**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BESHALACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Beshalach that after *Benei Yisrael* crossed the Sea of Reeds, they “traveled for three days in the wilderness and did not find water” (15:22). The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Kama (82a) famously interprets the term “water” in this verse allegorically, as a reference to Torah. The nation went three days without any engagement in learning, and this led them to a spiritual crisis of sorts. It was thus instituted at that time that the Torah should be read every Shabbat, Monday and Thursday, so that we would not go three days without exposure to Torah reading.

Clearly, the simple meaning of these verses is that *Benei Yisrael* found themselves without drinking water. The Torah proceeds to tell that the people eventually found water which was foul-tasting, and God had to make a miracle to transform the water. Quite obviously, the story here is about a lack of drinking water. And yet, *Chazal* understood that there was something more going on – namely, that the people experienced spiritual “thirst,” having been without exposure the Torah for three days. How might we explain the connection between the plain meaning of the text and *Chazal*’s Midrashic reading?

The Gemara perhaps instructs that we must not neglect our spiritual needs even as we struggle to obtain our material needs. *Benei Yisrael* at this time faced a grave crisis, journeying through a desert without water, and the Gemara draws our attention to the fact that alongside this problem, they also faced a different problem – a lack of “spiritual sustenance” in the form of Torah. They are not criticized for complaining to Moshe about their lack of water, because this was certainly a pressing and urgent matter that demanded a solution. However, even as they faced this crisis, they did not neglect the problem of their thirst for Torah. This matter, too, was given high priority, despite their preoccupation with their lack of water.

Sometimes, we excuse ourselves from rigorous spiritual engagement because of the many other urgent problems that we face. Life always poses one kind of challenge or another, and it becomes difficult to focus on our religious ideals when we are bogged down with our day-to-day struggles. *Chazal* warn us about this phenomenon in the famous Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (2:4), “Do not say, ‘When I have time I will learn,’ for you might never have time.” We will always be “busy,” we will always have problems that demand our time and attention. But *Chazal* urge us to try, as best as we can, to quench our thirst for Torah even as we struggle to quench our physical and material thirst, as we work to solve the day-to-day problems that we encounter.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Beshalach (13:19) tells that when *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt, Moshe took Yosef’s remains with him, in fulfillment of the promise made by Yosef’s brothers to bring his remains to *Eretz Yisrael* for burial. The *Mekhilta* praises Moshe for devoting himself to this cause, applying to him the verse in Mishlei (10:8), “*Chakham levi yikach mitzvot*” – “The wise of heart seizes *mitzvot*.” Whereas the rest of the nation was busy collecting the riches of Egypt, Moshe opted instead to involve himself in the *mitzva* of tending to Yosef’s remains. The *Mekhilta* comments that Moshe’s choice reflected both his “piety” and his “wisdom.”

The question arises, why was Moshe’s decision to occupy himself with Yosef’s remains an expression of “wisdom”? While we understand how this expressed his piety, foregoing on the opportunity to earn wealth for the sake of a *mitzva*, it is less clear why this was a reflection of unique “wisdom.”

An insightful approach to the *Mekhilta*’s comment is advanced by Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his [*Yalkut Yehuda*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2888&st=&pgnum=51&hilite=). Moshe’s “wisdom,” Rav Ginsburg writes, was expressed in his decision not to try persuading *Benei Yisrael* to tend to Yosef’s remains instead of collecting the spoils of Egypt. Moshe wisely recognized that the people would not heed such a call, enthusiastic as they were about their sudden and newfound opportunity for wealth. He realized that nobody would stop what they were doing to get Yosef’s coffin, and so he just did it himself. *Chazal* were impressed not just with Moshe’s decision to tend to Yosef’s remains instead of collecting spoils, but rather with his decision to do it himself rather than bother trying to find somebody else.

“*Chakham leiv yikach mitzvot*” – “The wise of heart seizes *mitzvot*.” Somebody who is wise recognizes that sometimes he cannot expect others to do what needs to be done, and so he needs to assume responsibility. Rather than fruitlessly pleading with people, or complaining about their indifference, the “wise heart” steps forward with a sense of duty and fulfills the uncomfortable or inconvenient *mitzvot* that others refuse to do.

