



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura

Take home Dvar Torah

Parshat Beshalach תשפ"ה

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Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

***Partners in Torah
has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.***

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

When our forefather Avraham was age 70, Hashem told him that his children would be slaves for 400 years in a foreign land. Hashem also promised him, *“But also the nation that they will serve, I will judge, and afterwards they (the Jewish people) will leave with great wealth.”* (Genesis 15:14)

(יד) וגם את הגוי אשר יעבדו דן אנכי ואחרי כן יצאו ברכש גדול

Just before Hashem was about to bring the last plague upon the Egyptians, He told Moshe to ask the Jewish people to *“Please ask the Egyptians for their gold and silver vessels before you leave.”* (Exodus 11:2):

(ב) דַּבֵּר נָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וְיִשְׁאַלּוּ אִישׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רֵעוּתָהּ כֶּלִי כֶסֶף וְכֶלִי זָהָב

2) **Please** speak in the ears of the people: Let each man request of his fellow and each woman from her fellow silver vessels and gold vessels.

The Sages wonder about the word “please” used here. Hashem is commanding them to ask for gold and silver vessels, why would He need to say *please*? Wouldn’t they naturally want to do it?

The Talmud explains that Hashem wanted them to take out with them as much gold and silver as possible. Hashem’s reasoning was that He didn’t want to be embarrassed in front of Avraham our Forefather, lest he say, “Hashem you kept your promise on the slavery part of the prediction, but as far as the promise about the money, they hardly left with anything!”

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin (d. 1966) asks on this, “The only reason that Hashem wanted to keep His promise was so as not to be embarrassed in front of Avraham our Forefather? What is the meaning of this quote from our Sages?”

Rav Sorotzkin explains that it wasn't until after the Holocaust that we can finally understand the true meaning of Hashem's "please."

After killing over six million of our brothers in the cruelest and most horrific manner, and stealing their every possession from them, the cursed Germans agreed to pay reparations to the Jewish victims of their atrocities. The prospective recipients were divided into two camps. Some said, "Should those who killed us, keep our wealth and money also? At least we should get back as much as possible!" While others said, "We do not want to take a single penny from them, lest they say that they compensated us for the horrors that they perpetrated upon us!"

It is easy to imagine that the Jews leaving Egypt shared those same emotions. Some said, "Let's take what we can as compensation for the years of our slavery!" while others said, "We do not want to take one penny from them, lest they say that they compensated us for throwing our babies in the river, killing them for Pharaoh to bathe in their blood, and enslaving us with barbaric work for so many years."

In deference to those opposed taking money from the Egyptians, Hashem did not mandate that they take their money; rather He asked politely, "Please, for the sake of the promise that I made to Avraham, take the gold and silver." The Jews granted Hashem's request, emptying Egypt of its wealth.

The verse tells us (Exodus 13:19):

(יט) וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ

19) And Moses took the bones of Yosef with him.

Yosef was buried in Egypt. Before his death, upon telling his children that they would be redeemed from Egypt, he made them promise to take his bones with them for burial in Israel. In connection to that, the Midrash Rabbah (20:19) says the following:

(י) **חכם לב יקח מצות**, שכל ישראל היו עסוקים בכסף וזהב ומשה היה עסוק בעצמות יוסף

The verse in Psalms says, “A wise heart will take mitzvot.” This refers to Moshe, because while the rest of the Jewish people were busy gathering gold and silver, Moshe was involved with Yosef’s bones [to bury them in Israel].

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky זצ"ל (1891-1986) asks the obvious question. The Jewish people were also engaged in a mitzvah! They were fulfilling Hashem’s request to empty Egypt of its wealth. Why, then, was Moshe lauded for taking Yosef’s bones any more than what the others were doing?

The answer to this question lies in a different Midrash (Midrash Rabbah Bereshit 87:8):

שמעון איש קטרון אמר בזכות עצמותיו של יוסף נקרע הים לישראל, הה"ד (תהלים קיד) הים ראה וינס בזכות ויעזוב בגדו בידה וינס

Shimon from Katron said, In the merit of Yosef’s bones, the Reed Sea split. The verse tells us that Yosef left his garment in the hand of Potiphar’s wife and **וינס** - *he fled*. Similarly, it says that “The (Reed) sea saw (Yosef’s bones) and **וינס** - *it fled* (split). The use of **וינס** - *fled*, in both places, connects the two events.

