

The Path To Follow

Beshalach

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Self-Interest Blinds

Regarding the verse, "Speak to the Children of Israel and let them turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-Zephon; you shall encamp opposite it, by the sea" (Shemot 14:2), Rashi cites the Sages in explaining the expression before Baal-Zephon: "It alone was left from all the gods of Egypt, in order to mislead them so that they might say that their god was [too] difficult [to defeat]" (Mechilta, Beshalach 1).

The commentators have examined this issue and said the following: Rabbi Yehudah is surprised by Rav. "How could G-d command them to encamp by the sea, 'before Baal-Zephon'? After all, we know that it is forbidden to tell your fellow, 'Wait for me by the side of that idol' [Sanhedrin 63b], since it would demonstrate too much consideration to its worship." We therefore have to understand why the name of this idol is mentioned here, since Hashem could have told the Children of Israel to backtrack without mentioning this idol by name.

Furthermore, how could it be that Pharaoh and his entire army were not afraid of pursuing the Children of Israel all the way to the sea [as it is written: "Egypt pursued and came after them – every horse of Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen – into the midst of the sea" (Shemot 14:23)]? After having experienced the extraordinary power of Hashem, Who fought them in Egypt, did they not think that He could drown them at the sea? (Da'at Zekenim Miba'alei HaTosafot).

We shall attempt to explain all this. Our Sages say, "Man is led along the path which he desires to take" (Makkot 10b), be it for good or evil, as it is said: "If one comes to defile himself, he is given an opening. If one comes to purify himself, he is helped" (Shabbat 104a). Man is free to choose his own path in life.

When the Children of Israel left Egypt, Pharaoh, his army, and his servants were only concerned about the material consequences of their departure. By exclaiming, "What is this that we have done, that we sent away Israel from serving us!" (Shemot 14:5), they only considered the economic damage that was caused by the Children of Israel's departure. They were so worried about satisfying their own interests and desire for personal gain that they forgot all about their downfall and the intense suffering they recently endured for having enslaved Israel more harshly than had been decreed.

The book Sha'ar HaPessukim (Parsha Shemot) notes that the initials of Et Bnei Israel Befarech ("[they enslaved] the Children of Israel with harshness" [Shemot 1:13]) forms the word aviv ("spring"), for they were freed in the spring, in the month of Nissan. Since the Egyptians overwhelmed the Children of Israel with excessively harsh work, Hashem hastened the end of the enslavement, which was to have lasted 400 entire years. Instead, He freed them as soon as it was spring.

Thus by seeking only material gain, the Egyptians were harming themselves. They chased after the Children of Israel in order to bring them back to Egypt, despite the numerous punishments they had received on their account, and despite unconsciously knowing what would still happen to them if they harmed the Children of Israel. Nevertheless, they ignored all this, just as they failed to heed Moshe's warnings when they were given.

Why did G-d continue to strengthen their hearts? In order to lead them astray and allow them to think that everything that had happened up to now was nothing more than coincidence, having no connection to the Children of Israel's enslave-

ment. The Egyptians would therefore think that nothing could prevent them from returning these former slaves to Egypt, meaning that they could pursue them as far as the sea without worrying about them or the Creator. We now understand why Hashem commanded Moshe to encamp before the idolatrous Baal-Zephon. He wanted Pharaoh to think that it was his god which had stopped the Children of Israel in the desert, and that they were now lost and wandering about, not knowing where to go, having encamped before Baal-Zephon.

Having concluded that he himself had trapped the Children of Israel in the desert on account of his divine strength and power, Pharaoh aroused himself to "defeat Hashem." As a result, he didn't even consider the risk he was running by pursuing the Children of Israel into the sea. This reaction was similar to that of Samson when he exclaimed: "Let me die with the Philistines!" (Judges 16:30).

