

Lekkutei Sichos - Beshalach

Four Camps, One Response

As the Jews left Egypt and approached the shores of the Red Sea, they were pursued by Pharaoh and his hosts. Moshe reassured them, saying: "Do not fear. Stand firm and see the salvation which G-d will bring about for you today. Though you see the Egyptians today, you will never see them again. G-d will fight for you, and you shall remain silent."

Commenting on these verses, the Mechilta explains that standing at the edge of the sea, terrified by the advancing Egyptians, the Jews broke into four camps, each advocating a different course of action.

The first camp said: "Let us plunge into the sea," i.e., rather than return to slavery, they preferred to drown themselves.

The second camp said: "Let us return to Egypt." They were willing to accept the yoke of slavery again.

The third camp said: "Let us wage war against them," hoping that they would be victorious.

The fourth camp said: "Let us cry out [to G-d]." Rather than follow any of the above approaches, this camp advocated appealing to G-d in prayer.

Moshe's statement included a response to each of these four camps. "Stand firm and see the salvation which G-d will bring about" was addressed to those who wished to throw themselves into the sea. "Though you see the Egyptians today, you will never see them again" was addressed to those who sought to return to Egypt. "G-d will fight for you" was addressed to those who advocated war. "And you shall remain silent" was addressed to those who advocated prayer.

What was the proper course of action? G-d told Moshe: "Speak to the children of Israel and have them journey forth," proceeding further in the path leading to Mount Sinai. For the arrival of the nation at Mount Sinai was the goal of the exodus from Egypt.

It is difficult to understand: How is it possible to answer all four camps at once? Their positions seemed diametrically opposed to each other. For example, the suggestion to return to Egypt was the direct antithesis of drowning in the sea. For those who advocated drowning in the sea were willing to sacrifice their lives and also sacrifice themselves spiritually, for suicide is forbidden so that they would not have to submit to the Egyptians again. And the camp which advocated war differed even more strongly. Instead of submitting themselves to slavery, they were willing to take up arms against their former masters, and actually thought they could be victorious. How much more so is such submissiveness opposed to the fourth approach, which advocates prayer.

Praying to G-d for all one's needs, particularly when one is in dire straits, is the core of the mitzvah of prayer. This is a mitzvah of great importance, for it expresses our faith in G-d and His Omnipotence. For this reason, there are certain opinions which consider this a mitzvah of general importance so encompassing that it cannot be considered one of the 613 mitzvos of the Torah.

It is true that the confrontation at the sea took place before the giving of the Torah, and thus before prayer was defined as a mitzvah. Nevertheless, the fact that it is considered a lofty mitzvah after the giving of the Torah indicates that it was also of great importance before the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai.

Given the drastic differences between these four positions, how is it possible for all of them to be addressed by one statement?

Also, it is necessary to understand the order in which the Torah mentions the rebuttals. At first glance, the Torah should first have rebutted the seemingly least developed of the approaches the submissive willingness to return to Egypt and then the increasingly more developed approaches of suicide in the ocean, waging war against the Egyptians, and prayer.

And also: Were all these approaches wrong? True, it was necessary to negate the desire to return to Egypt, for that represented the direct opposite of G-d's intent in the exodus. Similarly, casting oneself into the sea is undesirable, for Jews should never fall into despair.⁸ But the notion of doing battle with Pharaoh and his hosts appears to be constructive. And praying to G-d, giving oneself over to Him, is certainly a valuable act. Seemingly, it reflects an even deeper commitment than "journeying forth," for setting out could be interpreted as fleeing from Pharaoh, while prayer emphasizes absolute reliance on G-d.

The Consummation of the Exodus

These questions can be resolved by deepening our appreciation of the significance of the splitting of the sea. The splitting of the sea was the final stage of the exodus from Egypt. Until then, the Jews continued to share a connection with Egypt. Even when the Jews passed Pi HaChiros (lit. "the mouth of freedom"), which according to Egyptian custom was a landmark indicating that a slave had been freed, they were still pursued, and so it seemed that only by fighting and defeating their former masters could they preserve their freedom.

When was the exodus from Egypt completed? At the splitting of the Red Sea. For this reason the Tosefta requires the mention of the miracle every day, just as the exodus from Egypt must be mentioned every day. For until the splitting of the sea, our people were not truly free of Egypt.

(These historical events are paralleled by the stages within our daily Divine service. Each day, there are elements of our Divine service that correspond to the exodus from Egypt and others which correspond to the splitting of the sea.)