Monday

As *Benei Yisrael* stood trapped against the sea by the pursuing Egyptian army, Moshe urged them not to be frightened, “because the way you see the Egyptians today – you will never again see them” (14:13). Indeed, the waters of the sea split, allowing *Benei Yisrael* to pass through peacefully, before crashing down on and drowning the Egyptians.

The *Mekhilta*, commenting on the aforementioned verse, writes that this marks one of the three instances when the Torah issues a prohibition against going to Egypt. The other two are “and the Lord said: You shall not again return there” (Devarim 17:16) and “The Lord shall bring you back to Egypt in boats, along the way which I have told you that you shall never see again” (Devarim 28:68).

This *halakha* is mentioned in the Talmud, as well. The Gemara in Masekhet Sukka (51b) comments that the ancient Jewish community in Alexandria was in violation of the prohibition issued in Parashat Shoftim, “You shall not again return there.” Interestingly, the Gemara mentions only that verse, without citing the verse in Parashat Beshalach (or the verse from the end of Sefer Devarim) mentioned by the *Mekhilta*. This is in contrast to the parallel passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi (there in Masekhet Sukka), which comments that the Jews of Alexandria violated all three prohibitions mentioned by the *Mekhilta*.

This point was observed by the Maharitz Chayot, in his notes to Masekhet Sukka. He writes that the Talmud Bavli likely disagrees with the *Mekhilta* and Yerushalmi, and maintains that the only source for this prohibition is the verse in Parashat Shoftim. Moshe’s statement in Parashat Beshalach was made before *Matan Torah*, and therefore, in the view of the Bavli, it cannot serve as a source for a halakhic prohibition. To this we might add that the simple meaning of Moshe’s statement is that he reassures the people that they would never have to see their former oppressors, not that there is a halakhic prohibition to do so. For this reason, too, perhaps, the Bavli did not cite this verse as a source.

This discussion may likely yield practical implications. The *Sefer Yerei’im* (309) writes that the prohibition against returning to Egypt applies only to traveling to Egypt from *Eretz Yisrael*. Moving to Egypt from other locations, however, does not violate this law. The *Yerei’im* advanced this theory as a possible basis for explaining why many Torah observant Jews lived in Egypt. Already the Radbaz (Hilkhot Melakhim 5:7) raised the question of how to reconcile the *Yerei’im*’s theory with the *Mekhilta*, which cites as one of the sources of this prohibition Moshe’s remarks to *Benei Yisrael* at the shore of the *Yam Suf*. *Benei Yisrael* at that time stood not in *Eretz Yisrael*, but at the *Yam Suf*, and Moshe informed them that it was forbidden to return to Egypt. If, indeed, this is a source for the prohibition against moving to Egypt, it becomes very difficult to accept the *Yerei’im*’s contention that traveling to Egypt from places other than the Land of Israel is permissible. Evidently, the *Yerei’im* maintained that the Talmud Bavli did not accept the *Mekhilta*’s view, and did not view this verse in Parashat Beshalach as a source for the halakhic prohibition against moving to Egypt. According to the Bavli, the only source is the verse in Sefer Devarim which speaks of moving from *Eretz Yisrael* to Egypt, and thus the *Yerei’im* concluded that the prohibition is limited to this particular route.

(Based on Rav Chaim Leib Eisenstein’s [*Peninim Mi-bei Midresha*, Parashat Beshalach](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48330&st=&pgnum=122))

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Beshalach of the miracle of the splitting of the sea, in anticipation of which Moshe reassured *Benei Yisrael* that they would never again see the Egyptians who were pursuing them (14:13).

Somewhat ironically, the Torah tells that after *Benei Yisrael* crossed the sea and the waters then crashed down upon and drowned the Egyptian horsemen, they “saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore” (14:30). Moshe had assured them that they would never see the Egyptians again – yet they did, after the Egyptians died.

