

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Beshalah Part I

### 1. Upon Leaving Egypt

Our *parasha's* opening words, וַיְהִי בְשַׁלַּח פְּרַעֲהָ אֶת הָעָם ("And when Pharaoh sent forth the people" [Exod. 13:17]), speak of Israel's leaving Egypt in terms of Pharaoh's sending them forth. This phraseology constitutes a subordinate "when" clause that marks a point in time and introduces the principal clause\* that deals with G-d's manner of leading the nation forth. Why did the Torah not begin this new phase of national life with a locution that is more consistent with the larger picture and with the narrative that follows, such as, "When G-d took Israel out of Egypt," or merely, "When Israel departed from Egypt"?

It appears likely that these opening words were intended to highlight the fact that Pharaoh finally acceded to G-d's request of שְׁלַח אֶת עַמִּי ("Send forth My people" [Exod. 5:1]), reversing his resounding pronouncement of refusal, לֹא אֶשְׁלַח ("I shall not send" [v. 2]). It also points out the precise fulfillment of the guarantee G-d gave Moses at the burning bush וְאַחֲרָיִךְ כֵּן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם ("And afterwards he will send you" [3:20]). In the account of the actual sending the Israelites forth, the ש-ל-ה stem had only appeared in conjunction with the Egyptian populace – וַתִּחְזַק מִצְרַיִם עַל הָעָם לְמַהֵר ("And Egypt pressed the people, hurrying to send them forth" [12:33]), not with Pharaoh. Thus, an aspect of the previous narrative is here given "literary closure" (see *Exod. Rab.* 20:3).

The opening verse continues with וְלֹא נָהַם אֱלֹקִים דְּרַךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים ("G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines"). The verse explains that because via that route their destination was close the Israelites would soon confront war, and G-d was concerned that in that circumstance they might have a change of heart and return to Egypt. Juxtaposing וַיְהִי בְשַׁלַּח פְּרַעֲהָ with וְלֹא נָהַם אֱלֹקִים suggests that when Pharaoh finally yielded to G-d's demand, a chapter in

Israel's history was concluded and another chapter began under a very different mode of divine governance. It is one thing for G-d to overpower and manipulate the heart of Pharaoh (who, after all, was a side player in His plans for the Israelites) in order to achieve His ends for His people. But He does not want to so manipulate the Israelites, the focus of his present purpose; He does not want to remove their free will and thereby force them to proceed to Canaan. G-d will not now compel His people to go forth prematurely; He will nurture and educate them, prompting them to develop into the nation He would like them to become. He will respect the condition of free will and lead them in a manner accommodating their immaturity.

G-d's leading Israel via the indirect route to Canaan is not a surprise to Moses or to the reader. Moses had been informed at the burning bush that upon leaving Egypt the Israelites would serve G-d "on this mountain" (3:12). He was then at Horeb, located in the general direction of Midian, and not in northern Egypt, near "the route to the land of the Philistines." God had decided from early on that the Israelites should not proceed to the promised land through the closest route, one that would have taken a matter of days. Taking the long route led to the lawgiving occurring in the wilderness.

### 2. The Pursuit

What were Pharaoh and the Egyptians thinking after the devastating tenth plague when they assented to Moses' request? Moses had never requested permission for the Israelites to go beyond a three-day distance to serve Hashem, but he also never mentioned that they would return. It goes without saying that previously free people, who had been invited to dwell in the land and been unjustly enslaved against their will, when away on leave have neither a moral nor legal obligation to return to slavery. This is

especially the case with people who had been treated with inhumane harshness.

When Pharaoh gave permission he said כְּדַבַּרְכֶם and כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם (“as you have spoken” [12:31-32]), meaning that they may go – men, women and children, with all their cattle – but presumably only on the three-day-distance journey. Previously, he had intimated to Moses that he realized that in such an eventuality they would not return. When he first agreed – after the fourth plague – that they may go, he specified that they “not go far” (8:24). Subsequently, he stated that their request was clearly for (what to him was) a nefarious purpose (10:10). This implies that he sensed they would not return.