The fact that the splitting of the sea came after the negation of these four approaches and the fulfillment of G-d's command to "journey forth" is also relevant to us, as we experience the spiritual counterpart to the exodus "in each and every generation, each and every day." To leave Egypt, we each must "journey forth." In choosing to join any of the four camps, one is settling for a less-than-complete departure from spiritual exile.

An End to Concealment

With regard to the spiritual counterpart of the exodus from Egypt, we must experience both the initial departure from Egypt, and the consummation, the splitting of the Red Sea.

First, we must leave the boundaries and limitations of the animal soul. Although each of us lives in this material world, the world of kelipah, in which the wicked are more powerful than the righteous, every Jew must realize that evil has no dominion over him; he is not controlled by Pharaoh. On the contrary, a Jew must serve G-d alone; "They are My servants, and not the servants of servants."

The yetzer hora and the animal soul, the counterparts of Pharaoh and Egypt, strive to limit the powers of the G-dly soul, and attempt to drain the satisfaction that comes to a Jew from his observance of the Torah and its mitzvos. Nevertheless, a Jew proceeds with kabbalas ol, accepting G-d's yoke and committing himself to serving G-d rather than Pharaoh in every aspect of his life. This is the path which takes one out of Egypt, bringing one to "the mouth of freedom."

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the exodus from Egypt does not represent the consummation of the process. Speaking in terms of the analogy: the escaped slave's life is still lacking, because he finds no satisfaction in spiritual pursuits, and performs his Divine service only as an expression of kabbalas ol. Therefore it is possible for Pharaoh and his hosts to attempt to subjugate him again. The constraints and limitations of the yetzer hora and the animal soul and the concealment of G-dliness brought about by the world conspire to limit and conceal the light of the G-dly soul.

Therefore it is necessary for our Divine service to reach a stage which parallels the splitting of the Red Sea, of which it is said: "He transformed the sea into dry land." This phrase can be understood as an analogy: Just as the sea covers the sea bed, the term "sea" refers to the Divine power concealed within creation. "Dry land" refers to the revelation of this potential; that a person, through his Divine service, finds it possible to appreciate the G-dliness present within every entity. This takes him "out of Egypt" entirely. For the world does not conceal G-dly light for him; instead he sees G-dliness in everything.

Between Egypt and the Sea

The attitudes of all four camps were expressed after the beginning of the exodus. As such, it is apparent that the spiritual counterpart of these approaches do not hinder the actual observance of the Torah and its mitzvos. For a Jew motivated by an approach which contradicts the Shulchan Aruch has not left Egypt at all. Nevertheless, subscribing to one of these approaches indicates that a person has not “crossed the Red Sea,” i.e., the concealment of G-dliness brought about by the world still affects him. Pharaoh and his hosts daunt him, and push him to take one of the four “ways out” represented by these four camps.

In order to bring about the splitting of the Red Sea, drowning the hosts of Egypt and overcoming the final restraints and limitations of exile, it is necessary to negate the four approaches put forward by the four camps.

Parallels Within Our Divine Service

In fact, the four camps are mentioned in ascending order: The easiest approach is to plunge into the sea. Since we are living in a world in which Pharaoh and his hosts can be victorious, a person who doesn’t want to have anything to do with them at all may opt to “plunge into the sea,” to seek purification in the sea of Torah, prayer, and teshuvah.

But what about the world? And what about one’s fellow Jews? What about taking some action to end Pharaoh’s rule over the world? The “plunger” doesn’t want to face these questions. “Let someone else deal with these matters,” he retorts. “Why must [I] worry about G-d’s hidden secrets?” These are G-d’s problems; a person need not worry about saving the world; he has his own worries to deal with.

And so some Jews would rather “plunge into the sea,” cutting themselves off from the world at large. In the vernacular, such a person is called “a tzaddik in peltz,” a tzaddik who wraps himself in a heavy winter coat to protect himself against the world’s bitter winds, reasoning that he does not have the ability to warm up the entire planet.

Yes, he concedes that he could share his heavy coat, and thus warm up another Jew, perhaps another two Jews. Indeed, he could quite conceivably warm up a corner of the world. But he’s not interested in that. His pride will not let him be concerned with such limited matters; he thinks about the world at large, and knows that he is not capable of warming it. So he retreats.

