**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BESHALACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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Dedicated in memory of

Miriam Heller z"l

whose yahrzeit falls on the seventh of Shvat,

by her niece, Vivian Singer.

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (36b) records two different opinions among the *Tanna’im* regarding the events that unfolded before the Sea of Reeds split to allow *Benei Yisrael* to escape from the Egyptians who pursued them. Rabbi Meir tells that after God ordered *Benei Yisrael* to journey into the raging waters, every tribe wanted the distinction of being the first to show their faith and jump into the water. In the end, the members of the tribe of Binyamin jumped in first. Rabbi Yehuda disagrees, claiming, “*Lo kakh haya ma’aseh*” – “This is not what happened.” According to Rabbi Yehuda, whose view represents the more famous version of the sequence of events, none of the tribes wanted to jump first. They were all frightened, and each tribe waited for others to jump in first to see what would happen. Finally, Nachshon, a prominent member of the tribe of Yehuda, jumped first into the sea, and the waters then miraculously split.

Rav Yaakov Galinsky offered a creative reading of the Gemara’s discussion, suggesting that in truth, there was no debate between these two *Tanna’im*. When Rabbi Yehuda responded, “*Lo kakh haya ma’aseh*,” Rav Galinsky explained, his intention was not to dispute Rabbi Meir’s account, but rather to add that the argument among the tribes suddenly changed at the stage of “*ma’aseh*,” when the time came to put their words into action. Initially, they all vied for the privilege and distinction of jumping into the waters first, but when the moment came when they needed to move forward, they all changed their tune, and nobody wanted to go first until Nachshon finally jumped. He was the only one who translated his words into action – not only speaking of his desire to lead and show courage, but going ahead and doing it.

If so, then the Gemara’s discussion teaches us the valuable lesson that words mean far less than action. It is generally easy to speak in lofty terms, to talk about values and ideals, and to sound principled and altruistic. But the true test of our commitment to the values we speak about comes at the moment of “*ma’aseh*,” when those values need to be put into concrete action and require courage, strength, faith and resolve. Many of us speak of jumping into the sea, of our desire to make an impact, to lead, to inspire, to set an example for others to follow. But it is only the rare “Nachshon” among us who actually follows through on his words and has the courage to take the difficult steps required to lead. The lesson being taught is that we need to be prepared to act upon, and not merely speak about, our values and principles, to rise to the occasion when we are called upon to put in the work and make the sacrifices to uphold our ideals.

Sunday

Towards the beginning of *Shirat Ha-yam* – the song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after crossing the sea, they exclaimed, “*Zeh Keili ve-anveihu*” – “This is My God, and I shall glorify Him” (15:2). The *Mekhilta*, cited by Rashi, interprets this verse as indicating that *Benei Yisrael* saw at that time a revelation of the Almighty, such that they could point with their fingers and proclaim, “This is my God!” This revelation, the *Mekhilta* adds, was so clear that “a maidservant saw at the sea what Yechezkel, the son of Buzi, never saw.” Even the simplest members of *Benei Yisrael* withheld a revelation of God at the time of this miracle that exceeded in clarity the visions of the prophet Yechezkel.

The Netziv is cited as offering a novel reading of the *Mekhilta*’s comment to explain the specific reference to the “maidservant,” the simplest and least knowledgeable members of the nation. If a person “points” to God only in times such as *Keri’at Yam Suf*, upon seeing an overt miracle when God’s existence and power are unmistakably clear, then such a person is simpleminded. According to the Netziv’s reading, the *Mekhilta* here is teaching that it is only the “maidservant,” the simpleton, who needs a miracle in order to be able to declare, “This is my God, and I shall glorify Him.” The intelligent believer trusts that God is present and managing the world and all our affairs under all circumstances, even when His hand is concealed and cannot be discerned. According to this creative reading of the *Mekhilta*’s comment, its intent is not to extol the greatness of the simplest members of *Benei Yisrael*, who beheld a direct revelation of God at the time of the miracle of the sea, but rather to subtly criticize those people who proclaim, “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu*,” enthusiastically declaring their desire to serve and praise the Almighty, only when His presence is clearly felt and manifest.

