

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



MY GOD!

B'shalach

Perhaps, the most spectacular miracle of all time was the Splitting of the Sea. Hollywood noticed it, too. One of the early attempts at thrilling special effects in movies was the original Ten Commandments (1923), made by the same director as the famous 1956 version, Cecil B. DeMille. As a six-year-old, I was thrilled by that wide screen iteration of this week's Torah reading. Our traditional commentaries also endeavored to inform us of the dramatic nature of that wonder.

There are many expressions describing the remarkable nature of the miracle in SHIRAT HaYAM (Song of the Sea), but for me no phrase captures the experience of our ancestors like: ZEH EI-LI V'ANVEIHU (This is my God and I will exalt Him, Sh'mot 15:2). I'm really interested in the first two words of this phrase, but first a few ideas about the final term V'ANVEIHU.

There are three famous approaches to this word. Most translations are like mine above, namely praise or

exalt. The authoritative Onkelos translation is to house or build a habitation, and seems to be a commitment on the part of the Jews to build the Beit HaMikdash. The third, more mystical or spiritual approach, is ANI V'HU, 'I and Him'. This declaration is a promise to try and emulate the Divine attributes of love and compassion displayed by God. I really like the third option, and I hope we all try to fulfill it.

ZEH EI-LI has been used by the Midrash to make the following remarkable claim: From this verse it is derived that even a maid servant witnessed at the Splitting of the Sea what even Yechezkel and all the other prophets never saw (Mechilta). This is an amazing claim, because Yechezkel saw God's portable Throne, the MERKAVA. This is predicated on the demonstrative pronoun ZEH. It's as if they all used their index finger to point and say, 'There's God!' Cool!

It is clear that something special, unique happened at the Crossing of the Sea. Chizkuni is concerned about this whole approach, because God is, of course, invisible. So, what do we mean by the use of the term ZEH? He solves this problem by suggesting that the use of the demonstrative pronoun is based upon its use concerning Moshe, ZEH HA'ISH

MOSHE (Sh'mot 32:1).

In other words, the use of ZEH is informing us that the Jews at the Sea were at that moment on the same level of Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe was the only prophet who achieved this status. All other prophets prophesied based on a less clear vision than Moshe. All other prophets introduce the communication of their vision with the words, KO AMAR HASHEM. The term KO is generally rendered 'thus'. These prophets experienced their visions or prophecies with much less clarity than Moshe. So, they tell us that their rendition of the incident is approximately (not exactly) what God had in mind.

The Ramban asked the central question about this whole scenario: How did these recently emancipated slaves earn the right to view this wonder on the same level as the greatest prophet of all time? He answers this question as part of a very long comment to B'reishit 18:1 about the nature of prophetic visions. The Ramban suggests that the critical clue is the last verse before the start of the Song: They believed in God and Moshe His servant. This pure, innocent, simple faith brought the Jews to the pinnacle of prophetic vision for that wonderful experience. They got the vision because they not

only believed in God but in prophecy itself, as represented by Moshe Rabbeinu.

This phrase has continued to inspire us throughout the ages. Our Sages saw fit to include this phrase in ARVIT, our evening service. The phrase already appears in the morning service as part of the Song of the Sea. However, they included it in ARVIT because they knew that night is, historically, a time of doubt and uncertainty. We need the encouragement to remember the power of faith.

This phrase indirectly influenced my life. As I was deciding to become observant, there were many influences, friends and rabbis, but there was also one book. In 1959, one of America's bestselling authors, Herman Wouk, wrote about his wanderings from and, subsequently, back to Orthodox Judaism. He named his book This Is My God. He shared his experiences and thoughts on the importance of faith and observance in his life. It ended up influencing mine.

There were a lot of positive reviews for this very successful non-fiction tome, but there was one well-known negative commentator, the famous Jewish intellectual and Communist, Will Herberg. He complained that Mr.

Wouk 'gives the impression that being a Jew is lots of fun'. I have fun being Jewish and I'd like to think that the Jews crossing the Sea were also having fun. 🙄