G-d destroyed all the idols of Egypt except for one, namely Baal Zephon. This choice alludes to the unhealthy matzpun (conscience) of the Egyptians, who instead of repenting, worried about losing slaves who had become Hashem's subjects. G-d therefore allowed this idol to remain, in order to incite Pharaoh into pursuing the Children of Israel, and then to strike him along with his army.

The words of our Sages shed light on this issue: "The wicked do not repent even at the gate of Gehinnom" (Erubin 19a). Pharaoh could have repented after claiming that he was a god (Mechilta, Beshalach 8), as it is written: "Mine is the river, and I made it myself" (Ezekiel 29:3). Even upon seeing the Children of Israel backtracking and encamping before an Egyptian idol, Pharaoh erred by thinking that he was cause of their wandering.

In reality, if Pharaoh and his servants had abandoned their attempts to benefit from the Children of Israel's enslavement, he would not have pursued them. In that case, he would have reached the ultimate conclusion that "Hashem, He is G-d. There is none but Him" (Devarim 4:35). Pharaoh would have also been able to declare, while still in Egypt, and without having to wait for the drowning at the sea: "Who is like You among the heavenly beings, Hashem?" (Shemot 15:11).

However since they chose their own path, Heaven allowed them to see what they wanted to see. Hashem continued to lead them into error until He drowned them. He certainly strengthened their hearts, but they worked even harder in this regard, to the point of believing that Pharaoh, due to his great strength, had fenced the Children of Israel in the desert and led them to encamp before Baal Zephon.

In that case, the difficulty raised by Da'at Zekenim Miba'alei HaTosafot is solved: It is forbidden to tell your neighbour to wait for you by such-and-such an idol, in order not to add to its importance. However G-d intentionally commanded them to encamp before Baal Zephon, for He wanted to use this idol to induce the Egyptians into error. In this way, they would think that it had been the idol that had brought the Children of Israel to camp before it so as to deliver them into the hands of the Egyptians.

In reality, Hashem sought to strike Pharaoh and his army, to save Israel, and to magnify His Name throughout the world. The whole world would then know that Baal Zephon possessed no value whatsoever. It seems that this very same idol was destroyed, as it is written: "Against all the gods of Egypt, I will execute judgment" (Shemot 12:12) – each in its own time. In this way, the Name of Hashem would be glorified throughout the world.



They Believed in Hashem and in His Servant Moshe

The virtue of faith is immense. In fact through the merit of faith, we can transform the Divine attribute of justice into mercy and experience great deliverance. A question was once put to our teacher, Rabbi David Hanania Pinto, about the extraordinary miracles that his students often experience. He responded by saying that such miracles were certainly due to their faith, as well as to the merit of his own forefathers. He expressed himself as follows: “They believe very deeply that G-d will save them on account of the blessing of the merit of the fathers. This faith removes all obstacles in their path, and when they come to see me, I am helped from above to assist them.”

There are numerous stories of miracles that have occurred on account of faith in the Creator, as well as in those who do His will. Here are but a few:

Rav Shimon Cohen, the son of Rabbi Yechiya Cohen, who was a good friend of the tzaddik Rabbi Moshe Aharon Pinto, told our teacher that he once traveled with his father to a remote village in Morocco, which they reached by journeying through the desert. They were going to see a villager who owed them money.

On the way there, in the darkest hour of the night, their car broke down. Hence they found themselves in the remote desert, dark and dangerous, without a telephone, electricity, or any help. They feared for their lives, dreading thieves, foxes, wolves, and scorpions that lived in the desert. Exactly where were they? They had no idea! Only a stretch of endless desert lay before them. When Rabbi Yechiya realized the gravity of the situation, he began to pray for the merit of Rabbi Haim Pinto to protect them, since they were incapable of handling this serious danger on their own. A miracle then took place: As they were still praying by their broken down car, they saw a motorcyclist who was carrying tools to repair a vehicle. This motorcyclist approached them and asked Rabbi Yechiya Cohen: “What are you doing in the desert in the middle of the night?”

