**"And the People of Israel Went Up Armed"**

**By Rav Michael Hattin**

INTRODUCTION

And it came to pass that when Pharaoh sent the people forth, the Lord did not lead them by way of the land of the Pelishtim, although it was near. This was because the Lord said: lest the people have a change of heart when they see warfare, and return to Egypt. So the Lord caused the people to turn towards the way of the wilderness, to Yam Suf, and the people of Israel went up from the land of Egypt armed..." (13:17-18).

*Parashat Beshalach*, opening with a dramatic image of the Israelite slaves surging forth from Egypt at the chastened Pharaoh's behest, continues to gather only more momentum as its narratives unfold, until the climactic moment of truth at the Sea of Reeds. Recall that the people of Israel, leaving the store city of Ra'amses and its terrors behind, embarked on a lengthy march, led by Moshe bearing the bones of Yosef and buoyed by their first taste of freedom in centuries.

THE PEOPLE JOURNEY FORTH

The broad streets and sprawling squares of that colossal monument to hubris and greed, raised up by their muck-encrusted hands to immortalize the god king, constructed hurriedly under the cruel eyes of the impatient taskmasters, now were empty and eerily silent. Just a short while ago, the still desert air of this ever-expanding Delta city, Pharaoh's own capital and the seat of his imperial rule, was filled with the sound of activity and commotion, as weary work gangs scurried to and fro with their heavy burdens of brick and mortar, the cruel crack of a whip occasionally punctuating the monotonous and undifferentiated din. But now there was otherworldly calm, the unnatural tranquility occasionally interrupted by muffled cries as shovels struck dirt and another Egyptian body was mournfully lowered into the warm, black earth's embrace.

In the distance, the sounds of rejoicing and song could be faintly still heard, as the writhing mass of liberated Israelites, their numerous flocks and their newly-acquired possessions, receded towards the shimmering horizon and then disappeared. The Egyptians were left to their own solitude, to ponder the implications of the Hebrew God's mighty acts, the One who had proclaimed for the first time in the history of the world that slavery was unjust and imposed servitude a crime.

At Sukkot the people of Israel briefly rested, before continuing on to Etam to confront the vast and awesome wilderness that beckoned beyond. Anxiously entering its maw, they dutifully followed Moshe and the mysterious pillars of cloud and fire that now led them to the banks of the Sea. And at the banks of that cerulean Sea, they were forced to confront not only their budding identity, but their future destiny as well. Pharaoh and Egypt vengefully pursued, Israel descended into the depths on dry land, and God preserved His people from harm. Ascending from the waters, the Egyptian host now smashed and broken on its banks, Israel finally could be said to have emerged from bondage. Extolling His might and praising His compassion, Moshe and Miriam led the people in triumphant song.

FRAGILITY OF FAITH

Swept up by the excitement of the narrative, we often tend to overlook the fragility of Israel's newfound faith. Though the text states unequivocally that at Yam Suf "the people feared God, and they trusted in God and in His servant Moshe" (14:31), this trust was tenuous and delicate, inspired by the hour but neither deep nor long lasting. That is not to say that the people didn't WANT to believe, but as we all know, true faith and trust is neither bestowed gratis by God nor imparted by His prophets, but only acquired by man through great effort and toil.

There are many telling indications in the text that Israel's newfound trust and faith was less than steadfast. Even as the people left the land of Egypt, the verses suggest this to be the case, for in spite of the fact that "the people of Israel went up from the land of Egypt armed..." (13:18), nevertheless "the Lord did not lead them by way of the land of the Pelishtim, although it was near. This was because the Lord said: lest the people have a change of heart when they see warfare, and return to Egypt" (13:17). On the one hand, then, the people of Israel journeyed forth from Egypt bearing weapons. As Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain) perceptively remarks, "the people left in strength, carrying arms, and not like fleeing slaves!" (Lengthy commentary to 13:18). After all, the right to bear arms is not one that is enjoyed by the slave, for arms confer power, and the slave is powerless. But on the other hand, God was wary of the people, armed though they were, confronting and then fleeing the hostile coastal peoples, whose path they would surely cross by taking the main road along the Mediterranean shore, and therefore He redirected their path towards the less-traveled "way of the wilderness." Seforno, who often offers penetrating psychological insights, captures the essence of the matter:

[The text states that the people of Israel went up from the land of Egypt armed and yet God did not lead them by way of the land of the Pelishtim]. All of this was necessary though they were armed, because even with all of their weapons they lacked the COURAGE to engage the Egyptians in battle and to thus escape, for they were untried in battle...(commentary to 13:18).

