



The Splitting of the Sea
by David Silverberg

On the seventh and final day of Pesach (the eighth day, celebrated in the Diaspora, is merely a repetition of the seventh day's observance), we read the section from the Book of Shemot (14-15) that narrates the miracle of *keri'at Yam Suf* – the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. This reading stems from the Midrashic tradition, cited in Rashi's classic commentary to Shemot (14:5), that it was on this day, the 21st of Nissan, the seventh day since the Israelites' departure from Egypt, that these events occurred. Pharaoh, in yet another drastic change of heart, suddenly decides to pursue the Hebrew slaves he had driven from his country just days earlier, and traps them against the sea. God miraculously forms a path within the raging waters of the sea, allowing *Benei Yisrael* to escape, and then restores the sea to its natural course once the pursuing Egyptians attempt to chase the Israelites through the sea. The dramatic denouement occurs when *Benei Yisrael* behold the drowned Egyptian army and break out in a spontaneous and jubilant song of praise to God along the shores of the sea. This song, often referred to as *Shirat Ha-yam* or *Az Yashir*, has been incorporated into our daily prayer service, at the very end of the *Pesukei De-zimra* section, in which we offer praises to God before beginning our actual prayers.

The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra 23:654) indicates that we commemorate this miracle not only on the seventh day of Pesach, when the miracle actually occurred, but during the final six days of the seven-day festival. Noting that Halakha requires reciting the complete *hallel* service only on the first day (or, in the Diaspora, on the first two days) of Pesach, the Midrash explains that the miracle of the sea does not warrant a complete *hallel* recitation: "All seven days of Sukkot we recite hallel, but on Pesach we recite hallel only on the first Yom Tov and that evening. Why? Because 'When your enemy falls, do not rejoice, and when he stumbles, your heart shall not exult.'" Our celebration of this triumph is mitigated – if only slightly – by the tragic loss of life it entailed. According to the Midrash, this need for moderation accounts for the partial *hallel* recitation on the last six of the seven days of Pesach. This clearly implies that the celebration of these six days commemorates the events of *keri'at Yam Suf*. Whereas the first day of the festival celebrates the actual departure from Egypt, which warrants a complete *hallel* recitation, the remainder of the holiday marks the great miracle of the sea, to which we respond with a delicate balance between jubilation and solemnity.

"They Believed in the Lord and in Moshe, His Servant"

The final verses of the *keri'at Yam Suf* narrative, prior to the song of praise, tell of the powerful spiritual effect this event had upon *Benei Yisrael*: "The Lord delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. Israel saw the great power God had wielded in Egypt; the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in Moshe, His servant" (Shemot 14:30-31).

Seemingly, this description indicates that at this point Moshe earned the people's full trust and faith as God's prophet. The unprecedented spectacle of *keri'at Yam Suf*, which Moshe brought about through the raising of his staff (see Shemot 14:21,27) demonstrated unquestionably his role and stature as God's prophet and messenger to Israel. The sheer awe generated by such an extraordinary phenomenon confirmed Moshe's status and eliminated any



lingering doubts the people may have entertained as to whether he was truly their God-sent deliverer.

Maimonides, however, was clearly of a different view regarding *Benei Yisrael's* newfound "belief" at the shores of the Sea of Reeds. Amidst his discussion of prophecy in his *Code* (Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, chapter 8), Maimonides states in unequivocal terms that it was not the occurrence of any miracle that confirmed the Israelites' faith in Moshe:

Israel did not believe in our teacher, Moshe, because of the wonders he performed. For one who believes based on wonders harbors skepticism in his heart, since it is possible for him to perform the wonder through magic and witchcraft. Rather, all the wonders that Moshe performed in the wilderness he did only for necessity, not to bring proof to [his] prophecy. It was necessary to drown the Egyptians – he split the sea and drowned them in its midst; we needed food – he brought manna down for us; they thirsted – he split the rock for them.