“My car broke down on the road,” he told him.

The motorcyclist took out his tools and fixed a few engine parts before telling Rabbi Yechiya: “Get back in the car and start the engine.”

He complied and the car started! He then got out to thank the man for having rescued them...but they couldn't find him! He vanished as he had arrived!

In that situation they had merited two things:

First of all, their prayer had been accepted and had an immediate effect. But more than that, they had seen an angel!

In fact, who else could that man have been, if not an angel from Heaven who came to save them by the merit of the tzaddik? The desert stretched out for hundreds of miles in every direction, with no village or dwelling to be found, so where else could this motorcyclist and his tools have come from?

When our teacher heard this incredible story, he said to his student Rabbi Shimon Cohen: “You have merited much, Shimon, in that you saw an angel of Hashem. Since you benefited from such a miracle, never lose sight of the fact that there is a Creator, and be scrupulous in the performance of each mitzvah, both the lightest and the heaviest.”

They Have Eyes, But Cannot See

In the years prior to the Second World War, anti-Semitism had already started to wreak havoc around the world. Nations formulated various

laws whose sole purpose was to make the lives of Jews difficult.

One such law was enacted in Morocco, where anyone found with foreign currency was subject to immediate arrest. At the time, Rav Avraham Moyal possessed a large amount of money in foreign currency, and naturally he was very fearful.

One time, as he was traveling by bus, he was carrying a few cases in which he had placed his foreign currency.

Some people who were jealous of Rav Avraham Moyal denounced him to the authorities, informing them that he was preparing to travel to Mogador with five cases filled with money.

Having learned of this plan to denounce him, the Rav courageously left the bus prior to his stop, leaving everything aboard. He reached Mogador in a roundabout way, and was therefore not stopped.

After the bus reached its final destination, the Rav decided to try his luck by going to collect his belongings. By the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto, he prayed for a successful mission. His hope was to find his cases with all the money untouched, even if he thought that the other passengers had probably snatched them already.

Furthermore, the maintenance men who cleaned and prepared the bus at the end of each trip could have also found the cases and taken them.

Nevertheless, he tried his luck. He reached the last stop and noticed some workers washing the bus. When he asked them, “Has the inside been cleaned already?” he was told that it had.

However the Rav didn't lose hope, and so he turned to one maintenance man and asked: “Can I go aboard for a minute? I forgot something!”

“What did you forget?” he asked. “We've already cleaned up inside, and there's nothing left!”

All the same, the Rav ignored his response and went aboard.

What he saw next left him stunned: The five cases that he had brought aboard were exactly where he left them. Nobody had touched them! The workers had gone through the bus systematically, but had simply not seen them.

The verse, “They have eyes, but cannot see” had well and truly been fulfilled here.

The Rav then asked the workers to help him carry these cases to his car, which was parked nearby.

For their part, the workers were stunned: “How couldn't we have seen them?” they wondered. “We cleaned everything on the inside, so how is this possible?”

The Rav answered them in a confident tone:

“Clearly, you couldn't see them because I prayed that by the merit of Rabbi Haim Pinto, nobody would touch them, and that I would retrieve them completely intact. These cases allow me to earn a living, and I thank Hashem for having returned them all to me!”

Guard Your Tongue!

In That Case, You May Believe It

If someone has long been known as an evildoer because he publicly commits misdeeds on several occasions, deliberately transgressing prohibitions that are known by every Jew, then it is permitted to believe Lashon Harah about such a person.

– Chafetz Chaim

Cruel Jolts

It is written, “And Hashem stirred the Egyptians into the sea” (Shemot 14:27).

Like a person who stirs a pot and overturns that which is on top to the bottom, and that which is on the bottom to the top.

Another explanation: “And Hashem stirred [va-yena’er]” – He infused them with the strength of youth (na’arut) so they could receive this punishment.

