

THE SPLITTING OF THE SEA AND THE CONCEPT OF HIDUR MITZVAH

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Parshas Beshalach

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The Splitting Of The Sea and the Concept of Hidur Mitzvah

"This is my G-d and I will glorify Him (Zeh Keli v'Anveyhu); the G-d of my fathers and I will exalt him." [Shemos 15:2] The Talmud derives from here the idea of "beautifying ourselves before Him through our aesthetically pleasing performance of mitzvos: Acquire a beautiful Esrog, make before me a beautiful Succah, a beautiful Sefer Torah, beautiful Tefillin, and so forth." [Shabbos 133b]. This is the source for the general concept of "Hidur mitzvah".

Not only does the Torah expect us to fulfill the mitzvos, there is an additional aspect of fulfillment that involves carrying out the mitzvah in the most beautiful way possible. Even though one can buy a pair of Tefillin for \$300 - \$400 that are in fact kosher, buying an exceptionally nice pair of Tefillin with exquisite batim [housings] and exquisite writing on beautiful parchment can cost upwards of \$1000. We have spoken in the past that there is an obligation to spend up to 1/3 more to do mitzvos in a more beautiful way than what would be the bare minimum way of fulfilling those same mitzvos. All this is learned out from the above cited pasuk from Shiras HaYam: Zeh Keli v'Anveyhu.

One may ask: Why here? Why is specifically this, the time and place that the Torah decides to inform us of this concept of beautifying oneself before Him with our performance of mitzvos? It does not seem that it really fits into the context of Shiras HaYam.

I saw a very beautiful answer in the name of Rabbi Tzvi Cheshen from Eretz Yisrael. The Mishna teaches that 10 miracles were done for our fathers at Yam Suf [Avos 5:4]. In other words, the events at the Red Sea did not only involve one miracle - the splitting of the water - but rather there were 10 distinct miracles that happened there. The Bartenura and Tosfos Yom Tov proceed to list the 10 different miracles referred to by the Mishna. I am not going to go through the entire catalog. But just

to cite a few examples -- besides the basic splitting of the sea -- they enumerate the following: The sea became like a tent (with protection from above) and the Jews entered into the midst of it; the sea bed was dry and firm without being muddy; as soon as the Jews crossed through, the sea bed turned back into mud and quicksand to trap the pursuing Egyptians. The list of miracles goes on...

The question is, why were all these miracles necessary? With the Egyptians on their tails and nowhere to go, Klal Yisrael would have been perfectly satisfied with the "mere" splitting of the sea! No one would have complained if there was not a tent of protective water over their heads or if the ground was still a little muddy. Nine of the ten miracles were most likely superfluous. All they really needed was "split the Sea and let's get out of here". Why did G-d add all these flourishes to the basic miracle? They were basically a form of "hidur mitzvah". "When I do something for My Nation, I want it to be first class! I do not want to just 'get by.' I want it to be as nice as possible."

Therefore, it makes a tremendous amount of sense why this is the source from which we learn that when you do a mitzvah, you do it right; you make it beautiful. It is because that is how the Ribono shel Olam treated us. When we buy someone a present, it is a sign that we appreciate them and like them. Typically, when we buy a person a present, we put it in a beautiful box. We want the presentation to be as nice as possible. When we buy our wives jewelry, we do not just take the necklace out of our pocket and say "here is the necklace!" We get a nice box which itself costs a few dollars. We have it wrapped really nicely - with a ribbon and a bow -- which costs a few more dollars. Who cares? She cares!

These extra flourishes beyond the basic gift are done to demonstrate how much we love the person to whom we are presenting it. The splitting of Yam Suf showed us how much He loved us. Hiddur Mitzvah - the beautiful Tefillin, the beautiful esrog, etc. - are intended to show Hashem how much we love Him!

In Search Of Something New To Have Faith In

The second idea I would like to share, I saw in the Sefer of the Tolner Rebbe in the name of the Chiddushei HaRim. Chazal point out the grammatical problem with the pasuke "Az yashir Moshe u'Bnei Yisrael es haShirah hazos l'Hashem" [Then Moshe and the Children of Israel WILL sing this song to Hashem] [Shemos 15:1], which seemingly is speaking in the future tense, when in fact the past tense should have been employed in describing what took place. The Rabbis cite this pasuk as one of the Biblical allusions to the Resurrection of the Dead (Techiyas haMeisim).

Here too, we can ask the same question we raised regarding Hidur Mitzvah: Why here? Why is specifically this used to provide a hidden allusion to the concept of Techiyas haMeisim in the Torah?

The Tolner Rebbe answers this question based on a second question. If you study the text of the Shira, you see that the opening pasukim speak of G-d in the third person: "A horse and its rider He

threw into the sea"; "Pharaoh's chariots and army He cast into the sea." Then, suddenly in pasuk 6, the style switches and G-d is addressed in the second person: "Your right hand, Hashem, is majestic in might;" "...You devastate your opponents; You send forth Your wrath..."

