

Parsha Ponders

Shevii shel Pesach | April 2, 2021 | 20 Nissan 5781

The free choice to split¹

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? One explanation⁶ is from a *Midrash*, which says is it saw the Jews fighting whether they should jump into the sea or not⁷. Some felt it would be a sanctification of Hashem’s name, and they had faith He would perform a miracle. Others felt it wasn’t a good idea. This is very hard to understand. Why would this be a reason for the sea to split? If anything, the fact that the Jews disagreed whether to sanctify Hashem’s name should be a reason *not* to split. What’s the intent of this *Midrash*?

There’s a confusing verse in the *haftarah* for *parshas Metzora*⁸. There was once a horrific famine, where people had to resort to cannibalism to stay alive⁹. Elisha the prophet, the student of Eliyahu, announced to the King’s attendant that there would be tremendous miracle. There would be so much food, that fine flour would sell for pennies¹⁰. The attendant was bewildered. How could such a thing happen? He responded that even if Hashem made windows in the heavens, such a thing could never come to pass¹¹. Why was the attendant so shocked? He hadn’t heard of Hashem’s prophets performing miracles? What was so hard to comprehend?

These questions can be answered by understanding a revealing verse about Moshe. It says about Moshe that ויתא ראשי עם, he will come as the head of a nation¹². The context of the verse is discussing

¹ Based on Derashos Chasam Sofer II *Shabbos HaGadol* p. 217 col. 4 s.v. 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 See <https://parshaponders.com/shevii-shel-pesach-5780/> fn. 7 for other opinions and sources for what the sea “saw” that made it split

⁷ The Chasam Sofer quotes this from a *Midrash*, but we don’t seem to have one that matches exactly as he quotes it. His version says מה ראה? ישראל מדיינים אלו עם אלו אם לקדש השם לקפוץ לים או לא. The closest is a *Midrash* brought in Yalkut Shimoni Tehillim § 873, which says: ד”א ראה הים את ישראל עושים מלחמה זה עם זה על קדושת שמו של הקב”ה. אמר מה אני עומד? מיד הים ראה וינס. Both discuss the Jews fighting with regards to sanctifying Hashem’s name, but the version we have doesn’t necessarily indicate they’re unsure if they should do it or not. Indeed, the Zayis Ra’anan ad. loc. § 9 explains that they were fighting who would get the merit to jump in first (as we see in Sotah 37a). As well see, the Chasam Sofer’s whole explanation of this *Midrash* is dependant on his reading that they were unsure if they should do it or not

⁸ II Kings 7:3-20

⁹ See *ibid* 6:29

¹⁰ *ibid* 7:1 and 18

¹¹ V. 2 and 19

¹² Deuteronomy 33:21

Moshe's place of burial outside the land of Israel¹³. *Chazal* teach us¹⁴ that this verse means Moshe was told by Hashem that he won't be buried in the land of Israel. This was so that in the end of days he can escort the generation that left Egypt, and subsequently died in the wilderness, to the land of Israel. Is this fair? The people who died in the wilderness sinned, and Moshe has to suffer the consequences¹⁵? Why can't he get the burial he deserves in the land of Israel? Furthermore, the Torah is very explicit regarding Moshe's sin for hitting the rock and not having the proper faith in Hashem¹⁶. This was why Moshe died in the wilderness and never entered the land of Israel. Why then do *Chazal* need to tell us another reason Moshe wasn't buried in the land¹⁷?

One explanation for Moshe's sin was that he inappropriately got angry at the nation¹⁸. It was inappropriate because at that time they were justified in asking him for water. Hashem would have been very willing to give them water in abundance, yet Moshe's fury raged.

There's a psychological reality that when someone does something willingly, they do it with generosity, abundance, sincerity, and pleasure. This is in contrast to someone who does something because they're forced to; they'll do the bare minimum they have to. Hashem acts with us the same way. Sometimes the generation isn't deserving of Hashem's bounty, yet the merits of the righteous are enough to so-to-speak "force" Hashem to give us what we need¹⁹. In these instances, Hashem doesn't give us in abundance²⁰; only enough to push off the demands of the righteous.

