



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**B'Shalach / Shira**

**January 2005**

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### **Introduction**

Parashat Beshalach takes its name from the second word of the Torah portion. The word means “When he sent forth” and refers to Pharaoh’s decision to finally free the Israelite slaves. The Israelites leave Egypt led by Moses. But Pharaoh has a change of heart (again) and decides to pursue his former slaves. When the Israelites see Pharaoh and his army approaching they complain to Moses (again) saying: “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” (Exodus 14:11-12)

Moses reassures the people exclaiming, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Lord will battle for you; you hold your peace!” (Exodus 14:13-14) Moses leads the Israelites through the Sea of Reeds, as God parts the waters. The people watch from the other side as the Egyptian army is drowned in the sea. In thanksgiving for God’s deliverance the people are led in song and celebration by Moses and Miriam. “I will sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously.” The words of the *Mi Chamocha* prayer are taken from this beautiful poem in Exodus 15. Every time we recite this prayer we recall the miracle God did for our people and for us.

Following this great miracle the Israelites begin their journey through the Sinai wilderness. The Torah tells us that it is part of God’s plan that they will travel a more circuitous route through the *midbar* (wilderness). “So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.” (Exodus 13:18) The people continue to

complain to Moses. They cry that they have no water to drink or bread to eat. God provides water for them to drink by instructing Moses to touch his staff to a rock. The skies rain manna for them to eat. A double portion of this miraculous food was provided on Friday's so that the people would not have to gather on Shabbat.

While the Israelites encamp at Refidim, they are attacked by the Amalekites. Joshua successfully leads the Israelites in battle against the Amalekites.



### **Questions for your Family's Discussion**

This Torah portion is filled with stories of miracles that God did for us. There is the miracle of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. There is the miracle of manna. There is the miracle of plentiful water in the desert. There is the miracle of the defeat of Amalekite army. So here are some questions:

1. What is a miracle?
2. Do you believe in miracles?
3. Do you only believe in miracles "I'avoteinu—for our ancestors"?
  - a. Here is the reminder from the second Hanukkah blessing: "Blessed are You Lord our God Ruler of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors during these days."
4. What is a modern day miracle?
5. What is a miracle that happened to you? Is there a difference between miracles that benefit the community and those that reward the individual?

### **Texts to Wrestle With**

The tradition believes that our people's successful waging of war is a miracle. The following is an excerpt from the *Al Ha-Nissim* prayer recited on Hanukkah and Purim:

"We thank You for the miraculous deliverance, for the heroism, and for the triumphs in battle of our ancestors in other days, and in our time...You, in great mercy, stood by Your people in time of trouble. You defended them, vindicated them, and avenged their wrongs. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the corrupt into the hands of the pure heart, the guilty into the hands of the innocent. You delivered the arrogant into the hands of those who

were faithful to Your Torah. You have wrought great victories and miraculous deliverance for Your people Israel to this day, revealing Your glory and Your holiness to all the world....

Military victories are miracles when they are fought against tyrants and oppressors.

- In the tradition's eyes, how else does one explain the seemingly impossible victories of the Maccabees and Mordecai?
- Should we now recite Al Ha-Nissim on Yom Haatzmaut—Israel Independence Day? What are the dangers of calling modern day historical events miraculous?
- What are the rewards?

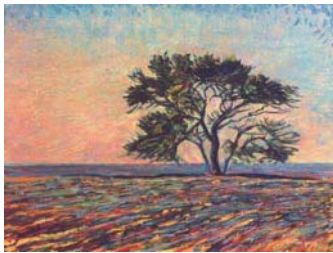
Said Rav Papa to Abaye: "How is it that miracles were performed for earlier generations but not for us?... He replied: The former generations used to be ready to sacrifice their lives for the sanctity of God's name; we do not sacrifice our lives for the sanctity of God's name." (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 20a)

- Is Rav Papa correct in his theory that we need only sacrifice more to bring more miracles?

According to one midrashic tradition God did not part the sea until an ordinary man named Nachshon jumped into the water. He jumped into the waters because he believed in God and God's ways. When he was nearly drowning in the sea, God parted the waters and the Israelites passed through on dry ground.

The Baal Shem Tov (the founder of Hasidism) said: "The world is full of wonders and miracles, but man takes his little hands and covers his eyes and sees nothing."

- Is the Baal Shem Tov correct in his assumption that today we are only blind to God's miracles that swirl around us?



### **Towards an Action Agenda**

- Recite a blessing every day. Every morning when you wake up say, "Modeh ani l'fanecha...--I give thanks to You, everlasting Ruler, for returning my soul to me."
- Whenever you see a natural phenomenon--the Long Island Sound, a snowstorm, the trees beginning to bloom--recite the blessing: "Blessed are You Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, maker of the works of creation."

See if these actions change your perspective on miracles.

- Donate a tree to the Jewish National Fund in honor of Tu B'Shevat (January 24). One day soon go to Israel and visit your tree in a JNF Forest.

See if this changes your perspective on miracles.

- This Shabbat bless your children with the words: "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh or for girls, May God make you like Sarah, Rebeccah, Rachel and Leah." If you don't have children call your parents or a friend and tell them you love them.

See if these actions change your perspective on miracles.



### 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](mailto:RavADS@bjeny.org)

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. 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](http://www.bjeny.org)

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