

Some Comments on Parashat Beshalach: Israel's "Iron Dome" at the Sea of Reeds

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January 27, 2024 17 Shvat 5784

The scene at the Sea of Reeds is so complicated. As we read the verses just prior to the great miracle, it's very difficult to put together a picture of what happened. But here goes: Pharaoh had a change of heart and ordered the Egyptian army, with its horses, chariots, and soldiers, to pursue the Israelites. The Egyptians catch up to them as the Israelites are encamped near the Sea of Reeds. The Israelites see them and panic. They scream to God and then, they turn their anger onto Moses:

<p>הַמִּבְלֵי אֵינִי קְבָרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתֵּנוּ לְמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר? מַה זֹאת עֲשִׂיתָ לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם? (שְׁמוֹת יד:יא)</p>	<p><i>Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you have taken us out to die in the wilderness? What, now, have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?</i> (Exod. 14:11)</p>
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Moses replies to them that God will save them: (Exod. 14:13-14)

<p>אַל תִּירָאוּ הַתִּנְצְבוּ וְרֵאוּ אֵת יְשׁוּעַת ה' אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲשֶׁר רִאִיתֶם אֵת מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם לֹא תִסְפוּ לְרִאֲתָם עוֹד עַד עוֹלָם. ה' יִלָּחֶם לָכֶם וְאַתֶּם תַּחֲרֹשׁוּ.</p>	<p><i>Do not be afraid! Stand fast and see God's deliverance which he will work for you today, for as you see Egypt today, you will never see it again for the ages! God will do battle for you, and you—be still!</i></p>
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Moses turns to God, but God rebukes him: (Exod. 14:15)

<p>מַה תִּצְעַק אֵלַי? דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ!</p>	<p><i>Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel, and let-them-march-forward!</i></p>
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It's at that point that God instructs Moses to stretch his hand out over the sea and split it so that the people can walk through it on dry land. Then the text tells us the following strange thing:

<p>וַיִּסַּע מַלְאֲכַי הָאֱלֹהִים הַהֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵי מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּסַּע עִמּוֹד הָעַנָּן מִפְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲמֵד מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם. וַיָּבֵא בֵּין מַחֲנֵה מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי הָעַנָּן וַיִּהְיֶה אֶת הַלַּיְלָה וְלֹא קָרַב זֶה אֶל זֶה כָּל הַלַּיְלָה. (שְׁמוֹת יד:יט-כ) (Exod. 14:19-20)</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, 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>
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It's confusing but let's try to figure it out. Already at the beginning of the journey, we learn that God will escort the people to their destination with a fire-cloud pillar.

<p>וַה' הֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עַנָּן לְנֹחַתָם הַדֶּרֶךְ וַלַּיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ לְהַאִיר לָהֶם לְלַכֵּת יוֹמָם וַלַּיְלָה. (שְׁמוֹת יג:כא)</p>	<p><i>Now God was going before them, by day as a column of cloud, to lead them the way, by night as a column of fire, to give light to them, to [be able to] go by day and by night.</i> (Exod. 13:21)</p>
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The fire-cloud pillar becomes a prominent feature of Israel's desert journey. But note: it is always located **at the front of the people**, leading them. Not at the back. By day it is a pillar of cloud that **leads** and protects; by night it is a pillar of fire that **leads** and protects; by night it is a pillar of fire that

caught up to the Israelites at the edge of the sea? According to the verses cited above (14:19-20), the fire-cloud pillar that was leading them, suddenly **lifted up and moved to the back**, guarding them from the rear. It served as a barrier **between** the Israelites and the Egyptians. Now this is where it gets confusing: the verse says **וַיְהִי הָעַנָּן וַיִּהְיֶה אֶת הַלַּיְלָה** *there was cloud and darkness*, and yet **וַיָּאָר אֶת הַלַּיְלָה** *the night was also lit up*. What happened? A midrash tries to explain it.

