




Comments on Beshalach

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February 4, 2023 13 Shvat 5783

The splitting of the sea has such an important place in Judaism. What is the text saying? How do we imagine it? Do the depictions of this moment conflict with the text? Can reading this text closely shape the way we imagine the events at the sea?

<p>ויסע מלאך האלהים ההלך לפני מחנה ישראל ויילך מאחריהם ויסע עמוד הענן מפניהם ויצמד מאחריהם:</p>	<p><i>The messenger of God that was going before the camp of Israel moved on and went behind them; the column of cloud moved ahead of them and stood behind them,</i></p>	<p>So, what happened? Who or what is this messenger, or angel? Think of it as a forcefield, an energy-presence. It had been at the front of the people. But with the Egyptians in hot pursuit, this forcefield moves to the back. The column of cloud which leads them during the day (column of fire at night, 13:21) now <b>also</b> moves to the back. This movement is significant: <b>protection</b>.</p>
<p>ויבא בין מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה ישראל ויהי הענן ותחשוך ויאיר את הלילה ולא יקרבו זה אל זה כל הלילה:</p>	<p><i>and came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel. Here were the cloud and the darkness, and it lit up the night; this one did not come near this one all night.</i></p>	<p>The <b>cloud-pillar</b>, which at night is a <b>fire-pillar</b>, lights up the night. It's a barrier between the Israelites and the Egyptians. Are the people in motion here? It doesn't seem so. They are stuck. Blocked by the sea, they have nowhere to go! But the Egyptians cannot overtake them because they are being protected by this forcefield. God is manifest in the fire. This goes on all night. That's important.</p>
<p>ולט משה את ידו על הים ויילך ה' את הים ברוח קדים עזה כל הלילה וישם את הים לחרבה ויבקעו המים:</p>	<p><i>Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea, and God caused the sea to go back with a fierce east wind all night, and made the sea into firm-ground; thus the waters split.</i></p>	<p>God's exact words to Moses were <b>lift up your staff</b> but here, Moses <b>stretches out his hand</b>. Is there a difference? But note carefully: it is not Moses that is causing the sea to go back. It's God. Contrary to the depiction in the movie, the wind blows <b>all night</b>. The splitting of the sea is not a sudden event. Hours of fierce wind <b>all night</b> cause the waters to recede. The seabed is dry. Dry enough for them to walk on and not sink in. Or was it rock?</p>
<p>ויבאו בני ישראל בתוך הים ביבשה ותמים להם חומה מימנם ומשמאלם:</p>	<p><i>The Children of Israel came through the midst of the sea upon the dry-land, the waters a wall for them on their right and on their left.</i></p>	<p>This is the critical line of the story. It demands our close attention. Is it literal or figurative? Poetry or prose? It has rhythm. There are 11 <b>מ</b> sounds in a verse of 11 words. <b>לם, נם, לם, נם</b> - which rhyme. That's poetry. Are the <b>walls</b> real or an optical illusion <b>for them</b>? Sometimes clouds can appear as mountains. Water can appear like walls. Or is this a metaphor? Are they in a protective bubble?</p>
<p>וירדפו מצרים ויבאו אחריהם כל סוס פרעה רכבו ופרשיו אל תוך הים:</p>	<p><i>But the Egyptians pursued and came in after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his riders, into the midst of the sea.</i></p>	<p>After a whole night of wind. It's still dark. Walking onto the dry seabed, the Israelites and are in a protected zone: the <b>fire-cloud pillar</b> at their rear. It gives them protection as they march forward. The Egyptians come into the sea but is it dry or wet? The text omits the word <b>dry-land</b>. Why? Because they are in shallow water.</p>
<p>ויהי באשמרת הבקר וישקף ה' אל מחנה מצרים בעמוד אש וענן ולתם את מחנה מצרים:</p>	<p><i>Now it was at the daybreak watch that God looked out against the camp of Egypt in the column of fire and cloud, and he panicked the camp of Egypt;</i></p>	<p>Why is this detail important? Because they are heading in an easterly direction. The wind is at their backs. And what will happen at daybreak? Sunrise! Precisely when the Ra, Egyptian sun-god will appears, the <b>God</b> of Israel will <b>looks out against</b> the Egyptians! The Egyptians will be blinded by God, not Ra, they will panic and be overwhelmed. Note that <b>to panic</b> is almost an anagram of <b>and the water</b>.</p> 
<p>ויסר את אפן מרכבתיו וינתנהו בכבדת ויאמר מצרים אנוסה מפני ישראל כי ה' נלחם להם במצרים:</p>	<p><i>he loosened the wheels of his chariots and made them drive with heaviness. Egypt said: I must flee before Israel, for God battles for them against Egypt!</i></p>	<p>Alt. The <b>wheels</b> got locked or stuck. Perhaps burned by the fire cloud. Horses that galloped a second ago are now still. Note the irony: up until now God has made Pharaoh's heart heavy. Now God has made Pharaoh's chariots heavy. Like Pharaoh, the chariots are not free. But the riders are. They speak freely with one voice: Let's get out of here! At this moment, they recognize God's power.</p>
<p>ויאמר ה' אל משה נטה את ידך על הים וישובו המים על מצרים על רכבו ועל פרשיו:</p>	<p><i>Then God said to Moshe: Stretch out your hand over the sea, and the waters shall return upon Egypt upon its chariots and upon its riders.</i></p>	<p>Where is Moses at this point? Is he on the opposite shore? Or is he still in the midst of the sea on dry land? The text doesn't say. But we know he is in a protected zone, the <b>fire-cloud pillar</b> shields him from the Egyptians. What would have gone through Moses' mind at this moment? He has killed one Egyptian already. Now his act will cause the death of hundreds more. With water.</p>
<p>ויט משה את ידו על הים וישוב הים לפנות בקר לאיתנו וימצרים נסים לקראתו וינער ה' את מצרים בתוך הים:</p>	<p><i>Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned, at daybreak, to its original-place, as the Egyptians fled at its approach. And God shook the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.</i></p>	<p>All of this is happening at sunrise. <b>איתנו</b> means permanence. The sea is going from its suspended state of retreat back to its permanent state. What must seem like a giant wave or a tsunami is coming right towards them. <b>Rashi: God shook them the way person stirs a pot. Bringing the top to the bottom...</b></p> 