The Egyptians who pressed the Israelites to leave seem to have done so without mentioning any conditions, “hurriedly sending them out, for they said we will all be dead” (12:33). Although we only know of it from Moses’ assertion in the predictive mode, it may be assumed that Pharaoh’s ministers came to Moses, bowed, and requested, “Leave, you and all the people that follow you” (11:8). As the psalmist put it: “Egypt was happy when they left” (Ps. 105:38). So while the populace was urging the Israelites to depart at once and his ministers were begging Moses to leave, Pharaoh’s granting permission while insisting on the point, stating “as you have spoken,” was only a formality. It constitutes a farcical and pathetic scene of a monarch who in his haughtiness “just doesn’t get it.” He could not publicly admit that Moses’ awaiting his permission at this juncture was only to demonstrate that the mightiest of human kings must yield to G-d’s request. This is part of the mockery G-d perpetrated in Egypt (Exod. 10:2).

Shortly after the Israelite’s departure, G-d directed them to make a “detour” to lead Pharaoh to believe they were hopelessly lost in the desert. This provided the Egyptians a basis to rethink their position and pursue the Israelites to bring them back. G-d was preparing the way for another major manifestation of His glory.

When the information that Israel was not returning – and apparently hopelessly lost in the desert – reached the king, he and his ministers had a “change of heart” and said, “What did we do that we sent Israel out from serving us?” (14:5). For Pharaoh, granting permission

for the journey turned out to be equivalent to sending the nation out of slavery; for his ministers, it seems natural to take their question to mean that when they pressed the Israelites to leave it was understood to be permanent. Regardless, king and ministers regretted what they did and mobilized a mighty force to bring the Israelites back. The stage was set for the miracle at the sea and for Egypt to finally recognize *Ani Hashem*.

Despite all that G-d had already done for them, when Israel saw the mighty Egyptian military in pursuit they were very fearful and complained bitterly to Moses, “What did you do to us to take us out of Egypt?” (14:11-12). Ibn Ezra asks, Why did they not think about fighting for themselves and their children? He answers: “The Egyptians were Israel’s masters and this generation was trained from its youth to endure the yoke of slavery. Possessed of a subdued disposition, they could not now battle with their masters. Also, they were not learned in war...they would also not have been able to battle the Canaanites at that time, until a new generation arose that did not know slavery and acquired a lofty spirit.”

We will discuss the Song at the Sea in our next study.

### 3. Marah

Immediately following the sea crossing we are informed וַיַּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם סוּף (“Moses moved Israel from the Sea of Reeds” [Exod. 15:22]). The causative verb וַיַּסַּע seems to indicate that Moses had to prod the Israelites to leave the Sea of Reeds to continue on their journey, which entailed entering the desert, a fearful prospect to be sure. Despite having recently witnessed G-d’s great intervention on their behalf, the Israelites were reluctant to abandon a comfortable location in a well-watered area, free from slavery and from pursuit, and enter a dangerous expanse. Thus, at the beginning of the national enterprise there is tension between G-d’s exalted plans for the nation and its mundane, earthly orientation.

Sure enough, they travel three days without finding water. When they finally found water it was bitter and undrinkable (the location was called Marah, “bitter”). The people murmur against Moses, who cries out to Hashem, who shows Moses a tree. Moses casts [the tree or a portion thereof] into the water and the water

sweetens. Then and there G-d officially charged the nation for the first time with the basic principles of responsibility and accountability: וַיִּשֶׂם לָהֶם לְיוֹם הַחֵק וּמִשְׁפָּט (וַיִּשֶׂם נִסֵּיהָ), (“There He set for it [the nation] statute and ordinance and there He tested it” [15:25]). He proclaimed that if the nation is fully obedient to the will of Hashem its G-d “all the maladies that I brought upon the Egyptians I will not bring upon you, for I, Hashem, am your healer” (v. 26).

When the Israelites departed from the Sea of Reeds to enter the desert, like all prudent travelers, they undoubtedly took a large supply of water with them. At Marah the text does not state that they were thirsty (as it does at a subsequent station, Rephidim [Exod. 17:3]), but that they were complaining, “What shall we drink?” Perhaps they desired a source of water to drink from rather than consume their limited reserves. In any event, the Israelites are being taught that they must learn to trust that G-d will provide for their needs in a timely fashion. The manna passage that follows shortly expands on this concept.