Rav Dov Ber Treivish, in his [*Revid Ha-zahav*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=51386&st=&pgnum=122), suggested that these verses may perhaps be relevant for a practical halakhic question. If a person vows not to look upon a certain individual ever again – for example, he became very angry at that person – may he look upon that person after his death? This question might arise in cases where the person who took the vow is needed to identify a corpse so that his wife can remarry and his children can divide the estate. At first glance, we might assume that once a person vowed not to look upon his fellow ever again, he may not look upon him even after he dies. In light of these verses in Parashat Beshalach, however, we might reach a different conclusion. Moshe – presumably, on the basis of prophecy – assured *Benei Yisrael* they would never again see the Egyptians, and it turned out that this meant only that they would not see the Egyptians alive. By the same token, perhaps, one who vows not to look at another person may look at his remains after his passing.

One may, however, refute this proof in light of the *Targum Yerushalmi*, which translates Moshe’s promise to means that *Benei Yisrael* would never again see the Egyptians “*be-shibud*” – in a state of subjugation. According to this translation, Moshe did not say that *Benei Yisrael* would never again have to lay their eyes on the Egyptians, but rather that they would never again see them as their enslavers. (The basis for this translation is likely the word “*ka’asher*” in this verse, which implies that *Benei Yisrael* would never see the Egyptians in the same fashion as they had seen them previously.) As such, we cannot draw any conclusions from this pair of verses to cases where a person takes a vow not to ever again look at another person.

(See Rav Chaim Leib Eisenstein’s [*Peninim Mi-bei Midresha*, Parashat Beshalach](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48330&st=&pgnum=125))

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Beshalach tells about the manna, the miraculous food with which God sustained *Benei Yisrael* during their period of travel through the wilderness. We read that one portion of food fell from the heavens each day for each person, and manna that was left over until the following day became spoiled (16:20). The exception was Friday, when two portions were provided for each person, one of which was to be eaten that day and the other left over for Shabbat. Unlike on the other days, the manna left over until Shabbat did not spoil, and remained edible and fresh (16:22-25).

On a symbolic level, this arrangement teaches us an important aspect of the Shabbat experience. Throughout the rest of the week, it is expected that each day we will find yesterday’s food “spoiled,” that we will feel discontented with the material assets we had accumulated until then. This is not to say we may feel ungrateful, but rather that we are entitled to desire more and to go out to try obtaining what we desire. Just as leftover manna was spoiled the next morning, likewise, we are entitled each morning to look at what we have as unsatisfactory, and thus seek to increase our assets. On Shabbat, however, we may not look at anything in our lives as “spoiled.” On this day, we look at everything we have as perfect, as precisely what we need and what we want. As Moshe tells *Benei Yisrael* here in Parashat Beshalach, “Each man shall remain in his place; no man shall leave his place on the day of Shabbat” (16:29). On Shabbat, we have nowhere to go, because everything we want is right here with us. Whereas during the week we do not feel content with what we’ve been given, on Shabbat we are to feel that all our needs are cared for, that we have no reason to search or work for more. Just as God created for six days, but on the seventh He saw that everything was “very good” (Bereishit 1:31), we, too, work restlessly during the week but then stop on Shabbat, reflecting on how “very good” our lives are, on how the “manna” given to us the previous days is still perfect, and sufficient for meeting all our needs.

In this way, we maintain a healthy balance between ambition and contentment. We spend six days working hard, creating, innovating and developing the world in our quest for our livelihood, but then remind ourselves on Shabbat that we have enough and can enjoy the serenity that comes with contentment. We experience, on the one hand, the restlessness and dissatisfaction that leads us to meaningful work and productivity, but on the other hand, we also experience the joy and bliss of gratification and fulfillment.

Thursday

Towards the beginning of “*Az Yashir*,” the song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the miracle of the splitting of the sea, they proclaim, “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu, Elokei avi va-aromemenhu*” – “This is my God and I shall glorify Him; the God of my father, and I shall extol Him” (15:2).

