

TELLING OVER THE STORY OF THE EXODUS AND ALL THE MIRACLES SHOULD BE ACCOMPANIED BY VISUALS. THIS EXPLAINS WHY WE LIFT THE MATZA. USE OUR IMAGES TO ASSIST WHEN READING THE HAGGADAH.

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## THE SPLITTING *of the* RED SEA

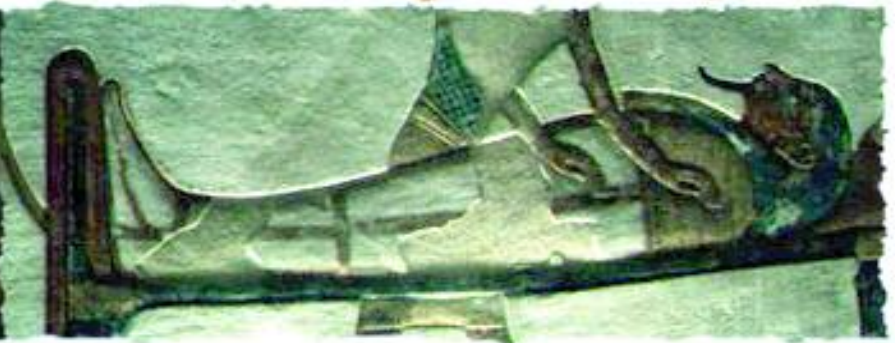
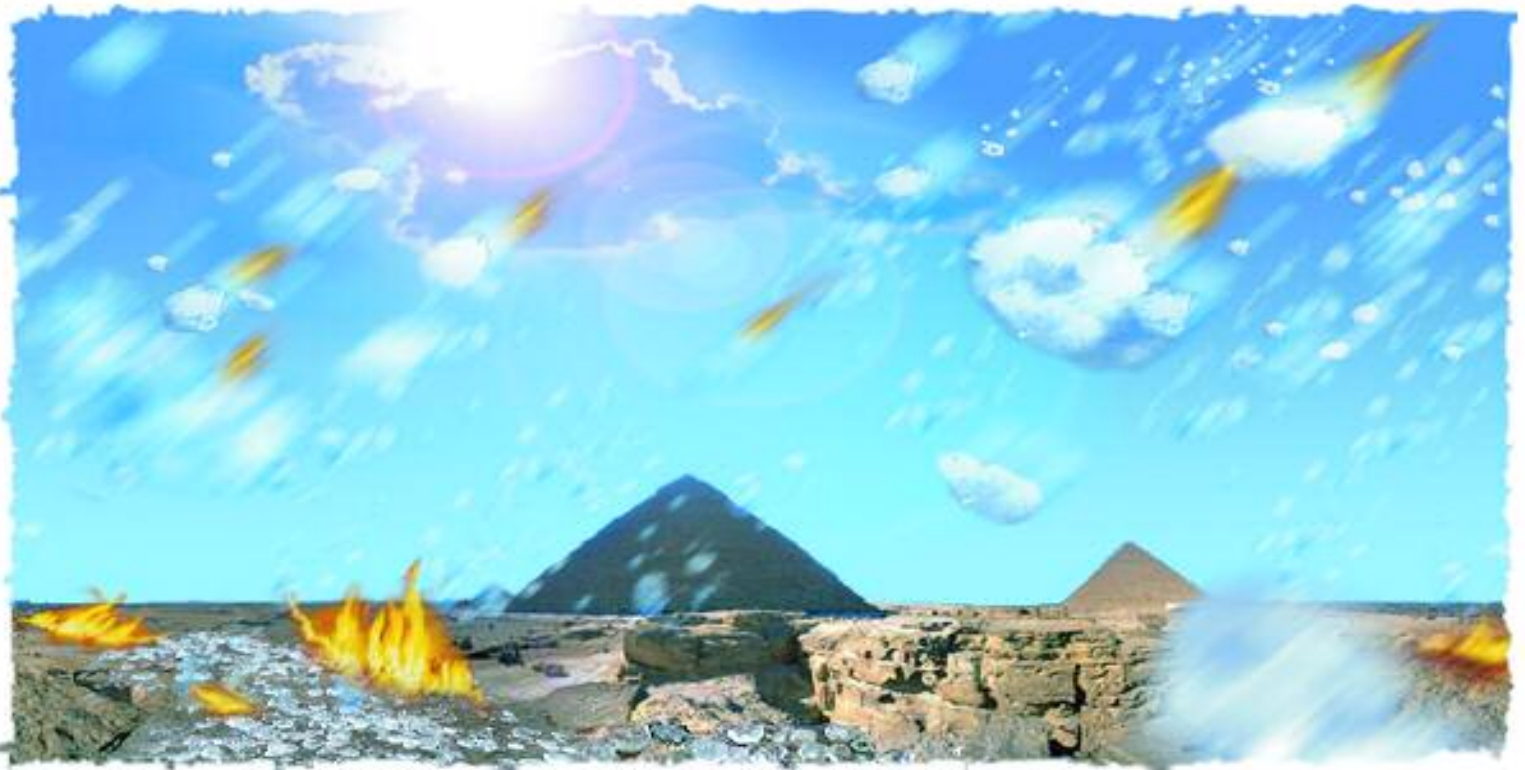
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# THE 10 PLAGUES









