

Parsha Ponders

Shevii Shel Pesach | April 14, 2020 | 20 Nissan 5780

A sense of gratitude¹

הים ראה וינס הירדן יסב לאחור

The [Reed] Sea² saw and ran away, the Jordan River turned backwards³

During the holiday of Pesach (as well as every other holiday), we recite *Hallel* during the morning prayers. It consists of chapters 113 to 118 from Psalms. Chapter 114 describes how when the Jews left Egypt, nature was entirely subservient to them. Nothing stood in their way. Most pronounced was the miracle of the splitting of the sea. On the seventh day of Pesach, we commemorate this event with the Torah Reading being the Song at Sea that the Jews recited⁴ after this miracle⁵. In Psalms the sea is described as “running away” from the Jews, meaning that it split in two, after seeing something. What did it see that made it split? *Chazal* teach us that it was the coffin⁶ of Yosef⁷. Why would the coffin of Yosef be the reason the sea split?

We can first ask a very basic question on the whole miracle of the splitting of the sea. Why was it necessary? Sure, the Egyptians were on the Children of Israel’s tail. However, why couldn’t they have fought back⁸? They were a large and mighty nation. The Torah explicitly says that the Jews left Egypt armed with weapons⁹. They could have withstood the threat of the Egyptian army, which by that point had been withered down due to the plagues. It’s also a stretch to say that the Jews weren’t skilled in warfare, and that’s why they needed the miracle of the splitting of the sea¹⁰. We see this isn’t so, as right after the sea split that they fought a war with Amalek and survived¹¹.

¹ Based on Kesav Sofer to Exodus 14:31 s.v. איתא בילקוט

² This verse is referring to the ים סוף, often translated as the Red Sea, but more correctly as the Reed Sea

³ Psalms 114:3

⁴ Exodus 15:1-18. This is because the sea split on the Jews’ seventh day of their journey

⁵ Megillah 31a; Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 490:5

⁶ Literally: the bones of Yosef

⁷ Mechilta Masechta D’Vayehi § 3; Bereishis Rabbah 87:8; Midrash Tehillim § 114:4. It’s actually a big dispute in whose merit the sea split: in Shemos Rabbah 21:8 it’s stated as either Avraham (this is also in Mechilta loc. cit., see also Shemos Rabbah 15:10), Yaakov, or Moshe. Sotah 37a (with Maharsha ad. loc.) says it was either the tribe of Binyomin or Nachshon Ben Aminadav’s act of jumping in the sea that caused it. Mechilta loc. cit. also brings an opinion that it was either in the merit of Yerushalayim or the Twelve Tribes. Mechilta loc. cit. § 5 and Mechilta D’Rashbi 14:20 bring the same dispute as in Sotah as to who jumped in first. Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 42 and Bamidbar Rabbah 13:7 only say Nachshon was the first to enter the sea. Interestingly, Shemos Rabbah 24:1 says the tribe of Yehudah were the first. Perhaps the intent is like Mechilta loc. cit., which brings an opinion that Nachshon went in first, and the rest of his tribe followed. Midrash Tehillim 76:1 brings a dispute if it was Nachshon, or if the story went that the tribe of Binyomin tried to enter, but the tribe of Yehudah beat them to it. Midrash Tehillim 114:4 says the tribes were fighting about who would get to enter first, and Binyomin and Yehudah were neck in neck. The sea saw that the Jews were fighting to sanctify Hashem’s name, and decided to split

⁸ Ibn Ezra to Exodus 14:13

⁹ Exodus 13:17 with Targum Onkelos. Cf. Targum “Yonasan”, Targum Yerushalmi and Rashi ad. loc.

¹⁰ This is the Ibn Ezra loc. cit.’s answer, which the Kesav Sofer doesn’t like

¹¹ Exodus 17:8-16. The Ibn Ezra himself addresses this issue, by explaining that they only survived because of the prayers of Moshe. The Kesav Sofer rejects this answer, because why then didn’t Moshe pray here as well?

One of the *mitzvos* in the Torah is not to abhor an Egyptian, as we were a stranger in their land¹². Rashi explains¹³ that this is so, even though they oppressed and enslaved us, and threw our baby boys in the Nile river. Nevertheless, they hosted our ancestors when there was no food in the land of Israel. As such, we must be appreciative and not be ingrates. Therefore, the Jewish people didn't want to wage war against the Egyptians, since regardless of their crimes, they hosted their ancestors¹⁴. As such, the only way for salvation was for Hashem to perform a miracle by splitting the sea that was in their way.

This mode of behavior wasn't unique to that situation. We find that Yosef also acted this way. While he was a servant in the house of Potiphar, Potiphar's wife endlessly tried to seduce him¹⁵. The seventeen-year-old Yosef adamantly refused, not wanting to be guilty of adultery. One day, when they were left by themselves, the wife of Potiphar grabbed hold of Yosef's cloak, propositioning him. Yosef, as a means to escape the situation, slipped out of his cloak and ran away without any clothes. He was eventually thrown in prison for his "crime", as the wife of Potiphar used Yosef's cloak as evidence of his immoral intentions.

