



The Parsha in Practice

THIS is My G-d

I've long thought that that Parshat Beshalach contains the single most dramatic moment in the Torah. With their back against the sea and facing the marauding Egyptian army, the pasuk describes that the Jews:



וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲנֶה מִצְרַיִם | נֹסַע אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֱלֹהִים:

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the LORD.

You can sense the terror. The pasuk continues to describe their desire to return to the slavery of Egypt rather than be wiped out in the desert by the Egyptians. What a moment!

It's sometimes difficult to sense the excitement when we are reviewing a story that we have read so many times, but I think this event, and more, this moment, is forever etched into the Jewish psyche. In the song of celebration that follows their miraculous escape, they say: *זֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, *This is my G-d and I will glorify Him!*

The word "zeh" is significant as it implies that in that incredible time of crisis and subsequent salvation, their sense of G-d's existence was so clear and His involvement so obvious, that they could point and say "zeh!" Like the other times "zeh" appears in the Torah (think Menorah, Machtzit HaShekel), we can imagine the people pointing to G-d Himself. This sense of the significance and clarity of the revelation is expressed in Rashi's comment:

זה אלי - בכבודו נגלה עליהם והיו מראין אותו באצבע, ראתה שפחה על היים מה שלא ראו נביאים:

THIS IS MY GOD – In His glory did He reveal Himself to them and they pointed to Him – as it were – with the finger exclaiming “This is my God!” (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 3:15) A maid servant beheld at the Red Sea what even the prophets never saw (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 15:2:2).

G-d's immanence and the certainty of His existence was more obvious to these people than to any of the prophets of the future!

What did we do with that feeling? How do we forever mark it? The Gemara in Shabbat famously teaches that it is from here that we learn the requirement of Hidur Mitzvah, to beautify the mitzvot that we do. Usually, we refer to this beautification in terms of the expense. We should spend more money on the higher quality mitzvah product: the lulav, the Sefer Torah, or the Mezuzah. Don't just pay for the

base model, rather invest in something a little more special. How exactly does this relate to the source text? "This is my G-d," so pay more?

I think there is something deeper to the idea of Hidur Mitzvah. The Mishna teaches that we are not supposed to eat in the afternoon before the Pesach Seder. The Rashbam explains that the reason is because being in a state of hunger when you eat the matzah will cause you to eat it with more relish and that is a fulfillment of Hidur Mitzvah. I've long thought that this Rashbam was novel in that he added to the classic definition of the concept. Usually, we want a more beautiful mitzvah performed (read: financially), but here, the Rashbam even included that you aren't only limited to money to express the beauty, but that enthusiasm is also an expression of Hidur.

I've realized that this is likely a mistake. The Rashbam isn't adding to the definition of Hidur, rather he is offering a most precise definition. When I am in a situation of terror and fear, when I am beset with threats and pressure from all directions, and I am subsequently able to plainly see how and through whom I was delivered from that crisis, how should I react towards that person? Should my relationship be prof-forma? Superficial? Should I simply be going through motions? Rashbam explains that the truly worthwhile response is a response of sincerity and enthusiasm. I should be chasing opportunities to react, to offer my gratitude, and exert whatever meager efforts I can to "pay back" and acknowledge the debt I owe. Indeed, I should be hungry to do so.

Yes, that might also mean that in order to get myself more excited about a mitzvah, I should probably spend more money on the item I will use. The nicer item will likely be more impressive and engaging and make it more likely that I will elevate my enthusiasm in the performance of its ritual. But it's not about the money we spend. It's that after we have spent the money, we're more likely to enjoy the performance of the upgraded mitzvah.

The moment at the sea was a high-water mark (excuse the pun) in our grasp of Divine involvement in the world. The specific details are recalled in our blessing of "Geulah" (redemption) immediately before we can engage G-d in conversation in our Tefilah. We attempt to recall the substance of that day because it's the day on which we could literally point to G-d's involvement. Only then do we turn to that G-d that we pointed to so long ago in Tefilah, for the needs of now to save us - personally and communally - again.

How are we to best relate to the G-d that appeared to us on that day? What is the logical result of knowing that **זָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ**? I think the answer is that to really expect G-d's involvement in our lives requires us to live as if we already find it there. It's not a relationship we wish we had, it's a relationship that the Torah teaches us began generations ago. We don't buy our way into relationships. We don't maintain them through bribery. We hunger for them. We don't do mitzvot to check off boxes, we need to do them to express a desire for connection. To feel as if WE are pointing towards the G-d who we believe in now as clearly as they did then.

Living through extraordinary times will inevitably cause people to seek G-d and wonder how to better connect to Him. He is undoubtedly here with us, and as incredible events unfold, there is so much we can point to. Through enthusiastically performed mitzvot, let's behave as if we see that.

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach