

PARASHAT B'SHALACH



מאזני צדק ומשפט The Scales of Law and Justice

■ G-d's Greatness: Measure for Measure

The spirit of the Song of the Sea accompanies us in our daily Morning Prayers, arousing each day anew the memory of our nation's incredible salvation at the Red Sea. The climax of this miracle, of course, was the mass drowning of our long-time bitter tormentors, with all their horses and chariots – the equivalent of today's tanks and armor. As the Song begins:

אֲשִׁירָה לַה' כִּי גָאָה גָאָה סוּס וְרֹכְבּוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם.

*I will sing to G-d for He is exalted and uplifted;
horse and its rider He has heaved into the sea.* (Sh'mot 15,1)

That this key verse is the Song's central axis is evident from the song of Miriam the Prophetess, Moshe Rabbeinu's sister. She and the women of Israel chose precisely this verse to express their sublime feelings at the miracles G-d had wrought for them:

וַתַּעַן לָהֶם מִרְיָם: שִׁירוּ לַה' כִּי גָאָה גָאָה סוּס וְרֹכְבּוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם.

*Miriam called out to them: "Sing to the Lord,
for He is exalted and uplifted;
horses and their riders He cast into the sea."* (verse 21)

The question may be asked: Is it for this that we sing that G-d, the King of the Universe, "*is exalted and uplifted*"? He could sow destruction throughout the entire world in an instant, and can bring about earthquakes on land or under water that can claim tens and hundreds of thousands of victims at once. Why is He so extolled for having overcome a few "*horses and riders*"?

The answer is provided by Yitro, father-in-law of Moshe. During his solidarity visit with Moshe and the People of Israel, after hearing all the stories of Hashem's power and miracles over the Egyptians, Yitro marvels: *"Now I know that G-d is greater than all other gods – for in the very thing that they plotted, [He came] upon them."* (18,11)

Yitro emphasizes that what brought him to the realization of G-d's greatness was not His tremendous power, but the justness of His deeds. As we read in Haazinu: *"The deeds of the [Mighty] Rock are perfect, for all His ways are just"* (D'varim 32,4). The watery punishment meted out to Pharaoh and his men corresponded exactly to the horrendous Egyptian crime of drowning the Jewish baby boys in the river. The absolute Divine Justice turned precisely back upon the Egyptian king like a boomerang when his *"horses and their riders"* were hurled into the swirling waters.

The ultimate King of Justice informed Pharaoh from the very beginning that he could expect to be punished *midah k'negged midah*, measure for measure. When Moshe returned to Egypt from Midyan, Hashem told him to tell Pharaoh that his punishment will precisely fit his crime:

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר ה' בְּנִי בְכֹרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
... וְתַמְאֵן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי הֹרֵג אֶת בְּנֵי בְּכוֹרֶיךָ.

Tell Pharaoh that G-d said, "Israel is My firstborn son... if you refuse to send him out, I will slay your firstborn son." (Sh'mot 4,22-23)

In the future, Israel will be required to perpetuate this path of true justice by redeeming their firstborns and sacrificing those of pure animals. This will express their thankfulness and appreciation of the great salvation G-d wrought for them: *"When Pharaoh refused to send us out, G-d killed all the firstborns of Egypt... Therefore, I offer up to G-d all the firstborn males, and all my firstborn sons I will redeem."* (13,15)

■ He Weighed Them Down

The purpose of the plagues in Egypt, clearly, was to rescue the Israelites from bondage, turn them into a full-fledged nation, and bring them to Eretz Yisrael. But there was also another goal, no less important: Just as Israel must come to know Hashem and His power and providence, Egypt, too, must know Who is G-d:

וַיֵּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּהַכְבִּדִי בַפְרִיעָה בְרִכְבּוֹ וּבַפָּרָשָׁיו.

The Egyptians will know that I am G-d, when I come down heavily upon Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen. (14,18)

Bnei Yisrael are to come to this realization via their salvation, while the Egyptians begin to truly know G-d through their punishment. Just as they begin sinking in the mud, they say: *“I will run away from Israel, for G-d fights for them against Egypt”* (verse 25) – but their realization came too late to save them.

Why is it that they were finally able to recognize G-d at the Red Sea, while during the Plague of Lice, for instance, when the wizards grasped the extent of G-d's strength, Pharaoh actually hardened his heart even more? As we read there: *“The sorcerers said to Pharaoh: ‘It is the finger of G-d.’ Pharaoh hardened his heart and did not hearken to them..”* (8,15)

When the lice hit Egypt, Pharaoh thought it was some “other god” harassing him, and not Hashem. His wizards had not specified exactly which “god” they felt was responsible; they merely said, *“It is the finger of Elokim.”* At the Red Sea, however, the Egyptians recognized that it was specifically the G-d of Israel, as we saw above in verse 25, when the Divine Name of Being (*Havayah*) was used. What brought them to this realization?

