

PARSHAS BESHALACH: ACTION IS REQUIRED

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

Shortly after the Jews left Egypt, things began to deteriorate very rapidly. Paroh rallied the troops of Mitzrayim, who followed the B'nei Yisroel and cornered them at the edge of the Sea. Only the miraculous cloud of Hashem separated the Jews from the Egyptians. Out of fear and frustration, the Jews cried out to Moshe (Shemos 14:11), "Are there no graves in Egypt? Why did you take us out [of Egypt only] to have us killed in the desert"?

Faced with the sea at his back, a hostile army of Egyptians only a short distance away, and a terrified Klal Yisroel looking to him for guidance; Moshe Rabbeinu davened to Hashem for salvation. Surprisingly, Hashem responded by telling Moshe, "Mah titzak eilay... - Why are you crying out to Me? Instruct the Jews to continue traveling [into the sea]" (Shemos 14:15).

Rashi comments that Hashem told Moshe that this particular moment - when Klal Yisroel is in jeopardy - is not the time to engage in lengthy tefilos. Action is required at this time! Therefore, continued Hashem, command the B'nei Yisroel to enter the Yam Suf!

This exchange is quite difficult to understand. Wouldn't this be the most appropriate time for prayer? Shouldn't Moshe have davened to Hashem in this moment of crisis, more than any other time? What makes this difficulty more pronounced is the fact that Hashem did, in fact, answer the tefilos of Moshe and instructed him how to extricate himself from this crisis - by moving forward into the Yam Suf.

The Ohr Hachaim explains that while Moshe was davening on their behalf, the Heavenly Court was passing judgment on the B'nei Yisroel as to their worthiness of a miraculous salvation (see Rashi 14:19). At this point, says the Ohr Hachayim, tefilah ALONE was not sufficient. Surely, Moshe Rabbeinu was correct in turning to Hashem for guidance and salvation. However, at that critical moment, Klal Yisroel had to act in a manner that would show their bitachon in Hashem. Only then would they be worthy of the miracles that were about to transpire.

The Shem Mi'Shmuel offers a profound insight regarding the seemingly inexplicable 'U-turn' that the Jews made in the Midbar on the third day of their escape from Mitzrayim - as they charted a course that would lead them back to Egypt (Shemos 14:2). As Rashi explains, this reversal caused the Egyptians to believe that the Jews were lost in the swirling sands of the desert. This resulted in Paroh once again hardening his heart and pursuing the B'nei Yisroel to the Yam Suf.

The Shem Mi'Shmuel comments that there was a deeper reason for this turnabout. When children

learn to walk, parents lovingly holds their hands and support them as they take their first steps. Eventually, the parents must let go and allow the children to acquire the skill independently by encouraging them to walk without parental assistance.

At the time of yetzias mitzrayim, the B'nei Yisroel were collectively in the depths of the forty-ninth level of tumah (impurity), says the Shem MiShmuel. They were unworthy of redemption. Hashem had to 'hold their hands' and release them from slavery on the future merits of their commitment to a life of Torah and mitzvos. After receiving their gift of redemption, the Jews needed to turn back towards the Egyptians. They had to create their own Yetzias Mitzrayim, as free people - by taking the initiative and entering the Yam Suf.

Moshe Rabbeinu's sister internalized this important lesson as well. After Moshe and Klal Yisroel sang Az Yashir, Miriam led the women in singing shirah at the Yam Suf (Shemos 15:20). At first glance, there seems to be little added value in the song of Miriam - which appears to be a mere repetition of selected words of Moshe's song. Upon reflection, however, her song was far more than a second rendition of the Shirah. She gathered the women and inspired them to personalize the Az Yashir and make it their own song of praise to Hashem. Moshe gave them the gift of a person example of shevach to Hashem. However, even the nicest gifts often go unopened, or collect dust in closets. Miriam showed her appreciation of Moshe's shirah by immediately 'using it' - taking the words of Moshe and praising Hashem.

These are important messages to internalize during our teenage years - as we begin to take our own first steps toward adulthood. Our parents, rebbeim and moros provide us with the gifts of chinuch and education; with their values and a moral compass to guide us. However, even the most loving parents and educators need to let go after a while. The next steps on the road to living a meaningful and fulfilling Torah life are up to us - as we internalize these values and make them our very own.

Best wishes for a gutten Shabbos.

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