<p><b>וישבו המים</b>  ויכסו את־הרכב  ואת־הפְּרָשִׁים  לְכָל־חַיֵּי פְּרֹעֹה  הַבָּאִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם בַּיָּם  לֹא־נִשְׁאָר בָּהֶם עַד־אַחַד:</p>	<p><b>The waters returned;</b>  <i>they covered the chariots  and the riders  of all of Pharaoh's army  that had come after them into the sea,  not even one of them remained.</i></p>	<p>It's hard not to hear an echo of another water story, Noah and the Flood: <b>ויַעֲבֹר אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁבּוּ הַמַּיִם</b> - <b>and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.</b>(Gen. 8:1). There, the water subsides and the entire generation perishes. Here, the entire army of Pharaoh is submerged. It is a shocking and terrifying sight. <b>וישבו</b> and <b>וישכו</b> are very similar.</p>									
<p><b>ובני ישראל  הלכו ביבשה  בתוך הים</b>  והמים להם חמה  מימין ומשמאלם:</p>	<p><b>But the Children of Israel  had gone upon dry-land,  through the midst of the sea,  the waters a wall for them  on their right and on their left.</b></p>	<table border="1"> <tr> <td data-bbox="787 304 901 346">14:16 going in</td> <td data-bbox="901 304 1015 346">14:29 coming out</td> <td data-bbox="1015 304 1521 457" rowspan="4"> <p>This verse is a reprise of the earlier one above. Note the subtle differences: when they go in, they enter <i>the sea</i>, when they come out, they exit the <i>dry land</i>. When they go in, the verb <b>ויבאו</b> precedes the noun <b>בני ישראל</b>. When they go out, the noun <b>בני ישראל</b> precedes the verb <b>ויבאו</b>. In other words, at the end of the ordeal, they emerge from the seabed as a nation. The effect of this lovely styling is to signal to the reader that we have reached the conclusion.</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="787 346 901 388">ויבאו בני־ישראל</td> <td data-bbox="901 346 1015 388">ובני ישראל הלכו</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="787 388 901 430">בתוך הים ביבשה</td> <td data-bbox="901 388 1015 430">בתוך הים ביבשה</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="787 430 901 457">והמים להם חמה</td> <td data-bbox="901 430 1015 457">והמים להם חמה</td> </tr> </table>	14:16 going in	14:29 coming out	<p>This verse is a reprise of the earlier one above. Note the subtle differences: when they go in, they enter <i>the sea</i>, when they come out, they exit the <i>dry land</i>. When they go in, the verb <b>ויבאו</b> precedes the noun <b>בני ישראל</b>. When they go out, the noun <b>בני ישראל</b> precedes the verb <b>ויבאו</b>. In other words, at the end of the ordeal, they emerge from the seabed as a nation. The effect of this lovely styling is to signal to the reader that we have reached the conclusion.</p>	ויבאו בני־ישראל	ובני ישראל הלכו	בתוך הים ביבשה	בתוך הים ביבשה	והמים להם חמה	והמים להם חמה
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	<p><b>So God delivered Israel on that day  from the hand of Egypt;</b>  <b>Israel saw</b>  <b>Egypt</b>  <b>dead by the shore of the sea,</b></p>	<p>Having just experienced a night of complete fear, the fear that the Egyptians would catch up to them, the fear of the water, the fear that they may not make it, they look back and see the dead Egyptians on the shore. We have to pause and wonder what they thought when they saw the Egyptians. Or were they too exhausted to feel anything? Here's the debatable proposition: a person is not the same after seeing hundreds of dead bodies. Even if they were your enemies. Did they just leave the bodies there? Were they really about to erupt in song? Or would they have stayed silent?</p>									
<p><b>ויראה ישראל  את־יְהוָה הגדולה  אשר עשה ה' במצרים  ויראו העם את־ה'  ויאמינו בה'  ובמשה עבדו:</b></p>	<p><b>and Israel saw  the great hand  that God had wrought against Egypt.  The people held God in awe;  they trusted in God  and in Moshe his servant.</b></p>	<p>This is the final verse of the story. Having been delivered from slavery, they are now free. Having been saved from death, they are now fully alive, while their enemies lay dead. They saw <b>the great hand</b>, that is, the <b>great hand</b> of God's justice. Their reaction is <b>awe of God</b>. The awe that defined Abraham at the Akedah and Moses at the Burning Bush, now defines them. And <b>they trust in God and Moses</b>. But it doesn't take long for those feelings to dissipate. A few days without food or water will be enough to raise their doubts about Moses and also about God. This becomes a defining theme.</p>									

