

Parasha Page

Parashat Beshalach

February 3-4, 2012

11 Shvat, 5772

TORAH READING: BESHALACH (P. 366)

Highlights:

- Hashem leads the Israelites through a longer route to avoid the Philistines.
- Pharaoh pursues the Israelites who are caught between the Egyptian "devil and the deep blue sea".
- The Red Sea splits. The Israelites are saved.
- Moshe and the people rejoice and sing the Shira.
- Manna falls from Heaven and water is produced from a rock.
- The Amalekites attack.

Food for Thought: TELL IT FROM THE TORAH, GEDALIA PETERSEIL

- When the Jewish people sang their song to God, the women used musical instruments, but the men did not. Why?
- God said that He will wipe out all memory of Amaleik. What did Amaleik do that merited such Divine retribution? They weren't the only nation in history to fight with the Jews, yet they have the distinction of being singled out by God for destruction. Why?

HAFTARAH: SHOFTIM 4:4-5:31 (P. 1152) WWW.OU.ORG

During the period of the Judges, Bnei Yisrael found themselves cruelly oppressed. When delivered from that oppression, Devora sang a song of praise and thanks to God, similar in nature to that of Moshe and Bnei Yisrael in the parsha. Similarly, the people's faith in God had similar "ups and downs" to those we find in the sedra. Devora was instrumental in restoring a high level of faith in God among the People and in leading the People to great victories. The format of the Song of Devora is the same as the Song of the Sea.

PARASHA INSIGHTS RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Efrat, Israel - "Israel saw the great hand that G-d inflicted on Egypt and the people revered G-d and they and they had faith in G-d and in Moses His servant" (Exodus 14:31)

In this week's Parsha, we read of one of the greatest miracles of all, the splitting of the Red Sea. It was a moment when all of the Jewish people experienced G-d's miracles. Rashi quotes a famous Midrash which teaches that even the simplest handmaid at the Red Sea experienced prophecy which was more powerful than that of one of the greatest prophets: Ezekiel (Rashi on Exodus 15: 2).

A couple of weeks ago, we saw how G-d made his presence known to our forefathers as E-I Sha-ddai. The splitting of the Red Sea was the culmination of G-d's promise that the Jewish People had entered a new phase of history in which they would experience G-d by His name and attributes of Hashem (Y-H-V-H). What is the significance of this new perception of G-d and what does it signify about our own relationship to G-d?

Rashi explains that in the past G-d made great promises to our forefathers, but He had not yet fulfilled them. Everything lay in potential, but the promises for the fruition of the Jewish nation had not yet been realized.

The Ramban explains how through the Exodus in general and at the Red Sea in particular, G-d performed miracles showing His power and mastery over the nature. Now, the Jewish people witness G-d as the director of history; rescuing His people and developing the Jewish nation.

Working through history, G-d is acting in partnership with the Jewish people. He has freed His nation of slaves, now He is working together with them to build the Jewish nation that will receive the Torah at Mount Sinai and live out its ideals and its commandments in the Promised Land. To fulfill this role, G-d will require eternal patience. The people will prove to be stubborn, fickle and complex; nevertheless, G-d will make them His partners and work together with them.

Our role and our challenge as the partners of G-d in history is beautifully expressed in a story about one of the great Jewish leaders of the Twentieth Century, Rabbi Shimon Schwab (1908-1995).

Rabbi Schwab writes in his memoirs that when he was a young man, he thirsted to learn more and more Torah. He studied at the famous Torah academies of Telshe and Mir, but he was still desperate to learn with the saintly scholar Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, affectionately known by the title of one of his books, the "Hafetz Haim". Eventually, in 1930, he travelled by foot to Radin, the Rabbi's hometown. It was a long and difficult journey, but eventually he reached the Yeshiva, found a seat and began to study. He studied with great diligence and dedication, but to his dismay there was no opportunity to meet the renowned scholar. He waited patiently, but eventually, after six months, he could bear it no longer. Plucking up his courage, he went to the home of the Hafetz Haim, knocked on the door and - filled with trepidation - he explained what he wanted. The Hafetz Haim welcomed him in to his sparsely furnished house offered him tea and cake and proceeded to offer a first lesson.

The Hafetz Haim, who was a Cohen (descendent of the Priest-teachers who served in the Temple and whose descendants will serve there in the future) asked the young man whether he too was a Cohen. The young man responded that he was not. And then the Hafetz Haim started to teach. This is what he said:

When the Messiah comes, he will bring us all to the Land of Israel. We'll sail to the port of Jaffa and from there we will make our way to Jerusalem. Once we arrive in Jerusalem, there will be tremendous excitement, we will head to Temple Mount and then make our way to the Beit Hamikdash (Temple). But there we will have to separate: I will enter with the Cohanim (Priest-teachers) and you will have to wait outside. I say this not to upset you, but to offer you a challenge.