We might add that this reading may perhaps shed light on the *Mekhilta*’s reference to the prophet Yechezkel. (It should be noted, however, that Rashi, in paraphrasing the *Mekhilta*’s comment, does not specifically mention Yechezkel, and says merely that the maidservants saw more than “the prophets.”) The simplest reason why the *Mekhilta* points specifically to Yechezkel is because Yechezkel gives the most vivid and detailed description of a vision of God that appears in the books of the prophets (Yechezkel, chapter 1). Therefore, the *Mekhilta* tells that the maidservants at the shores of the *Yam Suf* beheld even a greater prophetic vision than the remarkable vision described by Yechezkel. Additionally, however, we might suggest that Yechezkel is mentioned because of the unique circumstances surrounding his prophecy. Yechezkel is known as the only prophet (after Moshe) who received prophecy outside the Land of Israel. He was taken to Babylonia during the first stage of the Babylonian exile, during the time of King Yehoyakhin, and it was there, in exile, far from *Eretz Yisrael*, that he beheld his prophetic vision. He received prophecy when God seemed distant from the Jewish Nation, and several of his prophecies were aimed at dispelling the misconception that the Babylonian exile marked the permanent end of God’s special relationship with *Am Yisrael*. One of the important themes of Yechezkel’s prophecies is that God still seeks and expects our commitment and devotion in conditions of exile, even when it appears as though He has rejected us and has abandoned the special covenant He had made with the Jewish People.

It is perhaps for this reason, according to the aforementioned reading of the *Mekhilta*’s comment, that the maidservants at the sea are contrasted specifically with the prophet Yechezkel. These simple people beheld a vision of God at a time of miraculous triumph, when they saw very clearly how He meted out punishment against their oppressors who persecuted them for centuries. The revelation of God which they experienced marked the diametric opposite of the vision beheld by Yechezkel, who saw the Israelite kingdom crumbling, who experienced firsthand the humiliation and pain of being led out of his homeland by a brutal pagan emperor. Simple, small-minded people see the hand of God only at the shores of the sea, in moments of great joy and celebration, when His presence and His love for us is clearly felt. Great people, however, such as Yechezkel, are capable of beholding God’s presence, of maintaining their relationship with Him, even in periods of darkness and hardship, and firmly trusting that under all circumstances, God continues to love and care for His cherished nation, and we must likewise continue to devotedly and faithfully serve Him.

Monday

We read in Parashat Beshalach of *Benei Yisrael*’s reaction the first time they saw the manna – the miraculous food which God sent down from the heavens to sustain them each day in the wilderness. The Torah tells that upon seeing the mysterious substance, the people turned to one another and said, “*Man hu*,” and the Torah then adds, “because they did not know what it was” (16:15).

Rashi explains the word “*man*” in this verse to mean “food.” In Rashi’s view, the Torah means that the people referred to the substance generically as “*man*” – “food,” because they could not identify it and they therefore could not call it by its name.

The Rashbam and Chizkuni, however, explain differently, interpreting the word “*man*” to mean “what.” According to this understanding, *Benei Yisrael* turned to each other and asked, “What is this?” because they simply did not know what this substance was.

A Chassidic reading of this verse is cited by Rav Elimelech Biderman ([*Be’er Ha-parasha* – Beshalach, p. 19](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/177_16_77.pdf)), viewing it as an allusion to the tendency many people have to look down on others. People sometimes look upon their fellow and ask, “*Man hu*?” – “What is he? What is he worth? What value does he have?” Such people see only the negative qualities and failings of those around them, and they thus ask themselves, “*Man hu*?” – feeling and showing no respect for them. They feel this way “because they did not know what it was” – they do not bother to look for other people’s admirable qualities and accomplishments, and so they never truly get to know them. As a result, they look at the people around them with disrespect or disdain, asking themselves, “*Man hu*?” – “What does this person have, and what has he accomplished, that I should respect him?”

It would seem that those who offered this reading were not simply taking a verse out of context, but rather suggesting an analogy between the manna and the people in our lives. We are to view the people around us as our “manna,” as precious gifts sent to us from the heavens to “sustain” us, to help us and to enrich our lives. Although we might be intuitively inclined to look at some of the people around us and ask, “*Man hu*?” – wondering what they do for us, what value they have, and what benefit they provide, we are to instead respect and appreciate them as “manna,” as valuable gifts. And if at first we do not recognize their value, then we need to look harder and make a greater effort to identify their outstanding qualities, uncover their incalculable worth, and feel and show the appreciation and respect that they deserve.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Beshalach of *Benei Yisrael*’s experiences when the manna began to fall to sustain them as they traveled through the wilderness. The first day the manna fell, Moshe warned the people not to leave any manna over until the next morning, but there were those who disobeyed and put away some of their supply for the next day. When the arose in the morning, they found that the manna had spoiled (16:19-20).

