**SALT – PARASHAT BESHALACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Beshalach concludes with the story of Amalek’s unprovoked military attack against *Benei Yisrael* as they encamped in an area called Refidim (17:8). The *Mekhilta* famously interprets the name “Refidim” as an allusion to the fact that “*rafu Yisrael yedeihem mi-divrei ha-Torah*” – “Israel’s hands were lax in regard to words of Torah.” Amalek’s assault is seen as a punishment for *Benei Yisrael*’s “*rifyon*” – lethargy, or laxity, in their religious commitment.

The *Mekhilta*’s comment is commonly understood as seeking to warn against a relaxed attitude toward Torah study, and to urge us to try to maintain rigor and intensity in our engagement in learning. However, Rav Shmuel Borenstein of Sochatchov, in *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* (Parashat Yitro, 5673), offers an entirely different understanding of the “*rifyon*” which the *Mekhilta* says *Benei Yisrael* experienced. He writes that they felt discouraged, deeming themselves unworthy of receiving the Torah. As we read later, in Parashat Yitro (19:2), Refidim was the nation’s final encampment before journeying to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. As they encamped in Refidim, the *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* writes, the people experienced “*rifyon*” – anxiety, uncertainty and ambivalence. Knowing that they would soon be receiving the Torah, they were troubled by their sense of unworthiness, and concerned that several weeks after witnessing the miracles of the Exodus, they had still failed to attain the spiritual level necessary for *Matan Torah*. This was the “*rifyon*” which the plagued *Benei Yisrael* at that time.

The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* explains that the *Mekhilta* here teaches that such thoughts of unworthiness and inadequacy invite “Amalek” – which has often been seen as the symbol of a cynical, apathetic attitude toward spiritual achievement. When we perceive ourselves as undeserving of the Torah, as unfit for the life of sanctity for which the Torah requires to strive, then we will feel uninterested in, and apathetic towards, Torah study and observance. While we must of course acknowledge our failings and deficiencies, we must also feel confident and energized, encouraged by our many fine qualities and achievements, and by the awareness of the potential for greatness within us. A crucial component of our lifelong struggle against “Amalek” is the confidence in our worthiness of a close relationship with God, and our ability to cultivate such a relationship, notwithstanding our past failings or current shortcomings. We must remember that we are always deserving of journeying to Sinai, of reinforcing our commitment to the Torah, at all times and under all circumstances.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Beshalach of *Benei Yisrael*’s encampment in Mara three days after crossing through the sea. In Mara, the Torah relates, God “placed for them statutes and laws” (15:25). Rashi famously explains, based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 56b), that *Benei Yisrael* received several commands on that occasion. Although the Torah would not be given until several weeks later, already there in Mara, *Benei Yisrael* were commanded a number of *mitzvot*, one of them being the observance of Shabbat.

*Benei Yisrael*’s observance of Shabbat before *Matan Torah* was invoked as a halakhic precedent regarding Shabbat observance by a gentile in the process of converting to Judaism. Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, in *Binyan Tziyon* (1:91), wrote a responsum addressing a controversy that arose in 5608 (1848) involving a convert who had undergone circumcision but had yet to complete his conversion process by immersing in a *mikveh*. As *Halakha* forbids gentiles from observing Shabbat (Sanhedrin 58b), one of the rabbis in Jerusalem ruled that this fellow, who had yet to complete his conversion and was thus still considered a gentile, needed to perform on Shabbat actions forbidden for Jews, so as not to be properly observing Shabbat. Rav Ettlinger disagreed, noting the precedent of *Benei Yisrael*’s observance of Shabbat prior to receiving the Torah. *Matan Torah* is regarded as *Benei Yisrael*’s formal “conversion,” when they established a covenant with God and were thus regarded as halakhically “Jewish.” (See, for example, the Rambam’s famous comments in *Hilkhot Issurei Bi’a* 13:1, based on the Gemara’s discussion in Yevamot 46a.) They underwent circumcision in Egypt before the Exodus, and the process was completed at Sinai, when they received the Torah. Hence, Rav Ettlinger notes, *Benei Yisrael*’s condition at Mara was precisely the condition of this convert in Jerusalem, who had undergone circumcision but had yet to complete the conversion process. The fact that *Benei Yisrael* began observing Shabbat in Mara, even before *Matan Torah*, would seem to prove that a convert who had begun the process of conversion may observe Shabbat, despite his having yet to complete his process.

