

Parashat Beshalach

In our portion this week, as the title indicates, we read all about the tremendous events which occurred after Pharaoh had decided to let our people go. It is a portion which we both know and love very well, and I'm sure it is a story that each one of us here reads with great alacrity. It is, after all, a *really* great story, is it not? Certainly Hollywood thinks so, because ever since the invention of film a whole host of great directors have attempted to recreate this story on celluloid and thus captivate anew the hearts of succeeding generations with its great drama. While there are, I dare say, a few sections of Scripture which some people struggle to get through, like the sacrificial laws in Vayikra, or the genealogies of B'midbar, this story of the *ker'iat Yam Suf* (parting of the Sea of Suf) is surely not one of them! Of course, the satisfaction which we derive from the story is no small part due to its happy, triumphal ending. The fact that at the very beginning of the portion we are given insider information to aid our understanding of the events helps a great deal too. As we read in the first few lines, "After Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not guide them to the highway that goes through the land of the P'lishtim, because it was close by – God thought that the people, upon seeing war, might change their minds and return to Egypt. Rather, God led the people by a roundabout route, through the desert by the Sea of Suf." Thus the Torah furnishes us with a really useful insight into the mind of God at this critical juncture for our people, and helps to explain why, from His point of view, the *ker'iat Yam Suf* was absolutely necessary. As we read the narrative we are therefore in on God's cunning plan in a way that our people were not. Now we now, in contrast to our people, exactly why it was that Hashem commanded the people of Israel to double back upon themselves and place their camp effectively in a death trap by the Sea of Suf. The Pharaoh, seeing our perilous strategic situation, apparently lost in the desert and with no means of retreat, was thus emboldened to go on the offensive and seek our destruction. Hindsight, as they say, is a wonderful thing! If only *he* had known, as we know, that he was being played and that within a few sentences *his* people would be destroyed, not God's then he might not have been so bold. And if only our people could have known that everything would be ok then they might not have panicked as they did, questioning Hashem's goodness in the process. But such *is* life! Israel's experience mirrors our own. None of us knows what awaits around the corner. Like Israel we too would certainly wish that our route to the Promised Land would be swift, simple and trouble free. But we should remember that along a super highway there is no learning curve, there are no challenges, and therefore there is no real progression. We are not challenged to change, to ask hard questions or develop by the good times when we feel secure and feel surrounded by health, wealth and blessing. No, it is when we are challenged by and in life that we truly grow. And yet when challenge and suffering comes we consider ourselves abandoned by God, traumatised by a set of circumstances that we believe ought not to be, as if anything but the super highway through life on the road to heaven is a deviation and a curse. On the contrary, as our parashah demonstrates, "God led the people by a roundabout route, through the desert by the Sea of Suf." In other words the twists and turns, the feeling of being lost, the traumas, crises and pressures on our faith of the wilderness route was precisely the divinely mandated path that our people were forced to follow - as it is ours too.

Parashat Beshalach

Ultimately, so the Torah tells us, all this trial and trouble was part of a divine plan to test and teach our people, as it is so when we experience trial and trouble it is likewise intended to test and teach us. But, as we have said, hindsight is a wonderful thing! Can we really learn when we know that the answer to the crises that beset us has been foretold? The book of Iyov would certainly read very differently if at the beginning of his troubles this tortured man had been able to skip to the last chapter. Indeed, learning is very seldom facilitated by anyone being able to skip to the back of the book and check out the answers in advance. So when we go through it, as with our people, for us to truly learn we must let go of any ideas that a positive result is guaranteed. In fact, that's what made our people's experience at the Yam Saf so transformational. To understand just how transformational it was we must let go of hindsight and place ourselves in their shoes. Can you imagine what it felt like after forty years of merciless servitude to walk out of Egypt in full view of Israel's tormentors? It reminds me of something that Natan Sharansky said a few years ago when he described the response of Russian anti-Semites to the news of Israel's victory in the 1967 Six Day War. Remember that the Jews in Soviet Russia at that time were in a prison that paralleled ancient Egypt in many ways. Over many years Communism had sought to extirpate consciousness of Jewish identity from our people, and in many ways they succeeded, but still our people in Soviet Russia clung to a residual knowledge of their identity as Jews. In this environment anti-Semitism flourished and this, in conjunction with Stalin's murderous paranoia, resulted in great suffering among our people. However, remembering the day when the news of little Israel's victory over the combined might of Soviet Russia's Arab allies was first heard in Russia, Natan Sharansky recalled that everything changed. For the first time in their lives, Sharansky said, the Jews of Soviet Russia felt proud to be Jews! Their hearts swelled and they knew for the first time in their lives that they were connected to a people and a land. Then and there the desire for liberation from their Soviet prison awakened in their souls – at that moment, Sharansky said, the Russian Jewish resistance to Communist oppression which came to be symbolised by the brave Refuseniks, was born. Indeed, just as for the first time the news of Israel's victory caused Russian Jews to lift their heads in pride, so too it caused (for the first time) the anti-Semites around them to treat them with respect. Anti-Semites remained anti-Semites, Sharansky commented, but they now had a respect for the Jews they hated as if the two enemies now stood on an equal footing rather than as master and slave. And this must have been something like the experience of those Jews in Egypt thousands of years ago. For so long our people had been slaves, but now through the demonstration of Hashem's power our people stood with their hearts swelled out and their heads held high. Overnight, it seemed, the shame of slavery had been wiped away, and as the Scripture records, "The people of Israel went up from the land of Egypt fully armed" (Shemot 13:18). Yes, shaking the dust of Egypt off their feet our people took up the bones of their national hero, Yosef, the very symbol of Jewish life in Egypt, and they "left boldly" in full view of their former masters.