The answer is: They saw what happened to the wheels of their chariots. That is, as they tried to make their way across the mud that the Red Sea had become, they saw that the axis of their wheels had been burnt, causing the wheels to fall apart, all but incapacitating the vehicles:

...וַיִּהְיֶה אֵת מַחְנֵה מִצְרַיִם. וַיִּסַּר אֶת אַפְּן מִרְכַּבְתָּיו וַיִּנְהַגְהוּ בְּכַבְדָּת...

G-d threw the Egyptian camp into confusion; He removed the wheels of their chariots, and He led them with heaviness. (14,24-25)

Why would the Master of the Universe involve Himself with chariot wheels? The answer, of course, is that this was the epitome of His Divine justice, *midah k'negged midah*, measure for measure. Pharaoh had repeatedly hardened his heart and made it heavy against the Israelites, and had even ordered his slave-drivers to harden the Jews' work: *“Let the labor lay heavy upon the men”* (5,9). Pharaoh would therefore now be reminded of this: G-d *“led them with heaviness”* in the Red Sea, weighing them down and making their trek in pursuit of the freedom-seeking Jews impossibly difficult. The Egyptians would certainly get the message: *“The Egyptians will know that I am G-d, when I come down heavily upon Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.”* (14,18)

G-d's honor – *kavod*, from the same Hebrew root as the word “heavy,” *ka-ved* – increases when He causes the Egyptians to travel “heavily,” and is magnified with the hurling of the chariots into the sea. This is the manifestation of *midah k'negged midah*.

■ Outcry in Egypt

In the Torah's description of the Plague of the Firstborns, there is special emphasis on “crying out.” When Hashem describes to Moshe the results of the plague, He says:

וְהִיְתָה צְעָקָה גְדֹלָה בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר כָּמְהוּ לֹא נִהְיְתָה
וְכָמְהוּ לֹא תִסָּף.

*There will be a great cry in Mitzrayim,
the likes of which never were, nor will be again.* (11,6)

This prophecy was fulfilled in its entirety: “*There was a great cry in Mitzrayim, for there was no house in which there was no dead*” (12,30). Why is this outcry emphasized so strongly in the Torah's account? It is because it is reminiscent of another outcry that echoed before the Creator of the World, the King of Justice: the terrible sobbing of the People of Israel as they suffered through their torturous slavery in Egypt:

...וַיֶּאֱנְחוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ
וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעֲתָם אֶל הָאֱ-לֹהִים מִן הָעֲבֹדָה.

*The Children of Israel gasped from the hard work, and they cried
out, and their plea rose up to G-d from the work.* (2,23)

The cries of Bnei Yisrael remained in the air, until they were offset by the outcry of the Egyptians at the deaths of their firstborns.

The ethical significance of this punishment can also be noted from another angle: If the purpose of the plagues was only to free the Israelite slaves as quickly as possible, Hashem could easily have scared the Egyptians into releasing them via the Plague of the Firstborns, with no need for the first nine plagues. The last plague alone would have been enough, as we read: “*The Egyptians [hastened] to send them out of the land, for they said, ‘We will all die.’*” (12,33)

Yet G-d did not do this. He began by turning the Nile waters into blood, as if to tell Pharaoh: “The water you have been drinking is the blood of the myriads of Jewish babies you drowned in this river” – measure for measure! Then followed the other plagues, climaxing with the killing of all

the firstborns, giving this message: “You hurt my eldest son Yisrael, and you will pay with the death of your eldests.” The message is: There is a Divine Judge, and He pays back precisely in kind!

■ The Response to Deception

Throughout the long, drawn-out negotiations between Moshe and Pharaoh, Moshe keeps repeating one demand: *“Let My people go and they will worship Me.”* At one point, he mentions a specific number of days, determined by Hashem, that would be required for this worship: *“We will walk three days in the desert, and we will offer sacrifices to Hashem our G-d.”* (5,3)

Why did Hashem initiate such a deception? It is patently obvious that His plan was for Israel to quit Egypt forever, not three days! Their destination was nothing less than the inheritance of the Land of Israel, in fulfillment of Hashem’s promise to the Patriarchs - as Hashem had clearly told Moshe earlier:

וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יָדֵי לְתֵת אֶתָּהּ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק
וְלְיַעֲקֹב וְנָתַתִּי אֶתָּהּ לְכֶם מִוְרֶשֶׁה אֲנִי ה'.

