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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Abiding Presence

Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us out...?” (14:11)

Parshas B'Shalach is about memory...

It's about a people who have witnessed miracles that shook the world — the plagues, the Exodus, the Splitting of the Sea—and yet, only days after each of these events, they forget.

At the sea, they panic. They complain. They say, “Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us out...?” After the sea splits and their enemies drown, just days later, they complain about the lack of water, then about the food... (Chapters 15-16).

How can you forget something so overwhelming?

But Parshas B'Shalach isn't really about forgetting facts.

It's about forgetting presence.

Amalek attacks them b'derech, on the way — when the Jewish People are tired, disoriented, and unsure of themselves. Amalek's power is always the same: to make you forget that Hashem is with you now, not just in the past.

Towards the end of her life, my mother began to forget things. For the last five years, communication became harder and harder.

Anyone who has been through that knows how painful it is. Visiting can feel like a one-way conversation. And if I'm honest, I sometimes found it very difficult.

Perhaps my one regret is that I didn't always sit there longer.

I could have read a book. I could have just been there.

But here's the thing.

Even when memory goes, **presence remains.**

Before her memory faded, someone from the local health authority came to test her. He gave her a long oral memory exam. When he left, he forgot his umbrella.

My mother said, “That's the kind of person they send to test **me** for my memory?”

She hadn't lost herself.
And maybe she never did.

Parshas B'Shalach reminds us: emunah isn't remembering yesterday's miracles.
It's choosing to be present now—even when the conversation feels one-sided, even when clarity is gone.

Because Hashem doesn't forget us.
And sometimes, just being there is the greatest act of faith.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Pharaoh finally sends Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. With pillars of cloud and fire, G-d leads them toward *Eretz Yisrael* on a circuitous route, avoiding the Pelishtim (Philistines). Pharaoh regrets the loss of so many slaves, and chases after the Jews with his army. The Jews are very afraid as the Egyptians draw close, but G-d protects them. Moshe raises his staff, G-d splits the sea, and the Jews cross safely. Pharaoh, his heart hardened by G-d, commands his army to pursue, whereupon the waters crash down upon the Egyptian army. Moshe and Miriam lead the men and women, respectively, in a song of thanks. After three days' travel, only to find bitter waters at Marah, the people complain. Moshe miraculously produces potable water. In Marah they receive certain mitzvahs. The people complain that they ate better food in Egypt. Hashem sends quail for meat and provides manna, miraculous bread that falls from the sky every day except on Shabbat. On Friday, a double portion descends to supply the Shabbat needs. No one is able to obtain more than his daily portion, but manna collected on Friday suffices for two days so that the Jews can rest on Shabbat. Some manna is set aside as a memorial for future generations. When the Jews again complain about a lack of water, Moshe miraculously produces water from a rock. Then Amalek attacks. Joshua leads the Jews in battle, and Moshe prays for their welfare.

Q & A

QUESTIONS

1. What percentage of the Jewish People died during the plague of darkness?
2. Why did the oath that Yosef administered to his brothers apply to Moshe's generation?
3. Why did the Egyptians want to pursue the Jewish People?
4. Where did the Egyptians get animals to pull their chariots?
5. What does it mean that the Jewish People "took hold of their fathers' craft" (*tafsu umnut avotam*)?
6. How did G-d cause the wheels of the Egyptian chariots to fall off?
7. Why were the dead Egyptians cast out of the sea?
8. To what future time is the verse hinting when it uses the future tense: "Then Moshe and Bnei Yisrael *will* sing"?
9. Why are the Egyptians compared to stone, lead, and straw?
10. The princes of Edom and Moav had nothing to fear from the Jewish People. Why, then, were they "confused and gripped with trembling"?
11. Moshe foretold that he would not enter the Land of Israel. Which word in the *parsha* indicates this?
12. Why is Miriam referred to as "Aharon's sister" and not as "Moshe's sister"?
13. The Jewish women trusted that G-d would grant the Jewish People a miraculous victory over the Egyptians. How do we see this?
14. Which sections of the Torah did the Jewish People receive at Marah?
15. When did Bnei Yisrael run out of food?
16. What lesson in *derech eretz* concerning the eating of meat is taught in this week's *Parsha*?
17. How did non-Jews experience the taste of the manna?
18. The Prophet Yirmiyahu showed the Jewish People a jar of manna prepared in the time of Moshe. Why?
19. Which verse in this week's *parsha* alludes to the plague of blood?
20. Why did Moshe's hands become heavy during the war against Amalek?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