The Gemara, in Masekhet Shabbat (133b) and elsewhere, cites the first clause of this verse – “This is my God, and I shall glorify Him” – as the source for the well-known requirement of *hiddur mitzva* – to aesthetically enhance our observance of *mitzvot*. The word “*ve-anveihu*,” the Gemara asserts, can be read as a derivative of the word “*na’eh*” – “beautiful” – and thus refers to the “beautification” of *mitzvot* through high aesthetic standards, such as by wearing beautiful *tefillin* and a beautiful *tallit*, constructing a beautiful *sukka*, and so on.

Clearly, on the level of *peshuto shel mikra* – the straightforward meaning of the text – the word “*ve-anveihu*” refers to praise, as it parallels the word “*va-aromemenhu*” (“I shall extol Him”) in the second clause of the verse. How might we explain the connection between the straightforward meaning of the verse and its halakhic denotation?

It is not often that we are moved and inspired to erupt in song and praise to the Almighty. Rarely do we experience the kind of exuberance and excitement that led our ancestors to sing “*Az Yashir*.” And if we try to arouse such emotion within ourselves, it is likely to be an artificial feeling that we attribute to religious zeal but really has little to do with our connection to God. *Chazal* here perhaps teach us that when we do not genuinely feel moved to “*ve-anveihu*,” to express real emotion, then we should instead devote our attention to “*hiddur mitzva*,” to raising the standards of our *mitzva* observance. The experience of “*ve-anveihu*” – the outpouring of spiritual joy and exuberance – certainly has its place, when we are truly and genuinely moved and overcome by emotion and by a sincere feeling of love for, and awe of, our Creator. At other times, however, rather than trying to produce artificial feelings of spirituality, we should express our dedication to the Almighty through “*hiddur mitzva*,” through patient, thorough and rigorous engagement in each and every *mitzva* that comes before us.

*Chazal*’s interpretation of “*ve-anveihu*,” then, reflects the balance that we need to maintain between emotion and deed, between the outpouring of spiritual feelings and the careful, disciplined and detailed attention to *mitzvot*.

Friday

The Torah tells that after *Benei Yisrael* crossed through the *Yam Suf*, “Moshe had Israel journey from the Sea of Reeds, and they went into the wilderness of Shur” (15:22). The *Midrash Tanchuma*, cited by Rashi, notes that the Torah speaks here not of *Benei Yisrael* journeying, but rather of Moshe having them journey (“*Va-yasa Moshe et Yisrael…*”). The implication is that the people were not interested in traveling forward, and Moshe therefore had to force them to leave. The Midrash explains that the Egyptian horsemen who drowned in the sea had adored their horses and chariots with gold and silver jewelry, all of which washed up on shore after the Egyptian army was drowned. *Benei Yisrael* worked feverishly to collect the riches, and had no desire to advance to their destination, Sinai. Moshe therefore had to push them to leave the shore and proceed into the wilderness.

The Midrash’s description should perhaps be read in the context of the narrative that follows – the story of *Benei Yisrael*’s experiences in the desert, where they found themselves without any water, and then without food. There is bitter irony in the fact that the people worked tirelessly to amass the riches of Egypt, but then three days later were without water (15:22). All the gold and silver they collected suddenly became valueless. Traveling in the searing desert without water, all the jewelry in the world could not help them. They invested a great deal of time and energy into collecting the Egyptians’ riches, which proved to be utterly worthless just three days later.

The Midrash, then, perhaps warns us of the tendency to devote time and resources on vanity and on pursuits which do not really help us in the long run. We sometimes get caught up in the glitter of the “gold and silver,” in the glamor and hype associated with things which offer us little or any valuable benefit. Just as the riches of Egypt did not help *Benei Yisrael* in the desert, much of what we spend our time and effort accumulating does not benefit us in the long run. *Chazal* here remind us to carefully consider which assets we want to invest time and effort accumulating, and to know when it’s time to “move on” to more valuable and worthwhile undertakings.