

YOSEF'S BONES AND SPLITTING OF THE SEA: A LESSON IN UNITY

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

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The pasuk in Tehilim (114:3) states, "Hayom Ro'oh Vayonos" -- the sea saw and it fled. This alludes to the miracle of Kryas Yam Suf, the splitting of the Red Sea, which took place on the seventh day of the first Pesach during which Klal Yisroel left the servitude of Egypt. The Medrash on Tehilim (Shochar Tov, 114:3) addresses the issue of what the sea "saw" that triggered it to split. One of its well-known responses is "Ro'oh arono shel Yosef yored L'Yam" -- it saw the casket of Yosef entering the sea. The Medrash continues, "Omar HaKodosh Baruch Hu, Yanus Mipnei Hanos" -- it should flee because of the one who fled - namely, Yosef, who fled from the overtures of Potiphar's wife, as it is stated (Bereishis 39:12), "Vayonas Vayetze Hachutza" -- he fled and went outside. A similar statement linking the splitting of the sea to Yosef's casket appears in the Medrash Tanchuma, Sefer Bereishis (Parshas Yayeshev, 9).

This is taken to mean that in the merit of Yosef, Am Yisroel earned the privilege to have the sea part for them, and thereby yield their final salvation from the approaching Egyptians. However, it remains unclear as to precisely how Yosef's merits served as a catalyst for the sea to split. Furthermore, the expression that the sea split in response to the sight of Yosef's casket requires explanation; it should have stated that it saw his "image" or "face" or "soul" or his "merits." In fact, another Medrashic discourse (Bereishis Rabbah, 84:5) simply states, "Hayom lo nikra ela b'zechuso shel Yosef " - that the Red Sea split in the merit of Yosef.

I would like to suggest there must be some clue in reference to the "casket" of Yosef, which implies the linkage to triggering the splitting of the sea. We know that the casket contained the remains of his bones, as it is stated in the beginning of Parshas Beshalach (Shemos 13:19), "Vayikach Moshe es atzmos Yosef imo" - that Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him when he left Egypt, as Yosef had

commanded. Interestingly enough, a textual variation of the Medrash on Tehilim appears in Medrash Rabba (Bereishis 87:8) which states, "B'zchus atzmosov shel Yosef nikra hayom leYisroel" -- in the merit of Yosef's bones the sea split for the Jews, as it is stated (Tehilim 114:3) "Hayom Ro'oh Vayonos" -- the sea saw and it parted. Thus, the word "atzmosov" -- his bones - must reflect the "essence" of Yosef, and consequently will shed light on the underlying basis for the willingness of the sea to split for klal Yisroel.

Let us examine what transpired at the point of klal Yisroel's encampment by the Red Sea. There is a famous Medrash (cited in Yalkut Shimoni, Shemos 234) that Satan complained to Hashem as to why He was performing miracles for the Jews since they too were idol worshipers. Upon hearing this the Angel of the Sea sought to drown the Jews and not permit the sea to split. This is hinted at in the Verse (Shemos 14:29), "V'hamayim lohem Chomah" - that the water transformed into a wall. The word "Chomah" is written without the letter "vov", which therefore also spells "Cheimah" - meaning anger. Rav Meir Simchah of D'vinsk (5605-5686), in his Sefer Meshech Hochmah (Shemos, 14:29) raised the question as to why this prosecution statement was not voiced by Satan earlier, while the Jews were still in Egypt, during which the Egyptians were smitten with the ten plagues and the Jews escaped all harm. His response is as follows.

Differential Consequences of Communal Versus Individual Transgressions

There are two broad categories of commandments with differential classes of punishments - depending on whether they are transgressed individually or collectively. Sins between man and Hashem - such as idolatry, forbidden sexual unions, desecration of Shabbos -- when performed intentionally by an individual -- require various capital punishments as atonement. On the other hand, sins of an interpersonal nature - such as "machlokes" (strife), "lashon haro"(slandering), and theft - when performed by an individual - do not even require "malkos" (court-ordered 39 lashes). For example, in the case of theft one can return the item, and seek personal forgiveness from his fellow man.

In the case of collective transgressions, precisely the reverse is true. That is, large-scale interpersonal transgressions on the communal level elicit capital punishments, while those between man and Hashem may be forgiven. The rationale is that when manifesting communal unity, there exists a divine protective power for the "tzibur" (collective). With large- scale interpersonal transgressions, the unity of the collective is violated - resulting in each person being judged as a "yochid" (individual) for his sins in the man-Hashem domain, and is subject to their commensurate individual punishments.