Another explanation: He delivered them, so to speak, to “young” angels – cruel angels, as it is written: “A cruel angel will be sent against him” (Mishlei 17:11). Also: “Their soul will die in youth” (Job 36:14) – these are cruel and reckless (“young”) angels.

– Mechilta

You Destroy Them

It is written, “In Your abundant greatness, You destroy those who rise up against You” (Shemot 15:7).

There were two magicians in Egypt: Yochanan and Mimra. They used magic to fashion wings for themselves, and they flew to the top of the world.

The angel Gabriel said, “In Your abundant greatness, You destroy those who rise up against You” (for they had risen in the air and rebelled against Hashem by using their magic to lower the angels from on high). Immediately, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the angel Michael: “Go judge them!” Michael seized them by the sides of their head and threw them upon the water, as it is written: “You shatter the sea with Your might; You smashed the heads of sea serpents upon the water” (Tehillim 74:13).

– Midrash Avkir

Naked in Judgment

It is written, “At the blast of Your nostrils, the waters were heaped up” (Shemot 15:8).

Rabbi Shimon bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: “G-d punishes the wicked in Gehinnom only naked, as we know from the verse: ‘In nakedness will You despise their appearance’ [Tehillim 73:20].” ... Rabbi Nathan said: “The Egyptians, when they sank in the sea, were also punished naked, as it says, ‘At the blast of Your nostrils, the waters ne’ermu [“were heaped up,” but evoking the term arum (“naked”)] in the midst of the sea.’”

– Esther Rabba 3:14

For Israel Only

It is written, “I shall rain down for you bread” (Shemot 16:4).

Bread (lechem) was given only to you (lachem), not to any other people. If all the nations gathered in order to try and benefit from the manna, be it ever so little, they would be unable to. However this explanation concerns only the manna. How do we know that they could not benefit from the well? Because it is said, “Well that the princes dug” [Bamidbar 21:18]. (It was Moshe and Aaron alone who dug it for the Children of Israel). This teaches us that if all the peoples of the world gathered to fill a bucket at the well, they would be unable to.

– Midrash Avkir

Preparing for Faith

It is written, “No man may leave over from it until morning” (Shemot 16:19).

Why? In order to prepare and accustom their hearts to having faith in their Father in Heaven. In fact those with sons and daughters would worry and think: “Perhaps the manna will not fall tomorrow, so how will I be able to feed my family?” At that point, they yearned for faith in their Father in Heaven.

– Midrash Socher Tov

The World Endures

It is written, “When Moshe raised his hand, Israel was stronger” (Shemot 17:11).

He raised his hand to bless them with the Birkat Kohanim.

This is why Rabbi Yochanan said, “What is the meaning of, ‘When Moshe raised his hand, Israel was stronger, and when he lowered his hand, Amalek was stronger’? This teaches us that the world endures only because of the Nesikat Kapayim [“Raising of the Hands”] of the kohanim.”

– Sefer HaBahir

In the Light of the Parsha

The Merit of Torah Protected Those Who Left Egypt

It is written, “G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, because it was near, for G-d said: ‘Lest the people reconsider when they see war, and they return to Egypt’” (Shemot 13:17).

From the fact that it is written, “Lest the people reconsider when they see war, and they return to Egypt” we learn that G-d only led the Children of Israel by the longer desert route lest they would want to return to Egypt upon seeing war in the land of the Philistines. This is surprising. Were the Children of Israel not more fearful of entering the desert with their women and children than the prospects of war? After all, the desert is described as “that great and terrible wilderness, where there were venomous serpents, scorpions and drought, where there was no water” (Devarim 8:15).

The Sages have said, “The effect of Israel’s acceptance of the Torah would be that no nation or tongue could prevail against them” (Avodah Zarah 5a). Hence before receiving the Torah on Sinai, they did not merit a miracle, namely that their enemies should not prevail over them. If G-d had led them by way of the land of the Philistines, the latter would have provoked and attacked them, as often happens. At that point, however, they would not yet have had the merit of the Torah to protect them before their enemies.