Why does the Torah switch from third person to second person? The Zohar states that Klal Yisrael went through a transformation here. The transformation was that they started Kriyas Yam Suf with a basic belief (Emuna) in the Master of the World. However when they experienced Kriyas Yam Suf and they saw the Revealed Hand of G-d, their belief changed into a reality! [The Rabbis comment that a common handmaiden on Yam Suf saw visions greater than the great prophet Yechezkel.] Previously, belief was just a concept. It was "third person" (detached). By the time they experienced Kriyas Yam Suf and saw the Hand of G-d, it was a reality: I can point: This is my G-d.

If that's the case, at this time Klal Yisrael was devoid of Emuna. There was no question of belief anymore. It was reality. The Master of the Universe said "I want to still give you the opportunity to believe - to use faith to believe in something you have not yet witnessed! What's that? Techiyas HaMeisim - the fact that everyone will die but everyone will also come back!" That was not yet reality, it was still in the realm of Emuna.

When BELIEF in the Almighty was no longer possible because it became REALITY, the Jewish people were given the promise of Resurrection (Az Yashir Moshe U'Bnei Yisrael...) to provide them with a concept about which they could have Emuna (belief).

A second answer to this same question comes from the Belzer Rebbe, zt"l, cited by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky. When the Belzer Rebbe tried to gather his people together after World War II, he saw that the Chassidim -- most of them Holocaust survivors who had lost large portions of their families - - were in no mood to sing Zemiros on Shabbos.

The Belzer Rebbe posed this question to his Chassidim: Why specifically now at the time of the splitting of the Sea were the Jewish people taught the Biblical allusion to the concept of Resurrection (Techiyas haMeisim)?

The Belzer Rebbe explained: Realize that when the Jewish people sang the Song of the Sea, the entire nation was not present. How many people did not survive the enslavement of Egypt? How many survivors had lost the majority of their families in Egypt who had never lived to see the day of the Exodus? According to Chazal, 80% of the Jews died in Egypt. It is safe to say that everyone who did make it out of Egypt had lost relatives and could not therefore fully celebrate the miracles they were witnessing at that time.

Moshe Rabbeinu told them "It is time to sing." But they responded, "Sing? How can we be happy? Eighty percent of Klal Yisrael is missing!" Moshe then explained that we have an allusion to the resurrection of the dead from this very place in the Torah: We will get your relatives back! The knowledge that the dead will rise and come back is very consoling.

Not long ago, I read the story of a woman who lost her only son in the War (Shalom HaGalil) in Lebanon. She was inconsolable. She refused to go to any family simchas. She would only go to funerals. She was a widow who lost her only son, "what joy is there any more in life?" She once went to a family levaya. A woman accompanied her to the cemetery. Following the burial, they stopped at the grave site of Reb Aryeh Levine (The Tzadik of Yerushalayim: A Tzadik In Our Time) to say Tehillim. On Reb Aryeh Levine's tombstone, she saw the following written: Anyone who comes to pray at my grave should first say 'I believe with a complete faith that Resurrection of the dead will transpire when it is the Will of G-d, blessed be He that this will happen.' The woman read that and it touched a chord. Suddenly, it became a reality to her that "one day I will get my son back." From that moment on, she began to live her life again because the hope that there will be Techiyas haMeisim consoled her.

Last Sunday, I had to fly to St. Louis for a wedding. I was sitting in the aisle seat with the seat next to me empty. The window seat was taken by an older woman with a box of tissues. She kept on blowing her nose. I was thinking to myself "I am going to catch a cold after this flight." The plane took off and I noticed that the woman was wiping her eyes also. I thought to myself, maybe she doesn't have a cold, she's crying!

The stewardess came down and sat in the middle seat and started talking with her, at which point the woman broke down and cried loudly. The stewardess tried to console her. Apparently Southwest Airlines was alerted that this woman had some kind of problem. The stewardess left. The woman continued to cry the whole time.

I said to her, "This is none of my business, but what is bothering you?" She told me, "I found out this morning that my daughter was killed in a car crash and I am on the way to her funeral. My only other child, my son, was killed in Iraq two months ago!" She was inconsolable. I asked her, "Is there anything I can do for you?" She said, "Just pray for me."

The knowledge of "From here there is a Biblical allusion to Techiyas HaMeisim" - the idea that one day we will again see the relatives whom we so dearly miss, is a very consoling thought. That is what rejuvenated the Belzer Chassidim who were Holocaust survivors and that is what consoled the woman at the grave site of Reb Aryeh Levine -- one day she will see her son again and she can therefore go on living her life.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas B'Shalach are provided below:

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