# THE SPLITTING *of the* RED SEA

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Parshas Bishalach commences with the Jews' journey immediately following their Egyptian exodus, (Exod. 13:17) "God did not guide them via the path of the land of the Phillistines, as it was near, lest the people repent when they see war and return to Egypt." As Maimonides teaches in his great work, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Book III. Chap. 32), God's initial plan was not to lead the Jews towards the Red Sea, but towards the Phillistines. A separate consideration demanded this route be avoided. But I ask, why would the Jews return to the very place they were now fleeing? Nonetheless, we are taught to prevent the Jews' return to Egypt, God circumvented their route.

We then read that God clearly orchestrated events to make the Jews appear as easy prey for Pharaoh, enticing him to recapture his fled slaves. God told Moses to encamp by the sea. What was the purpose? (Exod. 4:3) "And Pharaoh will say about the Children of Israel, 'that they are confused in the land, the desert has closed around them.'" The purpose of traveling not by way of the Phillistines, but towards the Red Sea now appears to have a different objective; to lure Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea to be drowned. But it does not appear this was the plan from the outset. Had it been, God would not have taught of His consideration regarding the Phillistines. That nation's war would not have entered into the equation.

The ultimate purpose in the death of Pharaoh and his army is stated in Exodus 14:4, "And I will strengthen Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them, and I will gain honor through Pharaoh and his entire army, and Egypt will know that I am God..." God sought to gain honor by leading the Jews to the Red Sea, luring in Pharaoh, and creating the miraculous partition of waters. We are confused; did God lead the Jews to the Red Sea to circumvent the Phillistines, or to lure Egypt to their death and gain honor?

Upon their arrival at the Red Sea, the Jews soon see Pharaoh and his army in pursuit. Moses prays to God, and God responds, "Why do you cry unto me?" This is a surprising response. A basic principle in Judaism is the beseeching of God's help when in need, and the Jews most certainly were. So why does God seem to oppose such a principle at this specific juncture?

Another question apropos of this section is what the goal was of the Ten Plagues, in contrast to the parting of the Red Sea? If the Red Sea parting was merely to save the Jews and kill Pharaoh and his army, God could have easily spared this miracle and wiped out the Egyptians during one of the Ten Plagues. God prefers fewer miracles, this is why there is 'nature'. Our

question suggests that the destruction of Pharaoh and his army has an different objective other than the simple destruction of the Egyptians. What is that objective?

There is also an interesting Rashi which states a metaphor taken from *Medrash Tanchumah*. Rashi cites that when the Jews "lifted their eyes and saw the Egyptian army traveling after them, they saw the officer of Egypt traveling from heaven to strengthen Egypt." (Exod. 14:10) What is the meaning of this metaphor?

Looking deeper into the actual miracle of the Red Sea splitting (Exodus 14:28-29) we read, "And the waters returned and they covered the chariots and the horsemen and the entire army of Pharaoh coming after him in the sea, and there was not left of them even one. And the Children of Israel traveled on dry land in the midst of the sea and the water was to them walls on their right and on their left." Ibn Ezra states that Pharaoh and his army were being drowned simultaneously with the Jews' crossing through on dry land. This is derived from the Torah first stating that Pharaoh was drowned, followed by a statement that the Jews traveled on dry land. Although one section of the sea turbulently tossed and submerged the Egyptian army, "...and God churned Egypt in the midst of the sea", the adjoining section contained waters parted into two calm walls on either side of the Jews, bearing a dry seabed. Ibn Ezra calls this a "wonder inside a wonder".

We must ask why God deemed it essential to combine salvation and destruction in one fell swoop. God could have exited the Jews completely prior to allowing the Egyptians to enter the sea. What is learned from the God's planned simultaneity of Jewish salvation and Egyptian destruction?

