

# Parsha Ponders

Beshalach | January 13, 2022 | 11 Teves 5782

## *Hashem's question for Moshe*<sup>1</sup>

ויאמר יקוק אל-משה מה-תצעק אלי דבר אל-בני-ישראל ויסעו

Hashem said to Moshe: “Why are you crying out to Me? Speak to the Jews, and journey”<sup>2</sup>

As the Jews reached the Reed Sea, they panicked. They were supposed to be freed from Egypt, but there was a barrier of water in their way. The Egyptian army was quickly approaching. We aren't told how they reacted, but presumably they were terrified for their lives. The Torah doesn't tell us what they did, but we are told Hashem's response. Hashem asked Moshe why he was crying out to Him. Rashi explains<sup>3</sup> that Moshe was praying to Hashem that they be saved. Hashem responded that this wasn't a time for prayer. They should journey towards the sea, and they shall find salvation. Indeed, the sea miraculously split, allowing their salvation.

Rashi seems to be reading the verse, “Why are you crying out to Me?”, to be saying, “Don't cry out to Me!”. However, Targum Onkelos, the ancient Aramaic interpretive translation of the Torah, translates<sup>4</sup> the verse non-literally. Instead of Hashem asking Moshe, “Why are you crying out to Me?”, the translation reads: “I have accepted your prayers”. Why did the Targum translate the verse this way?

In general, Onkelos in his translation tries to remove rhetorical questions regarding Hashem. For example, in the prophetic Song at Sea, the verse says: “Who is like You, amongst the Mighty, Hashem?”<sup>5</sup>. He translates this as: “There are none like You; You are The G-d”<sup>6</sup>. Instead of “Who is like You”, Onkelos renders it as “There are none like You”. Therefore, some suggest<sup>7</sup> that this is Onkelos' intent here as well. Instead of the rhetorical question, “Why are you crying out to Me”, to which Hashem presumably knows the answer, the verse is rendered “I have accepted your prayers”.

However, this suggestion is untenable. First of all, we only see Onkelos do this with regards to rhetorical questions *directed at* Hashem. Besides the example above, another verse states: “The Judge of all the earth won't perform justice?”<sup>8</sup>. Onkelos translates this as “the Judge of all the earth will indeed perform justice!”<sup>9</sup> However, when Hashem Himself is asking the rhetorical question, like the verse, “Who will stand before the giants?”, the translation remains literal<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, “Why are you crying out to Me”, isn't really a rhetorical question.

Another consideration for Onkelos is the difficulty in the verse itself. Hashem is asking Moshe why he is crying out to Him, yet there is no indication that Moshe was crying out. We can perhaps suggest that Onkelos is trying to emphasize the power of prayer, as he often does in his translation. One verse, often understood to be negative, Onkelos renders positively: “Man began to call out in the name of G-d” is translated as “Man began to pray to G-d”<sup>11</sup>. Onkelos also emphasizes the power of prayer of the

<sup>1</sup> Based on [Parshegen](#) to [Exodus 14:15](#), an encyclopedic work on [Targum Onkelos](#) by [Rav Refael Posen zt"l](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Exodus](#) *loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ad. loc.*, based on [Mechilta ad. loc.](#)

<sup>4</sup> *Ad. loc.*

<sup>5</sup> [Exodus 15:11](#)

<sup>6</sup> *Ad. loc.*

<sup>7</sup> [Marpeh Loshon](#) and [Lechem USimla ad. loc.](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Genesis 18:25](#)

<sup>9</sup> See [Parshegen ad. loc.](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Deuteronomy 9:2](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Genesis 4:26](#). Cf. [Rashi ad. loc.](#), quoting [Bereishis Rabbah 23:7](#)

righteous, like he translates with Moshe, “his hands were faithful”, into, “his hands were spread out in prayer”<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps then, in our case, this was Onkelos’ intent by stressing that Moshe’s prayers had been answered. It was to give us the possibility to believe the sea split due to Moshe’s prayers.

Another explanation<sup>13</sup> is that Onkelos translated it this way for the honor of the Jewish people. The *Midrash* connects<sup>14</sup> our verse to the verse: “Call out and Hashem listens”<sup>15</sup>. The *Midrash* continues that Yitzchak bequeathed the Jewish people with the power of prayer. Since the Jewish people called out to Hashem<sup>16</sup>, Hashem heard their cries. Hashem said to Moshe: “Why do you cry out to Me? I have already heard the cries of the Jewish people”.

The problem with this *Midrash* is that the Jewish people weren’t crying out to Hashem in a positive fashion. They immediately began to complain to Moshe, and exclaim their wish that they had remained slaves. Nevertheless, prayer is an inheritance from Yitzchak, regardless of merit. The verse, “Call out and Hashem listens”, is said in the context of evildoers. Nevertheless, Hashem listens to their prayers. Therefore, Onkelos was stressing that the Jews’ prayers were heeded, even though they weren’t deserving.

At the end of the day, the Ohr HaChaim provides<sup>17</sup> the simplest explanation for Onkelos. Onkelos is merely providing the connection between our verse and the two that follow. After Hashem asked Moshe why he was crying out, Hashem says if you lift up your staff, the sea will split. Then Hashem says that He will harden the heart of the Egyptians. The verses don’t seem to flow together. Therefore, Onkelos clarifies that Hashem has accepted Moshe’s prayers. The Jews have no need to fear. Hashem will harden the Egyptian’s hearts, and they will ambush the Jews into the sea. The sea will miraculously split, and the Jews will find salvation, and the Egyptians will perish.

Good Shabbos

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<sup>12</sup> [Exodus 17:12](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Yefeh Toar](#) to [Shemos Rabbah](#) 21:1

<sup>14</sup> [Shemos Rabbah](#) *loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> [Psalms 34:18](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Exodus 14:10](#)

<sup>17</sup> *Ad. loc.* and v. 17. The [Ohr HaChaim](#) doesn’t really seem to be saying this, unless I’m missing something