Rav Yaakov Asher Weisfish, in his *Iyei Ha-yam* commentary, makes an insightful observation about this incident that might shed new light on the sequence of events. When God first told Moshe that He would be providing miraculous food from the heavens, He informed him that He would be sending the people daily rations, and a double ration on Friday (16:4-5), but He did not warn against leaving manna over until the next day. Rav Weisfish thus suggests that Moshe introduced this provision on his own. God did not forbid leaving over manna, but Moshe told the people not to leave over their manna, in order to build their faith so they would confidently trust that God would provide a new ration each morning. After Moshe introduced this rule, God made the miracle of causing leftover manna to spoil in order to support Moshe, so-to-speak, so that his authority would not be undermined by those who insisted on leaving over some of their manna.

Rav Weisfish suggests explaining several different aspects of this story on the basis of this theory, including the incident that occurred on the first Shabbat after the manna began to fall. On Shabbat morning, several members of the nation left the camp in search of manna, despite being told that no manna would fall on Shabbat. God reacted angrily, asking Moshe, “Until when will refuse to obey My commands…” (16:28). As Rashi notes, Moshe was included in God’s condemnation, despite the fact that he was, quite obviously, not among those who went to look for manna on Shabbat. Rav Weisfish suggests that Moshe was partially to blame for this incident, because he had decided to introduce the provision forbidding leaving over manna. If not for this decision, leftover manna would not have spoiled. And it was thus because of him that some among the nation nervously went looking for manna on Shabbat morning. Knowing from their experiences during the previous week that leftover manna spoiled, they woke up early Shabbat morning expecting their remaining supply of manna to spoil at any moment. This fear prompted them to disobey God’s command to go out to look for manna.

In turns out, then, that Moshe bore indirect responsibility for this unfortunate incident. As Rav Weisfish explains, Moshe intended to raise the level of the people’s faith and trust in the Almighty, but not everyone was ready for this jump. There were those among the nation who could not yet have been expected at this early stage, just several weeks after leaving Egypt, not to leave any manna over until the next morning. It was unreasonable to demand such a high standard from the entire nation – that everyone should complete all their food rations at the end of the day, leaving nothing for the next day and trusting that God would perform a new miracle in the morning. By trying to rush *Benei Yisrael* to an exalted level of faith of which they were as yet incapable, Moshe led some among the nation to violate God’s instructions regarding Shabbat, as they nervously sought food, fearful that their leftover rations would not remain intact. And for this reason, God held Moshe partially accountable for this violation.

Wednesday

The Torah tells in Parashat Beshalach (16:15) that the first time *Benei Yisrael* saw the manna, they turned “*ish el achiv*” – “each man to his brother” – and said, “*Man hu*,” which is commonly translated as, “What is it?”

Rav Yitzchak Yaakov of Biala found it significant that the Torah speaks of the people speaking “*ish el achiv*” – an expression which could connote a special feeling of brotherly love and affection. When the manna fell and *Benei Yisrael* went to obtain their ration of food, they looked at one another as “*achiv*” – brothers. There was no competition or jealousy, because they all knew that each person was receiving his portion designated for him by the Almighty. This is in contrast to natural means of sustenance, the pursuit of which is often characterized by fierce competitiveness, strife and envy. People compete with one another for jobs and customers, and they feel deprived when they see others who enjoy greater financial success than they do. The Rebbe of Biala detects in the Torah’s account of the manna an emphasis on the absence of such tension as the people fetched their manna. Knowing that each and every portion was a gift sent by God, for which nobody had worked or exerted any kind of effort to obtain, there was no room for competition or friction as the people went about collecting the food they needed for themselves and their families.

