

TIMELESS TORAH

BESHALACH: THE FAITH OF THE SEA

Intelligent Design, Intelligent Continuity

In the year 1802, the English philosopher, William Paley, published his *Natural Theology*, in which he introduced what became known as the watchmaker analogy. A classic pocket-watch runs by itself, faithfully telling the time without any input from its owner. Clearly, though, the watch did not come into existence by itself. The complex mechanism that allows its continuous running testifies to the fact that it was designed and created by a skilled watchmaker at some point in the past. It follows, Paley argued, that the mechanical perfection of the natural world also demonstrates the existence of an intelligent Designer.

Shortly after this theory became popular, the Malbim (d.1879) referred to it obliquely in his classic commentary on Tehillim. Commenting on the verse '*shiru laShem shir chadash* – sing to God a new song' (Tehillim 96; Friday night prayer service), the Malbim explains that the Jewish song of praise to Hashem is truly 'new'. There have been many belief systems throughout history which have viewed the Creator simply as a watchmaker, who at some point in history designed a perfect world and let it run on its own accord. Their song, says the Malbim, is an 'old song'; our song, however, is 'new' because it emanates from an understanding that Hashem is constantly involved in the continuous creation of the world. In this way, Hashem is '*nora al kol elohim* – awesome over all powers of nature' (ibid.). In Jewish faith, Hashem is not only the Watchmaker of the universe, but He is still winding the clock.

So central is this principle to Jewish thought that the Ramban (Commentary on the Chumash, end of Parashat Bo) writes that 'one has no part in the Torah of Moshe until they believe that all things that happen to us are miraculous and not simply the natural course of the world'. Indeed, the Ramban asserts, all the open miracles that we experienced in Egypt and at the Splitting of the Sea, as well as throughout history, were performed in order to allow us to appreciate the hidden miracles – no less wondrous – that we witness on a daily basis.

Heavenly Cavalry

While Moshe's staff, symbolising the 'finger of Hashem', is a central theme throughout the narrative of the Plagues in Egypt, the recurrent motif throughout the Shirah is the Hand of Hashem. According to the Kli Yakar (d.1619) this is alluded to in the introductory passage to the Splitting of the Sea, where Moshe is commanded, '*Hareim et matcha u'nteih et yadcha*', translated by the Kli Yakar as 'Put aside your staff and raise your hand' (14:16). Why was this transition from staff to hand so crucial? The Kli Yakar explains that the use of the staff brought with it a certain danger. The Egyptians might have mistakenly thought that the miracles they had witnessed were not Divine but wrought through the staff's apparent 'magical' powers. At the Splitting of the Sea, however, the imagery of Hashem's Hand takes a far more prominent place. Here, it was abundantly recognised that '*natita yemincha tivla'eimo aretz*' (15:12), Hashem holds the entire creation in the palm of His hand, and once he tilted His hand slightly, the Egyptians were consumed by the sea.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Another significant symbolism in the Shirah is the image of the 'horse and its rider' being cast into the sea. This phrase is used in both the opening stanza of the Shirah and in the concluding line, and is the single line used by Miriam when she led the song with the women. The Netziv (d.1893) gives a powerful interpretation that continues the concept developed by the Malbim. A battle horse, he writes, is primarily trained to follow its rider regardless of the distractions from the fighting around it. This is one of the most important roles that the horse plays in warfare – to be faithful to the soldier who rides on top of it. But the soldier who rides the horse is himself subordinate to his officer, and the officer to the rank above him and so on. An army operates with a strict hierarchy, with each lesser rank like a 'horse' to the rank above it. At the Sea, it was demonstrated that Hashem was '*ga'oh ga'ah* – exceedingly exalted' (15:1), able to cast both the horse and its rider – i.e, all levels of authority – together into the sea. The order of nature was upended, and Hashem's supremacy was revealed.

Fascinatingly, in Shir HaShirim, the Jewish people are compared to 'a horse in the cavalry of Pharaoh' (1:9). This is the opposite perspective containing the same message: while the Splitting of the Sea demonstrated the omnipotence of Hashem and His intimate association with every occurrence, the mission that we developed at the Sea is to display the control of the ultimate 'Rider' to the rest of the world.

Food of Faith

The second half of Parshat Beshalach revolves around the miracle of the manna. For almost the entire period of their wandering in the Wilderness, each Jewish family awoke every day to find a portion of Heaven-sent food on their doorsteps. It is significant that in the same way that the recital of the Shirah is part of the daily morning service, the Shulchan Aruch writes that it is commendable to recite the passage of the manna as well. These two passages are closely related not only by their proximity in the Torah, but by their shared message.

One of the primary miracles of the manna is that no matter how much a person would collect of it, and no matter how big or small their family was, they would always receive the precise amount that they needed. The manna demonstrated for eternity that all of our needs are provided for directly by Hashem. As the Malbim taught, the Splitting of the Sea demonstrated that Hashem is not merely the watchmaker, but He actively recreates the world at every moment; He is able, at any given moment, to turn the order of nature on its head. But this is true not only of major world events such as the decimation of the Egyptian army and the salvation of the Jews. Throughout our day-to-day existence, we encounter countless less obvious miracles, as the Ramban encourages us to focus on. Contemplating the miracle of the manna brings home to us the lesson that the food on our plate is as miraculous and Divinely inspired as the Splitting of the Sea.

**Next Week - YITRO: CONTINUING THE
CALL OF SINAI**