

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT BESHALACH - To Survive & To Thrive

The Challenge of Miracles

In order to properly understand *Parshat Beshalach*, we have to focus on finding the overarching messages conveyed to us in the episode of *Kriat Yam Suf* (the Splitting of the Sea). Rabbeinu Bechaye (d.1340), in his introduction to the *parshah*, finds its central theme in a verse in Mishlei (17:3): 'A refining pot is for silver and a crucible is for gold, but Hashem tests hearts'. The majority of the miracles that the *Bnei Yisrael* faced as they left Egypt were designed to test their faith. For example, he writes, the sea was not split for them all at once but moved away from them as they approached. They had to find in themselves the fortitude to move forward continuously towards the water. After hundreds of years in slavery, their freedom was not given to them on a silver plate, but the miracles they experienced were designed to ingrain within their hearts the importance of trusting Hashem.

Throughout the trials and tribulations of our daily lives, we look back at the entire episode of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and understand that, despite all the miracles that occurred, life was extremely complex for our ancestors, with their faith tested time and time again. In this way, we are able to learn strategies to keep us strong amid all the challenges that we face.

Divergent Experiences

A powerful observation from the Kli Yakar illustrates this. Two verses in the *parshah* contain almost exactly the same words but with an important difference. In one place, the verse says, 'And Bnei Yisrael walked into the sea on dry land' (14:22).

This verse reflects their faith when they entered a raging sea **before** it split and became dry land. The second verse switches the order: 'And *Bnei Yisrael* walked on dry land through the sea' (14:29), meaning that they waited for the sea to split before they entered. This group of people had less faith. They enjoyed the same miracles, but their experience was different.

Indeed, the Ramban, analysing the verses in the run-up to *Kriat Yam Suf*, shows how there were diverse attitudes among the *Bnei Yisrael* as they were trapped at the seashore. Some cried out in prayer to Hashem, while others complained to Moshe. Similarly, after the sea had finally returned to its original place, the Torah alludes to different reactions among the people. The '*am*', referring to the people as a whole, 'feared Hashem and believed in Moshe', but only the '*Yisrael*', the aspirational individuals of the nation, 'saw the great Hand of Hashem' (14:31). Spiritual growth in life, even in the presence of open miracles, is not a given but is a challenge that we must accept in order to succeed.

Faith Through Hardship

Rav Shimon Schwab (d.1995), in his commentary to the *Siddur*, makes a fascinating observation. Throughout the entire Shirah (Song by the Sea), and indeed when *Kriat Yam Suf* is mentioned in Maariv, only a nominal reference is made to the actual splitting of the sea. The bulk of our praise to Hashem is concentrated on the ordeals that the Egyptians faced when the sea returned to its place.



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The reason for this, he explains, is that our focus needs to be on what we can comprehend as human beings. The sea splitting for the Jewish people to walk through is beyond our comprehension. Although we believe entirely that it happened, it is difficult to connect to such a miraculous event. What we can connect to is the sea returning to its natural state, destroying our enemies and saving us. In essence, after all the wondrous events at the *Yam Suf*, the legacy for future generations is that while the sea will not split for us, Hashem will rearrange nature in order to allow us a way through.

Continuing in this vein, Rav Schwab presents a second idea. In the blessings of *Kriat Shema*, which revolve largely around *Kriat Yam Suf*, only two verses from the Shirah are quoted. One is, '*Mi kamocha ba'eilim Hashem* — Who is like you among mighty ones, Hashem' (15:11), and the other is, '*Hashem yimloch l'olam va'ed* — Hashem will reign for eternity' (15:18). While reciting the second verse, a proclamation of faith in the everlasting kingship of Hashem, can be well understood, the choice of the first verse needs some explanation.

Our Sages see in this verse one of the most challenging aspects of faith and a pathway towards attaining it. The word '*ba'eilim*—among the mighty ones' can be re-voweled to read '*ba'ilmim*—among the mute ones'. This interpretation is used by the Gemara (Gittin 56b) in response to the horrific acts committed by the Roman general, Titus, when he brazenly entered and profaned the Holy of Holies in the Beit HaMikdash.

After all he did, he received no retribution at all; Hashem seemingly remained silent in the face of these terrible acts.

In this sense, 'among the mute ones' refers to the forces of nature, which remain completely indifferent to human suffering. Elie Wiesel in his work *Pilgrimage to the Kingdom of Night*, echoes these sentiments: '*The beauty of the landscape around Birkenau is like a slap in the face. Low clouds, the dense forest, the calm scenery. The silence is peaceful, soothing. Dante understood nothing; Hell is a setting whose serene splendour takes the breath away.*'

The cry of '*mi kamocha ba'eilim*' according to this, is a recognition of the unfathomable existence of suffering in this world, yet at the same time, in that immensely powerful moment of redemption, it highlights the key epiphany of the *Bnei Yisrael*. With tremendous joy, they were able to sing a '*shirah Chadasha* — new song', a song of realisation that the Hand of Hashem was leading them despite His seeming silence throughout their years of oppression. This is the critical message from the Shirah that we reiterate every day, through emphasising this particular verse. If we were to try to sing only when we experience good things in life, this would not be a real song, because this is not how our lives work. Our challenge, both individually and as a people, when we face seemingly unnavigable seas of conflicting emotions, is to praise Hashem not only when He acts as our Redeemer but even through the times of silence as well.

**Next Week: Parshat Yitro -
Standing Together At Sinai - One
People, One Heart**