

## Selected Shorts: Beshalah

Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 30, 2021 17 Shevat 5781

(יח) ויטב אלֵהִים | אֶת־הָעַם גָּרָה הַמִּדְבָּר יַם־סוּף ...

### Exodus 13:18

(18) *So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.* This was to prevent them from encountering the fortifications on the Way of the Land of the Philistines, the coastal route. The verses at the beginning of this parasha establish the tension that remains with Israel throughout the desert: do we yearn to go forward to Israel or long to return to Egypt?

(ט) ויקח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ כִּי הִשְׁבַּע הַשָּׁבִיעַ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פֶּקֶד פֶּקֶד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהַעֲלִיתֶם אֶת־עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה אֶתְכֶם:

### Exodus 13:19

(19) *And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, "God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you."* With this small detail we are reminded of how Israel ended up in Egypt. The reinternment of Joseph's bones in the land of Israel, which doesn't take place until the end of the Book of Joshua, will be the final symbolic moment of homecoming. God fulfills His promise to Abraham by taking Israel out of Egypt; Moses fulfills the oath made with Joseph.

(ה) וַיֵּגְדוּ לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם כִּי בָרַח הָעַם וַיִּהְיֶה לִבָּב פָּרֻעַ וַעֲבָדֵיו אֶל־הָעַם וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִהֲזֹאת עֲשִׂינוּ כִּי־שָׁלַחְנוּ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִעֲבָדֵינוּ:

### Exodus 14:5

(5) *When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart about the people and said, "What is this we have done, releasing Israel from our service?"* We have to wonder what caused Pharaoh's "change of heart" here? Did he want the Israelites back as slaves or did he want to annihilate them? He is told that they have fled, but he also discerns that they are trapped. Israel numbers in the hundreds of thousands. Pharaoh assembles a force of "600 of his picked chariots" and some others. Would this force be sufficient to retrieve the Israelites or be enough to trample them and push them into the sea? What is the nature of his regret? Vengeance? Settling scores?

(יא) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הַמְּבִלִי אֵיךְ־קָרַיִם בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לְמֹות בַּמִּדְבָּר מִהֲזֹאת עֲשִׂיתָ לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם:

### Exodus 14:11

(11) *And they said to Moses, "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?"* Do we read this verse as the birth of Jewish humor or as an accurate assessment of the situation? To the Israelites it is clear that Pharaoh wants to kill them and not reinstate them. This is the inversion of the Exodus moment. When they leave Egypt "in the middle of the night" they don't utter a peep. They are compliant, orderly, and eager. Upon close examination, they are up all night, forsake the prepared meal and don't eat anything until the following day. And now it has been three days. They are tired, anxious, hungry, and bewildered. They have lost perspective and Moses becomes an easy target for their trauma. But rather than become defensive, Moses rouses them. *Do not fear! Stand firm and watch God's salvation... God will wage battle for you, and you are to remain silent.* ie. just as you were on the eve of the Exodus. That night, you were silent, compliant and orderly and now too, you will be silent, compliant and orderly. This moment at the sea is inextricably linked to that moment.

(כב) וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבָּשָׁה וְהַיָּם לָהֶם חֲמוֹהַ קִימִינָם וּמִשְׁמָאלָם:

### Exodus 14:22

(22) *and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.*

This is the dominant phrase of the story. What is encoded in this image? Creation. Recall that on the third day, God causes the water to pool so that "the dry land-yabasha will appear." And here the water is pushed aside so that the yabasha-dry land appears. The message: This miracle was just as significant as creation. Another interpretation: in a desert canyon (say in the Sinai or Negev), you can travel along the dry river-bed in the "longitudinal" direction of the dried river with walls of rock on your right and left. You can always track your way back. Here, they traversed

the “sea” (probably a large lake or bay) in the “latitudinal direction,” from one shore to the other along the dry sea-bed with a canyon of water on their right and left. Traversing from one shore to the other means that they left something behind. They created a physical disjunction from their past. Everyone understands that a “canyon of water” is temporary. In reading over and over that *the waters formed a wall for them on their right and on their left* we understand intuitively that once they get to the other side, there is no going back. Egypt will be behind them.