A more developed approach to Divine service is displayed by those who desire to return to Egypt. Such a person knows that “[G-d] did not create [the world] to be a wasteland, but rather a settled environment.” Since we are commanded to involve ourselves in the world, we must also participate in worldly activities, as it is stated: “Against your will, you live.” Whether one wants to or not, one must live in the world, in the body and in the animal soul, for this is what G-d wants.

Such a person, when given a clear instruction to perform a particular good deed, will do it. But it will be “harsh labor” for him, and he’ll do it without life or feeling. He will certainly not seek to illuminate his body and his portion of the world, for he does only what is necessary to fulfill the instructions he was given.

In general, such a person is haunted by despair. He doesn’t feel capable of doing anything not with the world at large, nor even with himself. There is no way he can prevent a return to Egypt, so he will again be a slave to the material world. This is his lot. He is obligated to observe the directives of the Shulchan Aruch, but for him this is “harsh labor.” When the sun rises, he davens. When the time comes for afternoon prayers, he recites that service. He must eat, so he makes a blessing before and after. And if he meets another Jew who needs a favor, he will do the favor. All with a sigh.

When someone tells him there is a Jew nearby whom he can help with material or spiritual matters, he realizes that the commandment “Love your fellowman as yourself” mandates him to help the person, and so he offers assistance. But he does it without any real desire to help, and finds no satisfaction in it. For him, it is just another dreary task, another part of the hard labor he must perform. He has already lost all hope; he sees no future outside Egypt.

This approach to Divine service is painfully inadequate. Kabbalas Ol, making a commitment to serve G-d as a servant serves a master, is the first stage in our Divine service, but it is only the first stage. One must then proceed with vitality and joy.

When a Jew studies Torah, and realizes that this study establishes a connection between himself and G-d, he should become charged with vitality and energy. It should be evident to even a casual observer that his study does not stem only from kabbalas ol, but is permeated by joy.

Similar concepts apply with regard to the observance of the other mitzvos. When a person realizes that by writing on an animal hide the four Torah passages included in tefillin, he makes the hide a medium for G-dliness, and that by donning the tefillin on his left arm and his head he carries out G-d’s will, he should be overwhelmed with joy.

A Jew should feel that with every word of the Torah that he studies, and with every mitzvah which he observes, he affects the entire world. Every mitzvah reduces the influence of “Egypt” in the world.

But when a Jew is not possessed by this awareness, and instead is overcome by despair, regarding the Torah and its mitzvos as a burden which he must drag about day after day, without happiness or vitality, he is merely carrying out “harsh labor” in Egypt.

At a higher rung is the decision to wage war against the world. Since one is unable to bear the concealment of G-dliness brought about by Pharaoh and his hosts, one battles against them. This is surely a more developed approach than returning to Egypt, for the warrior is

not in despair. On the contrary, he feels that the forces of holiness can overcome the forces of unholiness. And so he carries out his Divine service with relentless energy. But such a person has resigned himself to imperfection, for in a war, even the winning side suffers losses.

And there's another drawback. Every phase of Divine service has an appropriate time. When G-d is telling the Jewish people to proceed to "serve Me on this mountain," a person should not involve himself with any other matters. When a person should be concentrating on illuminating the world with the light of Torah, it is not appropriate to begin waging war against Egypt. Instead, he should be focused on "journey[ing] forth" and coming closer to receiving the Torah.

But above all, the question arises: what is the source for the warrior's desire to fight? Did he ask G-d or Moshe if this is the appropriate form of Divine service at this time? No, he declares war on his own, and develops strategy based on his own intellect.

Since the initiative is merely his own, it is possible that his lust for battle comes from outside the realm of holiness altogether. Perhaps his personal nature tends toward gevurah, "might," and therefore he is bent on war.

With regard to trying to influence another through love, the Alter Rebbe writes that even if one does not succeed, one has not forfeited the reward generated by brotherly love. But there is no such reward for declaring a personal war.

The highest of the four approaches manifested before the splitting of the sea was the urge to pray. Prayer means developing a connection with G-d. Such a person is committed to carrying out G-d's will. He does not desire to "plunge into the sea" by taking care of his own spiritual development and cutting himself off from the world. For he realizes that G-d wants the world to become a dwelling for Him.

Nor does he desire "to return to Egypt," for he is not overcome with despair. On the contrary, he has no doubts, for he realizes that G-d's will ultimately prevails.