ONLY A FIFTH WENT UP

Seforno understands the technical aspects of the text somewhat differently, positing that God directs the people towards the wilderness in order to preclude not conflict with the sea peoples but rather breathless reports reaching the Israelites of Pharaoh's pursuit – for then they would surely have turned around and returned to Egypt of their own accord. But the crux of the matter, even according to his interpretation, is nevertheless the same. Israel's resolve, the courage conferred upon them by their proud bearing of arms as they waved their taskmasters goodbye, was nothing but a sham.

The realization that the faith of the people at that time – their concomitant trust in God's care – was superficial and shallow, should in no way be misconstrued as a harsh indictment of them. Quite the contrary. We should be very surprised indeed that oppressed slaves, shorn over the interminable eons of any vestige of self-confidence and dignity, were able to muster the necessary strength of spirit to leave Egypt at all. Rashi (11th century, France) suggests as much when he explains that the term "armed" quoted above, called in Biblical Hebrew "*chamushim*" (13:18) after the "*chomesh*" or fifth rib next to which the weapon was typically slung, could also be rendered "one-fifth." As the ancient Rabbis that he quotes, fancifully (but thoughtfully) explained the matter:

Only one-fifth of the people of Israel went forth from Egypt, while four-fifths perished during the plague of three days of darkness, for there were sinners among Israel in that generation who did not want to go forth and at that time they died. This was in order that the Egyptians should not see their downfall and say: 'Look how they too have been stricken like us!' (commentary of Rashi to 13:18 and 10:22; *Midrash Shemot Rabba* 14:3).

The pivotal term "armed" was thus midrashically rendered "one-fifth," not only as an alternative fantastical reading but as a profound and ironic commentary on the nature of the moment: how fragile was that resolve, how frail that bearing of arms when the people of Israel proudly journeyed forth from Egypt. This understanding of the matter is not only useful insofar as constructing a spiritual profile of the people at the time of the Exodus, but may also shed light on a number of difficult exegetical matters.

A THREE-DAY FESTIVAL

Recall that from the very first time that God spoke to Moshe at the burning bush, and throughout the course of his unfruitful confrontations with Pharaoh, the demands for freedom were invariably couched in the same formula. God told Moshe that he and the elders should come before Pharaoh and press their petition: "...and now let us journey a distance of three days into the wilderness and offer sacrifice to God our Lord" (3:18). And indeed, Moshe and Aharon said just that: "Thus says God the Lord of Israel: send forth My nation, that they might celebrate to Me in the wilderness...let us go a distance of three days in the wilderness and sacrifice to God our Lord..." (5:1-3). As the plagues painfully unfolded, Moshe neither added nor took away from this fundamental request, for always he would introduce his warning to the recalcitrant monarch with the same refrain: "Thus says God the Lord of the Hebrews: send forth My people so that they might serve Me!" (7:16; 7:26; 8:16; 9:1; 9:13; 10:3).

Pharaoh, of course, began to suspect that a demand for a three-day furlough was nothing but emancipation in disguise, for did Moshe really expect him to believe that they would in fact return? Was it really necessary for all of them, young and old alike, to journey into the wilderness when the service could be just as easily accomplished, as it was in the Egyptian cult, by the adult males (see 10:8-11)? And what of their numerous flocks that could otherwise serve as a guarantee for their return? Why was Moshe insistent that the flocks should also go with, if not because he really never intended to return at all (see 10:24-29)? Moshe, of course, calmly and confidently representing the God of Israel, left matters intentionally vague, for never did he exclaim forthwith that Israel would NOT return. Employing this tactic of strategic ambiguity of course constituted a more revealing test of Pharaoh's true mettle. Eternal freedom was one thing, but how could he not allow the slaves to enjoy even a short three day festival of rest unless his heart was indeed made out of unflinching stone?