The Marah episode, preparatory to revelation and the lawgiving that follow in due course, appears intended to achieve a preliminary status of commitment to G-d’s laws on the part of the Israelites. *Hoq umishpat* – which translates “statute and ordinance,” general terms, each in the singular – may possibly be a reference to the *huqim umishpatim* categories of law that will be attached to revelation (see Deut. 5:28; 6:1; etc.). This interaction with G-d provided Israel a mini-lawgiving that contained certain basics as an introduction to the upcoming Decalogue and the major law compendium attached to it.

The Talmud (*b. Sanh. 56b*) cites a *baraita* that views the Marah passage in such a manner. It states (to some degree in an aggadic vein) that ten laws were given to Israel at Marah. These were the seven *misvot* of *bene Noah*\*\* – the great foundational code governing the essentials of human behavior – plus *dinim* (civil law, above and beyond what the laws of *bene Noah* require in that area), Shabbat, and honoring father and mother.\*\*\* Conceptually, *hoq* is very appropriately applied to Shabbat, a ritual law that defines man’s relationship with G-d, which is central to the upcoming episode of the manna and prominent in the Decalogue. *Mishpat* (justice), may readily be seen as referring to *dinim*, laws regulating interaction between

man and man, the theme of the later Decalogue commandments.

Rabbi S. D. Sassoon thought that the words *hoq umishpat* possess much broader connotations than merely a statute and an ordinance; rather, he thought, *hoq umishpat* referred to the covenant itself. *Hoq* is widely attested as parallel to *berit* (covenant), apparently being somewhat of a synonym for it. Concerning the earth’s defilement for Israel’s violation of the moral code, speaking in large categories, Isaiah states: “For they transgressed the teachings, abrogated *hoq*, annulled the ancient covenant” (Isa. 24:5). In reference to the eternal laws of nature, G-d states: “If My covenant was not with day and night, if the *huqot* (plural of *hoq*) of heaven and earth I did not appoint...” (Jer. 33:25). In regard to G-d’s scolding of the wicked, He states: “What are you doing, relating My *huqim* (statutes) and mentioning My covenant upon your mouth?” (Ps. 50:16). “He established it unto Jacob as *hoq*, to Israel as an eternal covenant” (Ps. 105:10).

*Mishpat* also takes on broad meaning. “For it is a *hoq* for Israel, *mishpat* for the G-d of Jacob” (Ps. 81:5). These usages demonstrate that *hoq* and *mishpat* refer to the fundamental principle central to the relationship between G-d and Israel (see *Natan Hokhmah Lishlomo*, Heb., pp. 153-5).

Upon Hashem’s benefaction on behalf of Israel – His sweetening the water – He charged the nation with the foundation of the covenant, an increased degree of commitment to their relationship with Him. The attached verse constitutes a brief statement of basic covenant procedure (see our study *The G-d-Israel Covenant: On Meaning and Format*). In it G-d requests a full measure of loyalty to His will and provides a promise of reward for compliance and a hint of punishment for betrayal. Such an explanation is supported by a passage in the Book of Joshua.

When וַיַּכְרֵת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּרִית לְעָם (“Joshua made a covenant with the people” [Josh. 24:25]), the conclusion of the verse states: וַיִּשֶׂם לָהֶם לְיוֹם הַחֵק וּמִשְׁפָּט בְּשֵׁכֶם (“He established it as *hoq umishpat* in Shechem”). He defined the enactment with the identical locution that appears in our Exodus passage. In addition, the Joshua passage relates to ours in standard chiasmic fashion. In the verse that precedes the contracting of the covenant,

the people say to Joshua וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָעָם... אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ נַעֲבֹד וְנִשְׁמָע (‘‘The people said... we will serve Hashem our G-d and hearken to His voice’’ [v. 24]), a statement that corresponds with Moses’ proclamation that follows the *hoq umishpat* of our passage. The last clause of the people’s statement to Joshua corresponds with the first clause of our passage’s proclamation, which begins by calling for וַיֹּאמֶר אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָע לְקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ. The first part of the people’s statement to Joshua is a digest of the later clauses of Moses’ proclamation. Joshua next engages in what clearly are covenant-concluding procedures, namely, writing down the agreement and designating a large stone as witness.