And thus he does not seek to "wage war against them," by using his own strategies and initiative. Since he is connected to G-d, and has subordinated his will to Him entirely, he does not have any personal desires. Therefore his path of Divine service is not to try to change the natural order. Instead, he gives himself over to G-d entirely, praying that G-d will enable him to achieve everything which he must accomplish in the world. He asks G-d to fulfill his requests, and elevate the world.

This represents a movement towards self-nullification, and indeed can involve the ultimate self-nullification. Still, prayer can be lacking. For at times, a person who prays may have resolved that he will not endeavor to affect change. This is not the proper path; work and initiative are necessary.

To Trust G-d, and Yet Proceed on One's Own Initiative

A Jew is commanded to rise above his personal self. He must realize that nothing he accomplishes is the result of "[his] strength and the power of [his] hand," but that it is G-d "who gives him the power to prosper."

This reliance on G-d should not, however, rob a Jew of his initiative and his urge to achieve. He must work with the potentials G-d has given him. Just as G-d fuses opposites, so too a Jew's Divine service can combine opposite thrusts. He can have no sense of self, knowing it is G-d who achieves everything, and yet simultaneously work with his own power.

These two contradictory thrusts come into play in a Jew's efforts to earn a livelihood. On one hand, he must have simple faith that everything is granted him by G-d, and that since all things come from G-d, whatever he receives must be for his ultimate good. If to our material eyes it does not appear good, that proves only that it comes from a level which cannot be revealed on this earthly plane. Simultaneously, a Jew must manifest perfect trust (bitachon), believing without any doubt that he will receive good that can be recognized as good.

For bitachon does not mean trusting that G-d will provide circumstances which He alone appreciates are good. Bitachon means trusting that G-d will provide us with good that we can appreciate as good even with our limited human understanding.

We must have such faith even when, according to natural circumstances, there is no rationale for it. Even then, one should trust that G-d will surely help. For G-d is not limited, and He has the potential to change nature.

When a person is forced to confront suffering, he should accept it with happiness, believing with perfect faith that this too is for his ultimate good. When, however, suffering has not come yet, even though there seems no natural way of avoiding it, one must have perfect faith that G-d will bring him overt good, and remove the threat.

We ask both things from a Jew. This is possible because every Jew is connected with G-d, who reconciles opposites. Such bitachon does not contradict faith. Indeed, it is one of the foundations of faith.

Similar concepts apply with regard to our Divine service. A Jew must be aware that "Everything is in the hands of heaven." Even "the fear of heaven," which our Sages say is not in the hands of heaven but rather is given over to man's initiative, requires G-d's help, for we can do nothing alone.

Nevertheless, together with our trust in G-d, individual effort and initiative are required. Since both trust and initiative stem from the G-dly soul, which is "an actual part of G-d," these two thrusts are not contradictory. Instead, one complements the other.

Revealing the Hidden

The command G-d gave to Moshe was: "Speak to the children of Israel and have them journey forth." Our Divine service must involve drawing closer to Mount Sinai, and not joining one of the four camps; i.e., not withdrawing entirely from worldly involvement, not performing our Divine service in misery, not abandoning one's mission and instead, waging war against the world, and not merely lifting up one's hands and depending solely on G-d.

Instead, we must be involved in illuminating the world, bringing it closer to the Torah. This approach setting forth to Mount Sinai brings about the splitting of the sea, the transformation of water into dry land.

What is implied? That the material dimensions of worldly existence should remain, but the G-dly power contained therein should be revealed. This in turn leads to the giving of the Torah, which is a microcosm of the revelations of the Era of the Redemption, at which time it will be seen that this world is G-d's dwelling.

Responding to a Higher Source

Everything which transpires in the world is dependent on the Jewish people. When a Jew attains a particular spiritual objective within his own personality, a parallel effect is produced in the world at large. As such, we can appreciate that "journeying forth" involves not only a higher level of Divine service than that represented by the approaches of the four camps, but produces a more comprehensive change. "Journeying forth" brings about a parallel to the splitting of the sea within a person's soul. The hidden G-dliness therein is revealed, and this brings about a parallel to the splitting of the sea in the world at large.

This reflects another distinction between "journeying forth" and the approaches of the four camps. The approaches of each of the four camps stems from human wisdom, while "journeying forth" is a response to G-d's command. No one had thought of it until Moshe conveyed G-d's word. (This is reflected in the Mechilta's description of four camps. If there had been a camp which desired to "journey forth," the Midrash would have spoken about five camps.)