THE COMMENTARY OF RABBEINU CHANANEL

In the end, of course, Pharaoh would not yield, Israel journeyed forth against his will, and the "three day" condition was rendered irrelevant, at least to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. BUT NOT NECESSARILY FOR THE HEBREWS. Rabbeinu Chananel, the 11th century North African scholar, offers what must surely be one of the most dazzling comments concerning the narratives of the Exodus:

God forbid that this thing [the three day proviso] was a deceit in order that they might flee! Rather, it was for the sake of receiving [upon themselves] the commandments, for the Holy One blessed be He wanted to initiate them into the commandments very slowly. After all, they were commanded concerning the Shabbat at Mara (in the immediate aftermath of the splitting of the sea). It is similar to what we find concerning Avraham [at the Akeida] for He did not say to him at the outset "take now Yitzchak," but rather "take your son, your only one, the one whom you love, take Yitzchak..." (commentary to 3:18).

In other words, the population most in need of hearing that the journey from Egypt was a temporary one that would last only three days was neither the Egyptians nor their god king who entertained no illusions about the true nature of Moshe's request. Rather, it was the Israelites themselves! According to Rabbeinu Chananel, the Israelites could not really imagine tearing themselves away from Egypt forever, for while the brick pits held much misery they also held the comforts of the known. To leave and to be free, though tantalizing to oppressed slaves chafing under the yoke, was also terribly unsettling, for liberation (at least to the God of the Hebrews) meant more than rest from toil. It meant a journey into the unknown and unsettling realm of self-sufficiency, self-assurance and spiritual development; it meant initiative and responsibility; it meant *mitzvot* and higher purpose, it meant "bearing arms" for a just cause and having the confidence to use them.

But Israel at the time of the Exodus possessed none of those qualities, and hence the thought of leaving Egypt and journeying into the unknown constituted for them unmitigated terror of another sort. God, foreseeing that the people's acquisition of faith and trust would be a lengthy process over time, plagued by no shortage of setbacks and fruitless journeys down blind alleys, lessened the burden at the outset by seemingly offering a psychological out. "Do not worry," Moshe seemed to be saying to them, "in three short days you will return! Enjoy the festival in the wilderness and then we shall be back, back to the routine, back to the customary schedule and surroundings, back to the brick pits that hold in their mucky depths the familiar clay of your bondage! Just three days to taste freedom and then you can forget the whole ridiculous scheme and return to your normal lives!"

Sometimes, when we are asked to confront decisions of destiny, we prefer to avert our gaze and turn the other way. Even an oppressive routine can be comforting, especially when its suspension necessitates asking difficult questions that may require of us to initiate self-transformation. The events of the Exodus indicate that God well understands this dynamic, for it is eminently human and reasonable. But destiny cannot be held at bay indefinitely, unless we are to betray our true selves and remain forever in bondage to the Pharaoh. How then to confront it without being consumed by self-doubt and apprehension? The answer, it would seem, is eminently reasonable as well: if necessary (and every journey as does every traveler has its unique needs), embark on the journey in incremental steps. Set your sights for the horizon but do not anticipate arriving there in a single bound. Israel's Exodus soon brought them to Sinai and eventually to the Promised Land, but in actuality involved a lifetime of hard spiritual work on their part. Faith and trust, the twin pillars of our spiritual and emotional connection to God, in the end must be made of sterner stuff if they are to sustain us.

FOR FURTHER STUDY: Rabbeinu Chananel's approach also explains the otherwise equally curious Divine refrain that the people on the eve of their exodus are to "borrow" vessels of silver and gold from their overlords. "Borrowing" of course implies "returning" the said objects, another expression not of Egyptian foolishness but rather of Israelite hesitation to leave. "Borrow" because we will "return"! Curiously though, Rabbeinu Chananel fails to adopt this approach in this instance (see his commentary to 3:22).