(ל) וַיִּוְשַׁע הַבָּיִת הַהוּא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת־מִצְרַיִם מֵעַל־שַׁקֵּת הַיָּם:

### Exodus 14:30

(30) *Thus the LORD delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea.* Question: what is the farthest the unaided human eye can see? At the GWB the Hudson is about a mile wide. If you stood on the New Jersey side it is doubtful that you would be able to make out a human form on the New York side. In order for the Israelites to see the bodies of the Egyptians they must not have been that far away, maybe the length of a football field. In other words, they got very close. But aside from the trauma of proximity, the narrow escape, we have to consider the emotional impact of seeing that amount of death. Recall that on the eve of the Exodus, they only **heard** the shrieks of the Egyptians. That in itself must have been terrifying but this **sight** of the dead Egyptians had to be different. What went through their minds? Anguish? Terror? Relief? Awe? Jubilation? Pity? The Hebrew text is subtle. It can be translated as: *And Israel saw **Egypt** dead on the shore of the sea.* Indeed, to Israel, Egypt was dead. This was the ultimate disjunction. But it’s not so simple. For the liberated slaves, the Egyptian experience still had residual effects.

(כב) וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם־סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל־מִדְבַר־שׁוּר וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת־יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא־מָצְאוּ מַיִם:

### Exodus 15:22

(22) *Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water.* It doesn’t take long for reality to set in. The rabbis place the splitting of the Sea of Reeds on day 7 following the Exodus.

The Israelites are now ten days out. Having attained freedom, having miraculously survived the Egyptian onslaught, having vanquished their enemies, they now have to deal with the realities of sustaining themselves in the desert. Moses has been effective as a liberator but can he manage the day-to-day provisions of food and water? Can he maintain the morale of the people while lowering expectations? Clearly the euphoria is gone as the people begin to complain. What is more difficult, the process of liberation or the process of establishing a viable social order with enough provisions for all?

(יב) שְׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־תְּלִוּוֹתַי בְּגִי יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּבַר אֲלֵהֶם לֵאמֹר בֵּין הָעַרְבִים תֹּאכְלוּ בָשָׂר וּבִבְקָר תִּשְׁבְּעוּ־לָהֶם וַיִּדְעוּהֶם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם:

### Exodus 16:12

(12) *“I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Speak to them and say: By evening you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; and you shall know that I the LORD am your God.”* Clearly, the Israelites are in no position to sustain themselves without Divine assistance. Their complaints are valid and the intervention is necessary for their survival. All of this demonstrates God’s power and beneficence. But it’s hard not to feel the depth of frustration that the Israelites have. In not being able to produce their own food they have to be totally reliant on God. Will they be able to purge their slave mentality, acknowledge their dependence, and achieve a sense of dignity as well?

(לג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן קַח צִנְצֻנֹת אֶחָת וְתוֹ־שֶׁמֶה מִלֶּ־אֶ־הַעֲמֹר מִן הַמָּן וְהִנֵּחָ אֹתוֹ לִפְנֵי ה' לְמִשְׁמַרְתָּ לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם:

### Exodus 16:33

(33) *And Moses said to Aaron, “Take a jar, put one omer of manna in it, and place it before the LORD, to be kept throughout the ages.”*

What a powerful symbol the manna is! Two loaves of challah at our Shabbat table are intended to take us back to the formative stage of our peoplehood as we re-enact the surprise, joy and limitations of this miraculous food. The first set of rules pertaining to Shabbat dealt with the collection of manna, thus the loaves also represent the beginning of Shabbat norms, and the creation of Shabbat as an institution. The souvenir manna-jar was lost, but Shabbat remains for eternity! Shabbat Shalom!