

**Shvi'i Shel Pesach (The last day of Pesach):
Harmony of Paths in the Sea of the Infinite
Rabbi Elisha Wolfin**

Dear Fellow-Journeyers,

Chag Sameach and Mo'adim Le'simcha! Pesach is almost over.

The pattern repeats itself: Every year we prepare for the holiday with great excitement. We spend a lot of money on gifts and afikoman prizes, we recycle wonderful jokes in our Whatsapp groups, send mass sms's with generic wishes - mostly for a happy season of spring and freedom. The bloggers among us write their thoughts about the wonderful opportunity for freedom and self-fulfillment, and how each of us has their own personal Egypt which they need to leave, and if they don't, they should have one so that they can leave it. And then we survive traffic jams and arrive at our own personal seders. We sit around beautifully prepared tables, read from the great variety of Haggadahs available in recent years, sing the familiar songs with gusto, and through our open windows we hear our neighbors doing so as well - each family with its own tribe and its own tunes.

And now it is all coming to an end. Those of us who changed dishes for the holiday are getting ready to change them back. Those who closed their chametz in closets and sold it will soon open them again (this year a day later, on Saturday night, because of Shabbat). We will open the newly-cleaned windows and breathe in the fresh spring air, complete with the dust, mosquitos, and bugs which are also part of the joy of living in Eretz Yisrael.

On Sunday the supermarkets will begin to empty the Kosher-for-Pesach items from the shelves, and replace them with barbecue trappings for the upcoming holiday. This year it will be extra-special - all the tribes of Israel are celebrating Israel's 70th birthday: Those who ate legumes on Pesach and those who didn't; those who ate matzah and those who didn't. On Yom Ha'Atzma'ut we will all be fairly similar again.

Shvi'i Shel Pesach is a holiday unto itself, and it is described as such in Vayikra 23: 6-8 **“And on the fifteenth day of that month the LORD's Feast of Unleavened Bread. You shall eat unleavened bread for seven days... Seven days you shall make offerings by fire to the LORD. The seventh day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations.”**

It is on this seventh day following the Exodus that the parting of the sea takes place.

In third grade, when we first learned the story of the Exodus (in Israeli schools), our teachers forgot to mention that Moshe never told Pharaoh that the plan was to leave forever! Leaving all together was never discussed! Throughout the difficult negotiations with Pharaoh, Moshe and Aharon simply ask for a three-day holiday in order to celebrate in the desert:

“Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the

wilderness.” But Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go”. They answered, “The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us. Let us go, we pray, a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God...” (Shmot 5: 1-3)

Why leave for three days? The customs of the Israelites were abhorred by the Egyptians, forcing them to celebrate at a distance - three days' worth. Furthermore, the deception includes a mass borrowing of silver and gold utensils from their Egyptian neighbors. It is clear to all that at the end of the celebrations the Israelites will return. When they don't, Pharaoh understands he has been conned, and he hurries to collect his army and chase his escaping slaves.

The dramatic encounter between the two sides takes place on the shores of the Red Sea.

In a wonderful Midrash from the collection called “Pirkey Derabbi Eliezer”, chapter 42, the parting of the sea is described not as one path, but rather as twelve separate paths, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

“Rabbi Eliezer said: On the day when He said, "Let the waters be gathered together" (Gen. i. 9), on that very day were the waters congealed, and they were made into twelve valleys, corresponding to the twelve tribes, and they were made into walls of water with windows between each path, and (the people) could see one another.”

I love this midrash! It offers a unique perspective.

The epic tale of the parting of the Red Sea is a wonderful metaphor for the way in which a person finds his or her path in the world: We arrive in the world without an instruction manual or a map, equipped only with genetics, urges, desires, inclinations, and - there are those who would say - a personal, preordained mission that we are here to fulfill. Life is like a wide, endless sea of possibilities, today more than ever. A child born into the 21st century can be just about anyone they want to be, and can learn a tremendous variety of professions and disciplines.

But how does one choose? There are significant points in one's life at which decisions are necessary - before the army, before university, when choosing a life-partner, building a career; when we hit our mid-life crisis, at 40, 50, or 60 years of age.

How can we decide on the right path for ourselves? How is a decision taken to follow one particular path, excluding endless other possibilities? And... are we really the ones making the choice? Perhaps life or some other “power” decides for us?