Years ago, when our ancestors stood at Mount Sinai and then panicked at the disappearance of their leader, they asked Aaron to build a Golden Calf. When Moshe came down from the mountain, he saw the terrible sight of the Jewish people dancing around this idol and proclaimed, "Let those who are for G-d follow me." (Shemot 32: 26). Only one tribe responded - my ancestors, the tribe of Levi. That is why we are the Priest-teachers and you are not. So I beg you, next time when you hear the call of the G-d of history, do not miss your opportunity. Respond immediately.

This was the message of the Hafetz Haim. We are privileged to live in a generation which, like the generation that crossed the Red Sea, is privileged to see G-d working in history. G-d calls to us with a mission to perfect the world according to His vision.

This time we dare not refuse the challenge.

Shabbat Shalom

FRUITY MEN AND VEGETATIVE DONKEYS

Tu BiShevat, the New Year for trees, is a time of great festivity. We may wonder, though, why this should be so. We do not find such celebration on the New Year for vegetables or crops. What is so special about fruit?

A distinction between fruit and crops is found at the beginning of the Torah. In the utopia of Gan Eden, Adam was instructed that his diet would consist of fruit:

"And Hashem, God, commanded man, saying: You shall eat from any tree in the garden." (Gen. 2:16)

When Adam sinned and fell from his lofty spiritual stature, his diet was also reduced to a lower status:

"And to Adam He said: ...The land is cursed because of you; you shall eat in suffering all your life. It shall sprout thorns and thistles for you, and you shall eat the grasses of the field." (Gen. 3:17-18)

No longer would the fruits of the trees sustain man. Now he was to live off the grasses of the field - wheat, barley and other grains and vegetables. Upon hearing this, Adam became greatly distressed:

"When Hashem said to Adam, 'It shall sprout thorns and thistles for you...,' his eyes streamed with tears; he said, 'Master of the Universe! I and my donkey shall eat from a single trough!'" (Pesachim 118a)

In the transition from a diet of fruit to one of crops, Adam perceived that he had fallen to a status approaching that of an animal. If we contrast the natures of fruit with crops and vegetables, we shall see the same essential difference.

When grains and vegetables are grown, the entire plant is cut and consumed. What you see is what you get. Once it is consumed, there is nothing left. There is never any further possibility of produce from this plant.

A fruit tree is different. What you see is only a tiny fraction of what you get. For even when all the fruit have been consumed, there remains vast potential in the tree. It has the ability to produce more fruit, and more, for many generations.

Adam was originally on the level of eating fruit. He was a vast reserve of potential, just waiting to be actualized. He is named after the *adamah* - the fruitful earth, a vast reservoir of hidden potential. But when he sinned, he dropped to little more than the level of an animal. An animal is called a *behemah*, which is formed of the words *bah mah* - "what is it? What's in it" - or, as we might say, what you see is what you get. An animal has nothing more to it than meets the eye. It does not possess great potential that can be used for creative spiritual expression. Adam therefore notes that his donkey subsists on a diet of crops and vegetables, which likewise have no potential for further development. In the same way, Adam's capacity for spiritual development was greatly reduced.

The donkey, featured in Adam HaRishon's cry of despair, is called *chamor*, which is based on the word *chomer*, "material." The donkey is the most "materialistic" creature. A simple-minded beast, it is drawn solely after its physical desires. Adam realized that his altered diet demonstrated a fall to such a level.

But it is not only memories of a time long gone that we can ponder. There are great times yet to come, times in which we shall return to the level of Adam's original spiritual heights:

"In the future...trees will bear fruit every month, and man will eat of them and be healed..." (Shemot Rabbah 15:21)

We yearn for the final redemption, through which we will regain the spiritual level of Adam in Gan Eden. Tu BiShevat is the day of rejoicing over fruit, the more spiritual of foods, and a day of hope for man's ultimate restoration to his true greatness.



THE SONG OF THE GRASS

Know, that each and every shepherd
Has his own unique melody,
Know, that each and every blade of grass
Has its own unique song,
And from the song of the grass
Comes the shepherd's melody.

How good, o how good and pleasant it is
To hear their song,
It is so good to pray among them,
And with joy to serve the Lord,
And from the song of the grass,
The heart fills and yearns.

And when the heart fills with song
And yearns for the Land of Israel,
A great light shines forth
From the sanctity of the Land over it,
And from the song of the grass
Comes the melody of the heart.

By Naomi Shemer,
based on the words of
Rav Nahman of Breslav