This also serves as a lesson for all generations, enabling us to appreciate what is truly G-d's will. When a Jew is introduced to a path of Divine service which runs contrary to his natural tendencies and will, and which he therefore has difficulty in accepting, it is highly probable that this is the path which G-d desires from him. It was thus Divine Providence that caused him to hear about it.

When a path of Divine service is accepted enthusiastically and without effort, one cannot be sure if the motivation comes from the person's G-dly soul or his animal soul. When, however, one is exposed to a path of service which runs contrary to his nature, this comes as a directive from above.

Indeed, the more natural resistance a person feels to a particular path of service, the more it appears that this path has a particular connection to him. And for that reason the yetzer hora makes it difficult for him to accept this path.

Stepping Beyond One's Self

There is a common factor in the approaches of all four camps, and therefore the Torah links them. All four are natural responses, stemming from human intellect. All these approaches lack a complete sense of bittul, self-transcendence and commitment to G-d's will. Since a complete sense of bittul was lacking, i.e., there was a deficiency in the individuals involved, the service they performed was also imperfect. They were overlooking the option of "journeying forth" as prescribed by G-d's will.

When a person's conduct is characterized by bittul, and he seeks to adapt his conduct to G-d's will, G-d empowers the person's mind to appreciate that Divine will. The resulting directive will not be merely an expression of the individual's nature; indeed, it may run contrary to that nature.

The Splitting of the Sea in Microcosm

On this basis, we can appreciate how "journeying forth" brings about a parallel to the splitting of the sea within a person's soul. Within the inner reaches of every Jewish soul, there is bittul to G-d's will. Our human nature, our habits, and our thoughts conceal this. But when a person "leaves Egypt," i.e., when he transcends his individual limitations and personal preferences, but instead commits himself to G-d's will, "the sea splits within his soul," i.e., his inner self is revealed.

The microcosm then influences the macrocosm. The revelation of the G-dliness hidden within the soul of an individual brings about a revelation of the G-dliness hidden within the world at large "the splitting of the sea." Indeed, this heralds the ultimate revelations, when "the glory of G-d will be revealed, and all flesh will see together that the mouth of G-d has spoken."

The Rebbe's Message: "Journey Forth"

In most years, Yud Shvat, the anniversary of the passing of my revered father-in-law, the Rebbe, falls in the week of Parshas Beshallah. Everything is controlled by Divine Providence, and thus we see a connection to the theme of this Torah reading, for the Rebbe's directives to his chassidim were permeated by the message "journey forth."

The Rebbe demanded that we not isolate ourselves from the world, not regard observance of the Torah and its mitzvos as "harsh labor," not become absorbed in combating negative forces, and not fulfill our obligations merely with prayer and trust in G-d. Instead, he desired that his chassidim take the initiative in illuminating the world with G-dliness, and

fulfill this mission with energy and vitality. The aim is to bring the world closer to the revelation of the Torah's inner secrets, which will take place in the Era of the Redemption.

This can be achieved through the personal splitting of the sea, revealing the G-dliness hidden within one's soul. When a person tries, and tries again, and tries a third time, and is still unable to bring light into the world, he must realize that the fault lies in himself; he has not revealed the G-dliness within his soul. He has not yet tapped the potentials granted to him.

Uncovering Treasures

Our souls' potentials are revealed by the Torah. Continuing this concept, it is the Torah's mystic secrets which reveal the hidden potentials of our souls. Therefore, in these last years, when we are approaching the coming of Mashiach, and when we must reveal the G-dliness hidden within the world (the splitting of the sea in the macrocosm) by revealing the G-dliness hidden within our souls (the splitting of the sea in the microcosm), there is an impetus from Above to reveal the Torah's mystic secrets. This includes the secrets en clothed within Nigleh, the revealed dimension of Torah law.

This was accomplished through my revered father-in-law, the Rebbe, who uncovered many concepts and directives of the Torah which had not been revealed previously. As explained in the maamar Basi LeGani, the motivating factor is that for the sake of emerging victorious in battle, one reveals treasures that have been hidden for generations. It is through revealing these treasure stores of Torah that we will reveal "the treasure store of fear of heaven" which each of us possesses.⁴⁶

And with this power, we will emerge victorious in battle. The veils with which the forces of evil conceal G-dliness will be torn asunder and the G-dly power invested in creation will be revealed. As the prophet declares: "All flesh will see that the mouth of G-d has spoken," with the coming of Mashiach. May this take place in the near future.