According to Maimonides, a miracle, regardless of how spectacular, cannot provide ironclad proof to a prophet's authenticity, "since it is possible for him to perform the wonder through magic and witchcraft." Even the most striking reversals of nature can be discarded as deception; some rationale can always be found to refute alleged proofs to prophetic power. Therefore, Maimonides asserts, we mustn't misunderstand Moshe's miracles as an attempt to prove himself to *Benei Yisrael*. He could not possibly have expected to earn their trust solely on the basis of wonders and miracles. The many miracles he performed were thus intended purely for their respective practical purposes. In our instance, he split the sea in order to drown the Egyptians who pursued the fleeing Israelites.

At what point, then, and through which means, did *Benei Yisrael* ultimately arrive at complete and unquestioning faith in Moshe's prophecy? Maimonides explains:

And through what did they believe? Through the Revelation at Sinai, where our eyes saw – not [those of] a foreigner – and our eyes heard – and not [those of] another – the fire, voices and torches, and he [Moshe] approached the mist as the voice spoke to him, and we heard, "Moshe, Moshe, go speak to them such-and-such."

Only the Revelation at Sinai proved Moshe's prophetic role beyond question, because there Israel themselves witnessed God's designation of Moshe. At Sinai, Moshe performed no miracles; rather God revealed Himself in the presence of the entire nation and explicitly summoned Moshe to the mountaintop to receive the Law. Thus, as Maimonides writes in the next passage (8:2), *Benei Yisrael* believed in Moshe's prophecy by virtue of their firsthand testimony, rather than through any secondary means of confirmation, such as supernatural powers. And only this degree of faith – which stems from firsthand testimony – is beyond refutation and doubt.

Maimonides underscores the critical importance of this principle in the final paragraph in this chapter:

Therefore, if the prophet arises and performs great miracles and wonders and seeks to deny the prophecy of Moshe, our teacher, we pay no heed to him and we know with certainty that those wonders are through magic and witchcraft. For the



prophecy of Moshe our teacher is not based upon miracles, in which case we would assess one's miracles against another's miracles. Rather, we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears, just as he did. To what may this be compared? To witnesses who testified to a person regarding something that he saw with his own eyes, that it was not as he saw. He pays them no heed; rather, he knows for certain that they testify falsely.

The "firsthand" nature of our belief in Moshe's prophecy precludes the possibility of its abrogation on the basis of secondary proof. Just as one pays no attention to alleged testimony that runs counter to what he knows to be correct based on firsthand testimony, so must we reject outright any claim seeking to undermine Moshe's prophetic authority. Therefore, even an alleged prophet who can perform miracles as Moshe did, who can split the sea, make bread descend from the heavens and produce water from a rock, can never be accepted if he opposes the laws transmitted by Moshe. No miracle in the world can override the nationwide testimony to Moshe's designation as God's prophet.

Maimonides draws compelling proof to his theory from God's own explanation to Moshe as to the purpose of the Revelation at Sinai: "Behold, I will come to you in the thickness of a cloud, in order that the people will hear when I speak with you, and thus they will believe in you forever" (Shemot 19:9). Only through the experience of this event, the Revelation, will the people "believe in you forever." Previously, the people's belief had been subject to skepticism, since it was predicated on the miracles Moshe had performed. But the moment they heard God designate Moshe at Sinai, they believed in Moshe's prophecy "forever," as no room had been left for skepticism and doubt. Maimonides elicits further textual support from an ambiguous dialogue between Moshe and the Almighty at the famous scene of the burning bush on Sinai, where God speaks to Moshe for the first time and charges him with the mission of freeing the Hebrew slaves. Moshe asks, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should free the Israelites from Egypt?" (Shemot 3:11). God replies, "For I will be with you; and this is the sign that it is I who sent you – when you have freed the people from Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain" (3:12). According to Maimonides, implicit in Moshe's question was the claim that *Benei Yisrael* will not necessarily accept him as their leader, even if he performs miracles to confirm his prophetic stature. God therefore guarantees Moshe that "when you have freed the people from Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain." Meaning, the Almighty will publicly reveal Himself and designate Moshe as His prophet, thereby ensuring the people's firm belief in Moshe as their prophet and leader.

