



Around the Shabbat Table

Be'shallach 5766
February 2006

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Shalom!

Introduction

This week's Torah portion, Be'shallach ("when he sent forth") begins as Pharaoh has finally permitted the Israelites to leave Egypt. Led by Moses, the Israelites set off for the promised land of Israel, following a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day.

But the Israelites have hardly begun their journey when Pharaoh regrets his decision and leads his army in pursuit of the freed slaves. The Torah relates that the army includes "six hundred elite chariots, and all of the chariots of Egypt, and captains over all of them" [Exodus 14:7]. Pharaoh's army overtakes the Israelites just as they reach the shores of the seemingly impassable Red Sea (literally translated as the "Sea of Reeds").

Trapped between the Egyptian army on one side and the sea on the other, the Israelites despair, and cry out to Moses "were there not enough graves in Egypt that you brought us here to die in the wilderness?" [14:11] God commands Moses to stretch out his hand, and the waters of the sea divide, allowing the Israelites to hurry across through a corridor formed by two walls of water. The Egyptian chariots reach the middle of the sea just as the Israelites have arrived at the far shore. God again tells Moses to stretch his hand over the sea, and when he does the waters of the sea come crashing in, drowning the entire Egyptian army.

Moses and Miriam, his sister, lead the Israelites in a victory song, part of which is included in our prayer service to this day: "Mi chamocha, ba'elim Adonai? Who can be compared with you, Oh God, glorious and fearful, working miracles?" [15:11]

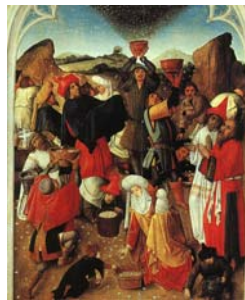
Nevertheless, as the Israelites set out into the Sinai desert, the people begin to have doubts. First they are unable to find drinkable water and then their food supplies begin to run out. The people complain to Moses and Aaron, "when we were in Egypt, we were able to eat our fill of bread, but now you will kill the whole community with hunger!" [16:3] The following morning, manna - a mysterious food whose taste was like "wafers made with honey" [16:31] - falls from the sky, and

everyone is able to gather enough to eat. The manna will be the main source of food for the Israelites for the rest of their time in the wilderness.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

1. Why do you think Pharaoh changed his mind about freeing the Israelite slaves? If you had been the captain of one of his elite chariots, how would you have advised him?
2. If you were one of the Israelites who crossed safely to the other side of the Red Sea, would you have joined in singing a triumphant song?
3. Were the Israelite people right to complain to Moses and Aaron as their food supplies began to run out? If you were Moses, how would you have answered them?



Some Texts to Wrestle With

“A miracle cannot prove what is impossible; it is useful only to confirm what is possible.”

-- Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:24

“Alas! The world is full of enormous lights and mysteries, and people shut them from themselves with one small hand.”

-- Baal Shem Tov, in Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters*)

This week’s Torah portion relates some of the most famous and most incredible miracles described in the Bible. Even such early commentators as Rashi had difficulty accepting that God would disrupt the order of the natural world, and sought out explanations that would reconcile these incredible events with what we know of how the world works.

1. Do you believe that the story of the parting of the Red Sea, the pillars of fire and cloud, or the falling of the *manna* happened the way they are described in the Bible?

2. What do we mean by the word “miracle?” Do you agree with Maimonides that miracles can’t prove the impossible – and if so, what good are they?
3. Do miracles happen nowadays? Do you agree with the Baal Shem Tov that we prevent ourselves from seeing miracles in the world around us?
4. Why do you think God performed these miracles? Why not rescue the Israelites, guide them through the desert, or provide food for them in a less spectacular fashion?
5. What do we get by telling this story? What do we get by telling it this way?

Towards an Action Agenda

1. Early commentators were confused by a verse from this week’s portion: “And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground” [14:22]. How, they wondered, could they have both gone “into the sea” and been on “dry ground?” They decided that this meant that the sea did not part for them until they stepped into it – “indeed, until the waters reached up to their very noses!” [Exodus Rabbah 21:10] Perhaps we can’t wait for miracles to happen, but need to act first? Is there anything you’ve perhaps been putting off, hoping that the problem will go away or that someone else will solve it for you? This week, take that bold first step, and plunge into the waters – who knows, maybe they will part before you!
2. This coming Monday, February 13th, is Tu B’Shvat, the new year for trees. In recent years, Tu B’Shvat has grown to be an opportunity for Jewish people to think about the wonders and mysteries of the natural world – and what we can do to take care of our environment. The website of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (<http://www.coejl.org/action>) offers many “first steps” for making a personal impact.



**Tu
B'Shevat**

Shabbat Shalom! May you have a restful, relaxing, and peaceful Shabbat.

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

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