

Spring 2013

Different Levels of Revelation when the Sea of Reeds Split

by R. Yaakov Bieler

Pesach 5773



Our discussions at the Pesach Seder focus on the ten plagues, which rose in a crescendo of ever-increasing destruction of the Jews' enemies, and was so powerful a demonstration of God's Might. Although the plagues were the catalyst that finally caused Pharaoh to grant permission

for the Jews to leave Egypt, the Haggada seems to hold that the Kriyat Yam Suf (the splitting of the Sea of Reeds), which occurred on the seventh day of Passover, was five times greater than all of the previous plagues combined!

In Egypt it says of them [Shemot 8:15], "The magicians said to Pharaoh "This is the *Finger* of God." At the sea it says [Ibid. 14:31], "Israel saw the Great *Hand* that the Lord Laid against Egypt; and the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His Servant Moshe." Now, how often were they smitten by "the finger"? Ten plagues!

Thus you must conclude that in Egypt they were smitten by ten plagues, at the sea they were smitten by *fifty* plagues!

Rabbi Eliezer said: ...Each individual plague which the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt consisted of four plagues....

Thus you must now say that in Egypt they were struck by forty plagues, and at the sea they were struck by *two hundred* plagues.

Rabbi Akiva said: ... Each individual plague which the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt consisted of five plagues....

Thus you must now say that in Egypt they were struck by fifty plagues, and at the sea they were struck by *two hundred and fifty* plagues.

The Rabbis assume that God's Power and intense Presence at the Sea was so tangible that everyone, young and old, regardless of where on the social spectrum they may have found themselves, experienced a literal visual Revelation:

Mechilta, Parashat HaShira #3 on Shemot 15:2 "This is my God and I will glorify Him."

R. Eliezer said: From where do we know that even a *handmaiden* at the Sea saw what Yeshayahu and Yechezkel and the other prophets did not see? For it is said [Hoshea 12:11], "I have also *Spoken* unto the prophets, and I have Multiplied Visions; and by the ministry of the prophets have I used *Similitudes/Parables*." And it is written [Yechezkel 1:1], "Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river Chebar that the heavens were opened, and I *saw visions* of God [as op-

posed to God Himself, so to speak]." A parable: A human king that comes to the State and he is surrounded by a group of bodyguards, and warriors are to his right and to his left, and soldiers in front of him and behind him. Everyone asked, "Which one is the king?" because they were all flesh and blood. But when the Holy One, Blessed Be He was Revealed at the Sea, no one had to ask, "Which one is the King?"; but rather when they saw Him, they recognized Him and they all as one proclaimed, "This is my God and I will glorify Him."

In the Talmud, the event is described as even more remarkable by including babies as well as those still in utero in the Revelatory experience!

Sota 30b-31a

Our Rabbis taught: R. Yosi the Galilean expounded: At the time the Israelites ascended from the Red Sea, they desired to utter a song; and how did they render the song? The babe lay upon his mother's knees and the suckling sucked at his mother's breast; when they beheld the Divine Presence, the babe raised his neck and the suckling released the nipple from his mouth, and they exclaimed: "This is my God and I will glorify Him" as it is said [Tehillim 8:3]: "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast Thou Established strength."

R. Meir used to say: Whence is it that even the *embryos* in their mothers' womb uttered a song? As it is said, Ibid. 68:27], "Bless ye the Lord in the Congregations, even the Lord, from the fountain [a poetic reference to the womb] of Israel." But these could not behold [the Divine Presence]! — R. Tanchum said: The abdomen became for them a kind of transparent medium and they did behold it.

However literally one takes such Midrashim and Aggadot, the perception they share is that something truly spiritually extraordinary transpired on that day, something far beyond the physical miracle of a path suddenly appearing in the midst of a body of water allowing millions of people to escape their pursuers. And while it appears incredibly difficult for us to imagine what that experience must have been like, the need to personalize it is explicitly stated as a religious *obligation* in Mishna Pesachim 10:5 and echoed in the Haggada:

In every generation a person is "chayav" [obligated] to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt, as it is said [Shemot 13:8]: "And you shall tell your child on that day: 'It is because of this that the Lord Did for *me* when I left Egypt.'"