Rav Ettlinger goes even further, suggesting that a convert in this state might be obligated, and not only permitted, to observe Shabbat, as evidenced by the fact that *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to observe Shabbat under the same circumstances. The reason, he explains, is that through circumcision, one enters into *Benei Yisrael*’s covenant with God – which is why it is called “***berit*** *mila*” (“the **covenant** of circumcision”) – and thus the convert who has undergone circumcision must observe Shabbat, which expresses our covenant with God, as indicated by its being called a “*berit olam*” (“everlasting covenant” – Shemot 31:16).

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/148_16_81_0.pdf) refutes this proof. For one thing, already the *Or Zarua* (*Hilkhot Erev Shabbat*, 1) raised the question of how *Benei Yisrael* were allowed to observe Shabbat before *Matan Torah*, as they had yet to attain the formal status as “Jews.” The *Or Zarua* answers this question by boldly positing that *Benei Yisrael* were not, in fact, commanded to observe Shabbat in Mara. They were given Shabbat as a “*siman milta be-alma*” – in general terms, but not as an obligation to actually refrain from forbidden activity. While this reading of the Gemara seems difficult (as Rav Weiss explains), nevertheless, according to the *Or Zarua*, *Benei Yisrael* did not observe Shabbat before *Matan Torah*, and thus the experience in Mara cannot provide a precedent for the case under discussion.

Secondly, Rav Weiss argues, even if we assume that *Benei Yisrael* were indeed commanded in Mara to begin observing Shabbat, their condition does not truly resemble that of a gentile who has begun but yet to complete the process of conversion. Although *Chazal* viewed *Matan Torah* as the nation’s “conversion,” Rav Weiss contends, they clearly had the status of *Am Yisrael* even prior, and they were given the command of Shabbat not as gentiles preparing to convert, but rather as *Am Yisrael*. Therefore, no comparison can be made between their status in Mara and that of a convert who had yet to immerse to complete the conversion process.

As for the question itself as to whether a convert at this stage is allowed to observe Shabbat, Rav Weiss references his discussion in *Minchat Asher – Bereishit* (17:6), where he posits that a gentile may observe Shabbat as part of his preparation for joining the Jewish Nation.

Monday

We read in the beginning of Parashat Beshalach that as *Benei Yisrael* journeyed from Egypt, God protected them by providing a “pillar of cloud” by day, and a “pillar of fire” by night, that traveled in front of them. The Torah relates, “The pillar of cloud did not leave by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, in front of the nation” (13:22).

Rav Asher Tzvi of Ostroh, in *Ma’ayan Ha-chokhma*, suggests a symbolic understanding of the significance of these two pillars. Just like the cycle of day and night, we all experience cycles of “light” and “darkness” – periods when we feel proud and gratified, and periods when we feel unfulfilled and unhappy with ourselves. During the “daytime,” Rav Asher Tzvi writes, we need the “pillar of cloud,” some small degree of “darkness” to prevent us from becoming arrogant and overconfident. When we feel legitimately proud over our accomplishments, we must ensure to balance these emotions with a tinge of “darkness,” of uneasiness over our flaws and deficiencies. Conversely, during the “nighttime,” when we feel down and uncomfortable with ourselves, experiencing debilitating shame, guilt or inadequacy, we need to introduce a “pillar of fire,” the light and warmth of pride and self-esteem. A delicate balance must be maintained between feelings of “light” and “darkness,” between a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment, and a sense of underachievement and deficiency. Too much “light” results in condescension, snobbery and complacency, whereas too much “darkness” results in self-doubt, unreasonably low expectations, and despair.