Now we must ask an unavoidable and basic question which Moses himself pondered; why were the Jews subjected to Egyptian bondage? To recap, Moses once saved the life of a Jew beaten by an Egyptian. Moses carefully investigated the scene, he saw no one present, and killed the Egyptian taskmaster and buried him in the sand. The next day, Moses sought to settle an argument between the infamous, rebellious duo Dathan and Aviram. They responded to Moses, "will you kill us as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses feared the matter was known. But how was this matter made public? The Torah described the scene just before Moses killed the taskmaster (Exod. 2:12), "And he turned this way and that way, and there was no man (present)..." So if there was clearly no one present, who informed on Moses? A Rabbi once taught there is only one possible answer; the Jew who Moses saved was there, he

turned in Moses. We are astounded that one who's life was saved would inform on his savior. What causes such unappreciative behavior? The Torah's literal words describing Moses' astonishment are "(Moses said) therefore the matter is known", referring to the disclosure of Moses' murder of the Egyptian. Rashi quotes a medrash on the words "the matter was known", paraphrasing Moses' own thoughts, (Rashi on Exod. 2:14) "The matter has been made known to me on which I used to ponder; What is the sin of the Jews from all the seventy nations that they should be subjugated to back-breaking labor? But now I see they are fit for this."

Moses now understood why the Jews were deserving of Egyptian bondage. This ungrateful Jew's backstabbing act answered Moses' question. But this ungrateful nature is not its own trait, but a result of another trait: The act of informing on Moses displays an inability to undermine Egyptian authority; "Even if my brother Jew saves me, Egypt is still the authority who I must respect". It wasn't aggression against Moses, but an unconditional allegiance to Egypt. The Jews' minds were emotionally crippled by their decades as slaves. The famous Patty Hearst case teaches us of the Stockholm Syndrome, where victims sympathize with their captors. Israel too sympathized with Egypt. Such an identification would cause one to inform on his own friend, even on his own savior Moses. Moses witnessed this corrupt character trait firsthand and realized that Israel justly received the Egyptian bondage as a response. But how does the punishment fit the crime? (You may ask that this is reverse reasoning, as this ungrateful nature came subsequent to bondage, not before. But I answer that Moses too knew this, yet Moses saw something in this ungrateful act which he knew predated Egyptian bondage, answering Moses' question why Israel deserved this punishment.) So what was Moses' understanding of the justice behind Israel's bondage? Seeing that the Jew informed on him even after saving his life, Moses said, "the matter is known", meaning, I understand why the Jews deserve bondage.

In approaching an answer, I feel our very first question highlights the central issue - the cause for the splitting of the Red Sea. The two reasons given for God redirecting the Jews' journey are not mutually exclusive. The latter, drowning of Pharaoh and gaining honor is in fact a response to the former, the Jew's security in Egypt fostered by their extended stay. I suggest the following answer: God did in fact wish to take the Jews directly to Sinai. This is His response to Moses' question as to the merit of the Jews' salvation - "they are to serve Me on this mountain". Meaning, their merit is their future Torah acceptance at Sinai and their subsequent

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adherence. But due to a peripheral concern of the Phillistines, a new route was required. And not just a route on the ground, but a route that also addressed the underlying inclination towards an Egyptian return. God initially wanted only to bring Israel to Sinai. But now He sought to address the Jews' draw towards Egypt. God wanted to drown Pharaoh and his army to respond to the Jews' current mentality. Their preference of Egyptian bondage over warring with the Phillistines to maintain freedom was unacceptable to God. God enacted the miracle of the Splitting of the Red Sea, for many objectives, but primarily to remove the security Egypt afforded these former slaves. Destruction of the Egyptian empire was a necessary step in Israel's development.

This answers why God responded to Moses' prayer when the Egyptian army drew near, "Why do you cry unto Me?" In other words, God was telling Moses that prayer is inappropriate right now. Why? Because the very act of traveling to the Red Sea was in fact the solution for what Moses prayed - the destruction of Egypt. God was informing Moses that what you pray for is already in the works, and therefore your prayer is unnecessary.

Egypt's destruction was not an ends in itself. It had a greater goal - to replace Egypt's authoritative role with the True Authority - God. This dual 'motive' is displayed in a specific formulation of the Red Sea miracle. Moses tells the Jews "as you see Egypt today, you will never again see them. God will war for you, and you will be silent." There are two ideas here. The first is the termination of the Egyptians. They had to be rid of the Egyptian 'crutch'. Seeing them dead on the seashore emancipated them mentally. There were no more Egyptian taskmasters to direct their lives. The phenomena of a slave can be created by nature, or nurture. In Egypt, the Jews were nurtured into a slave mentality, a dependency on a dominating authority. This mind set actually affords some psychological comfort, despite physical pain. When one prefers slavery, he in other words prefers not to make decisions, and relies heavily on a leader. Perhaps for this reason, the very first laws given (in Parshas Mishpatim) address slavery. They outline this institution as a simple, monetary reality. One has no money, so he pays his debt via servitude. But in no way is human respect compromised when he is a slave. The master must give his slave his only pillow and suffer a loss of comfort himself. The slave remains equal to the master in all areas and deserves respect as any other man. Slavery is simply an institution under the heading of monetary laws. This teaches the Jews that the slavery they experienced is not a way of life, but a temporarily, tolerable state. The fact that God does not prefer slavery for man is His statement that "you are servants to me and not to man." One

is even physically reminded of the corruption which exists in the desire to be a slave, by the Torah law of boring his ear. The ear which heard on Sinai, "servants to Me are you, and not servants to servants (man)". (Rashi on Exod. 21:6)