<p>וַיָּבֵא בֵּין מַחֲנֵה מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיְהִי הָעַנָּן וַיִּהְיֶה אֶת הַלַּיְלָה</p>	<p><i>And it (the pillar) came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel. Here were the cloud and the darkness and it lit up the night.</i></p>
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Midrash: (Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael Vayehi Beshalah 5:5)

<p>"הָעַנָּן", עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, "וַיִּהְיֶה אֶת הַלַּיְלָה" עַל מִצְרַיִם.</p>	<p><i>The "cloud" was on Israel, while the "darkness" was on Egypt.</i></p>
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Meaning: according to the midrash the fire-cloud pillar morphed into a type of **cloud-dome** over Israel, while Egypt was encapsulated in a **dome of thick darkness**. To imagine this, we have to think back to the plague of **חֹשֶׁךְ-darkness**. The **חֹשֶׁךְ-darkness** here at the Sea, and there in Egypt are the same **חֹשֶׁךְ-darkness**. Thick, impenetrable, and palpable darkness. The midrash says this explicitly:

<p>מִגִּיד הַכְּתוּב שֶׁכָּל זְמַן שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל נִתְּוֵנוּ בְּאוֹרָה, הָיוּ מִצְרַיִם נִתְּוֵנוּ בְּאִפְלָה, שְׁנֹאמַר: "לֹא יָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו, וְלֹא קָמוּ אִישׁ מִמַּחֲתָיו שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים". (שְׁמוֹת יג,כג)</p>	<p><i>The text is telling us that while Israel was experiencing light, the Egyptians were experiencing darkness, as it is said (earlier during the plague of darkness) no one could see his brother, and no one could arise from his spot, for three days!¹ (Exod. 10:23)</i></p>
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Egypt, in other words, is experiencing a 'mini-plague' of **חֹשֶׁךְ-darkness** at the Sea, while Israel has light provided by the miraculous fire-cloud that is now functioning like a protective dome over their heads. The midrash continues:

<p>וְכֵן אַתָּה מוֹצֵא לְעֵתִיד לְבֹא, מִהוּ אוֹמֵר? קוֹמִי אוֹרִי! כִּי בֹא אוֹרְךָ, וְקָבוֹד ה' עֲלֶיךָ יִרְחַח. מִפְּנֵי מַה? כִּי הִנֵּה הַחֹשֶׁךְ יִקְסֶה אֶרְצִי, וְיִכָּרֵךְ לְאֲמִים, וְעֲלֶיךָ יִרְחַח ה', וְקָבוֹד עֲלֶיךָ יִרְאֶה.</p>	<p><i>And this is what you will find in the future. What does the prophet (Isaiah) say? (Isaiah 60:1-2) Arise, shine, for your light has dawned; The Presence of the LORD has shone upon you! And why (is that going to happen?) Because behold! Darkness shall cover the earth,</i></p>
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¹And crucially, the verse ends with these words: **But for all the Children of Israel, there was light in their settlements.**

<p><i>And thick murkiness will cover the peoples;</i> <i>But upon you the LORD will shine,</i> <i>And His Presence be seen over you.</i></p>
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Isaiah presents a beautiful image. The world is dark, but Israel will have light because God will shine His light on Israel. This is one of Isaiah's great messages of comfort, to a demoralized people after the destruction of the First Temple and their exile to Babylonia.² The rabbis in this midrash are, for one brief shining moment, taking us out of Egypt and bringing us to a future in which **darkness will cover the whole earth**³ and Israel will have light. The message: the miracle at the Sea will occur again for Israel. They had light then, when Egypt was in darkness, and they will have light in the future, when the whole world is in darkness and moral turpitude. The midrash goes on:

<p>ולא עוד, אלא כל מי שהוא נתון באפלה רואה כל מי שהוא נתון באורה.</p>	<p><i>And not only that, but anyone who is encapsulated in darkness can see anyone who is encapsulated in light.</i></p>
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What does that mean? Even though the Egyptians are encapsulated in darkness, they were still able to see ahead of them that the Israelites had light. The best analogy for this would be a power outage in which one side of the street has no electricity and the other side does. On one side of the street there is total darkness, and total frustration and anger! While on the other side, everybody is going on normally and having a good time. And of course, it's not hard to see how this statement applies to life: Someone who is located in their own darkness can only see another person's radiance. Someone in pain, can only see another person's joy. Someone who is depressed can only see another person's cheerfulness. Someone who is lonely sees other people surrounded by family and friends. The envy is palpable. Here, the Egyptians see that Israel has light and they envy them. The midrash goes on:


<p>שהיו מצרים שרויים באפלה רואים את ישראל, שהיו נתונים באורה, אוכלים ושותים ושמחים.</p>	<p><i>For the Egyptians were encapsulated in darkness and they saw Israel, that it was encapsulated in light and they were eating and drinking and joyful!</i></p>
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Which is absolutely stunning! This is how the rabbis interpret this moment. Just a minute ago they were complaining bitterly to Moses, and now, according to the rabbis, **they are having a feast!** They are basking in God's light and protection! And the Egyptians are jealous of them! And then what happens?

