

G-d did not lead them through the way of the land of the Philistines (13:17)

Route of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt



The tribe of Ephraim had erred and departed from Egypt 30 years before the destined time, with the result that three hundred thousand of them were slain by the Philistines . . . and their bones lay in heaps on the road. . . . G-d therefore said: If Israel sees the bones of the sons of Ephraim strewn in the road, they will return to Egypt . . .

Thus the verse says, *v'lo nacham Elokim* ("G-d did not lead them," which can also be translated as "G-d was not comforted"). This is comparable to a king whose sons were carried off as captives, and some of them died in captivity. The king afterwards came and saved those that were left. While he rejoiced over those who survived, he was never comforted for those who had died.

(Midrash Rabbah)

G-d led the people about by way of the desert (13:18)

This is comparable to a king who had a son to whom he wished to bequeath an inheritance, but he argued: "If I give it to him now that he is small, he will not know how to take care of it. I will therefore wait until my son studies the writings and comprehends the value [of the property]; then I will bequeath it unto him." This is what G-d said: I shall first give them the Torah, and then bring them into the Land.

(Midrash Rabbah)

G-d said: If I bring Israel into the land now, each will immediately take possession of his field or vineyard, and they will neglect the Torah. Rather, I shall take them around the desert for forty years, so that they should eat manna and drink the water of [Miriam's miracle] well, and the Torah will be absorbed in their bodies. Thus Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai would say: The Torah was given to be expounded only to the eaters of manna.

(Mechilta)

God did not want the people immediately to face battle with the seven nations in the land of Canaan since, as newly liberated slaves, they were psychologically unprepared for war. We now know also that there was an additional factor. There were Egyptian forts at various points along the sea route to Canaan, so the Israelites would come up against them even before reaching the land.

Three facts, though, still need to be reckoned with. First, the Torah itself says that God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" ([Ex. 14:4](#)), leading him to pursue the Israelites with a force of six hundred chariots. This so demoralised the Israelites that they cried, "Were there not there are enough graves in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die in the desert? ... It would have been better to be slaves in Egypt

than to die in the desert” ([Ex. 14:11-12](#)). Why did God cause Pharaoh to pursue the Israelites if He did not want them to think of going back? He should surely have made the first stage of their journey as undemanding as possible.

Second, the people *did* face war long before they came anywhere near the land of Canaan. They did so almost immediately after crossing the Red Sea, when they were attacked by the Amalekites ([Ex. 17:8](#)). The strange fact is that when they had to fight a battle on their own, without any miraculous intervention from God, they expressed no fear. Inspired by Moses’ upraised arms, they fought and won ([Ex. 17:10-13](#)).

Third, the roundabout route failed to prevent the people’s response to the report of the spies. Terrified by their account of the strength of the native population and the well-fortified nature of their cities, they said, “Let us appoint a (new) leader and return to Egypt” ([Num. 14:4](#)).

It seems, therefore, that the circuitous route by which God led the Israelites was **not to prevent their wanting to return, but rather, to prevent their being able to return**. Leading them miraculously through the Red Sea was like Caesar crossing the Rubicon, or Cortes burning his boats before his conquest of the Aztecs. It made retreat impossible. Whatever their doubts and fears, the Israelites had no real choice. They had to continue onward, even if in the end it took forty years and a new generation to reach their destination.

(Rabbi Jonathan Saks)

The children of Israel went out chamushim from the land of Egypt (13:18)

Chamushim means “armed”. . . . Another interpretation: one in five (*chamesh*) among the children of Israel came out of Egypt; four-fifths died during the three days of darkness [because they did not want to leave Egypt].

(Rashi)

Rabbi Joshua interpreted it thus: fivefold they came out of Egypt, for five times their number in converts were gathered into the people of Israel upon their departure from Egypt.

(Midrash Tanchuma)

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him. For he had laid an oath on the children of Israel, saying, "G-d will surely remember you, and you shall carry up my bones away from here with you" (13:19)

How did Moses know the place where Joseph was buried? Serach the daughter of Asher remained from that generation. Moses went to her and asked: "Do you know where Joseph was buried?" She answered him: "The Egyptians made an iron coffin for him, which they sunk in the Nile so that its waters should be blessed."

Moses went and stood on the bank of the Nile and called out: "Joseph! Joseph! The time has arrived regarding which G-d swore, 'I will deliver you,' and the oath which you imposed upon the Israelites has reached the time of fulfillment. If you show yourself, well and good; otherwise, behold, we are absolved of your oath." Immediately Joseph's coffin floated to the surface of the water . . .

Rabbi Nathan says: He was buried in the sepulchre of the kings. Moses went and stood by the sepulchre of the kings and exclaimed, "Joseph! The time has arrived regarding which G-d swore, 'I will deliver you,' and the oath which you imposed upon the Israelites has reached the time of fulfillment. If you show yourself, well and good; otherwise, behold, we are absolved of your oath." At that moment Joseph's coffin trembled, and Moses took it and carried it with him.