That being the case, how were the Children of Israel delivered from Pharaoh and his servants when they pursued them? The Sages said, “The Children of Israel merited deliverance from Pharaoh at the sea only because of faith,” as we read further on: “They believed in Hashem and in Moshe His servant” (Shemot 14:31). How did they attain such faith? It was because G-d brought them through the desert, as our Sages have taught: “And they did so [Shemot 14:4]. What did they do? They said, ‘Whether we want to or not, we can only act on the word of Amram’s son’” (Mechilta, Beshalach 1).

Since they attained faith, they were worthy of being delivered from Pharaoh and his army, and the sea split before them. Although strict justice protested, “These and those are uncircumcised; these and those grow side-locks; these and those wear garments of linen and wool,” they were still delivered because they had faith. The Sages also taught (Mechilta, Beshalach 6) that the Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt only as a reward for their faith, as it is written: “The people believed” (Shemot 4:31).

We may therefore say that G-d brought the Children of Israel through the desert only so they would trust in Him and be worthy of being delivered from Pharaoh. Furthermore, He wanted to teach them that as long as a person does not take the yoke of the Torah upon himself, he is not protected from the forces of impurity or from his enemies. Although Hashem could have performed a miracle by preventing their enemies from attacking them, He did not want to perform a miracle for them for free.

Thus we read, in regards to a certain man for whom a miracle was performed, that the Sages said: “How lowly was this man, such that the nature of Creation was changed on his account!” (Shabbat 53b). Accusers could have said, “By what merit was a miracle performed for the Children of Israel and the laws of nature changed on their account?”

This is alluded to in this week’s parsha: “G-d did not nacham [lead them] by way of the land of the Philistines.” The term nacham is formed by the same letters as chinam (“free”), meaning that the Holy One, blessed be He, did not want to lead them through the land of the Philistines, for that would have required Him to perform a miracle for the Children of Israel for free, something that He did not want to do.

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian was never late for prayer, affirms the introduction of the book *Lev Eliyahu*. Oftentimes, when he was indirectly asked the question of the Sages, “To what do you owe your long life?” he would reply: “When a person is among the first in a minyan, he merits long life.”

One time, at the beginning of Elul, Rabbi Eliyahu had a very high fever. He was extremely weak, and did not go to the yeshiva for the first two weeks of Elul. When he recovered, he said that at the height of his illness, his fever had reached 42°C [107°F]. During his illness, a regular minyan had gathered in his home for all the prayers. Despite his severe weakness (his legs often gave way beneath him, and he needed to be supported so as not to fall), he always got up for prayer, dressed, and prayed aloud with enthusiasm, as he usually did at the yeshiva.

Dedication to Prayer

In her book *All for the Boss*, Ruchoma Shain writes that her father, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Herman, a Torah pioneer in the United States, never missed praying with a minyan:

Papa went to shul morning and night to say his Shacharis, Minchah, and Ma’ariv prayers with a minyan. Neither heat nor cold, rain nor snow, not even illness, deterred Papa from performing this mitzvah.

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef was sometimes confronted by difficult obstacles in regards to praying with the community, but he overcame them with tremendous courage.

In the year 5691, he travelled to Europe and visited the great men of the generation at their homes. Ruchoma Shain recounts her father’s description of this trip:

“I did not miss a minyan though I traveled by boat, train and plane through many countries. Where there is a will, you can always find a way to do a mitzvah.”

On his way home, after spending time in several cities in Poland, he arrived in Leipzig, Germany. From there he was scheduled to travel to London. Papa realized that if he followed his itinerary and traveled by train, he would miss davening Ma’ariv with a minyan.