As *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt and embarked upon their journey which we continue to this very day, they were shown to carefully balance these two experiences, that we must blend our pride with a sense of dissatisfaction and discomfort, so that we are always determined and focused in our pursuit of ever greater heights of achievement.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Beshalach of the manna, the miraculous food which God sent from the heavens each morning throughout the forty years of *Benei Yisrael*’s travels in the wilderness to feed them. The Torah describes the manna as resembling a “*zera gad lavan*” – “white coriander seed,” and tasting like a “*tzapichit bi-dvash*” – a pastry fried with honey (16:31).

Later in the Torah, in Sefer Bamidbar (11:7-8), we find a different description. There the manna is said to have had the appearance of “*bedolach*” – crystal, and to have tasted like “*leshad ha-shemen*” – a product fried in oil.

Malbim offers an especially creative approach to reconcile these seemingly conflicting descriptions, noting that here in Parashat Beshalach, the Torah describes the manna’s appearance and taste only after relating that it did not fall on Shabbat. The Torah tells that a double portion fell on Friday, and whereas leftover manna normally rotted overnight, the extra portion that was provided on Friday remained fresh through Shabbat. After telling us that the people did not collect manna on the first Shabbat after the manna began falling, the Torah then proceeds to inform us that it appeared like a white coriander seed and tasted like a “*tzapichit bi-dvash*.” Malbim thus boldly suggests that the Torah here in Parashat Beshalach speaks specifically of the manna which fell for Shabbat, which differed from the weekday manna. The manna which fell during the week had no color – it was transparent like crystal – and tasted like a simple fried dish. The manna provided for Shabbat, however, was special, as befitting the unique stature of Shabbat. It was colored pure white, and tasted especially sweet, like a “*tzapichit bi-dvash*,” so that *Benei Yisrael* would not be just fed on Shabbat, but would experience it as a special day of delight and enjoyment. Thus, the Torah gives two different descriptions of the manna because one refers to the manna provided on weekdays, and the other speaks of the special manna which fell on Shabbat.

According to Malbim, then, the obligation of *oneg Shabbat* – to enjoy especially fine foods and beverages on Shabbat – dates back to our ancestors’ experiences in the wilderness. Just as we are freed from working for our livelihood on Shabbat – like *Benei Yisrael* did not need to collect manna on Shabbat – we are also urged to enjoy Shabbat – like our ancestors did in the desert. We express our recognition of God’s control over the world on Shabbat not only by refraining from work, trusting that He has already given us all we need, but also by experiencing *oneg* – enjoyment and delight – on this day, even if this entails some additional cost, reinforcing our belief that God, in His infinite mercy and love, has given us not only enough to survive, but enough for us to enjoy. We are to invest in special foods and beverages for Shabbat with the faith that God is providing us with this enjoyment just as He did for our ancestors in the wilderness.

Wednesday

The opening verses of Parashat Beshalach tell that God led *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt toward the Land of Israel in a circuitous route, in order to avoid the territory of the hostile *Pelishtim*. The Torah writes, “*Va-yaseiv Elokim at ha-am derekh ha-midbar, Yam Suf*” – “God brought the nation around by way of the desert, [towards] the Sea of Reeds.”

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 20:18) draws a curious association between this verse and one of the requirements that apply at the *seder* on Pesach. Noting the word “*va-yaseiv*” (“brought…around”), the Midrash points to this verse as the source for the obligation of *heseiba* – to recline at the *seder* as an expression of luxury and royalty. The Midrash references the Mishna’s ruling in Masekhet Pesachim (99b), “*Afilu ani she-be-Yisrael lo yokhal ad she-yaseiv*” – “Even a poor person among Israel may not eat [on Pesach night] unless he reclines.” The source for this ruling, the Midrash posits, is the verse which tells that “*va-yaseiv*” – God led the people “around” – a word which resembles the Hebrew word for “recline.”