(Talmud, Sotah 13a)

G-d said to Moses: "Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the children of Israel, that they should go forward" (14:15)

As they stood at the shore of the sea, the people of Israel split into four factions.

One faction said: "Let us cast ourselves into the sea." A second faction said, "Let us return to Egypt." A third said, "Let us wage war against the Egyptians." A fourth said, "Let us cry out to G-d."

Thus Moses said to the people: "Fear not; stand by and see the salvation of G-d, which He will show you today. For as you have seen Egypt this day, you shall not see them again anymore, forever. G-d shall fight for you, and you shall be silent" (14:13-14).

To those who said, "Let us cast ourselves into the sea," he said: "Fear not; stand by and see the salvation of G-d." To those who said, "Let us return to Egypt," he said: "As you have seen Egypt this day, you shall not see them again anymore, forever." To those who said, "Let us wage war against them," he said: "G-d shall fight for you." And to those who said, "Let us cry out to G-d," he said: "And you shall be silent."

(Mechilta)

These “four factions” represent four possible reactions to a situation in which one’s divinely ordained mission in life is challenged by the prevalent reality.

One possible reaction is: “Let us cast ourselves into the sea.” Let us submerge ourselves within the living waters of Torah; let us plunge into the “sea of the Talmud,” the sea of piety, the sea of religious life. Let us create our own insular communities, protecting us and ours from the G-dless world out there.

At the other extreme is the reaction, “Let us return to Egypt.” Let us accept “reality,” recognizing that it is the Pharaohs who wield the power in the real world. We’ll do whatever we can under the circumstances to do what G-d expects from us, but it is futile to imagine that we can resist, much less change, the way things are.

A third reaction is to “wage war against them”—to assume a confrontational stance against the hostile reality, battling the “unG-dly” world despite all odds.

A fourth reaction is to say: It’s wrong to abandon the world, it’s wrong to succumb to it and it’s wrong to fight it. The answer lies in dealing with it on a wholly spiritual level. A single prayer can achieve more than the most secure fortress, the most flattering diplomat or the most powerful army.

G-d rejected all four approaches. While each of them has their time and place (it’s important to create inviolable sancta of holiness in a mundane world; it’s also necessary to appreciate the nature of the prevalent reality and deal with it on its own terms; it’s also necessary to wage an all-out war against evil; and it’s always important to recognize that one cannot do it on one’s own and to appeal to G-d for help)—none of them is the vision to guide our lives and define our relationship with the world we inhabit.

Rather, when the Jew is headed toward Sinai and is confronted with a hostile or indifferent world, his most basic response must be to *go forward*.

Not to escape reality, not to submit to it, not to wage war on it, not to deal with it only on a spiritual level, but to go forward. Do another mitzvah, ignite another soul, take one more step toward your goal.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

"Why do you cry to Me?" (14:15)

"When Pharaoh drew near . . . the children of Israel cried out to G-d" (14:10). Upon which Moses also began to pray to G-d. Said G-d to Moses: "Why do you cry to Me?" My children have already prayed, and I have heard their prayer.

(Midrash Rabbah)

G-d said to Moses: "Moses! My children are in dire straits, the sea is closing in on them and the enemy pursues, and you stand and pray at length? Why do you cry to Me? There are times that call for lengthy prayers, and times when one must pray briefly . . ."

(Mechilta; Rashi)

There was the cloud and darkness, and it illuminated the night (14:20)

The column, which traveled before the Israelite camp as a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, moved to interpose between the two camps and to protect the Israelites from the Egyptians. It now was a "cloud and darkness" for the Egyptians while "illuminating the night" for the Israelites.

(Rashi)

According to the natural order of the world, can a person who lights a candle say, "So-and-so, who is my friend, may use the light, while so-and-so, who is my enemy, may not"? But G-d is not so confined. . . . His cloud produced light for Israel and darkness for Egypt.

(Midrash Tehillim)

Moses stretched his hand over the sea (14:21)

Moses went to divide the sea as G-d had commanded, but the sea refused to comply, exclaiming: "What, before you I should divide? Am I not greater than you? For I was created in the third day, and you on the sixth." When Moses heard this, he went and reported to G-d, "The sea refuses to be divided." What did G-d do? He placed His right hand upon the right hand of Moses.

(Midrash Rabbah)

The waters were divided (14:21)

[All the water in the world](#) divided, even the waters in cisterns and ditches, in jars, cups, casks and bowls, as it is written, “The waters were divided”—it doesn’t say “the water was divided,” but “the waters were divided.” The supernal waters divided, as well as the terrestrial . . .

(Mechilta; Rashi)

The children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground (14:22)

Each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the sea. Then sprang forward Nachshon the son of Aminadav and descended first into the sea [and they all followed him] . . .