*I will bring you to the Land that I have raised My hand
to give it to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov,
and I will give it to you as an inheritance; I am G-d.* (6,8)

Why, then, is Hashem playing this “three days” game? Why did He not send Moshe to proudly demand total and absolute freedom?

Furthermore: G-d tells the Jews to “borrow” utensils of silver and gold and clothing from the Egyptians, as if they were planning to return after their “holiday weekend” in the desert. The Egyptians were happy to lend them their property, thinking that this “loan” would bring them blessing. Does such deception jibe with the Torah’s laws of justice and truth?

The answer to these questions lies in the opening story of the Book of Sh’mot. When the new Pharaoh wished to suppress the Hebrews, he said, הִבֵּה נְתַחְכְּמָה לוֹ, *“Let us outsmart them”* (1,10). From the very beginning, then, Pharaoh’s strategy in dealing with Bnei Yisrael is one of double-talk and deception – and Hashem’s measure-for-measure punishment repays him exactly in kind. This is so that the Egyptian king should know clearly that it was G-d’s hand doling out, with justice and righteousness, the consequences of his stubborn wickedness, and not just “fate” or “coincidence.” As King David writes:

עַם חָסִיד תִּתְחַסֵּד עִם גֹּבֵר תָּמִים תִּתְמָם.
עַם נָבֵר תִּתְבָּרַר וְעִם עֲקֹשׁ תִּתְפַּתֵּל.

*With one who is kind, act kindly; with a sincere man,
act sincerely. With a pure one, act purely,
but with one who is crooked, deal crookedly.* (Psalms 18,26-27)

We read of another manifestation of tricky Divine strategy immediately after the actual departure from Egypt. G-d tells Moshe to have Israel backtrack: *“Have them return and camp before Pi HaHirot ... and Pharaoh will say they are lost and entangled in the land... and I will strengthen his heart and he will chase them...”* (14,2-4)

This is simply a reflection of Pharaoh’s zig-zag behavior towards Israel, in which he led Moshe astray time after time by promising him to release the Israelites and then changing his mind. For instance, after the plague of *arov* (Wild Beasts), Pharaoh told Moshe, *“I will send you out,”* adding, *“just pray for me.”* Moshe agreed, but warned him not to engage in further deception *“by not releasing the nation to offer sacrifices to G-d.”* In the end, Pharaoh does exactly that, and *“did not send the people out.”* (Sh’mot 8,24-28)

■ Yitro’s Strong Point

Moshe’s father-in-law is revealed in the Torah as one who shows appreciation for kindness and returns the favor in kind. Even when he was still an idol worshiper, Yitro taught his daughters to show kindness to Moshe for rescuing them. Gratefulness and appreciation are fundamentals in a just society, and this was the point of purity that connected Yitro to Moshe and the People of Israel.

Yitro’s daughters returned home one day and reported that an Egyptian had saved them *“from the shepherds, and also brought forth water for us and gave the flock to drink.”* Yitro immediately asked them: *“So where is he? Why have you left the man? Invite him in [to] eat bread.”* (Sh’mot 2,19-20)

The positive results of Moshe’s act of kindness to Yitro’s daughters did not end there. It was precisely one of these daughters, Tzipora, who married Moshe and later saved his life by quickly performing a *brit milah* on their son on their way down to Egypt (Sh’mot 4,24-26). Her act of saving him was also a “favor for a favor,” a form of repayment of Moshe for having saved her from the wicked shepherds.

■ Measure for Measure

Now that we have seen how Divine Justice applies to the Egyptian sinners, let us clarify how it works to reward Israel's good deeds. When Yocheved and Miriam, also known as Shifra and Puah, disregarded Pharaoh's orders to kill the new-born Jewish males, Hashem rewarded them and "*made them houses*" (1,21). What type of houses were these, and why was this their reward?

The answer, once again, is "measure for measure." They saved countless babies and granted them life, leading to the strengthening and building of many homes in Israel – and in this merit, Hashem "*made them houses,*" i.e., "families." In just reward for having enabled the building of other Jewish families, Yocheved and Miriam established great and illustrious Jewish families in Israel: the priests and Levites of the Tribe of Levi, and the princes and kings of the Tribe of Judah, respectively.

This is also the story of the great wealth that G-d promised Israel back at the *Brit Bein HaBetarim*, the Covenant Between the Pieces that He forged with Avraham Avinu. Hashem told him that after the long years of bondage in Egypt, "*they will depart with great wealth ... and the fourth generation will return here*" (B'reshit 15,14-16). G-d said: "You, Avraham, were willing to forego the great wealth of S'dom that you captured, for the sake of sanctifying My name. I will therefore pay you back many times over by enabling your descendants to leave Egypt with tremendous wealth."