Of course, Maimonides' position raises the question of how to understand the people's newfound belief in "the Lord and in Moshe His servant" as a result of the spectacle of *keri'at Yam Suf*. Why, according to Maimonides, does the Torah describe *Benei Yisrael* as arriving at full faith in Moshe at this early stage, a full six weeks before the Revelation at Sinai? If the people definitively believed in Moshe only upon witnessing his designation at Sinai, why are they said to have believed in him already with the splitting of the sea?

On the simplest level, we might distinguish between different degrees of faith. The famous Spanish exegete Avraham Ibn Ezra, for example, suggests that after the splitting of the sea only certain segments of the nation reached the definitive conclusion that Moshe had indeed received the word of God. Many others, however, still insisted that no direct communication could exist between a non-physical deity and a physical human being. It was only at the Revelation at Sinai that the belief in Moshe became unquestionably accepted by even the skeptical factions among the nation.



One could argue, however, that the jubilant tenor of the *keri'at Yam Suf* narrative and the unqualified description of Israel's belief in God and Moshe in the wake of this event seem to point to a nationwide response, rather than a feeling experienced by only the mainstream elements. The reader of this narrative is left with the impression that the miracle of the sea transformed the outlook of the nation at large, and not merely of certain segments, as Ibn Ezra contends. One might therefore prefer distinguishing between *keri'at Yam Suf* and the Revelation not in terms of the scope of the impact, but rather with regard to its essential quality. The spectacle at the Sea of Reeds perhaps heightened the nation's faith in Moshe, but did not amount to resolute, unwavering trust. Lingered doubts remained even after this inspiring miracle, and were fully resolved only at the Revelation.

Still, the question arises as to why this incomplete faith earned mention in the Torah's narrative. If the splitting of the sea yielded merely a quantitative, enhancing effect on the nation's belief in Moshe, then why does this effect assume such prominent importance, to the point where it is presented as the apex and culmination of the entire *keri'at Yam Suf* episode?

Liberator and Lawgiver

Rashbam, the famous Medieval French commentator and Talmudist (and a grandson of Rashi), takes an entirely different approach in explaining *Benei Yisrael's* newfound "belief" at the shores of the sea. With characteristic brevity, Rashbam writes, "They believed – that even in the desert they will not die of starvation."

In order to properly understand the meaning and implications of Rashbam's remark, let us take a moment to consider from a broader perspective *Benei Yisrael's* situation as they encamped by the sea. Upon seeing the pursuing Egyptian army, *Benei Yisrael* understandably panic, and cast harsh accusations against their leader, Moshe:

Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?
What have you done to us, taking us from Egypt? Is this not the very thing we
told you in Egypt, saying, "Leave us, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is
better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness"?

(Shemot 14:12)

As the Israelites found themselves hopelessly trapped against the sea, all their initial misgivings and hesitations about the whole enterprise that Moshe had initiated resurfaced. This verse informs us that already in Egypt, *Benei Yisrael* were reluctant to accept Moshe's leadership and follow his campaign to earn freedom from bondage and leave Egypt. After all, this is the life they had known for two centuries, this was the country to which they had grown accustomed and where they at least enjoyed a modicum of security and stability. However harsh the workload they bore on their shoulders, the uncertainty involved in beginning a new life of independence discouraged them from lobbying for the right to emigrate. After all, where would they go? How do two million penniless, slave-class people relocate en masse to a different country? Where would they find provisions for the journey to Canaan? And how would they settle in Canaan, among a hostile indigenous population? Indeed, the Sages tell (as cited by Rashi, in his commentary to Shemot 10:22) that significant numbers of Hebrew slaves were not interested in leaving Egypt, and were miraculously killed by God during the plague of darkness.



The crisis at the Sea of Reeds called into question the entire campaign of the Exodus. *Benei Yisrael* challenge Moshe's initiative to defy a powerful empire in an ambitious attempt to win freedom, independence and emigration rights. Why, they wonder, did they ever think they could defeat Pharaoh? Why did they place their trust in Moshe, and show loyalty to him, rather than their familiar taskmasters?