The Rebbe of Biala teaches us that we can eliminate a great deal of the jealousy and fighting that plagues so many people by viewing our livelihood as heavenly manna, as a gift graciously and compassionately granted to us by God. Although we, unlike our ancestors in the wilderness, must work and use our strength, creativity and skills to earn a living, nevertheless, we are to look upon our sustenance as a gift from God. This message was conveyed by Moshe before his death, as we read in Parashat Eikev (Devarim 8), when he commanded the people to recall their miraculous sustenance in the wilderness after they cross into *Eretz Yisrael* and earn wealth through farming and breeding cattle. Moshe raised the concern that the people’s newfound prosperity might lead them to pride themselves for their wealth – “my strength and the might of my hand produced all this wealth” (Devarim 8:17) – and to forgot that it is God “who gives you the strength to produce wealth” (Devarim 8:18). The manna provided for our ancestors is to remind us that all our material possessions are, in essence, manna, a gift provided by God, even though we invest time and effort to obtain it. When we live with this awareness, then we will look to our fellow as “*achiv*,” our “brother,” and not as our competitor. If we believe that our sustenance ultimately depends on the grace of the Almighty, who is capable of providing everybody with all their needs, then we will not feel jealous or resentful of other people’s material success, and will rather look to them with love and affection and live peacefully with them as brothers.

Thursday

Earlier this week, we noted the different opinions cited by the Gemara in Masekhet Sota (36b) regarding the events that transpired in the moments before the miracle of the splitting of *Yam Suf*. According to Rabbi Meir, the tribes quarreled with one other over the privilege of being the first to jump into the water and demonstrate faith in God’s promise to save the nation. As the tribes were arguing, Rabbi Meir tells, the people of the tribe of Binyamin jumped into the water, to the consternation of the people of the tribe of Yehuda, who proceeded to hurl stones at the Binyaminites. Rabbi Meir adds that in reward for taking this initiative, the tribe of Binyamin was granted the privilege of having the *Beit Ha’mikdash* constructed in its territory.

Rabbi Yehuda presents a much different account, claiming that to the contrary, none of the tribes wanted to jump into the water. They were all frightened and insisted on waiting for others to jump first. Finally, Nachshon, a prominent member of the tribe of Yehuda, jumped into the sea. The tribe of Yehuda was rewarded for Nachshon’s leap of faith by becoming the tribe of royalty.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, observes the difference between the rewards that were said to have been given in these two accounts. According to the first account, the tribe that jumped first was rewarded with the *Beit Ha-mikdash*’s presence in its territory, whereas according to the second, the tribe that jumped first was rewarded with leadership. The explanation, Rav Ginsburg writes, is that leadership is earned through the ability and preparedness to inspire others to act. According to the first account, the Binyaminites did not show special courage. After all, all the tribes – according to this opinion – eagerly wanted to jump into the water. Binyamin was commended and rewarded for its zeal, jumping without waiting for the argument to be resolved, but while zeal is undoubtedly an important and valuable trait, it does not characterize leadership. The essential quality that characterizes a leader is motivating others, courageously charting a path that is not necessarily popular, and inspiring others to follow. According to the second version cited by the Gemara, Rabbi Yehuda was rewarded specifically with leadership because this is precisely what its member, Nachshon, displayed at the shores of the *Yam Suf* – the willingness to be the first when no one else dared to, tread uncharted waters which everyone else feared, and serving as an inspiring example for other people to emulate.

Friday

We read in Parashat Beshalach of the terror *Benei Yisrael* felt at the shore of the *Yam Suf* when they saw the Egyptian army pursuing them. They proceeded to shout at Moshe, telling him that he should never have initiated the process of the Exodus, as they were better off working as slaves in Egypt than being killed by the Egyptians at sea. Moshe responded, “Do not fear; stay still and see the Lord’s salvation which He will bring you this day, for as you see Egypt today – you will never see them again, forever” (14:13). The simple meaning of this promise, as it is commonly understood, is that *Benei Yisrael* would never see the Egyptians again, for they would soon be drowned in the sea.

The Maggid of Duvna, however, proposes a creative reading of this verse, explaining that Moshe was telling the people to pay close attention to what was about to unfold. The miracles that were about to occur and which eliminate the pursuing Egyptians, Moshe was saying, would be something which *Benei Yisrael* would never again see. This was going to be an extraordinary, singular event in human history, and thus Moshe instructed the people not to fear, to remain calm so they could experience something which they would never again be able to experience.

It would appear that the Maggid here alerts us to the unfortunate tendency to miss precious opportunities in life because of fear and anxiety. The pressures and worries of life often occupy our minds and prevent us from seeing, appreciating and enjoying our gifts and blessings. Moshe’s message to the people – as understood by the Maggid – that “you will never see them again, forever” can be said about every moment of life. Each moment is an opportunity that will never return, and we too often squander these opportunities due to paralyzing worries and anxiety. The Maggid of Duvna here urges us to work to make the most of all our opportunities and to appreciate the blessings we enjoy each day despite the pressures and concerns that weigh on our minds.

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