How might we understand the connection between this verse and the *heseiba* requirement – specifically, the law applying this requirement even to the poor?

Rav Meir Ha-kohein Varshaviak, in *Imrei Kohein*, finds the answer in the verse’s reference to the wilderness. The Torah here emphasizes that God led *Benei Yisrael* “*ha-midbara*” – “into the wilderness” – in order to circumvent the Philistine region. Despite the fact that *Benei Yisrael* had not prepared food provisions for their journey (“*ve-gam tzeida lo asu lahem*” – Shemot 12:39), God led them into the wilderness, where they had no natural source of food or water. He would sustain them supernaturally for forty years, providing manna from the heavens and a miraculous well which accompanied them during travel. Rav Meir Ha-kohein explains that a pauper sitting at the *seder* might legitimately wonder why he should recline like a wealthy aristocrat at the *seder*, given his state of destitution. With little food to eat, and without proper clothing, what purpose is there to recline as an expression of wealth and luxury? The response to the pauper’s question is the precedent of *Benei Yisrael*’s journey into and through the wilderness. There seemed to be no possibility of obtaining their basic needs in the wilderness without food or water, but in the end, they were fully cared for. The pauper is reminded that as difficult, and hopeless, as his situation might seem, he must not despair. To the contrary, he can comfortably “recline” and feel confident and secure like a wealthy nobleman, because he knows that he is being led through life by the Almighty, just as our ancestors were after they left Egypt. Although he currently finds himself in a “wilderness,” in a situation which offers little or no hope for a secure livelihood, he is to recline and place his trust in God, trusting that just as God sustained *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness, so can He sustain us all even under the harshest financial conditions.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted an enigmatic comment of the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 20:18) which draws a connection between the opening verses of Parashat Beshalach and the requirement of *heseiba* – reclining – at the *seder* on Pesach. The Torah relates, “*Va-yaseiv Elokim at ha-am derekh ha-midbar, Yam Suf*” – “God brought the nation around by way of the desert, [towards] the Sea of Reeds,” and the Midrash finds in the word “*va-yaseiv*” an allusion to the obligation to recline (“*le-haseiv*”). Specifically, the Midrash points to this verse as the source of the Gemara’s surprising ruling in Masekhet Pesachim (99b), “*Afilu ani she-be-Yisrael lo yokhal ad she-yaseiv*” – “Even a poor person among Israel may not eat [on Pesach night] unless he reclines.”

Rav Yitzchak Kunstadt, in *Luach Erez*, suggests explaining this association in light of the famous tradition that *Benei Yisrael* had sunken to the lowest spiritual depths during the period of Egyptian exile. The prophet Yechezkel (20) describes how *Benei Yisrael* were entrenched in pagan worship in Egypt, and Kabbalistic teaching famously speaks of them plummeting to the “forty-ninth level of impurity,” just one step before the fiftieth, from which they would have been unable to recover. The Exodus marked not only the nation’s physical redemption, their freedom from slavery and persecution, but also a spiritual redemption, as they were lifted from the abyss of paganism and immorality into which they had sunk. One of the indications of *Benei Yisrael*’s spiritually deficient state is the opening verses of Parashat Beshalach, which tell that God did not lead *Benei Yisrael* along a direct route to *Eretz Yisrael*, because it passed through the territory of the hostile Philistines. God was concerned “lest the nation have regrets when they encounter war, and they will return to Egypt,” and for this reason He led the people “around, by way of the desert,” at a safe distance from their hostile enemies. The fact that the people’s faith and resolve were so fragile at this point, that even after witnessing the supernatural plagues brought upon Egypt and experiencing the miracle of the Exodus, they would have so easily returned to Egypt upon confronting trouble, testified to their weakness of spirit. This showed that they were not, at this time, firm in their faith in God, and were thus wholly undeserving of the miraculous redemption which they experienced. But God nevertheless mercifully rescued them from Egypt in order to prevent their continued spiritual decline.