When the Jews first entered the wilderness, they also asked for water²¹. However, in that instance they asked inappropriately²². The only reason they got water was due to the merits of Miriam, not because they deserved it²³. Since it was underserving, Hashem gave them water like a person forced to do something. It didn't happen on its own. Moshe had to hit the rock to bring out the water. Not so much water came out either. However, in this later instance, when the people asked appropriately, and they were on a high level, the water came due to their own merits. Hashem was willing to give them, and as such it was given in great abundance²⁴. There was no need to hit the rock, as merely speaking to it would have provided them all the water they needed.

Moshe, in this latter instance of the people needing water, erred. By hitting the rock in anger, when he didn't need to, he was giving them the wrong impression. The people thought that they weren't

¹³ See *Targum Onkelos ad. loc.*

¹⁴ *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:13

¹⁵ טוביה חטא וזיגוד מינגד (*Pesachim* 113b)

¹⁶ *Numbers* Chapter 20. See note 18

¹⁷ I don't fully understand this question, as it could very well be the sin with the rock caused him to die without entering the land. Perhaps he would have been subsequently buried in the land of Israel, like Yosef and his brothers, if not for the reason *Chazal* provide

¹⁸ *Rambam* in his *Shemoneh Perakim* Chapter 4 at the end. See <https://parshaponders.com/chukas-5777/> for numerous other explanations for what exactly was Moshe's sin

¹⁹ ומבטלה (Moed Kattan 16b, based on *II Samuel* 23:3)

²⁰ See *Ta'anis* 23a regarding חוני המעגל

²¹ *Exodus* 17:1-3

²² See v. 7

²³ *Ta'anis* 9a

²⁴ ויצאו מים רבים (*Numbers* 20:11). It doesn't say רבים the first time they asked for water. See also *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:26

deserving of water, and were only receiving it because of Moshe's merits. They thought Moshe so-to-speak forced Hashem to give them water, but it wasn't that Hashem wanted to give it to them. Of course, this was incorrect. Since he upset the Jewish people by making them think they weren't worthy, and that it was in his merits alone that they received water, he was punished. Instead of being buried in the land of Israel as he deserved, he had to be buried in the wilderness. Since the people who died in the wilderness didn't merit to enter the land, Moshe due to his own merits was destined to himself lead them into it in the end of days. The punishment matched the crime²⁵.

Chazal teach us²⁶ that Hashem's attribute of good is greater than His attribute of punishment. The proof given is that with regards to the story of Noach's ark and the flood, the Torah says²⁷ that Hashem opened the windows of the heavens to pour out the rain. This is unlike the *mun* which the Jews ate in the wilderness, which also came from heaven. There, the verse says²⁸ that the doors of the heavens opened²⁹. The reason for this is the same as above. Hashem doesn't want to give us punishments, so He gives the bare minimum. It's as if He is forced. However, when Hashem wants to shower us with good, He goes beyond the letter of the law.

Let's go back to the verses with Elisha and the King's attendant. Elisha said that Hashem would give so much food in abundance, that fine flour would sell for pennies. Now, how can we understand this prophetic statement. If Hashem were to give so much food in abundance, why would there be a need to buy fine flour? There should be plentiful food available for free. Just like the *mun*, so much fell every day that there was an unbelievable amount left over³⁰. This was why the attendant was so astonished at such a prophecy. However, he misunderstood Elisha's intent. It must be that Elisha meant to say that there won't be so much abundance³¹. The attendant didn't realize that the generation wasn't worthy of such a large-scale miracle, and Hashem was only going to give them food because He was "forced" to from Elisha's intent³².

In this fashion, we can understand a teaching of our Sages: Make His will into your will, so that He will make your will into His will³³. This is because anyone who fulfills Hashem's *mitzvos*, not out of fear or promise of reward, rather entirely due to their own interest and desire, is on a very high level. In return, Hashem will act towards them with interest and desire, and not because He is "forced to". Hashem will act towards them with generosity, and not the bare minimum. This is the deeper understanding behind the idea that the righteous person's will "overrides" Hashem's will. In effect, Hashem's will becomes the will of those who serve Him willingly.