<p>והיו מורקין בהו בחציו ובאבני בליסטרויות.</p>	<p><i>They shoot arrows at them (the Israelites) and launch rock-missiles (ballistrayot).</i></p>
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² We read this as the Haftarah for Ki Tavo, the Sixth Haftara of Consolation after Tisha B'av.

³ Meaning: Evil. Falsehood. Malevolence. Moral Repugnance. Hatred. Injustice. Bigotry. How about this example: an International Court in the Hague prosecuting Israel for genocide at the behest of the those who would like to commit genocide against Israel!

<p>The Egyptians act out the jealousy and engage in violence. This is such a profound reading. Jealousy is the root of violence.</p>		<p>A Ballistra was an ancient missile weapon that launched either bolts or stones at a distant target.</p>
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<p>ומלאך וענן מקבלין, <i>But the angel and the cloud 'receives' (ie. protects) them (from the missiles).</i></p>
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In other words, the cloud literally functions like an ancient *Iron Dome* system which protects Israel from the missiles fired from the Egyptian camp. How do we know this? Because elsewhere, God has promised that He will shield Israel:

<p>שנאמר: אל תירא אברהם! אנכי מגן לך, שקרד הרבה מאד! (בראשית טו:א)</p>	<p><i>As it is said, Do not be afraid Abram! I am a shield for you, your reward is great! (Gen. 15:1)</i></p>
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God's promise to Abram, is an eternal promise to Abram's descendants. And we have another text, this time attributed to David:

<p>מגני וקרני ישעי, משגבי ומנוסי, משעמי! מזקמם תשעמי. (שמואל ב כב:א)</p>	<p><i>(O God, the rock wherein I take shelter:) My shield, my mighty champion, my fortress and refuge! My savior, You who rescue me from violence!# (2 Sam. 22:3)</i></p>
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God's promise to David is an eternal promise to the people of Israel. And a third verse from the Psalms⁵ in which God's promise of divine protection applies to all who seek God.

<p>מגן הוא לכל החסים בו. (תהילים יח:לא; שמואל ב כב:לא)</p>	<p><i>He is a shield to all who seek refuge in Him. (Ps. 18:31 but also 2 Sam. 22:31)</i></p>
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Explanation and Comment: The rabbis are perplexed by the scene at the Sea just as we are. And yet they read it with great literary and spiritual insight. They explain the text very plainly: the fire-cloud moved from the front of Israel to the back and encapsulated Israel as an *Iron-Dome* like protection. The Egyptians, on the other hand were encapsulated in a dome of darkness. From within their own darkness, they could see Israel's light. That made them jealous and angry, so they attacked Israel, but God's *Iron-Dome* light-cloud protected them. The divine protection that was promised by God to Abraham, that was experienced personally by David, and is

⁴ The Hebrew word for violence is HAMAS. The subtext of this interpretation is clear.

⁵ It is also found in that same chapter in 2 Samuel 22. It is standard practice in rabbinic midrash to cite one verse from the Torah, one verse from the Prophets and one verse from the Writings. It's just that here, the texts in 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18 are virtually identical.

available to everyone who seeks refuge in God, was what protected them. On the one hand, we read the biblical account of the Exodus and the splitting of the Sea with a feeling of awe and terror. But when we listen to the rabbinic midrash we get a message of divine comfort and protection. The rabbis lived in an era of terrifying human cruelty. They would have seen Roman bolt-throwers, javelins, spears, and arrows. They understood fear and vulnerability. They offered this interpretation as a verbal *Iron-Dome* to their own powerlessness in the face of such brute might. We can draw our parallels to the war in Gaza. What motivates Hamas? A ruthless hatred of Jews rooted in a profound envy. They live in

darkness and see Israel's light. They want to destroy is everything that they are not: a thriving democracy, a technological powerhouse, a place of joy. Hamas celebrates death. Israel celebrates life. The great symbol of Hamas emerging from this war is the terror tunnel. **Darkness**. Last week thousands of Israelis planted trees in **broad daylight**, in honor of Tu B'shvat, celebrating hope and exulting in life.

Today is Day 113. May the Shield of Abraham and David, and the Shield of all those who seek God's shelter, protect Israel. May the hostages and the soldiers of the IDF return home soon to the loving embrace of their families!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Gittel Footerman commemorating the yahrzeits of her mother, Mollie Gruman z'l, and her sister Ruth Leah Rothman, z'l.

עם ישראל חי! שבת שלום!
Shabbat Shalom! Am Yisrael Hay!