ANSWERS

1. 13:18 - Eighty percent (four-fifths).
2. 13:19 - Yosef made his brothers swear that they would make their children swear. Thus, the generation of Moshe itself did take the oath.
3. 14:5 - To regain their wealth.
4. 14:7 - From those Egyptians who feared the word of G-d and kept their animals inside during the plagues.
5. 14:10 - They cried out to G-d.
6. 14:25 - He melted them with fire.
7. 14:30 - So that the Jewish People would see the destruction of the Egyptians and be assured of no further pursuit.
8. 15:1 - Resurrection of the dead during the time of *mashiach* .
9. 15:5 - The most wicked ones floated like straw, dying slowly. The average ones suffered less, sinking like stone. Those still more righteous sunk like lead, dying immediately.
10. 15:14 - They felt horrible seeing Israel in a state of glory.
11. 15:17 - "*T'vi-aimo ...*" -- "Bring *them*" (and not "bring *us*").
12. 15:20 - Aharon put himself at risk for her when she was struck with *tzara'at* (See Bamidbar 12:1).
13. 15:20 - They brought musical instruments with them in preparation for the victory celebration.
14. 15:25 - Shabbat, Red Heifer, Judicial Laws.
15. 16:1 - 15th of Iyar.
16. 16:8 - One should not eat meat to the point of satiety.
17. 16:21 - The sun melted whatever manna remained in the fields. This flowed into streams from which animals drank. Whoever ate these animals tasted manna.
18. 16:32 - The people claimed they could not study Torah because they were too busy earning a livelihood. Yirmiyahu showed them the manna saying: "If you study Torah, G-d will provide for you just as He provided for your ancestors in the desert."
19. 17:5 - "And your staff with which you smote the river...."
20. 17:12 - Because he was remiss in his duty, since he, not Yehoshua, should have led the battle.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Birkat Hagomel
Thanksgiving Blessing (Part 2)

“A ship in harbor is safe, but that’s not what ships are built for.”
G.T. Shedd

Birkat HaGomel reads: ***Blessed are You Hashem, our God, King of the universe, Who bestows good things upon the guilty, Who has bestowed every goodness upon me.***

The congregation then responds: ***Amen! May He Who has bestowed goodness upon you continue to bestow every goodness upon you forever.***

The text of our blessing is intriguing. As mentioned last week, the blessing we recite is not exactly the same as the original, shorter and simpler one found in the Talmud. There the text reads: ***“Blessed are You... Who bestows beneficial kindness.”***

For at least a thousand years, however, the accepted text is ***“Blessed are You... Who bestows good things upon the guilty, Who has bestowed every goodness upon me.”***

Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi (1013-1103), commonly referred to as the “Rif” (the acronym of his name in Hebrew), was no doubt the most influential Torah scholar and Halachic authority of his generation. He spent most of his adult life leading the prestigious community in Fez, Morocco, and he headed the famed Yeshivah there during the period commonly referred to as the “Golden Age of Spanish Jewry”. Many of the next generation of Spanish Jewry’s spiritual leadership were his students.

The expanded version of the blessing that we say is found in the Rif’s writings (פירוש למסכת (ברכות דף מג/א), where he rules that it is the correct text. His ruling is accepted as well by the Rambam as the definitive text for *Birkat HaGomel* (*Hilchot Brachot* 10:8).

The opening body of the blessing - ***“Who bestows good things upon the guilty”*** - seems to have no obvious connection to the reason for the blessing itself: one recites this blessing when one has been through what our Sages see as a dangerous situation (the blessing is obligatory even if there was no apparent danger involved). Why, then, are the “guilty” mentioned? And what are they “guilty” of?

Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575), author of the Shulchan Aruch, writes in his commentary *Beit Yosef* on the *Tur* that the inference from the blessing is that Hashem bestows goodness to everyone *even though they may not deserve it*.

The blessing teaches that, first, the one saying the blessing must recognize that Hashem pours His goodness upon everyone – including the undeserving. After internalizing that message, the person is then ready to understand that Hashem “bestowed every goodness upon me” – even though I may not deserve it!