Rav Meir Simchah supports his thesis based on evidence from the following four (4) sources:

1. Our sages in the Talmud Yerushlami (Tractate Pe'ah 1:1) point out that in the generation of King David, although they were collectively pious in the domain of man-Hashem commandments, their soldiers were more likely to die in wars. This is attributed to the prevalence of "dilturin" - slanderers

and informants. In others words, they were "factionalized" and manifested interpersonal strife. This was in contrast to the generation of King Achav, which was prevalent with idol worshipers, but was consistently victorious in wars, without suffering deaths. Their merit was that they were characterized by unity. In the absence of unity, Am Yisroel loses the protective power of the divine presence that is afforded to the collective.

2. Another manifestation of this principle is evident in the Talmud Bavli (Tractate Yumah, 9b). Our sages contrast the differing triggers for the destruction of the two Temples. During the first Temple era, idolatry and illicit relations were the dominant sins - in contrast to the second Temple era where "sinas chinom" (baseless hatred) was prevalent. Thus, the first diaspora only lasted 70 years and the Temple was rebuilt. In contrast, we are still suffering for approximately 2000 years following destruction of the second Temple. Thus, the consequences of communal interpersonal transgressions are more severe than communal violations of man-Hashem commandments.

3. The destruction of humanity through the Great Flood in the generation of Noach is likewise compatible with this perspective. Rav Yochanan points out in Talmud Bavli (Tractate Sanhedrin 108a), that while this generation transgressed all commandments (including idolatry and illicit relations) their sentence for annihilation was only sealed due to large-scale theft. This is explicit in the verse (Genesis 6:13), "Hashem said to Noah, the end of all flesh has come before Me, for the land is abundant with theft, and I am about to destroy them." (See Rashi on the verse who refers to multiple sources for this analysis.)

4. Finally, this principle was also operative with the generation of the desert, which left Egypt. For the sin of the golden calf (idolatry), klal Yisroel was forgiven by Hashem (Shemos 32:14). However, the sin of the spies, which was characterized by slander toward Eretz Yisroel, resulted in factionalization. Since it encompassed a large-scale interpersonal transgression, the decree was meted out for all 600,000 men (between ages 20-60) that they must die over a 40-year period in the desert (Bamidbar 14:35).

While in Egypt, although our forefathers may have been idol worshippers and ignored the commandment of circumcision (with the exception of the tribe of Levi) - both of which carry a death penalty - due to their communal unity, they can be forgiven for these transgressions. Thus, the Satan had no argument for prosecution. However, at the foot of the red sea, our Sages tell us (Mechilta, Shemos 14:13) that klal Yisroel split into four (4) factions: one sought to return to Egypt, a second proposed to fight the Egyptians, a third endorsed a "scream" strategy, while another advocated for jumping into the sea. Once they lost their unity, Satan argued that they must be judged as "individuals" - and individuals merit the death penalty for idolatry.

The "Bones" of Yosef as a Metaphor for Unity

As stated at the outset, the sea ultimately split upon seeing "atzmos Yosef" -- Yosef's bones. I would like to suggest that the bones of Yosef connote a sense of "achdus" -- unity -- which countered the

challenge of Satan that was triggered by his perception of Klal Yisroel's factionalization. In other words, I hope to demonstrate that Yosef's bones -- as a metaphor of unity - served as an antidote to the "pirud" - factionalization -- which was the source of our vulnerability at the base of the Red Sea.

How so? Let us reflect on the initial self-reference that Yosef makes to "atzmosy" - my bones. This occurred immediately prior to his death (Bereishis 50:25), whereby Yosef commanded his brothers (who outlived him) that upon their redemption from Egypt and ascent to Eretz Yisroel, "Ve'haalisem es atzmosy mizeh" - and you shall take my bones with you from here (i.e., Egypt) to Eretz Yisroel.

Interestingly enough, the same phrase appears in Parshas Beshalach (Shemos, 13:19), "Vayikach Moshe es atzmos Yosef imo" - Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him - "ki hashbea hishbia es bnei Yisroel le'emor" - for he had adjured the Children of Israel, saying - " pakod yifkod Elokim eschem, ve'haalisem es atzmosy mizeh itchem" -- that Hashem will remember you, and you shall take my bones with you from here with you. Rashi on this verse cites an analysis of the Sages (in Mechiltah) that the word "itchem" (with you) is superfluous. This implies that Yosef commanded his brothers to take his bones along with theirs - meaning, the bones of the brothers, which indeed their descendants had obeyed. Thus, while "itchem" literally means "with you" - it can homolitacly mean "with yours."

