

Parashat BeShalach: How Do Paths Through the Sea Form

Dear Friends,

One week has passed since we left Egypt. We have arrived at the Sea of Reeds (also known as the Red Sea).

One more miracle and we're out!

The parting of the Sea of Reeds is a formative story. A story about a deep, internal truth - truth, regardless if it "really" happened or not.

I always rejoice when a good explanation for one riddle or another in the parasha no longer satisfies me. This is a sign that I have evolved. Sticking to jaded answers makes us old. New wisdom brings fresh, new perspectives to the soul, that keep us young.

God guides Bnei Yisrael on a very strange path. The Torah gives us a reason, but the explanation is inadequate: **Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.** (Sh'mot 13:17-18)

Of course, Waze would take Bnei Yisrael on the shortest route home, by land, skirting the sea (the Suez Canal had not yet been built). But God was concerned that the gigantic Philistine armed men (in the area of today's Gaza) would cause great panic and the people would rush back to Egypt. Therefore, He recalculated the route.

This explanation is inadequate mostly because it would have been quite simple to circumvent the sea from the north (the area of today's Suez canal), cross over to the Sinai desert on land - without all of the bells and whistles and without unnecessary miracles - and only then turn south, with the sea to their right. This would still have been very far from the land of the Philistines. But, no! Instead, they make a sharp turn south, west of the sea, and camped opposite sea, and directly in the path of the galloping Egyptian army.

Until recently I explained this to myself in the following way: Bnei Yisrael had to go south so that they would have to cross over into the Sinai desert through the sea and not on land. In this way, they would know and internalize that the Exodus is a one-way journey. That there is no way back. That it is not possible to change their minds and return. Just as there is no way back to our childhood, to the womb, and to the Garden of Eden, the Torah teaches us that life always moves forward. Time cannot be stopped and the past cannot be revisited.

This week, however, following a conversation with a friend, I understood another dimension of the story.

In Bnei Yisrael's experience, the sea appeared before them like an impenetrable wall; an infinite expanse that has no path or route.

A path, it turns out, does not become apparent to a person without a very good reason!

It is important to remember that contrary to everything we learned at school, Bnei Yisrael had it good in Egypt! The great difficulty in leaving there was not due to Pharaoh. He is just a player in this drama. The slavery was to the fleshpots, and their addiction to what was comfortable and familiar. Therefore, the Red Sea was not an irritating geographic obstacle to be navigated by a divine miracle, but a symbol of the tremendous difficulty involved in taking the first step, leaving the fleshpots, the comforting habits and luxuries once and for all, in favor of freedom and a new path.

When we are unable to muster the strength needed to extract ourselves from narrow places - to change habits, to leave our comfort zones, to overcome addictions, and to recreate ourselves - a tremendous grace comes to our aid in the form of a fearsome terror which rocks us to our core. The Egyptian army is chasing Bnei Yisrael like a fatal disease which has come upon us, God forbid, or a marital crisis. It was the Pharaoh and his army that pushed Bnei Yisrael out: **Then I will stiffen Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them... And I will stiffen the hearts of the Egyptians so that they go in after them;** (Sh'mot 14: 4,17)

Our story is one in which human will, as powerful as it may be, is not enough to get us out of being stuck. Only when it is aided by a burning need will a new path reveal itself.

Therefore, the force that enabled the crossing of the sea and the collapse of the wall that stood in their way was the powerful combination of tremendous need and very strong will. The need and the will together forged the path through which they could cross the sea.

It is no coincidence that for Bnei Yisrael the path was dry, but for the Egyptian army it was muddy and hazardous, because the real need was that of Bnei Yisrael and not of the Egyptians.

When the last of the Israelites crossed to the far shore, the need was over, the sea returned to its natural state, and the path disappeared!

The drowning of the Egyptian army, therefore, is not the main point, but rather the disappearance of the path. Because the *path* ("shvil", in Hebrew) was *for* ("beshvil") Bnei Yisrael, in answer to their tremendous need, their powerful will. The moment it was no longer necessary, it simply disappeared without a trace!

This is the difference between a road and a path. The former is permanent, whereas the latter is linked to a moment in time and to necessity.

The disappearance of the path is a reminder of the magic of renewal. The paths which worked for us yesterday are no longer appropriate for us today. Admittedly, something within us would like to turn every path into a road, into something familiar and permanent which will always be available to us; tomorrow; even next year. We do not have the inner strength to reinvent ourselves anew each day.

We are all creatures of habit who are aging and becoming ossified.

Until the Egyptian army appears and chases us, forcing us to discover a new path, and in doing so, to renew ourselves.

But in truth, it doesn't work that way. We do not recreate ourselves anew each day. We do not discover a fresh path every day. We learn, or create for ourselves, permanent habits - "roads" - and we teach them to ourselves and our children so that these habits can serve us and them tomorrow, because who has the strength to reinvent him or herself every day?

And that's okay. It is permissible to rest on our habitual laurels. When the day comes and the time is ripe, the Egyptian army will arrive and it will demand that we break down the wall of habit and rote and discover a new path. And as usual, if the experience was a good one, we will try to turn the path into a road. (We call this "learning from success.")

And sometimes not. Sometimes it gets covered back by the encroaching sea right away.

So, thank you Pharaoh, thank you Egypt. Thank you for the food, the sustenance, the initial hospitality. Thank you for being the womb, and then for pushing us out - when the time was right - to the desert, because had you not pursued us, we would never have left. We wouldn't dare take the step. Oh, and apologies for the casualties and the pain.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha