstances. It's reminiscent of the stories that one has heard from R' Herschel Schachter when he served as the chaplain in Buchenwald after the liberation. Men and women who were now technically free but who were understandably completely immobilized by the years of extreme trauma.

With that in mind we have a better understanding of the narrative at Yam Suf.

When Bnei Yisroel were in Mitzraim all they had at the beginning of the redemption journey was tefillah. There was really nothing else they could do. It was a moment of complete national surrender. But now at Yam Suf HKB'H is essentially telling Moshe Rabbeinu to march forward. Prayer is effective but to some degree tefillah contains in it an element of passivity - one is waiting for HKB'H to come to the rescue. There was and is a time for that. That time was not now. Standing at the Sea with a feeling of hopelessness, deferential to their previous masters, and enslaved by the psyche of an עבד, the only reparative option is ויסעו - move forward. Break the invisible shackles that took root over the course of the previous centuries. While Moshe eventually would stretch his hand over the sea and divide it that couldn't happen until Bnei Yisroel took the initiative in this process.

I have always been fascinated by the famous gemarah in Sotah 36b that communicated the feeling of fear and paralysis to which I refer. R' Meir said that each tribe was fighting for the zechus to be the first one in the Sea until finally the tribe of Binyamin took the plunge. R' Yehudah differed sharply with R' Meir and said that:

לא כך היה מעשה אלא זה אומר אין אני יורד תחילה לים
 וזה אומר אין אני יורד תחילה לים קפץ נחשון בן עמינדב
 וירד לים תחילה

It wasn't just that Nachshon entered the water but it was essentially an act that cut through the paralysis born of generations that had only tasted servitude. At that moment, tefillos are insufficient and nissim are counterproductive. What's necessary is man fully embracing his destiny and the opportunity to repair wounds.

While this concept is true historically for Klal Yisroel as well as for other nations who have been subject to servitude it's also deeply true on a personal level. Many if not most people have shackles of sorts - addiction, trauma, anxiety, depression, inability to function, crippling feelings of inadequacy - the list is endless as to what man encounters in their own personal journey and in one's aspirations for personal redemption. Tefillah is a start but in a way it's a passive acceptance of the reality of one's life. Does one have the wherewithal to move forward and to step towards decisions that brings a person closer to their values, closer to the best version of themselves, and ultimately closer to the Ribbono Shel Olam? That was the fundamental question that HKB'H posed to Moshe Rabbeinu thousands of years ago - מה תצטק אלי - and it's one that continues to echo loudly to this day.

R' Blass can be contacted about this Dvar Torah or about any other issue at blass@yu.edu