



## **Around the Shabbat Table Beshalach**

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**Shalom!**

### **Introduction**

The name of this parasha, Beshalach, is taken from the second word of Exodus 13:12 - "...and when Pharaoh sent out." It describes how the families of Israel leave their bondage in Egypt. God sends them the long way, avoiding the land of the Philistines. Back in Egypt, Pharaoh experiences another change of heart and sends his soldiers to pursue the slaves. It is at the Sea of Reeds (often misinterpreted as the "Red Sea") that Pharaoh catches up to the families of Israel. God then tells Moses to lift his staff, and the sea divides, allowing the Israelites to cross unscathed. As the sea closes behind them, Pharaoh's army is drowned. Now convinced of the greatness of God, the Israelites, led by Moses and Miriam, sing songs of praise. However, as soon as they reach the wilderness, the people begin to complain, so Moses makes bitter water (of Marah) sweet to quiet their complaints. God also introduces *manna*, the special food which falls from the sky. Still, the Israelites continue to quarrel with Moses over the lack of water. Moses follows God's instructions and hits a rock (at Horeb) bringing forth water. The place is named Massah and Meribah (Trial and Quarrel) because the people have tried the patience of God there.

The parasha concludes with the Amalekites attacking the people, and with Joshua being appointed by Moses to lead the army. The Amalekites are eventually defeated, and God instructs Moses to record these events and to remember Amalek as Israel's eternal enemy.

In Beshalach, several miracles seem to contradict the laws of nature:

- God leading the Israelites out of Egypt concealed in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.
- The splitting of the Sea of Reeds
- The miraculous waters of Marah and Horeb
- God's provision of quail and manna



### **A Special Shabbat:**

The Shabbat on which the Song at the Sea is read from the Torah is called “Shabbat Shira,” or “The Sabbath of the Song.” When the song is read, the congregation rises, a custom which we observe with only one other Torah reading- the Ten Commandments. In some communities, Shabbat Shira became an opportunity to give food to “nature’s singers,” the birds. Some sources add that the Orthodox practice of separating men and women at services is derived from this portion, since we read that Miriam led the women (separately) in song.

### **Questions for your Family’s Discussions**

As your family shares a meal this Friday night, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. What is a miracle? What determines which events we would consider to be miraculous?
2. Do miracles happen today? Give some examples in which you feel that a miracle has occurred either in your own life, or in modern times.
3. What do you think is the meaning of the miraculous events in the story of the Exodus? Is it important to figure out the meaning of these events? Do you know of other events in the Bible that are considered miraculous? Of all God’s miracles, which is the most significant? Why?
4. Rabbi Mordechai Katz (Lilmod Ul’lamade, p.70) notes that all the plagues in Egypt, as well as miracles at Sinai, had two purposes:

- convincing the Egyptians of the greatness of God
- convincing the Israelites of the same thing!

What proof can you find in the text to support Rabbi Katz's statement? (see Exodus 13:4 and 14:31)



### **Some Texts to Wrestle With**

Rabbis of the Talmud were of two minds regarding the manner in which the Israelites responded as they stood at the Sea of Reeds with the Egyptian army at their backs: Rabbi Meir said, "The tribes strove with one another, each wishing to descend into the sea first." Rabbi Judah said, "...each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the sea. Then sprang forth Nachshon, the son of Amminadab, and descended first into the sea..." (Sotah 37a)

- What would explain either version of the Israelite behavior?

In talking about the Song of the Sea, Rashi, the biblical commentator, said the following: "It was a miraculous experience. A maidservant standing at the Reed Sea experienced God in a way that the prophets were never privileged to experience."

- What does Rashi mean by this statement? Do you agree?

### **Towards an Action Agenda**

A Midrash relates that the angels began to sing when they saw the Egyptians drowning in the sea. God chastised them, saying, "How can you sing while my children are drowning? (Megillah 10b)?

- I. To commemorate this event, at our Passover seder, we show our sorrow that others had to suffer so that we could be free by removing one drop of wine from our cups for each plague. As a family, brainstorm a list of things you could do to remind yourselves that others in the world are less fortunate than you and ways to relieve some of that suffering. Plan to read or do something as part of your Shabbat observance.

2. There is a wonderful song based on the story of Miriam leading the women in song at the Sea. You can read the lyrics, and even listen to the song at <http://campuscgi.princeton.edu/~klez/zemerl/show.pl?title=Miriam's+Song>
3. Help to relieve the suffering of others by exploring volunteer opportunities in the Jewish community. In the New York area, you can start with: <http://www.ujafedny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=volunteering>
4. Help our community do miracles...This Sunday is Super Sunday for UJA Federation of New York. Volunteers throughout the area will join together in calling upon members of the community to ask their support of the important work of UJA-Federation [It was a grant from UJA-Federation that initially funded Around the Shabbat Table!]. Be sure to respond generously if you are called. For further information, go to <http://www.ujafedny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=supersunday> , or get involved in the "virtual Super Sunday" at [http://www.ujafedny.org/site/TR?pg=entry&fr\\_id=1010](http://www.ujafedny.org/site/TR?pg=entry&fr_id=1010)



**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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