Why did Yosef do this? He was much stronger than her. Why didn't he simply overpower her and escape? Why was his only solution to leave his cloak with her¹⁶? We see Yosef also acted with a sense of gratitude. He felt it wouldn't be right to use force against his master's wife. Potiphar had treated Yosef very well, given the situation. He gave Yosef full authority over his household. Yosef was free to do as he wished. It would have shown ingratitude if Yosef would try to overpower his master's wife. His sense of gratitude was so strong, that he was willing to "incriminate" himself not to go against it.

Now it's clear what the sea saw that made it split. The sea felt that there was no need for it to split, as the Jews were more than capable of overpowering the Egyptians chasing after them. However, once it saw the coffin of Yosef, it understood. Yosef refused to overpower his oppressor, even though it was within his capabilities, because of his sense of gratitude. So too, the Jews won't overpower the Egyptians coming to kill them¹⁷. That means the only solution is to split, and it did.

Tangentially, this approach answers a different question. The Torah tells us¹⁸ that Moshe's father-in-law heard what had happened to the Jews, and decided to join them by converting. Rashi clarifies¹⁹ what he heard: the splitting of the sea, and the Jews' battle against Amalek. Why was it specifically these two things which inspired him to convert? Why wasn't the Ten Plagues enough to get his attention? Why wasn't just the splitting of the sea miraculous enough to pique his interest in the Jewish nation?

¹² [Deuteronomy 23:8](#)

¹³ *Ad. loc.* It also appears in [Rabbeinu Bachaye ad. loc.](#) See [Berachos 63b](#): פתח רבי יוסף בכבוד אכסניא. See also [Bava Kamma 92b](#): בירא דשתית מיניה לא תדשי ביה קלא

¹⁴ The [Kesav Sofer](#) invokes [Kesubos 111a](#), which teaches that Hashem had the Jews make an oath not to rebel against any of their host nations, despite the oppression that they'll endure from them

¹⁵ [Genesis Chapter 39](#). See also [Yoma 35b](#)

¹⁶ [Ramban ad. loc. v. 12](#)

¹⁷ This fits nicely with the wording of the *Midrash*: ינוס מפני הנס. Meaning, the sea should "run away" for the same reason Yosef ran away

¹⁸ [Exodus 18:1](#)

¹⁹ *Ad. loc.* His source is [Mechilta Masechta D'Amalek § 1](#) and [Zevachim 116a](#). There it's presented as a dispute, and [Rashi](#) takes the two opinions and puts them together. There's also a third opinion there, that Yisro heard about the giving of the Torah (which is according to the opinion in [Zevachim](#) that Yisro came after the revelation at Sinai)

In truth, Yisro didn't need to leave his homeland and join the Jewish people. If he truly believed in Hashem, perhaps that could have been enough for him. In fact, that might have been the safer option. He wasn't so familiar with the Jewish people. Perhaps they wouldn't have greeted him with open arms, or perhaps they wouldn't accept foreign converts. It was a risk for Yisro to leave his homeland for a foreign nation. He wasn't aware that they in fact would have been obligated to treat him graciously, as he had graciously hosted Moshe for several decades in Midian. They would have had to honor him, and definitely not reject him. But for all Yisro knew, they were ingrates.

How did Yisro figure out that they weren't ingrates, and that he would be assured a royal welcome²⁰? He heard about the splitting of the sea. Since the sea split for them, it must be because they didn't want to fight their former hosts, the Egyptians. They had a sense of gratitude for being hosted and didn't want to appear ungrateful. However, the splitting of the sea wasn't on its own a proof. Perhaps the reason they didn't fight back, thus needing a miracle of the sea splitting, was because they didn't have weapons. Or perhaps it was because they weren't trained for battle.

Once Yisro heard about their battle with Amalek, how they emerged alive, all his doubts were cleared. He knew that they were in fact ready for combat, and could have overpowered the Egyptians. The only explanation then for why they didn't fight back was a sense of gratitude. As such, he felt confident that they wouldn't ignore the goodness he bestowed upon Moshe all those years earlier. He knew he would be joining a people with proper values.

Pesach is a time to renew our sense of gratitude. It's not only that Hashem did all these amazing miracles for our ancestors. The message is that each and every one of us experiences miracles every day. They're not as revealed or as supernatural, but every breathe, for example, can be seen as a miracle with the proper perspective. The seder night, culminating with the splitting of the sea, are to be used as a gratitude boost that with G-d's help, will carry us through the rest of the year. Hopefully we'll start seeing miracles in our own lives, and truly live with a sense of gratitude.

Chag Sameach!

²⁰ This is how the [Kesav Sofer](#) interprets the *Midrash's* question of "what did Yisro hear", as the verse explicitly tells us what he heard. That's why he doesn't interpret it literally