

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

B'SHALACH 5785

The event of Kri'at Yam Suf - the Splitting of the Sea - was a miracle of spectacular magnitude. The total defeat of the Egyptian empire and the astonishing salvation of the Jewish people were repercussive in many respects. Not only were the nations of the world aware of the occurrence, they were gripped with utter confusion and terrifying fear (15:14-15). Chazal famously comment (Michita, B'shalach 3, s.v. ZEH) that the spiritual intensity of the moment was so enormous that even the simple maidservant experienced prophetic visions that exceeded those of the great prophets. A special Yom Tov - the last day of Pesach - was designated to commemorate this unparalleled phenomenon. And finally, the significance of the event was such that it is mentioned numerous times in our daily and holiday prayers.

However, there is a lesser known - under the radar - meaning to this miracle that warrants our attention.

The Midrash makes a disturbing comment in the wake of the miracle (Shochar Tov, T'hilim 15:5): "R. Azariya says in the name of Rabbi Yehuda: In the future, all the nations will come to accuse Israel before the Holy One,

blessed be He, and will say: 'Master of the Universe, these [the Egyptians] are idolaters, and these [the Israelites] are idolaters...' Why are they [the Egyptians] descending to Gehinom and they [the Israelites] not? Why do You show them special favor?'" HaShem's response is enigmatic. Quoting two verses in the Song of Songs (Shir HaShirim 8:7-8), Gd declares His boundless love for His people and compares them to a young maiden.

The issue, as homiletically explained by different Midrashim, can be summarized thusly : The Attribute of Justice had reason to be severely critical of the vulgar assimilatory practices of the Jewish people, aping the Egyptian culture and abandoning their identity. When, in describing the splitting of the sea, the verse states that the "water was a wall for them" (14:22). Interestingly, the Hebrew CHOMA is written without a VAV (which only then properly translate as "wall"), but minus the VAV, the word can be read as CHEIMA, "anger". Indeed, the waters, acting upon the fury of the Almighty, actually threatened to drown the people because of their sins. And later, when in the Torah (D'vorim 4:34), Gd is described as "taking a non-Jewish nation [Israel] from a non-Jewish nation [Egypt] GOI MIKEREV GOI", the Jewish people are denominated as a non-Jewish nation - GOI and not with

the more Jewish designation of AM. All of which depicts the Jewish people as no better than their Egyptian counterparts, and clearly supports the argument of the nations of the world (see above) in their claim: that both peoples were idolaters.

How then does the Almighty justify exercising His Attribute of Mercy to redeem the Jewish people and overlook their transgressions? The answer is given by the Alshich HaKadosh in a number of places in his commentary. He asserts that HaShem discerned something quite precious about the Jewish people. True, outwardly, they appeared to be nothing but a motley bunch of slaves, crude and pagan, much like the burning thorn bush with no redeeming qualities. But HaShem can penetrate the surface personality and uncover the jewel in the rough. For in just a few weeks, these very slaves would stand at Sinai to receive the Torah, and they would qualify to be so chosen because, notwithstanding their external deficiencies, they possess the great spiritual potential to stand as dignified human beings and thus partner with Gd in the sacred Sinaitic covenant.

Put differently, the people can be compared to an immature youth - the young maiden of Shir HaShirim - who, as yet, has not fully displayed her marvelous qualities and aptitudes.

A very similar answer to the Alshich's is offered by Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky who employs a famous Midrash to make the same important point. Based on a verse in T'hilim (114:3), Chazal comment (Midrash T'hilim ad loc): "The sea saw and fled." What did it see? The casket containing the remains of Yosef." Why did the sight of Yosef's casket compel the sea to split, to flee? Says the Midrash, "The sea recalled how Yosef fled from his master's wife who sought to entice him, and the sea chose to do likewise and it too fled." What are we to make of this strange Midrash?