²⁵ [Sotah 1:7](#); [Nedarim 32a](#)

²⁶ [Yoma 76a](#)

²⁷ [Genesis 7:11](#)

²⁸ [Psalms 78:23](#)

²⁹ See the *gemarra* there, which explains that a door is large enough for four windows

³⁰ See [Exodus 16:21](#) and [Yalkut Shimoni Shemos § 258](#), that the animals also ate from the *mun*

³¹ The [Chasam Sofer](#) points out that Elisha's intent is actually alluded to in the response of the attendant himself (*loc. cit.*). He mentions Hashem opening the **windows** of the heavens. This is associated with Hashem giving less than He would want to, which would have been referred to as the doors of the heavens

³² If this was the attendant's mistake, and not that he denied Hashem's ability to provide such a miracle (as the simple reading would imply), then it's very unclear why Elisha cursed him that he would die

³³ [Avos 2:4](#)

The *gemarra* shares³⁴ a story with a mini “splitting of the sea”. Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was on a mission to rescue people who had been kidnapped. There was a river blocking his path. He told the river to split so that he could continue on his mission. The river told him that, “You’re going to fulfill your Creator’s Will, and I’m going to fulfill my Creator’s Will.” Meaning, nature has it that rivers don’t suddenly split in two, allowing safe passage. As such, the river wasn’t going to go anywhere. Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair responded by saying: “If you don’t split before me, I decree upon you that no water shall pass through you again!” The river immediately split. How can we understand this story? The river seemingly had a proper argument against Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. What then was his response³⁵?

According to the above concept, this dialogue makes perfect sense. The river is forced to flow the way it does, as it was commanded to do so by its Creator. However, Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was a righteous individual. As such, he has the ability to so-to-speak “force Hashem’s hand”, and override the command of the river. Hashem fulfilled the righteous person’s will, and the river split in two.

In summary, a righteous person, who fulfills Hashem’s commandments out of desire and joy, and not because they are forced to, can override Hashem’s will with their own. They can even cause the sea to split. We see this idea alluded to in our daily prayers. We say, ויוצא את עמו ישראל מתוכם לחירות עולם, He took out His nation of Israel from them to freedom forever, והמעביר בניו בין גזרי ים סוף, He passes His children between the divided passages of the Reed Sea³⁶. Meaning, Hashem took the Jews out of Egypt to complete freedom. It’s not that He took them out to be slaves to him³⁷, but rather that they could have the free will choice to serve Him forever. Since they served Him out of their own volition, the sea split for them. They could therefore pass through it on dry land.

We can now understand the *Midrash* which says the sea split because the Jews were fighting if they should sanctify Hashem’s name by jumping in the sea or not. The sea saw that they were unsure, which meant that they had a choice. They could choose not to serve Hashem by sanctifying His name, or not. In the end, they chose to jump in. Since the sea saw that they were serving Hashem completely out of free will, and not because they were forced, it split. It understood that the righteous nation had the power to “override” Hashem’s will that the sea should obey the laws of nature. The Jewish people were at that point above nature, and the sea split for them.

May we always merit to serve Hashem willingly and not out of compulsion, so that He may act towards us with generosity and not with the bare minimum.

Good Shabbos and Chag Sameach!

³⁴ [Chullin 7a](#)

³⁵ See [Maharsha ad. loc.](#), who suggests that Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair felt that fulfillment of his mission, which was dependant on his personal free will, was more worthy than the river’s mission, which was forced into its nature. The [Chasam Sofer](#) rejects this approach, as it’s not at all apparent from the wording of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair’s response

³⁶ Evening prayers, *Birkas Krias Shema, Emes VeEmunah*

³⁷ I’m not sure how this fits with [Rashi](#) to [Numbers](#) 15:41, who says על מנת כן פדיתי אתכם שתקבלו עליכם גזרותי, or to [Deuteronomy](#) 5:15, which says על מנת כן פדאך שתהיה לו עבד ותשמר מצוותי האלה, or to [ibid](#) 16:12, which says על מנת כן פדיתך לשמר חקותי, or to [ibid](#) 24:18, which says אפילו יש חסרון כיס בדבר