On the spur of the moment, he decided to travel by plane. In 1931 [5691], plane travel was expensive and hazardous, and few people used this means of transportation. Papa boarded the tiny plane, which flew into the horizon with few passengers aboard. The trip was a very rough one but within a short time Papa arrived in London.

When he disembarked from the plane, the customs officer checked his passport and noticed that Papa had no visa to enter England. However, he was so impressed that Papa had arrived by plane that he allowed him to enter the country without a visa and remain for his allotted time.

It was already quite late at night when Papa knocked at the door of Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler, author of the famous work of mussar, *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, who was then residing in London. Rabbi Dessler greeted Papa warmly, as he ushered him into his home. “Reb Yaakov Yosef, now I have an opportunity to repay a little of your hachnosas orchim to me when I was in New York. Tell me what I can do for you to make you comfortable.”

“I need a minyan for Ma’ariv,” Papa said quickly.

“It’s very late, but I will see what I can do,” Rabbi Dessler said graciously. He went from door to door, until he succeeded in gathering a minyan of his neighbors.

After Ma’ariv, Papa said thankfully, “This is real hachnosas orchim, Reb Elya.”

“He Might Have Been Eliyahu Hanavi”

Rabbi Herman’s daughter recounts another incident that describes her father’s ability to overcome hardship in praying with the community:

Once Papa had occasion to travel west on business. His train was scheduled to make an hour’s stop in St. Louis. It was early in the morning when the train pulled into the station.

Papa jumped off the train and hailed the first taxi he saw. “Drive me quickly to an Orthodox synagogue,” Papa directed the driver. Fortunately, the cab driver knew where to go, and in a few minutes the taxi was parked outside a synagogue.

In the meantime, Papa had put on his tallis and tefillin. He told the driver to wait for him, while he hurried into the synagogue. The early morning prayers were about to begin. As Papa entered, the congregants looked in amazement at this stranger who seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

“I would like to daven at the amud,” Papa requested courteously. Speechless, they nodded their heads in assent.

Papa’s praying always inspired his listeners to the heights of spiritual elevation. In this strange synagogue, in his usual way, he stood straight as a soldier, pouring out his heart and soul to Hashem.

As soon as the prayers were over, he immediately departed from the synagogue. The taxi took him to the train, which he reached on time.

During this period, Reb Boruch Ber Leibowitz from Kaminetz and his son-in-law, Reb Reuven Grozovsky, were orchim at our house. They traveled through many parts of the United States in order to raise funds for their yeshiva, and on one of their trips they arrived in St. Louis.

At the home where they were staying, their host related a remarkable incident that had happened recently in their synagogue.

“A stranger entered our synagogue with early morning, dressed in tallis and tefillin. His prayers were the most inspiring we had ever heard. Immediately after the Shacharis prayers, he disappeared. He might have been Eliyahu Hanavi,” the man ended his tale with awe.

When Reb Boruch Ber and Reb Reuven returned after an extensive trip, Reb Reuven said to Mama, “I always thought that there is only one Reb Yaakov Yosef in America.” He then went on to describe in detail the incident that they had heard while in St. Louis.

Mama smiled knowingly, for Papa had told us when he returned from his trip how the Boss always helped him carry out the mitzvah of davening with a minyan. “Reb Reuven,” Mama replied, “there is only one Reb Yankev Yosef. It was he who was in St. Louis.”

I Am Prayer

How Sustenance Reaches Man

One of the conditions ordained by the highest wisdom is that in order for a person to receive shefa [sustenance] from G-d, he must first motivate himself in G-d’s direction and turn to G-d in requesting his needs. The amount of sustenance depends upon the degree to which he does so. If a person is not awakened in this direction, then no Divine sustenance will reach him at all. This is the meaning of prayer.

G-d desires and wills to constantly benefit mankind. He therefore arranged for prayer to be a daily obligation. Through it, man receives sustenance, success, and blessing according to his needs, as dictated by his state of being in this world.

– Ramchal, *Derech Hashem*