But as things turned out their former masters were not in fact ready to let our people depart in peace. And so, gathering together a mighty armed force, Pharaoh set out after them.

Parashat Beshalach

Perhaps when we read the panic which ensued in the Israelite camp we are tempted to be critical of a lack of faith among our people, but to do so is once again to look at events through the lens of hindsight, to look to the answers at the back of the book. We know that ultimately our people were going to be saved, but here was a people which had only just begun to find relationship *as a people* with each other, *as a nation*, and with the God of Israel. And if we criticise our people for a lack of faith in the desperate circumstances that, as if out of nothing, had suddenly imposed themselves on them, in view of their expectations of a swift, victorious, trouble free march to the Promised Land, then we are expecting too much of them. It is all too easy to sit in safety and comfort and criticise that generation at that particular time for a lack of faith (and many have done so), but which of us have ever found ourselves in a similar situation? Which of us have, to suggest a parallel contemporary situation, felt the cold dread and fear of a Syrian mother as she sees truck fulls of IS fighters, armed to the teeth, bearing down on her village at full speed? Which of us in such a moment would truthfully be able to say that we would not panic and fear for our lives? And so if our people did not yet have the faith, as Moshe did, to believe that Hashem would rescue them then we should not condemn them! And yet the *ker'iat Yam Suf* was all part of God's plan to furnish our people with this faith.

So our people, seeing the massed ranks of chariots approaching, dissolved into panic. 'Now!', Hashem told Moshe, the time to act, the time to deliver Israel had come. In fact, the trap had been set and now the time had come for it to be sprung. For although he did not yet know it, Pharaoh, the hunter, now became the hunted! Moshe was instructed to hold his hand out over the sea and as he did so Hashem caused a strong wind to blow over the waters of the Sea of Suf in an act which consciously echoed the Creative act when Hashem's Ruach (wind) hovered over the face of the waters and consequently brought forth life. Soon through the parting of the waters Pharaoh's mighty army, which presently so terrified our people, would be reduced to nothing, and the God of Israel, the Creator God, would at one fell swoop also bring the nation of Israel into being. Henceforth our people who no longer be known as Hebrews but as the nation of Israel. "On that day," as the Scripture tells us, "Adonai saved Israel from the Egyptians; Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore. When Israel saw the mighty deed that Adonai had performed against the Egyptians, the people feared Adonai, and they believed in Adonai and in his servant Moshe" (Shemot 14:30-31). So you see, through the experience of the *ker'iat Yam Suf* our people were transformed into a nation. Moshe's spontaneous, antiphonal praise of Hashem symbolised this transformation. Indeed, the song of Moshe, which is known as *Shirat HaYam* (song of the sea), tells us much about this transformation experience. We should note first of all, in this respect, that this song was communal. Just imagine the wonderful scene as, according to tradition, Moshe sang each line and the people sang that line back to him in response! Now, as some of you known, there's nothing I like better than singing with the boys at a football match. There's something vital, empowering, uplifting and identity affirming about it. You feel part of a community. One people all together with a common love and a common goal. And I'll never forget the time some years back at a game against Nottingham Forest - my dad wasn't with me at that game