Rav Kamenetsky's explanation is dramatically amplified by R. Aaron of Karlin. When Gd originally arranged for the sea to split before the Jewish people, the sea, as it were, asked Gd to see one of those "Jews" for whom it would need to defy its nature and part. When the sea observed the souls of these Jews in heaven, it melted away in joy and ecstasy. Observing the extraordinary greatness and untold depth of a yiddishe neshama, of that Divine spark embodying the goodness, holiness, dignity, and Gdliness of its Creator, the sea declared to Gd, "If for these souls I need to split, it would be my great honor and pleasure. But now, at Yam Suf, those souls looked quite different. They were exhausted and broken and could only complain when

they found themselves trapped between the sea and the advancing Egyptian army.

According to Rabbi Aaron of Karlin, at this moment, a dialogue ensued. "Why?" asked the sea, "should I split"? "The Jews - they have, at last, arrived," came the answer. "Who arrived?" asked the sea. "The Jews." "Sorry, but these are not the same people I observed in the past. The souls I saw then were limitless in their depth, splendid in their dignity, glorious in their spirit. They constituted sheer celestial beauty. These people in front of me are grouchy, frustrated, divisive, filled with anger, fear, and negativity." The sea refused to part. It claimed it was deceived: The Jews of heaven were not the Jews on earth. The sea had agreed to split before rich spirits, not before depleted souls.

Until... until it saw the casket of Yosef. "Yosef recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him" (B'reishit 42:8). When the brothers descended to Egypt to purchase food, and they encountered their estranged brother, why did they not recognize him? The Chassidic masters explain that Yosef's depth of morality and holiness was concealed behind the dense facade of an Egyptian statesman. On the outside, Yosef seemed no more than a handsome young man, charming and charismatic, skilled as a diplomat, and

politician with endless ambition. It was not easy to realize that beneath these qualities lay a soul on fire with spiritual passion, a kindred spirit for whom the moral legacy of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov remained the epicenter of his life. But the brothers lacked the ability to discern the Divine dignity etched in the depth of Yosef's heart. They never understood who their brother really was. When they now encountered him in the form of an Egyptian leader, they failed to observe that beyond the mask of a savvy politician lay the soul of Jewish nobility.

This dual identity that characterized Yosef's life played itself out in the most powerful way when his master's wife attempted to seduce him. On the outside, she thought, it would be fairly easy to entice young Yosef to sacrifice his moral integrity for some sensual gratification. But when Yosef displayed heroic courage by resisting and fleeing, the sea remembered the story of Yosef, it understood that it had erred. Yes, the souls it had encountered in heaven were far greater and loftier than the exhausted humans it saw at its shore. But when the sea observed the life of Yosef, it understood that it must not limit its vision to the external appearance of man, often flawed and distorted. It had to gaze deeply into the depths of the human spirit to encounter royalty.

In a way, Yosef's casket was whispering this message to the sea: "When you gaze at another human being, do not make the same error that others make when they gaze at you. Some simple folks look at you, dear sea, and assume that there is nothing beneath your bed of water. But who better than you knows that underlying your facade of water lies an entire exquisite universe!" When the sea encountered Yosef's presence, it understood its mistake. It grasped the truth that the great drama and beauty of human life lie not in our perfection and flawlessness, but rather in the human battle not to surrender to the external forces of darkness, despair, and shallowness, and to remain loyal to the light, hope, and depth etched within. And with this realization, the sea parted before the Jewish people.

The hidden message of the Splitting of the Sea should now be plain. We were spared at the sea because HaShem chose to look beyond and beneath the immediate spiritual poverty of the slaves before Him. Instead, in His bountiful mercy, the Almighty acted upon what He knew were the hidden virtues of these descendants of the Forefathers and dismissed their wrongdoings. He confronted His chosen charges with an exciting but challenging future, one which would hold out the promise of greatness and ultimate fulfillment.

In a word, Gd believed in us and we rose to that challenge and believed in ourselves!

If this is how HaShem embraced us - and empowered us - even with all of our faults, we should feel obliged to behave the same way toward our fellow. And it is this that we should remember when reciting the great drama of Kri'at Yam Suf. 🙌