The miracle of *keri'at Yam Suf* put an end once and for all to these lingering doubts. "The Lord delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. Israel saw the great power God had wielded in Egypt; the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in Moshe, His servant." Seeing the demise of their former taskmasters, the Israelites understood that Moshe had been correct all along, that he was indeed sent by God to deliver the nation and bring them to their ancestral homeland. *Keri'at Yam Suf* thus confirmed the validity, if you will, of the Exodus. As Rashbam comments, at this point *Benei Yisrael* no longer entertained any doubts about traversing the empty, treacherous wilderness, or attempting to conquer and settle the Land of Canaan.

Accordingly, we might distinguish between the belief in Moshe as deliverer, and the belief in Moshe as lawgiver. As Maimonides posits, the people's acceptance of Moshe as the single and final authority concerning the divine will, as giver of the Torah, was established only through the Revelation at Sinai. This role had to be confirmed through nothing short of firsthand testimony, so as to preclude the possibility of the law's abrogation by an allegedly superior prophet. The splitting of the sea, by contrast, confirmed Moshe's status as deliverer from Egypt. It proved to *Benei Yisrael* that their national destiny was to be realized not in the mudpits of Egypt, but in the land flowing with milk and honey, the land promised to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov as the eternal possession of their progeny. Now that God – through Moshe – had defeated Egypt, the Israelites had no one upon whom to rely but Him and His messenger; they now have nowhere else to go, other than where God and Moshe lead them, even towards the searing wilderness. "They believed in the Lord and in Moshe, His servant" means that they believed in the future Moshe promised them, and trusted that he, as God's appointed deliverer, will lead them to a new and better life.

With this perspective on *keri'at Yam Suf* in mind, we can perhaps understand more clearly the integrated commemoration of the seven days of Pesach. Despite the fact that, as we have seen, the first day of this festival celebrates the actual Exodus, whereas the remaining six days commemorate the splitting of the sea, these seven days clearly constitute a single festival, with similar laws and observances. On Sukkot, the so-called "eighth day" – Shemini Atzeret – stands independent of the seven days of Sukkot. The mitzvot of sukka and *arba minim* (four species) do not apply on Shemini Atzeret, and its *musaf* offering is drastically different from that brought during the previous seven days (see Bamidbar 29:12-39). On Pesach, however, aside from the unique obligations of the seder commemorating the night of Israel's departure from Egypt, the festival observances remain consistent throughout all seven days. In fact, each day of Pesach features the precisely same *musaf* offering (see Bamidbar 28:16-25). Furthermore, whereas the onset of Shemini Atzeret requires a new recitation of the *shehecheyanu* blessing, which we recite each time we begin a festival, this blessing is not recited on the seventh day of Pesach. Since this day does not mark the beginning of a new holiday, but is rather the final day of Pesach, it does not warrant its own *shehecheyanu* blessing.

This integrated quality of the seven days of Pesach likely reflects the inseparable bond between the two events commemorated during this week – the Exodus and *keri'at Yam Suf*. In effect, these two events are actually two episodes within the single event of the nation's



departure from Egypt. At least emotionally and mentally, Israel did not truly "leave" Egypt until they fully resigned themselves to the introduction of a new chapter in their national history. Only when they witnessed the Almighty's unquestioned victory over Egypt did they detach themselves emotionally from their period of slavery, and embark upon a journey towards a new future and national destiny.

In conclusion, then, the "belief" in Moshe attained at the shores of the Sea of Reeds related strictly to his status as leader and deliverer, as God's messenger leading His nation to a fundamentally new stage in their history. When Maimonides speaks of the people's incomplete faith before the Revelation at Sinai, he refers to Moshe's role as transmitter of God's law. This role required more than a display of superior force, and even more than the reversal of the natural order. Only God's public, explicit invitation to Moshe to ascend Mount Sinai to receive the Law could establish beyond doubt his singular and everlasting role as the Almighty's exclusive lawgiver. But as far as his role as leader is concerned, confirmation was supplied by the spectacle of *keri'at Yam Suf*. The Israelites' triumph over Egypt confirmed the end of the period of bondage, and the onset of an entirely new stage of freedom and independence.