The reference was not only to material wealth, for "*silver and gold utensils and fancy clothing*" (Sh'mot 12,35) can hardly make up for the 100-plus years of torturous suffering. Rather, the promise of "*great wealth*" includes also the following blessing and promise, incorporated in the climax of the Four Expressions of Redemption:

וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעַם וְהָיִיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים...
*I will take you [plural] unto Me as a nation,
 and I will be G-d unto you.* (Sh'mot 6,7)

This concept was further clarified before the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai:

וְאָשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׂרִים וְאָבָא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי...
*And I carried you on the wings of eagles,
 and brought you unto Me.* (19,4)

That is, Bnei Yisrael would be very close to Hashem. For every level of physical hardship the Israelites suffered during their subjugation in Egypt, they merited yet another ascent in the service of G-d. He was preparing Israel, stage by stage, to reach the highest level, that which is closest to Him. And in fact, the nation would actually have reached this sublime level, had it passed the repeated tests it faced in the desert – beginning with the miraculous Manna and the inner process it brought about, as we will now see.

■ Without Mediators

Moshe and Aharon are clearly G-d's emissaries, loyally carrying out the Divine initiative and command to take Israel out of Egypt. But at the time, this was not clear to the Israelites, who felt that the two of them were themselves the motivating forces behind the push for their freedom, for better or worse. Undoubtedly, the miracles and signs that Moshe and Aharon continually wrought, using the Staff of G-d, contributed greatly to this impression. As such, whenever there was a crisis or difficulty, the people immediately pointed an accusing finger at them.

For instance, when their food supply was used up, they had this very sharp reaction: ***“You [two] took us into this desert, to starve the entire congregation to death”*** (Sh'mot 16,3). Their accusation is two-fold: “You, Moshe and Aharon, brought us into this frightful desert, and you are now also leading us to death by starvation.” The two leaders realized, at this fateful moment, the critical importance of showing Israel that Hashem Himself had initiated this tremendous Redemption, and that they were only His faithful emissaries.

The opportunity to show this occurred that very night, when the nation complained about the lack of food. Hashem responded by promising to rain down bread from the sky. Moshe and Aharon told Israel that this miracle was to begin that very evening, and continue the next morning:

... עָרַב וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי ה' הוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

וּבֹקֶר וַרְאִיתֶם אֶת כְּבוֹד ה' ...

***In the evening, you will know that Hashem took you out of Egypt,
and in the morning, you will see the glory of G-d.*** (verses 6,7)

The sudden arrival of quails (pheasant birds) for meat that evening, and the falling of the Manna bread the next morning, would make it crystal clear that the entire Exodus from Egypt was a Divine plan. Moshe and Aharon then concluded by saying, ***“Who are we, that you should complain against us?”***

(verse 7), meaning, “We are not the right address for your complaints. We are merely the agents; it was not us who took you out of Egypt, but rather G-d.”

The promised miracle began as follows: “*When Aharon spoke to the Congregation of Israel, they turned towards the desert - and behold, the glory of G-d was seen in the cloud*” (verse 10). No supernatural staff was raised, nor were Moshe’s arms lifted, nor did Moshe and Aharon take any other action; Hashem acted alone in nature. This was very different than what happened when the Red Sea split, and when it returned to inundate the Egyptians; in both cases, we read that the miracle occurred when “*Moshe extended his hand upon the sea*” (Sh’mot 14,21 and 27). Moshe was actively involved in these and other wonders and signs that had happened up until then. But here in Sh’mot 16, where G-d miraculously provided Manna for bread and (in the second year) quails for meat, Moshe and Aharon were not involved. As evening fell, myriads of quails covered the entire camp, and it became clear to all that G-d alone was the force running the show.

The quail-Manna combination, and the differences between these two miraculous foodstuffs, taught Israel another lesson as well. The quails came first, in the evening; the Torah describes their arrival as follows: “*G-d caused a wind to start blowing, sweeping quails up from the sea*” (Bamidbar 11,31). The quails were gathered from afar, and provided genuine meat. They served Israel’s food needs for just one night, and eating them involved no restrictions on quantity or anything else. In contrast, the Manna that fell the next morning was not a real food, and it was to be collected only in certain amounts, with nothing left over for the next day. It was not just a one-time event, but was rather supplied for forty years.