#### 4. Elim and the Wilderness of Sin

After Marah the Israelites came to Elim where there were ‘‘twelve water fountains and seventy palm trees and they encamped there by the water’’ (Exod. 15:27). In accordance with ancient Near Eastern symbolism that considered the numbers seven and twelve as especially prominent, these water fountains and date trees undoubtedly possess figurative meaning in our context. This must be viewed in the light of the new symbolism established in the Torah for the numbers thirteen and eight, which symbolize achievements associated with the commitment to one G-d and acceptance of the covenant, respectively (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon.*)

Accordingly, the numbers twelve and seventy very likely allude to the distinguished, but limited, level of spiritual achievement attained by the Israelites before the Mount Sinai experience. This is immediately following Marah, consistent with the notion of Marah being a preliminary stage to the Sinai covenant. (The wilderness of Sinai, where Mount Sinai is located, is appropriately the eighth station of Israel’s travels upon exiting Egypt, as recounted in Exodus 13-19: Succoth, Etham, Pi-hahiroth, Marah, Elim, the wilderness of Sin, Rephidim, and the wilderness of Sinai.)

The following verse speaks of Israel’s arrival at ‘‘the wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month from leaving Egypt’’ (Exod. 16:1), exactly one month after the Exodus. The people murmur against Moses and Aaron

because of the shortage of food. Instead of celebrating the one-month anniversary of the Exodus, they turn to complaining. They express nostalgia for Egypt, where ‘‘we sat by pots of meat and ate bread to fullness’’ (16:3). They express the feeling that they are doomed to die in the wilderness.

It should be recalled that when the Israelites left Egypt it was ‘‘along with sheep and cattle, a very heavy amount of livestock’’ (12:38). Although the Israelites had essentially been transformed into slaves, they maintained their possessions. As their arrival at the wilderness of Sin was only one month following the Exodus, the present situation was not one of life and death. The people, however, placed a higher priority on the preservation of their livestock than on their trust in G-d’s promises.

#### 5. Trials and Tribulations

Although the Israelites had believed in Hashem and in Moses his servant, as stated at the sea crossing (14:31), their commitment was not maintained through the arduous vicissitudes that arise in life. Complaints and trials were common. *Parashat Beshalah* contains six of the ten instances to which the Mishnah (*m. Abot* 5:4) makes reference (according to the Rambam’s enumeration) wherein Israel ‘‘challenged’’ G-d during the wilderness period.

1. The complaint at the Sea of Reeds, before the sea splitting (Exod. 14:11- 12)
2. The complaint for water at Marah (15:24)
3. The complaint for food, followed by the quail and manna (16:2)
4. Some individuals retaining manna until morning (16:20)
5. Some individuals going out to gather manna on Shabbat (16:27)
6. The complaint for water at Rephidim (17:2-3).

All this happens between the Sea of Reeds and the arrival at Sinai – a period beginning about one week after leaving Egypt and extending about six weeks, as described in the narrative. Nevertheless, with great forbearance, G-d proceeds with His plans for revelation. Although disappointed with Israel’s failings, He seems to have viewed them as frailties that to some extent are part of the human condition; they were indications of the Israelites’ great need for

an educative process, but not a reason to postpone revelation. On the contrary, the inability of the Israelites to abide by the preliminary stage of the lawgiving at Marah supports the need for a more inspirational and comprehensive experience of revelation and law that will ultimately discipline them more fully.

Of course, even with the Sinai revelation and lawgiving and establishment of the covenant it is understood that the vision of the Torah is lofty and sublime and will not totally remake the character of the people overnight. Many would not abandon their habits and previous practices without protracted effort. A national transformation requires G-d to extend His extraordinary patience and perseverance over the long term. But the Israelites' transgression with the golden calf is a different matter altogether from the violations that preceded Sinai; it was a breach of the covenant contracted at Sinai. G-d considered annihilating everyone except for Moses and starting a new nation with him (32:10). The prophetic message in our passages seems to be providing a telescopic view of the macrocosmic reality at work in the subsequent centuries of Israel's history.