*The Song at the Sea* is a great example of a text we are very familiar with, like the Shema, the Akedah, or the Ten Commandments, but one that we tend not to study very closely since we think we know it because we are constantly reciting it liturgically. But look at it closely: The **Story** (Exod. 14) and the **Song** (Exod. 15) have many different elements. The following chart lists some key contrasts between the two of them:

THE STORY: EXODUS 14	THE SONG: EXODUS 15
The Egyptians give chase to retrieve the Israelites and re-enslave them. (14:5)	The Egyptians are in hot pursuit of the Israelites to kill and despoil them. (15:9)
Israelites complain bitterly and fear their death. (14:11-12)	No complaints or interactions of any kind.
The Pillar of Fire/Cloud has a central protective role.	Pillar of Fire/Cloud has no role or appearance.
Moses acts as God's agent.	Moses has no direct role.
The sea splits because Moses <b>stretched his hand</b> over it and God <b>caused a wind to blow</b> all night. (14:21)(no anthropomorphism)	Moses does not stretch out his hands over the sea. The sea splits as a result of a <b>blast of God's nostrils</b> (15:8)(anthropomorphism).
The sea covers the Egyptians because Moses stretches his hand over it (14:27)	The sea covers the Egyptians because <b>God blows with his breath</b> . (15:10)
The Egyptians die as a result of the sea <b>returning to its normal state</b> . (14:28)	The Egyptians die because God actively <b>hurled them into the sea and drowned them</b> . (15:4)

The events happen at night and culminate at daybreak.	No references to time of day are listed.
Narrow lens: Egypt, the sea and the wilderness.	Wide lens: Moab, Edom, Philistia, Canaan and others.
Main theme: God saves Israel. Israel walks through the sea on dry land.	Main theme: God is a man of war. Who is like God, God will reign forever.
Ending: sight of the Egyptian dead, Israel's awe. and faith.	The ending: God will reign forever.
Reaction: Collective silence.	Reaction: Collective song.

What do we make of all of these differences? The Song focusses on the God of Israel; the Story focusses on the People of Israel. The Song expresses emotion. The Story cultivates imagination. The Song conveys God as Mighty Power. The Story conveys God as Benevolent Protector. The Song is an ancient layer of Israelite belief. The Story is a much more nuanced recollection of the events. **Shabbat Shalom!**