The sea in front of us, with its endless possibilities, is a powerful kabbalistic concept which is a metaphor for God's infinite grace (chessed). The Egyptian army pursuing us is a metaphor for the quality of judgment (Din) which reduces and limits. There are ways in which limitations and Din appear in our lives - social and cultural norms, family expectations, the need for livelihood, consideration for others who share our path, the laws of the land, etc.

This contrasting but fruitful dichotomy between the endless sea of chessed and the limiting din of the approaching Egyptian army creates a path almost magically. Our unique journey often makes itself known in times of threat or challenge, because that is the point at which a decision must be made.

Whether we have chosen our path or the path was chosen for us by the pressures of reality, by God, or by some unknown fate - we will nevertheless tell ourselves and others all kinds of stories to justify our path. From the moment the path is chosen we defend it zealously. We may even criticize the decisions of others because they threaten to subvert our own. They cause us to question and to doubt the wisdom behind our choices and consider whether another's path is more stable, greener, or shinier.

Many midrashim tell us about the disputes which break out between the leaders of the People standing on the shores of the sea. Moshe, who is from the tribe of Levi, demands that prayer is the only salvation. Nachshon ben Aminadav, one of the leaders of the tribe of Yehuda, demands action - they should jump into the water and swim! The tribes of Yoseph - Efraim and Menashe, who carry Yoseph's coffin - demand to march first in honor and in memory of Yoseph who brought the People to Egypt and saved them from hunger, etc. (As we see - nothing has changed in this respect!)

The midrash quoted above from Pirkey Derabbi Eliezer is so wonderful because it releases us from the need to justify our choices and repudiate others'.

Service of the Heart: "Know that each shepherd has his own unique melody"

Two hundred years before the Exodus, when Bnei Yisrael went down to Egypt to break their fast of hunger, Yaakov sent with them "Produce of the Land" ("zimrat ha'aretz" in Hebrew). **"Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice produce of the land in your baggage, and carry them down as a gift for the man..."** - for Yoseph, the Pharaoh's second-in-command. (Bereishit 43:11)

Zimrat Ha'aretz refers to produce, but Rashi - followed by Rabbi Nachman, followed by Naomi Shemer - explains it as Zemer, i.e. song: **"That about which people sing its praise (מזמרים) when it comes into existence"** (Genesis Rabbah 91:11).

Rabbi Nachman, as was his way, gave these words a wonderful Breslaver meaning: **"Know that every shepherd has his own special melody according to the grass and according to the place in which he shepherds. Every beast has its own special grass which it needs to eat. Even he does not graze always in the same place, the grass and the place in which he shepherds has its own melody, because every grass and weed has its melody."** (Loosely translated from Lekutei Moharan Tanyana 63)

Naomi Shemer turned these pearls into a beautiful song, stating that **"From the songs of the grasses the melody of the heart is created."**

Bnei Yisrael were a tribe of shepherds. Every shepherd has his own grazing territory of which he is very possessive. Disputes between the sons of Yaakov were well-known. In fact, they were the cause of the descent to Egypt to begin with. However, they were united in their need to stave their hunger and save their families. United, but not one. They become a harmonious community of voices, each with his own unique song of the land, a song or a melody which was the product of the "weeds and the place in which he shepherded." Later in the story, once Yoseph reveals his identity to his brothers, he sends them home to bring their families, including their elderly father. He asks them not to argue and fight on the way. Yaakov and Yoseph know the nature of Bnei Yisrael: each has its own path and its own tune, and each is sure that his is right and desirable.

We are all faced with a sea of endless opportunities. We each find ourselves on our own unique path, whether we chose it consciously or not. Any path is possible, each one is the result of an unknown encounter between chessed and din, between infinite possibilities and threats, challenges, and constraints.

There is no need to justify our path.

Between paths there is a window through which one can see the paths of others.

There is no need to negate them.

One can observe and listen to the melody that may be heard from the neighboring paths.

Immediately following Pesach, Jews of Moroccan descent will celebrate the Maimuna holiday. Two weeks later, all of Israel will celebrate 70 years of independence.

Seventy is a wonderful number. There are "70 faces to the Torah". Will we be able to look through the window of our own camp, our own tribe, our own choices, parties, streams of Judaism, and see our brothers'?

The Red Sea parted into many paths with many windows through which one can wave to his neighbor along the way. At the other end of the sea we will meet up again. Together we will sing the Song of the Sea, albeit in different tunes. We will praise and be thankful for the miracle, for the many unique paths in the infinite sea which meet and separate repeatedly.

Elisha