## 6. The Battle with Amalek

The concluding passage in our *parasha* is the story of the coming of Amalek to battle against Israel (17:8-16). Moses appointed Joshua to lead the military campaign. With the rod of G-d in his hand, Moses, together with Aaron and Hur, ascended to the hilltop. When Moses held his hand aloft, Israel prevailed; when he let it down, Amalek prevailed. Moses' hands became heavy; Aaron and Hur placed a stone for him to sit on and supported his uplifted hands, which remained faithful until the sun set.

The literal explanations proffered here are implausible. When Moses holds the rod of G-d high, perhaps with a flag or symbol attached to it, the Israelite soldiers see it, are encouraged and succeed; when his hand is down they are deflated and fail. Or when he raises his hand he focuses G-d's supernatural intervention in Israel's favor. Or when he raises his hand and inclines the rod of G-d upon the Amalekites, he brings plagues upon them.

The Mishnah sages recognized that a literal reading of this passage was problematic and ask rhetorically: "Is it possible that Moses' hands win or lose the war?" (*m. Rosh. Hash. 3:8*). Of course not! This incisive question brushes aside all literal explanations. The sages cannot believe that military ups and downs are the result of the position of Moses' hands or that the status of his hands somehow reflects military ups and downs. The Mishnah acknowledges that the Torah is to be read with rationality and common sense. Whenever clearly indicated that a passage is not literal it must be so acknowledged.

In this case the Mishnah itself provides an allegorical interpretation. Moses' lifting his hand represents the Israelites turning their hearts toward their father in Heaven, and then they triumph; when they do not do so, they fail.

This is not to say that in the course of the particular battle with Amalek, at some moments the Israelite soldiers turned their hearts heavenward and prevailed, and at some moments turned their hearts away and failed. Rather, it should be recognized that this passage describes the first military battle Israel engaged in. The verses connecting Moses' hands with victory or defeat refer to a general spiritual truth applicable at all times and in all battles. The Mishnah further informs us that the case of the copper serpent (Num. 21:9), in which all who were bitten by the serpent and looked at the copper replica were healed, should similarly be understood in such allegorical fashion.

The Mishnah teaches that the Torah's primary intention cannot always be discerned from the literal translation of the words (see our study *On Interpreting Midrash*).

## Endnotes

\* The verse is complex and its syntactical parsing is in dispute. The principal clause may be the assertion immediately following the statement of when Pharaoh sent them out, that G-d did not lead the nation via the most direct route. Alternatively, the latter statement, as well as the following ones explaining His reason for doing so, may also be subordinate to the next verse's announcement that He turned the nation toward the wilderness.

\*\* The details are still a matter of discussion but the standard enumeration comprises belief in G-d; prohibition of blasphemy, murder, adultery (as well as incest) and stealing; a requirement to have a legal justice system to regulate laws between man and man; and the prohibition of eating a limb shorn from a live animal (exemplifying cruelty to a living creature).

\*\*\* Also in aggadic fashion, Shabbat and honoring father and mother are derived from the fact that in the Deuteronomy text of the Decalogue, the phrase כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ (“as Hashem your G-d had [previously] commanded you”) is mentioned only with those two commandments. Since that version recited by Moses is understood to reflect verbatim what was said in the original Decalogue proclamation, it is interpreted to

mean that those two laws had been commanded before the Decalogue, presumably at Marah. In regard to Shabbat, it should be noted that in the manna narrative that follows shortly there is a statement that may imply that the law of Shabbat had already been given to Israel. When the people gathered their manna on Friday it turned out to be a double portion and the chieftains asked Moses about it. He answered, “This is that which Hashem has spoken, Shabbaton, tomorrow is the holy Shabbat for Hashem” (Exod. 16:23). There is no explicit record of Hashem having previously transmitted the law of Shabbat so some associate Moses’ announcement with the lawgiving at Marah.

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