The idea is, that Potiphar’s wife in trying to force Yosef to sin with her, grabbed his cloak. To escape the temptation, Yosef left his garment in her hands and *fled* the scene. In the merit of his *fleeing* the scene, the sea, upon seeing Yosef’s bones, *fled* (split) for the Jewish people.

Rabbi Kamenetsky explains the connection. By leaving his garment in her hands, Yosef knew that he would suffer dire consequences. He realized that to cover up her embarrassment she would have to come up with an excuse for having his garment in her hands. Her only excuse

would be to allege rape, a claim that would land him in prison where he could possibly languish forever. Nevertheless, Yosef was prepared to accept the consequences of fleeing, endangering his future, not to commit a sin.

The merit of Yosef's self-sacrifice is what the Jewish people needed when they came to the Reed Sea. The Midrash tells us that when the Jewish people reached the Sea the angels claimed to Hashem, "Why should you split the sea for the Jews and drown the Egyptians? The Jews are also idol worshippers!"

Yosef's bones were the refutation to this claim; they proved that the Jewish people indeed are not the same at all; they are completely different from the Egyptians. Even though the Jews worshipped idols, they did so only superficially, not with their essence. On the contrary, the essence of every Jew is good and wants to do Hashem's will. They come from the great Patriarchs and Matriarchs who instilled within them deep belief and love of Hashem. A Jew is prepared to make great sacrifices to keep Hashem's commandments. Look at Yosef! Even though he realized that he could sit in prison for the rest of his life, he was ready to risk it not to sin.

The Midrash teaches us that if it were not for the bones of Yosef, the Jewish people would not have made it across the Reed Sea, all the wealth that they had collected in Egypt would have been worthless. That is why the Midrash praised Moshe for retrieving Yosef's bones instead of collecting money, since his mitzvah caused the others to be fulfilled.

The Talmud (Chullin 7a) relates the following story regarding Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair.

דרבי פנחס בן יאיר הוה קאזיל לפדיון שבויין. פגע ביה בגינאי נהרא. אמר ליה גינאי! חלוק לי מימך ואעבור בך. אמר ליה, אתה הולך לעשות רצון קונך ואני הולך

לעשות רצון קוני; אתה ספק עושה ספק אי אתה עושה אני ודאי עושה! אמר ליה,
אם אי אתה חולק גוזרני עליך שלא יעברו בך מים לעולם. חלק ליה.

Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was on his way to ransom a captive when he came upon the Ginai River which stood in his way. He said to the river, "Split your waters so that I may pass through!" The (angel of the) river responded, "You are going to fulfill the wish of your Maker, and I am fulfilling the wish of my Maker. You may or may not accomplish your goal, but I am surely doing what I am supposed to be doing!" Rabbi Pinchas said, "If you don't split for me, I will decree that your waters dry up forever." The river split.

This story presents a difficult question. The Reed Sea splitting for the Jewish people when they left Egypt constitutes an epochal event in Jewish history. The song that the Jews sang after passing through the sea has been incorporated into our daily prayers, and the Shabbat that we read about it is called "Shabbat Shira," the Shabbat of Song, to commemorate it. But Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair performed the same feat with no fanfare or fame. Not only that, he *commanded* the river to split and it complied, whereas the Jewish people, with Moshe Rabbeinu at their head, needed the merit of Yosef's bones to get through. How are we to understand this?

Our Sages explain that Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was a צדיק גמור - perfectly righteous person. He is the one who wrote the prescription for how to achieve רוח הקודש the *Divine spirit*. Hashem has placed the צדיקים - righteous people, in charge of the world, and, as such, Hashem grants their wishes. Based on the verse in Job (22:28):

וְתִגְזַר אֹמֶר וַיִּקָּם לָךְ

22) You would utter a decree and it would be done

the Talmud (Taanit 23a) derives – אתה גזרת מלמטה והקדוש ברוך הוא - מקיים מאמרך מלמעלה

You decreed down here, and Hashem fulfills your statement from above.

Hashem made the nature of the world to fulfill the wishes of the holy and righteous people. This is why it was no big deal to split the river for Rabbi Pinchas; as a perfectly righteous person, that was appropriate! But to split the sea for the Jewish people who were less than righteous at that point because they had worshipped idols like the Egyptians, posed a problem. Why should the sea split for them when they were no more deserving of the miracle than the Egyptians? Hashem did it anyway, in the merit Yosef's bones, because internally, we are very different.

