

THE TEST

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Beshalach

The Test

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Micheline and David Peller in memory of his parents Hinda bat Yisroel Yechiel a"h and Efraim Fishel ben Avraham a"h

In this week's parashah, we find the beginning of the receiving of the Torah. On the verse (15:25), "There He established for [the nation] a decree and an ordinance, and there He tested it," Rashi z"l comments: "He gave them a few sections of the Torah in order that they might engage in study thereof -- the sections containing the command regarding Shabbat, the red heifer and the administration of justice."

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270) writes: This is wondrous! Why does the Torah not spell out the laws as it does in other places-"Speak to Bnei Yisrael and command them, etc." From Rashi's wording it seems that [Moshe did not teach these laws as "official" commandments; rather] he told them that this is what they would be commanded to keep in the future, when Hashem would give them the Torah at Har Sinai. In this light, says Ramban, we can understand why the Torah calls these commandments a "test." Bnei Yisrael were being tested to see whether they could accustom themselves to mitzvot and accept them with joy.

R' Simcha Mordechai Ziskind Broide z"l (rosh yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim; died 2000) asks: How would these few mitzvot reveal whether or not Bnei Yisrael were ready to receive the whole Torah? He explains:

Ramban teaches (in his commentary to Sefer Devarim) that the Torah expects more of us than merely keeping the mitzvot. We are called upon to learn from the mitzvot what Hashem's Will is. For instance, the Torah tells us not to speak lashon hara, not to take revenge, to stand up for our elders,

etc., and from these examples of interpersonal behavior, we are supposed to learn how to interact with our fellow men. When Hashem taught the laws of Shabbat, the red heifer and the administration of justice in our parashah, the purpose was to see whether Bnei Yisrael would look behind those mitzvot to see the Will of Hashem that those laws represent. If Bnei Yisrael succeeded in doing that, it would indicate that they would know what to do with the other mitzvot as well. (Sahm Derech: Ha'yashar Ve'hatov p.19)

"Yisrael saw Egypt 'mait' on the seashore." (14:30)

This verse is commonly translated, "Yisrael saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore." However, R' Eliezer Nachman Foa z"l (rabbi of Modena, Italy; died 1701) translates it differently: "Yisrael saw the Egyptians dying on the seashore." As a precedent for this translation, he cites Bereishit 35:18, "And it came to pass, as her [Rachel's] soul was departing-ki maitah / for she was dying-that she called his name Ben Oni." Although some translate "ki maitah" as "she died," this cannot be correct, for how could she give her son a name after she died?

What is the significance of the fact that "Yisrael saw the Egyptians dying on the sea shore"? R' Foa explains that just as the Jewish People saw the Egyptians dying, the Egyptians saw in their last moments that the Jewish People had survived. This increased even more the sanctification of G-d's Name that resulted from the miracle. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Midrash B'chiddush p.110)

"I shall sing to Hashem for He is extremely exalted, having hurled horse with its rider into the sea." (15:1)

Rashi writes: Hashem did something that no human warrior can do. A human warrior knocks the rider off the horse and then vanquishes him. Only Hashem could hurl a horse and its rider into the sea together.

R' Yitzchak Yerucham Borodiansky shlita (Yeshivat Kol Torah in Yerushalayim) writes: This is the attribute of Hashem which the Torah refers to as the "Yad Chazakah" / "Strong Hand," and we eat matzah on Pesach to recognize this attribute. Matzah is a mixture of flour and water. Naturally, flour and water that are mixed rise to make a bread dough, but the "strong hand" of the baker can overpower the natural tendency of the dough in order to make unleavened bread.

In the Pesach Haggadah, we say, "The 'Yad Chazakah' is [the plague of] devver / an animal disease." R' Borodiansky asks: The general theme of the haggadah is elaborating on the greatness of the miracles. Why does the author of the haggadah here limit the definition of the "Yad Chazakah"?

He answers: The haggadah is not referring here to the specific plague of devver. Rather, all of the

plagues can be classified either as *devver* or *cherrev* / a sword, as in the verse (Shmot 5:3), "Lest He strike us dead with the *devver* or with the *cherrev*." "*Devver*" refers to those plagues which involved a change to the nature of a physical object or phenomenon--e.g., blood, animal disease, and darkness--while "*cherrev*" refers to the plagues that involved an attack from the outside--e.g., frogs, wild beasts, and hail. Based on this understanding, the *Yad Chazakah* and *devver* indeed are synonymous, for they both refer to Hashem's mastery over nature, such as when He tossed horse and rider into the sea together. (Siach Yitzchak: Geulat Mitzrayim p.43)

"This is my G-d and I will make Him a *naveh*." (15:2)

Rashi writes: Onkelos translates "*naveh*" in the sense of a dwelling as in (Yeshayah 33:20), "a peaceful habitation" and in (Yeshayah 65:10) "a dwelling for flocks." [According to this, Bnei Yisrael were referring prophetically to the future Mishkan or Bet Hamikdash.] Rashi continues: Another explanation of it is that it has the sense of "*noy*" / beauty, and the meaning is, "I will relate His splendor and praiseworthiness to the inhabitants of the world."