It then stands to reason that what we are expected to recreate in our minds is not only the sensation of leaving Egypt, which

we celebrate by word¹ and deed,² but also what transpired while we stood at the Sea and participated in the grand Revelation. On the seventh day of Pesach, the Tora reading consists of verses from Parashat BeShalach, including Shirat HaYam (the Song of the Sea), and we could imagine ourselves literally standing on the far side of the seashore and singing God's Praises.³ R. Adin Steinsaltz, in his stirring book of personal spiritual interpretations of the Jewish holidays throughout the year, *Change and Renewal: The Essence of the Jewish Holidays, Festivals and Days of Remembrance*,⁴ challenges us to come to grips with an important lesson about man's very nature via our thinking about, and even re-experiencing, the splitting of the Sea, based upon the Zohar I 18a:

People generally act like creatures of dry land, and their consciousness deals with the visible world. The higher, exalted elements of man—all that transcends plain and ordinary consciousness—are represented by the sea. These are the concealed worlds in a man. [R. Steinsaltz points out that this is not a reference to the subconscious, but rather the *superconscious*, i.e., the parts of the soul that transcend consciousness.] As a rule we see only the lower end of the exalted things, the "tip of the iceberg" protruding above the surface. Usually we do not see what is happening within. It is as though man's essence is sunk inside the great space, within the hidden sea, and what is visible to our eyes is but a small part, the thin stratum in which we operate....

The parting of the sea—the revelation of the sea and its transformation into dry land—brings about the unification of the worlds, so that man sees the complete form of himself and of the world. The ability to experience the parting of the sea and to live like *amphibious creatures*

[what an interesting metaphor!] in the sea and on dry land, is what distinguishes us as human beings. For such duality exists in man, as well, in the combination of body and soul....

In this process, all the heavens open, yet man continues to stand on the earth; sea and dry land, heaven and earth intermingle, and the whole mystery is revealed at once. The world, as it were, is split open, and one can view all the layers of reality, creation as a whole spec-

trum. This explains the well-known saying of the sages: "Maid servants beheld at the sea what even the prophet Yechezkel never saw...."

From R. Steinsaltz' perspective, the plagues were merely means to the end of human beings' coming to realize not only God's Power, but the spiritual, Godly dimension, whether one calls it "Tzelem Elokim" (the Image of God) or "Neshama" (soul), that is to be found in each one of them. There is virtue in not only perceiving the actual "land" that lies at the bot-

tom of the concealing sea within us, but setting foot on that land and traversing it. Kriyat Yam Suf itself then serves as a stepping stone to the ultimate purpose of the Exodus, the receiving of the Tora on Shavuot (Atzeret), bound to Pesach by the Commandment of Sefirat HaOmer (the counting of the Omer). While Tora could be understood in an external manner, approaching it internally and soulfully by connecting its teaching with our inner essences can only enhance our religious experience. The study of the Tora can be understood not only as a way to adhere to God's Will, but also as an act of self-understanding and growth, when it resonates with those elements within us that we come to understand only by recognizing the deep wells of holiness that we possess.

We certainly will not be able to better understand our true natures as long as we are enslaved to elements from without. But once we achieve freedom from those distracting and consuming forces, it is incumbent upon us to contemplate our true essences in order to embrace Tora and Mitzvot as complying not only with our Master the Creator, but the essence of ourselves as we did when (Shemot 14:29) "the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left."

Moadim LeSimcha!

NOTES

¹Retelling the story at the Seder as well as instructing our children whether or not they ask about it (the illustration of the four sons who require different educational approaches).

²E.g., drinking four cups of wine, reclining, being waited upon, eating the Pesach sacrifice or its present-day substitute, singing songs of praise and thanksgiving.

³In the spirit of empathy, an additional emotion that we are called upon to recreate within ourselves, even for the deaths of those bent upon destroying us, only partial Hallel is recited in accordance with Yalkut Shimoni, II Divrei HaYomim #1085. See RaShI on Yeshayahu 21:3 for another example of how a prophet was disturbed when he was called upon to predict defeat and devastation for Israel's tormentors.

⁴Trans. Daniel Haberman, Maggid Books, New Milford, CT, 2011, pp. 244-9.