This is why the Talmud (Pesachim 118a) teaches us:

אמר רב שיזבי משמיה דרבי אלעזר בן עזריה: קשין מזונותיו של אדם בקריעת ים סוף

Rav Shizvi quoted Rabbi Eliezer ben Azarya, "For a person to acquire his sustenance is as difficult as splitting the Reed Sea."

Rabbi Yochanan (Sanhedrin 21a) said the same thing about finding one's spouse: It is as difficult as splitting the Reed Sea. Since we are not perfectly righteous, we are not worthy of the miracle of earning a livelihood or finding our "*bashert*." Hashem in his great mercy, does these miracles for us even though we do not deserve them.

Why does the Talmud say that one's livelihood and finding a spouse constitute miracles like splitting the Reed Sea? Aren't those things just plain nature? After all, people are finding jobs and getting married all the time! Where's the miracle?

Our Sages teach us that, for a Jewish person, these are indeed miracles. We are different, and we acquired our difference as we passed through the Reed Sea. How so?

The Midrash Rabbah (Shemot 3:8) tells us that after the Jews went through the Reed Sea, they were called עברים - *Hebrews*.

למה קורא אותם עברים? על שום שעברו ים.

*Why were they called עברים - Hebrews? Because they - **passed through a sea.** עברו ים.*

What was so significant about this event that the Jewish people were named for it?

For something to exist in this world, it must have a suitable place to exist. Fruit trees and vegetables do not grow in a desert, only cacti do. Similarly, fish cannot live on dry land and humans cannot survive in the middle of a sea. Yet, when the Jewish people left Egypt, they walked through a sea on dry land. They were surrounded with water, but they were able to live in the midst of the water. Contrary to nature, the sea had become a suitable place for the Jewish people to live. Hashem made the sea dry land for His people.

The reason that this event became our name is because this event defines us as a people – this is who we are. The Jewish nation is a people who are not subject to the laws of nature and can survive in the middle of a sea. Since passing through the Reed Sea, we are עברים, because our existence, and everything about it is defies nature. The way that Hashem deals with us is not natural, it is supernatural. So, while gentiles get jobs and get married with no problem at all- that is life as usual for them; for the Jewish people, who have a special relationship with Hashem and receive everything directly from Him, such events are Hashem's direct acts - hidden miracles.

In the story of Jonah (Yonah), when the raging tempest threatened to sink the ship, Yonah went down to the hold of the boat and fell asleep. The ship's captain found Yonah sleeping and said to him, "How can you sleep at a time like this!? Get up and call to your G-d, maybe he will have mercy on us!" When nothing helped, they cast a lot to determine whose fault it was, and the lot fell out on Yonah. They asked him, "Where do you come from, and of what people are you?" Yonah answered, "I am an עברי." Why did he use specifically that word to describe himself at this time? He was explaining, "You know how I can fall asleep in the middle of a tempest? I am from the people who walked through the Reed Sea! I am an עברי! My people and I can survive in the middle of a sea. We've been through this before, and it doesn't scare me. Our whole existence is in the middle of a raging sea, that's our nature!"

This image of the Jewish people existing in the middle of a sea is an apt description of our situation in the world today, and for how things always were for the Jewish people. There is a sea raging about us trying to drown us, but, miraculously, we survive. This is because we are a supernatural people, עברים, who are not subject to nature's rules. By the regular laws of nature, the Jewish people, without a homeland or common language for over two thousand years, and after numerous excessive attempts to annihilate it, should not exist.

In the words of our Sages, "One small sheep in the midst of seventy hungry, salivating wolves, each vying to devour it; does it stand a chance to survive? If it has a powerful shepherd, keeping the wolves at bay, absolutely!"

The following is an essay entitled "Concerning the Jews" written by Mark Twain for Harper's Magazine in March 1898.

About Jews

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extremely out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contribution to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are also very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendour, then faded to dreamstuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind.

All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. *What is the secret of his immortality?*

The secret is that we are עבריים!

This concept is true for individuals as well as the whole nation. To the degree that Hashem is a reality to us, that is the degree to which we are above the rules of regular nature, and are elevated to the special

nature of the Jewish people. This is why the perfectly righteous people, like Rabbi Pinchas and many others like him, are able to override the regular rules of nature. We the עברים are super- natural!