Similar to the latter explanation, the Gemara (Shabbat 133b) cites this verse from *Az Yashir* / the Song at the Sea as a basis for performing mitzvot in the most beautiful way possible. [For example, this is why we decorate the sukkah.] What is the connection between this concept and the splitting of the Yam Suf?

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l (Yerushalayim; 1910-1995) explains: We read in Pirkei Avot that Avraham Avinu was tested ten times, and he passed all his tests. Commentaries write that it was the self-sacrifice that he demonstrated during these tests which caused him to merit many miracles during his lifetime. Similarly, before the Exodus, Hashem commanded that Bnei Yisrael circumcise themselves and slaughter a *korban Pesach* and put its blood on their doorposts, two mitzvot that required self-sacrifice. [Slaughtering the *korban Pesach* and putting its blood on the doorposts required self-sacrifice because the Egyptians considered the sheep to be a deity.]

Therefore, when Bnei Yisrael reflected on the awesome miracles involved in splitting the Yam Suf, they were inspired to accept upon themselves a higher level of Divine service, i.e., to not only perform the mitzvot, but to make the necessary sacrifice to perform mitzvot in a more beautiful way. (Minchat Avot p.115)

"Bnei Yisrael saw and said to one another, 'It is *mahn*!'--for they did not know what it was. Moshe said to them, 'This is the bread that Hashem has given you for eating'." (16:14)

Rashi explains: "*Mahn*" means "food," but they did not know its proper name.

R' Chaim Yosef David Azulai z"l (Chida; 1724-1806; Chevron and Livorno, Italy) writes: The Gemara (Ta'anit 24b) teaches that one should not benefit from an item that is the product of a miracle. This is what our verse means: "It is mahn (מֶה) -- an acronym for "ma'aseh nissim" / "the product of a miracle" -- "for they did not know what it was" -- i.e., they did not know if it was permitted to benefit from it. Moshe answered them, "This is the bread that Hashem has given you for eating." "The bread" -- i.e., it is a reward for another bread, namely the bread that Avraham Avinu fed to his guests. (Chida writes: "This much I have heard from others.")

He continues: Certainly, one can benefit from a miracle if it is a matter of life or death. This is why the Torah emphasizes (Devarim 8:3), "He afflicted you and let you hunger, then He fed you the mahn that you did not know." Because you were starving, you were permitted to eat the mahn.

Also, Chida writes, if the item already exists and it miraculously changes its nature as a result of prayer, one is permitted to use it. Thus, for example, the sage Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa was permitted to light Shabbat candles with vinegar (see Ta'anit 25b). (Quoted in Torat Ha'Chida)

R' Zvi Pesach Frank z"l (1873-1960; Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim) quotes Chida as writing that only an individual may not benefit from a miracle, because the miracle might have been at the expense of his reward in Olam Haba. However, a tzibbur / multitude does not have to worry about that. [Their collective merit is presumed to be sufficient to justify a miracle.] Therefore, the mahn which fell for everyone could be eaten. This would explain, as well, why the Jewish People were allowed to benefit from the one jug of oil that miraculously lasted eight days (i.e., the Chanukah miracle). (Mikra'ei Kodesh: Chanukah p.15)

Letters from Our Sages

The letter below was written by R' Yechezkel Levenstein z"l (1895-1974). Reb Chatzkel, as he is popularly known, was mashgiach ruchani of the Mir yeshiva in pre-war Poland and in Shanghai, China during World War II. After the Holocaust, he lived briefly in New York and then settled in Yerushalayim. In later years, he served as mashgiach ruchani of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. This letter is printed in Ohr Yechezkel - Michtavim, no. 7. Reb Chatzkel was particularly renowned for mining the story of the Exodus for lessons in emunah / faith.

Third [day, of the week of Parashat] Eikev, 5709 [1949]

My honorable friend, etc., After inquiring of your welfare,

I remember the days of old, when I would reflect on the kindness which we received in the form of the Exodus, the splitting of the Yam Suf, and the conquering of the Land, and I would think, "If only I could be in the place [near] where these things happened, in our Holy Land! Then I could sense the reality of these events." I said then that the Diaspora is not a place where these events can make as

much of an impression on my heart, for that requires feeling the reality, just as they were real to those who witnessed them. Now that, thank G-d, I have merited this, I say, "May Hashem give me the ability to strengthen myself constantly in these matters, for the early commentaries write that the verse (Devarim 4:9), "Take care for yourself and take care for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes beheld," is a negative commandment. (See [Sha'arei Teshuvah by] Rabbeinu Yonah [z"l], Section 3, paragraph 27.)

Regarding what you wrote in your letter that you hope you merit to always dwell within the four cubits of halachah, it would be good to see the introduction of Rambam [z"l] to Seder Zera'im regarding the meaning of the expression, "the four cubits of halachah." [Ed. note: Rambam writes that a literal interpretation of our Sages' statement, "G-d takes no interest in this world except in the four cubits of halachah,"--i.e., that He cares only about those who sit and study halachah--would be very far from the truth, for that would mean that G-d was not found in all the generations before the Torah was given. Rather, this statement refers to a person who is well-rounded in knowledge of both his legal and moral duties, and who acts upon his knowledge. "The world exists for a person who is wise and good!" Rambam writes.]

Your friend,

Yechezkel Levenstein

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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