



Around the Shabbat Table

**Shabbat Beshalach 5763
January 2003**

**Tu Bi'Shevat
Israel Education Month**

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Introduction

This week, we read the *parasha* of Beshalach, in the book of Shemot (Exodus). This dramatic *parasha* begins with the Children of Israel, under the inspirational leadership of Moses, leaving Egypt after the Ten Plagues, and concludes with the victorious battle over their nemesis, Amalek, on the plains of the Sinai Desert.

Separating these incidents the Israelites are chased by Pharaoh and his army to the shores of the Red (Reed) Sea, which miraculously parts for the Jews, only to close on their Egyptian pursuers. Moses composes a song of victory, the epic “*Shirat HaYam*” (Song of the Sea) which is put to music by Miriam, his sister. This is echoed in the victory song of Deborah in the haftarah (taken from the book of Judges).

The path to Mt. Sinai and the Revelation is replete with miracles including the pillar of cloud that guided the Israelites by day and the pillar of fire that guided them by night. We can learn from these pillars that we should always endeavour to live moral lives as God is always before us. “Know whom before you stand” (Psalms).

We then follow the Israelites through the desert and hear their constant whining for food and water. Physical sustenance is provided time and again by Moses through the instruction of God, culminating in the miraculous manna. The manna would appear every day except Shabbat. On Friday a double portion would appear in order to set a precedent of Shabbat being a day of rest and spirituality.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together this Shabbat, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

1. Why does God cause the Pillar of Cloud, which guided the Israelites during the day to move *behind* them at the beginning of the *parasha* (Exodus 14:19)?
2. During their travels, the people of Israel complain several times (Exodus 14:11, Exodus 16: 3). Why do they complain so much? What can we learn from these incidents?
3. There is a custom that is observed every Shabbat to remind us of the double portion of manna that was given in anticipation of Shabbat in the desert. Do you know what the custom is? (Hint: See Exodus 16:22)
4. On what Jewish Holiday is the “Shira” (Song of the Sea) recited and why?
5. One of the most interesting issues raised by the *parasha* is: Why did the Children of Israel have to exit Egypt and then subsequently wander through the Sinai Desert for three months in order to receive the Torah? You might want to consider the following possible answers:
 - The world doesn’t revolve around us.
 - We are small cogs in a vast universe.
 - Survival depends on a higher force.
 - Survival depends on working together -- “All of Israel is responsible for one another.” (Talmud)
 - The sound of silence can be deafening. “Say little and do much.” (Mishna Avot)

The sheer pristine beauty and silence allowed them to clean out their minds and to think about what is really important in life and to loose their slave mentality. Anyone who has experienced a *tiyul* (hike) in the Negev or Judean Desert will always have a part of that “desert-peace” deeply embedded in his or her hearts.

A Contemporary Text to Learn From

This Shabbat we celebrate **Tu Bi'Shevat** (The New Year for Trees). Once the children of Israel entered Canaan under the Leadership of Joshua the manna ceased: “The Israelites ate the Manna for forty years, until they came to a settled land; they ate the manna until they reached the border with Canaan” (Exodus 16:35). In our land we can’t just sit back and say: “God will provide.” The Talmud tells us not to rely on miracles. Much of the beauty we see in today’s Israel is due to the hard work of the *Chalutzim* (pioneers), young men and women who returned the Jewish people to the Land. Anyone who sees the beauty of the Galilee today finds it difficult to believe that just over a century ago it was full of malarial swamps and uncultivated desert: “*The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent... It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land.*”

(Mark Twain, “Innocents Abroad,” 1869)

One of these heroic individuals who made a difference was **Rachel Bluwstein** (1890-1931) known affectionately as “Rachel the poetess”



Rachel was born in Russia in 1890 and arrived in Israel at the age of 19. She first worked as a labourer in Rehovot and later joined a training farm near the Kinneret. In 1913 she went to France to study agriculture and from there to Russia where she contracted tuberculosis. In 1919 she returned to Israel and for a while lived in Deganya.

Her poetry is set in the pastoral countryside of Israel although her personal struggles add a sad and nostalgic mood to their reading. Many of her poems were set to music both during her lifetime and thereafter. She is buried in the cemetery of Kibbutz Kinneret, alongside many of the socialist ideologues and pioneers of the second and third waves of immigration (Aliyot) to Israel.

Kinneret

There, the heights of the Golan, you would caress them
by stretching out a hand,
suggest a serene and silent pause,
there, the venerable Hermon,
in its radiant solitude,
the immaculate crown
sends me its wind.

There, on the lakeshore, a small palm tree
with its tousled branches
like a mischievous child
running along the lakeshore to dip his feet
into the waters of Kinneret.

To My Land

I have not sung your praises, my land, or celebrated your heroic deeds,
One tree I planted on the way
Which to the Jordan leads
One narrow path to my feet yields
Which runs across the fields.

I know how humble are the gifts
The child offers her mother:
A cry of joy one glorious day,

When shines the sun in splendor,
And, shed for you, a secret tear,
To see the shabby clothes you wear.

In the poem/ode "To my Land" (*El Artzi*) Rachel is asking herself & the reader: What is the purpose of our life? How can we be heroes? Do we have to "glorify God's name with deeds of heroism or with the spoils of war?" Or is it enough to "plant a tree on the quite shores of the Jordan?" The central question reminds us of the selflessness of the early *Chalutzim*, planting trees where none had grown for generations, and cultivating the land in order to recreate a beautiful land that many of them would never live to see for the future Jewish people in a future homeland was truly an heroic endeavour. What can we do to make a difference? Our rabbis state that "It is not for us to complete the work, but we must not refrain from it" (Mishnah).



Aerial View Of Cultivated Fields By The Sea of Galilee

Towards an Action Agenda

This month Tu Bi'Shevat kicks off Israel Education month at the BJE and throughout our community. Learn more about this at:

- Learn about Tu Bi'Shevat at <http://www.ualberta.ca/~yreshef/tuintro.htm#intro>
- Some families hold a "Seder" for Tu Bi'Shevat, celebrating the land and recognizing our commitment to the environment. You can find one text for conducting a seder at http://www.coejl.org/celebrate/tub_haggadah.shtml

- To learn more about Rachel and her poetry check out: <http://www.jajzed.org.il/100/people/BIOS/rahel.html>
- One of the ways to recognize Tu Bi'Shevat is through supporting both the agriculture of the land of Israel, and its environment. Two of the organizations that are active specifically in this area -- and both offer wonderful ways to celebrate Tu Bi'Shevat through *tzedaka*:
 - Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel -- Israel's foremost environmental organization -- its American office is here in Great Neck -- You can learn about its work at <http://www.spni.org/e/>
 - Jewish National Fund -- JNF was the organization that purchased lands in Israel for the settlement of Jews over the last 100 years. They have also been a leader in planting forests and in addressing water issues. To learn more about its history and work, go to <http://www.jnf.org/unity/years.html>

Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

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