Rav Moshe Wolfson, Sh'lita (the long-standing Mashgiach of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath) in his Sefer Emunas Itecha (Bereishis, Parshas Vayechi) posed several questions regarding Yosef's commandment to his brothers:

A. First, why did he command his brothers vs. his own sons, which is the normative procedure pertaining to last wills?

B. Why did he also insist on the transmission of his brothers' bones for burial in Eretz Yisroel? If this was their wish, it would be incumbent on them directly to command their own children to implement such will.

C. Furthermore, when Yaakov asked Yosef not to bury him in Egypt, and transport him to Eretz Yisroel, Yosef responded by saying "Anochi e'eseh ki'devorecha" (Bereishis 47:30) - I shall do as you say. The Medrash (cited in Daas Zekenim Mi'baalei Ha'tosfos on the verse) interprets Yosef's response to his father to mean that, "Just as you are commanding me, likewise I will command my brothers, prior to my death, to transport me from here" (which he had indeed done, as noted above). The question arises regarding the propriety of such a response. At a time when Yaakov is beckoning Yosef regarding his insistence on being buried in Eretz Yisroel, Yosef turns the conversation to his own futuristic needs - without an apparent direct acquiescence to Yaakov's request.

D. Finally, why did Yosef refer to himself as "my bones" ? He should have said, "and you shall transport me" - referring to the totality of his remains. Surely his flesh remained intact as he was labeled "Yosef ha'tzadik" (the pious), and was no worse than the sage Rabbi Elezar son of Rabbi Shimon, who said of himself that his flesh shall remain for eternity (Talmud Bavli, Tractate Bava

Metziah, 84b). (Parenthetically, Rav Tzadok haKohen, in his Sefer Pri Tzadik (Bereishis, Vayechi 16) raises this question as well, and adds that if Yosef was not confident about the preservation of his flesh, how was he certain about the survival of his bones?)

Rav Wolfson answers all four (4) questions based on a famous Talmudic dictum (Niddah 31a) that there are three partners in the development of humans: Hashem, who infuses the soul; the father, who contributes the bones; and, the mother who is the source of flesh. Thus, Yosef, in his utmost respect for his father's wishes and concern for their optimal fulfillment, responded by referring to his personal insistence that his own "bones" - which are a remnant of Yaakov's essence - be ultimately buried in Eretz Yisroel. His focus was, therefore, exclusively on the bones vs. the flesh. It explains why Yosef was concerned about his brothers' bones also being buried in Eretz Yisroel -since they represent direct remnants of Yaakov. He did not want to leave it to their discretion to command their own children - since Yosef was the one directly commanded by Yaakov, his dedication to fulfill his father's wish prevailed upon him. He directed the commandment to his brothers because of their greater obligation to respect their father , relative to Yosef's children who are also required to respect their grandfather. The requirement for respecting a father supercedes respect for a grandfather (Rashi, Bereishis 46:1).

It follows from this analysis that Yosef's concern with "bones" - - his own and those of his brothers - in the interest of respecting Yaakov and perpetuating his commandment to the maximum, represents the ultimate in "achdus" - unity. That is why our sages specifically made reference to Yosef's bones , or his casket which contained his bones, as embodying the essence of Yosef, and which served as an impetus for the sea to split. This was the symbol of unity, and the necessary antidote to the factionalization which characterized klal Yisroel by the Red Sea.

This notion of Yosef as an embodiment of unity is further supported from a statement in the Talmud Bavli (Tractate Shabbos 139a), "Miyom she'piresh Yosef me'echav lo ta'am taam yayin" - from the day that Yosef separated from his brothers he did not taste a drop of wine. The Ben Ish Chai (Rav Chaim Yosef of Bagdad, 5594- 5669), in his Sefer Ben Yehoyodah, offered several reasons for Yosef's avoidance of wine. In an intriguing analysis, he suggests that Yosef was constantly engaged in prayer - beseeching Hashem not to harm his brothers for their sin of selling him into servitude. Since one who is inebriate is not permitted to pray, and since his prayer was constant - "min hayom ve'halayla" (from day and night) he practiced total abstinence from wine.

Thus, Yosef's prayers were not focused on his own predicament - but rather on the welfare of his brothers. This represents an extraordinary manifestation of unity on the part of Yosef. Coincidentally (though not likely), in the previous daf Yomi cycle , this page in Tractate Shabbos (139a) was studied on the seventh day of Pesach (5758) - the day that the sea split in response to encountering Yosef's bones, the ultimate metaphor for unity among klal Yisroel!