The message is patently clear: “If you miss the flesh-pot and meat of Egypt, and if your eyes are raised towards crass materialism, then the meat of the quails will fulfill your desires. But if you wish to rise above simple physical lusts, and choose to sanctify yourselves and taste special wondrous nourishment created especially for you - then wait until the morning, when the Manna falls. You will then know that G-d plans to take you out of the coarse, materialistic way of life of Egypt, and bring you to something pure and uncontaminated, as symbolized by food that has nothing disposable (such as peels or pits), and that has not passed through the earth at all.”

■ The Glory of G-d

Just like the soul is revealed in the body, so too the Light of G-d appeared in these wondrous grains of Manna, which appeared under the shining morning dew:

וְתֵעַל שִׁכְבַּת הַטֶּל וְהִנֵּה עַל פְּנֵי הַמִּדְבָּר דֶּק מְחֻסָּפִס דֶּק בְּפָפֹר עַל הָאָרֶץ.

The layer of dew rose up, and behold, on the surface of the desert, there were little grains like fine frost on the ground. (Sh'mot 16,14)

The Manna was not natural food, but rather a spiritual substance. Unlike the quails, it was not gathered from afar, but rather appeared abruptly, all at once. In addition, in accordance with its great spiritual value, the Manna came with many restrictions: Only an *omer* (1.6 kilograms) could be taken by each person; none of it could be left over for the next day; and it was forbidden to go out and seek it on the Sabbath, when no Manna fell at all. All these limitations were testimony of the special sanctity inherent in this food, created especially for Israel on its way out of Egypt.

In short, then, the answers to the complaints of the Children of Israel are the following: “You are now graduating to a new level. No more physical food; the time of spiritual nourishment has begun. Forget about what you had in Egypt; from now on, you will be nourished directly from G-d’s glory.”

They were able to feel and experience the Manna’s holiness just by collecting it: Whoever gathered more or less than the *omer* measure found that the amount would even out by itself. Manna that was left over for the next morning would become spoiled, while on Fridays, the amount that fell was doubled, providing for the Sabbath as well, when no Manna was provided.

■ Closeness to G-d

What would have happened had the Children of Israel never complained? What level would they have reached had they suffered quietly, waiting and hoping only for G-d’s salvation? The answer is supplied by Moshe Rabbeinu himself: “*I sat on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights; bread I did not eat, water I did not drink.*” (D’varim 9,9)

Moshe reached a very high spiritual level, and he informs the Children of Israel that they, too, could have reached this level – even higher than eating the Manna whose grains reveal the Light of G-d. They could have drawn their nourishment, without need for regular food, from a higher place: the place from which Moshe received his spiritual provisions on Mt. Sinai. The light that shone forth from his face as he came down from the mountain was the same light that nourished Moshe on the mountain.

Proof of this is what happened to Bnei Yisrael’s clothing and shoes in the desert:

...אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר לֹא בָּלוּ שְׁלִמְתֵיכֶם מֵעֲלֵיכֶם
וְנַעֲלָה לֹא בָּלְתָה מֵעַל רַגְלֶךָ.

*...forty years in the desert, your clothing did not wear out,
and your shoes did not wear out off your feet. (29,4)*

Hashem prepared for us the highest spiritual planes that man could reach; we could have been like ministering angels. But everything depended on whether we could detach ourselves from a materialistic life. This difficult challenge can be likened to a spaceship taking off from earth. More than any other part of the journey, the launch itself is that which burns up the most fuel and requires the greatest engine efforts, because the Earth's pull of gravity must be overcome. Once the rocket extricates itself from that force, the rest of the journey is much easier.

The People of Israel were unable to disengage from the materialistic world that had surrounded them in Egypt. They did not succeed in escaping the attraction of the flesh-pot and the Golden Calf – and G-d therefore forbade them from coming near Mount Sinai and reaching the spiritual heights it could have afforded them: *“Guard yourselves not to climb the mountain [or] touch it”* (19,12). Only Moshe Rabbeinu alone was able to break through the materialistic covering, and therefore he alone was allowed to climb into the Cloud of Glory.

Hashem prepared for Israel the same supreme spiritual level that Moshe reached atop Mt. Sinai: Top-level prophecy and survival without food and drink. Israel did not reach this highest rung - but did reach the relatively high levels of receiving the Torah and of being granted the miraculous quails and Manna.

This great closeness to the Supreme Divine Light, even if not the highest level possible, is the wonderful gift and the genuine “great wealth” granted to Israel as just rewards for its many decades of difficult slavery. As we read in Psalms:

צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט מְכוֹן כְּסֵאָךָ חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת יִקְדָּמוּ כְּנִיָּהּ.

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your seat;
kindness and truth will welcome You. (Tehillim 89,15)*