The second idea derived from "God will war for you, and you will be silent", is that salvation is delivered solely by God. Your "silence" means God alone will bring salvation. There cannot be another cause sharing God's role as the "go-ale Yisrael". - the Redeemer of the Jews is God alone. Why is this necessary? This underlines the primary concept of the miracle of the sea. The goal was to instill in the Children of Israel an appreciation for God, and an acceptance of His authority. This authority would remain compromised had Egypt survived. Respecting God's exclusive authority is also a prerequisite for the Jews' impending acceptance of the Torah on Sinai. For this reason, many of God's commands are "remembrances of the Exodus" for the goal of engendering appreciation for the Creator's kindness. When man's relationship with God is based on appreciation for Him - as guided by the commands - man is thereby reminded that God desires the good for him. As man acts to fulfill his Torah obligations, he will not view them as inexplicable burdens, but he will seek to understand God's intended perfection in each command. Man will then arrive at his true purpose, and find the most fulfillment in his life. Man will be guided in all areas by Divine, rational and pleasing laws which conform perfectly with man's mind. All conflicts will be removed.

The males and females of the Children of Israel verbalized identical, prophetic responses to God's triumph, "God is greatly exalted, the horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea". God's objective of not only eliminating Egypt's, status in the Jews' mind, but gaining honor for Himself was achieved. This identical song of praise (Az Yashir) of both the male and female Jews displayed the newly instilled appreciation for their victorious God. The destruction of the Egyptians and the acceptance of God were the two primary issues that were addressed successfully. This explains why the Jewish salvation and the Egyptian destruction happened simultaneously. They formed one ultimate goal. Had God desired simple destruction of the Egyptians as its own ends, he could have done so in Egypt. But it was only in response to the Jew's warped overestimation of Egypt, that God destroyed them in the Red Sea, together with the Jewish salvation. The deaths of the Egyptians was a means for the acceptance of God, unobscured by any other master. Subsequent to the parting of the sea, the Jews in fact attested to God's success in His plan, as it is said, "and they believed in God and in Moses His servant."

How do we explain the medrash regarding the "officer of Egypt? It now fits precisely with our theory: The Jews felt unconditionally bound to Egypt as inferiors. At the shores, they didn't actually see any "officer of Egypt traveling from heaven." This metaphor means they looked at Egypt as invincible, as if some heavenly force defended Egypt over which they could not prevail. This is the meaning of the medrash. It is a metaphor for Israel's vanquished state of mind.

In summary, the plagues of Egypt served to spread fame of God, "And you will speak of My name throughout the land." The splitting of the Red Sea had a different purpose, "And I will gain honor through Pharaoh and his entire army." I am suggesting the honor God acquires is also for the good of Israel, not just Egypt. The Jews will view God as One Who is incomparable. The Red Sea miracle was executed as a response to the crippled mentality of the Jews, as God's stated, "...lest they repent when they see war and return to Egypt." The circumvention from Phillistine to the Red Sea was to avoid an inevitable return to Egypt, and to also correct that very impulse by the Jews witnessing God's triumph over Egypt, simultaneously instilling tremendous appreciation for God. In one act, the corruption in Israel was removed and a new faith in God was born, "and they believed in God and in Moses His servant." This simultaneous termination of Egypt and salvation for themselves was reiterated twice in the Az Yashir song, "God is greatly exalted, the horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea". This response displayed how effected the Jews were by God's miraculous wonders and salvation.

In all honesty, the Jews do revert to "fond" recollections of Egypt not too long after these events, and in the Book of Numbers. However, we cannot judge any acts of God's as failures, if His subjects subsequently err. God's method - and perfection - is to offer man the best solution at a given time. This is a tremendous kindness of God. Man has free will and can revert back to his primitive state even after God steps in to assist him. This human reversion in no way diminishes from God's perfect actions. Our appreciation of His wisdom and His precision in His divine actions remains firm. All of God's actions displaying His perfection and honor are not for Him, as He does not need a mortal's praises. He does it for us, so we may learn new truths and perfect ourselves in our one chance here on Earth.

One question remains: What is Moses' understanding of, and agreement with God's plan to enslave Israel due to their corruption, as sampled by Moses' informant. How does bondage fit the crime, and what exactly was the crime?