

BACK-SEAT DRIVER

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

It appears from different Midrashim that before the Red Sea finally split for Moshe and the Jews, some fairly heavy-duty negotiations took place. The Yam Suf, it seems, had a mind of its own about splitting. According to one Midrash (Tehillim 15), the Sea argued that the Jews were no more deserving than the Egyptians, seeing as how they too had worshipped idols in Mitzrayim. According to another (Shemos Rabbah 21:6), the Sea argued that since it was formed on the third day of creation, and Moshe on the sixth, it was "older" than Moshe - and why should the older sibling move aside to make way for the younger? Indeed, when Nachshon ben Aminadav jumped into the sea's raging waters, he almost drowned. Yet in the final hour, just as things seemed bleak and hopeless, his bravery, and the prayers of Moshe Rabbeinu, saved the day, and the Yam Suf split for Bnei Yisrael, and drowned the pursuing Egyptians with its reverting waters. The narrative has all the elements of an old-fashioned cliff-hanger...

In another Midrash, however, Chazal reveal that the splitting of the sea was a pre-condition of its very creation: Hashem, the Midrash says, made a stipulation with the Red Sea on the day it was created that when the time would come, and the Almighty would give the cue, it would miraculously split its waters (Shemos Rabbah 21:6). One would imagine that had Moshe, Nachshon, and the Jews been privy to that version of the script, they might have been a lot calmer!

If everything was pre-arranged, and the final touches on their salvation had already been taken care of thousands of years previously, why does there seem to be such a sense of urgency surrounding the moments before the sea splits?

We are taught that finding a shidduch (a spouse), and finding a parnasah (means of earning a living), are as difficult for Hashem as splitting the Red Sea (Pesachim 118a [parnasah], Sotah 2a [zivug]). What is the connection between these two tasks and splitting the sea? And in what way is anything "difficult" for Hashem? Is k'rias Yam Suf any more "difficult" for Hashem than, say, a man opening a door? (After all - they don't call Him "Master of the Universe" for nothing!)

The father of a not-so-young yeshiva bachur told the following story: Our oldest son was soon going to turn twenty-eight, and he was still single. When we first realized it was not going to come easy, and that our younger children would in-turn suffer from the delay, my wife and I stopped sleeping at night. Every day, we would await "the" phone call, and wonder if, perhaps, today would bring relief. As the years passed, we suffered many disappointments.

My entire life had become wrapped up in finding a shidduch for our son. I was nervous and overwrought constantly. I was unable to function as a father for my younger children. One Chanukah night, when my wife had taken the children to visit my mother, I stayed home, too depressed to go along. As I sat there staring at the candles, I slowly felt a tremendous sense of siyata di- Shemaya flow from the candles and envelop me. "Enough!" I told myself, "this can't go on."

The following Friday night, after the little ones were asleep, I told my family the following story, which I heard from one of the gedolei ha-dor zt"l: He had once been riding on a bus when he noticed that in the front-passenger seat sat a small boy. On his knees, he held a plastic dashboard that had a steering wheel and a horn attached to it. His gaze was fixed intently on the road ahead. As the bus veered right and left, he turned his steering wheel accordingly. Of course, when the bus stopped, he stepped on "the brakes," and a small pneumatic psssss escaped his lips. He checked the doors and windows periodically, and honked abrasively when they were cut off. He worked hard the entire trip, much to the amusement of the passengers.

"He dreams day and night about becoming a bus driver," his father explained. "Before I got him the steering wheel, he would drive me crazy, trying to honk my horn, and getting in my way. Now, I sit him next to me, and I tell him: Gadi - start the motor and drive the bus! As you can see, he does a beautiful job, and I can do mine in peace."

"Did you hear that?" the Torah Sage later remarked. "The Almighty runs the whole show: He gives us a steering wheel, turns to us, and tells us: Nu - drive the bus! And we, small-minded children that we are, sweat and struggle to keep the bus on course. We exhaust ourselves from the effort, while 'upstairs,' all the passengers are amused. Our livelihood is fixed on Rosh Hashana, yet we struggle to earn it, and work overtime to earn even more. If we feel someone is getting in our way of earning a living, we yell at him: Get outta my way!... What we fail to see is that our Father is really the one driving the bus, and that while we must wave our arms and go through the motions as best we can, we should never forget that we're really just back-seat drivers." From now on, I told my family, we're going to try to take things in stride. Your mother and I are still going to continue doing everything we possibly can, but I'm going to try to keep things in perspective, and not allow stress and obsession to ruin our family. (Remarkably, a few weeks after telling his family this story, and changing his attitude, the right match came along, and his son became a chassan.)

Something similar to this occurred at the banks of the Red Sea. The script had been written way-back-when, and the envelope had been sealed; there was absolutely no need for alarm. But we knew nothing of all this - and we were really sweating. Hashem even let us "drive the bus:" Nachshon plunged into the waters, Moshe and the Jews prayed, and at the last minute... Well, we all know the rest of the story. Had we known about the now-famous "condition" would we have acted differently? Should we have acted differently? NO. Hashem very much wants us to do everything within our means to "help ourselves." But perhaps, had we known that our "last-minute" escape route had already been sketched in indelible ink onto the wall-map of history, we might have sweated

things a little less. Perhaps what's so "difficult" about splitting the Sea is that Hashem must ultimately allow us to have that delusion; He must hide His face from us, and allow us to continue to grope and struggle as if the bus were ours to drive.

Among the things that give people stress, earning a living and finding a zivug (match) undoubtedly rank among the very top. Yet our zivug, and those of our children, were already proclaimed in heaven forty days before we were conceived (Sotah 2a). Our parnasah for this year was already decided on Rosh Hashana (Beitzah 16a). We go through the motions, as we must, but there's really not all that much we can do to change things. Hashem, as He did when He split the sea, makes things seem as if we are holding the wheel and steering the bus. We fret and we sweat, we dodge and we turn, and Above, the Almighty smiles - enjoy the ride!

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication was sponsored by Mr. Moshe Wajsbaum, in memory of his grandfather, R' Yehoshua Heshel ben R' Moshe Eliezer Wajsbaum, who passed away Shabbos parshas Beshalach, 13 Shevat 5752.

Text Copyright © 2002 Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Project Genesis, Inc.**