On this basis, Rav Kunstadt suggests explaining the connection between these verses and the Mishna’s ruling that even the impoverished must recline at the *seder* like wealthy noblemen. If the redemption from Egypt was only about improving our nation’s physical and material conditions, then indeed, we might excuse a struggling, destitute pauper from this obligation, as he cannot be expected to celebrate freedom in his state of suffering. However, the *seder* celebrates not only our freedom from slave labor, but also our freedom from our spiritual “slavery,” our having been lifted from the depths of sin and extricated from a process of steady deterioration. And spiritual growth is something which everyone, regardless of one’s physical condition or financial status, can and should appreciate and celebrate. Even those who struggle and suffer, and may thus be unable to celebrate the physical liberty received at the time of the Exodus, can celebrate the spiritual “freedom” which we achieved, the ability we have been granted to serve the Almighty. Even during periods of challenge and hardship, we should try to acknowledge and appreciate the priceless privilege we have to serve God and connect to Him at every moment, and this appreciation should provide us with some degree of comfort and solace in life’s darker moments.

Friday

The *haftara* read on Shabbat Parashat Beshalach, taken from Sefer Shoftim (4-5), tells the story of *Benei Yisrael*’s miraculous military victory over the far superior army of Yavin, the king of Chatzor, and the jubilant song sung by the prophetess Devora in the aftermath of the battle. In her introduction to this song, Devora exclaims, “*Anokhi le-Hashem anokhi ashira*” – “I, to the Lord I shall sing” (5:3).

Rashi, commenting on this verse, cites the Midrash’s explanation for why Devora here repeated the word “*anokhi*,” drawing a connection between the miraculous victory she celebrated and the Ten Commandments, which begin with the pronouncement, “***Anokhi*** *Hashem Elokekha…*” (“I am the Lord your God”). The Midrash relates that two mountains in the Land of Israel – Carmel and Tavor – sought to be chosen as the site of the Revelation. Both felt disappointed when God chose Sinai, but God assured them that they would be rewarded for vying to facilitate the event of *Matan Torah*. Later in history, both these mountains were sites of great miracles. Mount Carmel was the site where the prophet Eliyahu proved the fallacy of the pagan worship of *Ba’al* by offering a sacrifice which a heavenly fire then consumed, in the presence of the people. Earlier, Tavor was the site of the victory over the army of Yavin during the time of Devora. The repetition of the word “*anokhi*” in Devora’s song, the Midrash explains, expresses the fact that Tavor received twice the glory of Sinai – whereas the word “*anokhi*” was pronounced only once at the time of the Revelation, it was pronounced twice after the victory at Tavor. God rewarded Tavor (and Carmel) for their quest to host *Matan Torah* by granting them double the glory which was showered upon Sinai. (The Midrash shows how at Mount Carmel, too, twice the glory of Sinai was manifest.)

How might we understand the story of these mountains’ disappointment and subsequent reward?

Perhaps, this story was told as an analogy of the times when we experience disappointment and grief over being denied what appeared as a great opportunity. Like Tavor and Carmel in this story, all people are occasionally turned down and rejected, leading to discouragement and frustration. The Midrash here assures us that when one opportunity fails to materialize, there will be others available in the future, and so we mustn’t wallow in frustration after losing an opportunity.

Moreover, the Midrash here teaches that there are many different roles we can fill in order to make our mark and our unique contribution. In the story told by the Midrash, Tavor and Carmel saw *Matan Torah* as their moment, as their opportunity to shine, to distinguish themselves, and to achieve greatness, but in truth, their moments would come only centuries later, in very different forms. There are numerous different ways we can shine and accomplish. Sinai distinguished itself through its role of hosting *Matan Torah*; Tavor and Carmel distinguished themselves by being the sites of other great miracles which brought glory to the Almighty. When we find ourselves feeling disappointed over lost opportunities for accomplishment, we need to remember that we are all meant to accomplish and contribute in different ways, and as long as we are determined and work hard to try to seize every opportunity that comes our way, we will ultimately find our niche and make our unique contribution.