Parashat Beshalach

- when Norwich won a corner in the dying minutes of the match, and I was so into what was happening that I spontaneously started singing 'Come on You Yellows,' only to find a thousand other Norwich fans joining in with me. Wow. What a thrill. So I can guess what Moshe felt like as he began to sing God's praises. But what I cannot imagine is what it was like to have not just one thousand people singing with you, in response to you, but one million! They say that there was a mini earthquake on the occasion of Leicester City's last minute winner against Norwich a couple of years back, we were there unfortunately in the away end, can you imagine how much the earth must have moved when one million Israelites roared?! There were no individuals on any of these occasions, certainly not at the keriat Yam Suf and the Shirat HaYam! On the contrary, the communal joy at their deliverance and their singing in praise cemented a new national consciousness. Thus the Hebrew became Israel. Indeed, nothing unites us more in our communal identity as praise. When we feel defeated we feel alone and isolated. Just listen to Canary Call after a Norwich defeat and it's often fan against fan. Up and down the land fans of defeated clubs argue amongst each other. There a Wenger outers and Wenger inners. Defeats fracture, but victories unite. And there's nothing like the thrill of victory to cement communal, tribal identities and unite people. That is why it's significant to note that while the nation of Israel was created in the white heat of their desert adversity, this communal identity was sealed by the victory of the Yam Suf. The first words of our new nation were those of praise - the song of victory over our common adversary. Indeed, as the name Jew indicates, the Jewish people were created precisely for this purpose - to be the praise of God. In fact, in connection with this we should note that as the song of praise progressed it changed in a very significant way. Whereas in the first section of the shirah our people addressed Hashem in the third person, in the second section our people addressed God in the first person, denoting a movement towards God. It was as if then Moshe was leading our people in what we might call a prayer of commitment, one which established and I-Thou relationship between God and Israel.

These things being so is it any wonder then that the Shirat Ha Yam has ever since played such an important part in the life of our Jewish people? Indeed the Shirat Ha Yam is considered so foundational to the Jewish people that according to scribal tradition every scroll that is written must have the words of this song copied so that the column imitates the bricklayer's art, with "a half brick over a whole brick and a whole brick over a half brick"; that is, the words must be spaced so that the writing on each line has a blank space below it, and the blank space will have writing beneath it. The Ron, a 14th Century Talmudic commentator, observes that this is done in order to show that just as a brick wall symbolises strength the Shirah reminds us of the strong foundation upon which our national relationship with Hashem is built. Moreover, the Shirah's importance is so foundational to us as a people that from early times it assumed a special place in Jewish liturgy, and it has maintained that place for thousands of years. In the days of the Second Temple, for example, it was customary for a Levitical choir to accompany the priestly tamid offering on Shabbat afternoons with a singing of the shirah in two parts, verses 1-10 being intoned one week and the rest on the next Shabbat. After the destruction of the temple this Levitical custom was maintained in the

Parashat Beshalach

Land, although without sacrifice. The Jews of Rome incorporated the entire Shirah into the fixed, daily morning service, a practice that gradually became universal among Jews. This daily recitation assumed ever greater meaning as an affirmation of God's moral governance of the world, itself an assurance of the ultimate and inevitable downfall of tyrants. Such unassailable convictions took on increasing significance for Jews during the long dark nights of exile and persecution. So you see, this Shirah is at the heart of who we are and what we are as Jews. It reminds us of our nationhood, and by that we understand that no Jew can stand alone or should seek to be alone. Thus above all else we value community and in our daily lives we practice community too, preferring it even if, at times, that is at a cost to our selves as individuals or as individual families. The Shirah reminds us in this context that the strength of our nation lies in direct correlation to the degree to which its individual members identify with the experience of the *ker'iat Yam Suf*. As we noted earlier, the halakhah enjoins us at each seder to consider that we personally came through the Sea of Suf and sang the Shirah on the other side, and the Scriptures themselves tell us that one who does not keep Pesach or is not circumcised is *kares* (cut off from his people). It is not so much that the wrath of God falls upon one who is *kares*, but that by his failure to do these things that person's connection with his people, both in a physical and spiritual sense, is necessarily severed - and as Jews we are nothing if we are not connected to our nation. Thus not only in God's eyes but in his own too the one who fails to do these things ceases to be part of the nation. So as we read our portion this week and as Pesach begins to appear on the horizon let us consider these things and prepare ourselves appropriately. Let us remember that it is our experience of the *ker'iat Yam Suf* which makes us a nation, and let us bind ourselves to our people by entering into that experience ourselves. Let us allow the spirit of the Shirah to enter into us and rediscover the joy of praise. For that indeed was not only our first experience as a newly born people it is our eternal purpose as Jews.