Why does it say “The children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground”? If they went into the sea, then why does it say “on the dry ground”; and if they went on the dry ground, then why does it say that they went “into the midst of the sea”? This is to teach that the sea was divided only after Israel had stepped into it and the waters had reached their noses—only then did it become dry land.

The daughters of Israel passed through the sea holding their children with their hands; and when these cried, they would stretch out their hands and pluck an apple or a pomegranate from the sea and give it to them.

(Talmud, Sotah 37a; Midrash Rabbah)

The waters returned, and covered the chariots, the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them (14:28)

The Egyptians are likened to foxes, because they were cunning. . . . What did they say? “Come, let us deal wisely with them” ([Exodus 1:10](#)): let us deal cunningly with Israel, and plan such a persecution for them that their G-d will not be able to punish us in the same coin. For if we persecute them with the sword, He can visit us with the sword; and if with fire, He can bring fire upon us. But we know that He swore that He would no longer bring a flood on the world ([Genesis 9:11](#)); let us therefore persecute them with water, which He cannot bring upon us. G-d then said

to them: "Wretches! True I have sworn that I will not bring a flood into the world, but I will do this to you: I will drag each one of you to his own flood." This is what David said (Psalm 63:11): "They shall be dragged to the seabed; they shall be a portion for foxes."

(Midrash Rabbah)

In that hour the ministering angels wished to sing songs of praise before G-d, but He rebuked them, saying: "My handiwork is drowning in the sea, and you wish to sing before Me?!"

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 39b)

Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to G-d, and they spoke, saying . . . (15:1)

How did they render the song? Rabbi Akiva says: Moses said "I will sing to G-d," and they responded "I will sing to G-d"; Moses said "For He has triumphed gloriously," and they responded "I will sing to G-d" (and so on with each verse—Moses would sing a phrase, and they would respond with the refrain "I will sing to G-d").

Rabbi Eliezer says: Moses said "I will sing to G-d," and they responded "I will sing to G-d"; Moses said "For He has triumphed gloriously," and they responded "For He has triumphed gloriously" (and so on—they repeated each phrase after Moses).

Rabbi Nechemiah says: Moses sang the opening words of the song, after which they each sang it on their own.

(Talmud and Rashi, Sotah 30b)

These three opinions represent three levels of leadership.

Rabbi Akiva describes an ideal in which a people completely abnegate their individuality to the collective identity embodied by the leader. Moses alone sang the nation's gratitude to G-d, their experience of redemption, and their vision of their future as G-d's people. The people had nothing further to say as individuals, other than to affirm their unanimous assent to what Moses was expressing.

At first glance, this seems the ultimate in unity: hundreds of thousands of hearts and minds yielding to a single program and vision. Rabbi Eliezer, however, argues

that this is but a superficial unity—an externally imposed unity of the moment, rather than an inner, enduring unity. When people set aside their own thoughts and feelings to accept what is dictated to them by a higher authority, they are united only in word and deed; their inner selves remain different and distinct. Such a unity is inevitably short-lived: sooner or later their intrinsic differences and counter-aims will assert themselves, and fissures will begin to appear also in their unanimous exterior. So Rabbi Eliezer interprets the Torah's description of Israel's song to say that they did not merely affirm Moses' song with a refrain, but repeated his words themselves. Each individual Jew internalized Moses' words, so that they became the expression of his own understanding and feelings. The very same words assumed hundreds of thousands of nuances of meaning, as they were absorbed by each of the minds, and articulated by each of the mouths, of the people of Israel.

Rabbi Nechemiah, however, is still not satisfied. If Israel repeated these verses after Moses, this would imply that their song did not stem from the very deepest part of themselves. For if the people were truly one with Moses and his articulation of the quintessence of Israel, why would they need to hear their song from his lips before they could sing it themselves? It was enough, says Rabbi Nechemiah, that Moses started them off with the first words of the song, so as to stimulate their deepest experience of the miracle, with the result that each of them sang the entire song on their own.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dances (15:20)

How did the Israelites have tambourines in the desert? But the righteous women of that generation were certain that G-d would perform miracles for them, and they prepared tambourines and dances while still in Egypt.

(Mechilta; Rashi)

They could not drink of the waters of Marah, because they were bitter (15:23)
Because they—the children of Israel—were bitter, everything they tasted was bitter to them.

There He made for them a statute and a law (15:25)

The Israelites were given ten precepts at Marah: the seven which had already been accepted by the children of Noah, to which were added at Marah social laws, the Sabbath, and honoring one's parents.

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 56b)

They shall gather each day's allotment on its day (16:5)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was asked by his disciples: Why did not the manna come down for Israel once a year?

He replied: I shall give a parable. This may be compared to a king of flesh and blood who had an only son, whom he provided with maintenance once a year, so that he would visit his father once a year only. Thereupon he provided for his maintenance every day, so that he called on him every day

(Talmud, Yoma 76a)