The Chofetz Chaim was known to regularly spend time alone in his attic making a *chesbon henefesh* (reflecting on his actions, spiritual achievements and shortcomings) and “speaking” with Hashem. Someone once had the audacity to listen behind the closed door, and what he heard shook him to his core:

He heard the saintly Chofetz Chaim say to Hashem: “I wrote the *Mishnah Berurah*, which took me decades. I did whatever I could do to ensure that the Jewish soldiers in the Russian army could eat Kosher food. I wrote *Machane Yisrael* for Your children who were drafted into the Russian army so that they could remember You in the darkest moments, surrounded by people who hate them and who hate You. I awakened people to value the power of speech. I did whatever I could to see that the *Mikvaot* in my region were halachically acceptable.”

Then the Chofetz Chaim burst into tears. Through his sobs he kept repeating: “What did I ever do to deserve such kindness? You let me do so much! I have no words to tell You how grateful I am for what You have given me!”

It is entirely possible that a person might feel that they are doing “okay” in their spiritual growth; that Hashem should be proud of everything that they have managed to achieve. *Birkat HaGomel* comes to teach us that, more often than not, our perception of ourselves is, at best, biased and, at worst, completely incorrect.

To be continued...

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

SHABBOS BOUNDARIES

(Mitzvah #24 in *Sefer HaChinuch*)

See that Hashem has granted you the Shabbos. Therefore, on the sixth day [of the week] He gives you bread for two days. Let every man remain where he is; no man shall leave his place on the seventh day
(Shemos 16:29).

THE MITZVAH

When Hashem sustained the Jewish people with *manna* in the Wilderness, He gave a double portion on *Erev Shabbos* and commanded them not to leave their places to gather it on Shabbos. The Sages interpret the words “*no man shall leave his place on the seventh day*” as a mitzvah for all generations, that we may not travel outside the city on Shabbos. Noting that the “place” mentioned in the verse refers to the Jewish encampment, which measures twelve *mil* by twelve *mil*, the Sages infer that one may travel up to this distance outside a city on Shabbos. As a safeguard, the Sages decreed a further restriction, decreasing the permitted distance to one *mil* (*Chinuch*). One *mil* is approximately 1 kilometer, or 0.6 miles.

REASON ONE: A DAY OF REST

We are commanded to observe the seventh day as a day of *rest* so that we remember that the world has a Creator, Who completed His work and rested on this day. The Torah therefore forbids the highly strenuous activity of travelling. Until a distance of twelve *mil*, however, a walk may be considered pleasurable and restful (*Chinuch* §24).

REASON TWO: A DAY OF ABSTAINING FROM BUSINESS

This mitzvah was given in the Wilderness where the only source of livelihood was the *manna*; the command not to leave the encampment to get the *manna* was essentially a command not to pursue one’s livelihood (see *Chizkuni*). Even after that period of history, travelling always remains a primary means of doing business. The Torah thus limits our travel on the day of rest, measure to prevent us from engaging in the pursuit of our livelihood.

REASON THREE: A DAY AT HOME

“*Let every man remain where he is*” means that a person should stay home (*Ibn Ezra*). This indicates another facet of this mitzvah, in addition to the ‘travel ban’: We are commanded to be at total rest in our homes on the day of Shabbos.

REASON FOUR: A DAY OF APPRECIATION

During the week, we preoccupy ourselves with the pursuit of our needs and wants, and we cannot properly recognize and appreciate that which we already have. This is similar to the way that someone who is constantly moving around cannot focus on anything. On Shabbos, every Jew is commanded “*Let every man remain where he is*” so that he can appreciate what he already has and give thanks and praise to the Creator, as it is written, “*Mizmor shir l’yom HaShabbos: Tov lehodos laHashem...A psalm of song for the day of Shabbos: It is good to thank Hashem....*” (based partly on *Ayalah Temimah*).

REASON FIVE: A DAY OF SPIRITUAL PURSUIT

Shabbos is a holy day, on which our conduct must be distinctly holier than that of the week. For this reason, the Torah states, “*Let every man remain where he is; no man shall leave His place on the seventh day.*” “**His place**” alludes to **Hashem’s** place, as it is written “*Blessed is Hashem’s glory **from His place.***” We dwell with Hashem throughout Shabbos by meditating upon His Torah. In order to enable our minds to better perceive the Torah, our souls expand on Shabbos, and our intellectual capacity increases correspondingly. This is one reason why the Torah at Sinai was given specifically on Shabbos (*Rav Menachem HaBavli* §13).

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